

For an inviting anthropology

TOMÁS CRIADO *Open University of Catalonia*

FRANCISCO MARTÍNEZ *University of Murcia*

EVA BERGLUND *Aalto University*

Anthropologists have recently become inspired, captivated even, by the practices of the arts, design, and architecture in efforts to renew anthropology's modes of engagement and understandings of its relevance, particularly affecting how we approach ethnographic fieldwork. Having each worked for well over a decade at these crossroads, the authors reflect on a search for anthropological relevance undertaken through collaborative materializations of the field, in situations where anthropologists go beyond gestures of cultural critique and participant observation. This entails creating hosting environments where our counterparts turn not just into co-ethnographers or co-thinkers, but also and mainly into ethnographic guests. The idea is familiar in a discipline rooted in forcing uninvited visits on hosts around the world. However, in our material explorations, we envision a different route. For us, hosting, as a mode of inquiry, provides openings to a more inviting anthropology, involving zones of mutual uncertainty among a multiplicity of actors so as to instil generative puzzlement without imposing our discipline on others. We conclude by making a plea for practising anthropology as a field of invitations in hopes of remaking worlds together with our ethnographic guests.

In search of lost relevance

Anthropologists have, for decades, struggled for relevance. As numbers of students enrolled in anthropology programmes decrease in many places, there is a fear that the discipline might have become uninviting for some, but also uncomfortably attractive to others, notably those willing to reduce the discipline to the ethnographic methods so useful to corporate attempts to understand users or clients. See, for instance, a recent review of the US context, published in the journal *American Ethnologist*. 'It would hardly be an exaggeration to state that the long-term survival of anthropology as a discipline depends, to some degree, on finding ways to apply the knowledge it produces' (Moss

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2024: 171). Emanuel Moss works at Intel Labs, promoting anthropology's utility as a means of achieving practical, corporate goals by helping it to become a source of 'job skills' and 'strategic insights' that can 'make a difference' while still 'challenging the caricature of the discipline as a cloistered pursuit' (2024: 171). Certainly, more and more anthropologists are involved in assisting corporate design work, and ethnographic methods are well established in marketing and usability research.

In this article, we problematize such ideas of the usefulness and practicality of anthropology's forms of knowledge production. We propose an alternative way to develop the discipline, based on the fact that anthropologists have already embarked on novel adventures towards relevance, in the company of kindred spirits in the arts, design, and architecture fields. Many of us have collaborated with these practitioners on an open-ended quest exploring sites and approaches around how and why anthropology might become relevant to others (Savransky 2016). In what follows, we provide examples from our own work having all participated in collaborative forms of making both knowledge and worlds. These encounters ground the proposal we outline below for what we call 'an inviting anthropology', one that flourishes in hospitable acts of material intervention. An inviting anthropology is a mode of inquiry that hosts situations – devices, scenes, and routines – so that ethnographers and counterparts can co-problematize matters of life not to represent them as finished objects but to make them matter, experimentally, in ways that redistribute who knows and who does.

We argue for recognizing a debt to ways of knowing and doing beyond academic and disciplinary borders in domains like the arts, design, and architecture. In our experience there is potential here for transformative learning that could reflect back our own, anthropological, practice. In hospitable exchanges with adjacent disciplines and practitioners, we can materialize situations that allow alternative ways of knowing and doing. To elaborate upon such joint socio-material explorations and to view them as generating alternative epistemic distributions is also to encourage the discipline to take part in active worlding with more confidence. An inviting anthropology entails creating hosting environments for ethnographic exploration through working together. Hosting is thus not just a metaphor for us; it is a concrete, infrastructural labour – rooms booked, budgets negotiated, tools fabricated; in such scenes, description and intervention are two faces of the same practice. This gesture may feel too provocative for those who rely on anthropology's historical legacy of participant observation, comparison, and epistemic disciplining. We, however, believe that in the current context, anthropology should be part of ongoing attempts of world-making, intervening in reality.

Anthropological research already unfolds in the company of a wide variety of 'publics', from technical experts to affected communities, also including many interventionist research practices with policy relevance, such as participatory design and planning, which are solidly embedded in contemporary decision making across a wide range of political, economic, and cultural domains. In these encounters, anthropology has an opportunity to embrace new roles. Above all, we can also develop our own forms of material and social intervention. Yet, for these to happen, we should begin by recognizing that anthropological research and pedagogy have more to learn from others – designers, artists, and architects, say – than has been acknowledged to date.

To consider what such an endeavour would mean for anthropology as a discipline and as a practice, we present below a series of our own examples where two of us – Tomás and Francisco – undertook joyous ventures together with a series of

guests across several European countries. Together these point to a more inviting anthropology: one that enacts, performs, or stages the field in an endeavour to be hospitable to ethnographic guests so we could all remake the worlds we study, sharing our inventiveness. We use 'guest' not as a euphemism for research participant but to name a provisional role in the field, whose terms are co-set, speculative, and revisable. Hosting, in this sense, distributes authorship, responsibility, and the right to refuse.

In contrast to anthropologists who have engaged with designers and other expert practitioners such as engineers, artists, or architects as 'critics' (Houdart & Minato 2009; Suchman 2011; Wilkie & Michael 2015; Yarrow 2019), we focus more on the cross-pollination and intervention that happens through research. This is certainly a move towards inscribing and transforming the social, but one premised on the making of hosting environments. Fieldwork can still lead to description, as in regular understandings of ethnography, but also offers a site of socio-material intervention with the inviting capacity to challenge, through collaborative world-making, the pre-established significance of things.

The article continues as follows. We begin with a survey of cross-pollination across anthropology and design – broadly conceived – in academia and beyond, where concrete design interventions have followed similar impulses. We also survey relevant methodological innovations in social research that are moving towards public engagement via invention and intervention, also in the company of adjacent fields and practices. We then sketch out examples of more-than-textual ways of working by creating epistemic devices (Fortun 2012) and spaces for collaborative ethnographic inquiry (Estalella & Criado 2018; Lury 2020; Martínez 2021) close to the 'multimodal turn' (Dattatreya & Marrero-Guillamón 2019; Mattern 2012). In conclusion, we return to why developing 'an inviting anthropology' would be a timely gesture.

Redesigning our roles in the contemporary

To invite is not to usher others into a pre-furnished interior. It is to draw out a novel line of correspondence. Hosting such lines requires devices and settings that hold open a time and place for what might yet be said or done. In these scenes, ethnographers do not stand outside, nor do we claim the centre; we compose the conditions under which relations may show themselves otherwise. The field, then, is not where we arrive but what we set in motion: a field of invitations, sustained by the craft of making room for others to think and act with us. Our proposal is indebted to colleagues who have become interested in the cross-pollination of anthropological and other ways of doing research. We build in particular on recent explorations where design has taken centre-stage:

1. The development of what has come to be called 'design anthropology', an often corporate-driven approach (Miller 2018), influenced by Nordic design thinking and its critiques (Binder *et al.* 2011), which has led to a wide variety of methodological innovations (Drazin 2021; Gunn, Otto & Smith 2013; Pink *et al.* 2022; Smith *et al.* 2016).
2. The anthropology by means of design developed by Tim Ingold (2013) and his collaborators, which argues for expanding anthropological work to the exploratory investigations that makers (such as artists, architects, and designers) undertake, learning to 'know from the inside' of their practices; this can be read as a pedagogy of hosting through material invitations that keep analysis in motion (Gatt & Ingold 2013).

3. The scenographic experiments of Luke Cantarella, Christine Hegel, and George Marcus (2019), where design practice serves to reimagine productive encounters in the field by staging para-ethnographic relations and materializing new conditions for research, in the process surfacing ordinarily invisible problems or silenced situations.
4. The diverse field of social design, born of the confluence of several factors, such as the rise of activist practices, new forms of public management, and the promotion of entrepreneurship and inter-disciplinarity (Armstrong, Bailey, Julier & Kimbell 2014). In practical terms, it means experimenting with alternative forms of collaboration and knowledge-making, often integrating those excluded by previous forms of design or politics, and inherently critical of how power and resources are distributed (Julier 2013).

This last mode speaks to a contemporary need to redistribute epistemic work, specifically through fabricating material situations for collective speculation (Stengers 2021). A novel research programme in that vein was delineated by Paul Rabinow, George Marcus, James Faubion and Tobias Rees (2008) in *Designs for an anthropology of the contemporary*. Inspired by design, the writers tried to overcome an intrinsic epistemic tension in our discipline, namely the challenges of working with tools developed to study people 'out of time' (Fabian 1983). In an inspiring move, they proposed to develop more collaborative approaches to fieldwork, including constructing experimental settings in order to do analytical work whilst also engaging with actors who were not necessarily trained to do (academic) research. In invoking divergent understandings of knowledge and knowing, *Designs for an anthropology of the contemporary* pushed in important ways for renewing what counts as anthropological work.

Present-day concerns require us to deepen and expand the gesture initiated by these colleagues. This is not merely because of compelling ecological, economic, and political concerns, but also because of recurrent criticisms of conventional design practices that view them as too technocratic and supportive of throwaway culture and environmental devastation (Julier & Kimbell 2019; Martínez & Errázuriz 2024). Intriguingly, a series of in-between practitioners have emerged that are more inclined towards socially informed design, or design with social values even whilst the possible pitfalls associated with trying to make design more virtuous simply by adding the epithet 'social' have been recognized (Nold, Kaszynska, Bailey & Kimbell 2022). All these are challenges that affect both design and anthropology and that can be taken further. Likewise, more and more designers are feeling a need to re-learn their own practice critically from concrete situations, prompting them to reconsider what it means to be a designer (Fariás & Criado 2018): what socio-material arrangements do design practices imply, and what might they render im/possible? For instance, when facing the role of design in ecological disruptions of anthropogenic origin, many practitioners have started to realize that a designer should also know how to re-design or even un-make things (Coombs, McNamara & Sade 2019; Lindström & Ståhl 2023; Tonkinwise 2014), to consider reparability (Callén & Duque 2023; Errázuriz & Greene 2021; Martínez 2023a), or to rethink the designers' skills from a wide variety of non-human actors and agents (Tironi, Chilet, Ureta Marín & Hermansen 2024).

A pioneering example of this is the work of Thomas Thwaites (aka *GoatMan*), who took a 'holiday' from being human in the attempt to learn, as a designer, from

the bodies of goats. In doing so, Thwaites was exploring the limits of the human senses and physiognomy while generating innovative exchanges with other animals and conditions for knowledge production. Previously he had renewed material inquiry into the global circulation of commodities and the corresponding logistical infrastructures, asking formerly unarticulated questions through his attempts to reverse-engineer a cheap toaster entirely from scratch (Thwaites 2012; 2016). Also in this vein, Martín Ávila (2012; 2022) has created a series of 'hosting devices' that facilitate the encounter between rather incompatible species. An example of this is a gadget to study human–tarantula and human–scorpion relations and, eventually, to open them up for alternative configurations. Ávila offers these hosting devices as a critical and experimental pedagogy, which appears as a process of learning about our own relational limitations. As he explains, hospitality or hostility is not a property of systems but it has to do with our ways of relating to each other in a given environment. In other words, it is the host that offers a frame of conduct to guests according to a specific set of rules, language, and material affordances.

Drawing attention quite explicitly to inviting, designer Rosario Talevi has developed hosting platforms that foreground practices of learning, such as her parasitic readings and the curricula she put together in the Floating University of Berlin (Bader, Kafka, Schneider & Talevi 2022). Yet another inspiring example is the Helsinki-based *Pixelache* collective for emerging art and design research. Since 2002, they have been an important element in what might be considered an alternative ecosystem of 'new media' in Finland, extending invitations to many audiences to ponder questions around what knowledge is and what it does – or does not – achieve. What we feel these designers are doing is expanding the domain that can be collectively known and, alongside these speculative practices, re-designing the social, to put it in Latour's (2008) terms. These approaches do not merely make the social amenable to reconfiguration – something that can be done, or at least tried, in a technocratic manner. We suggest that they are doing social research, simultaneously suspending existing ways of doing and re-thinking collectively how we relate with the world.

A similar re-designing of the social was undertaken by Rania Ghosn and El Hadi Jazairy with the *Design Earth* project. This revised some of the maps through which we make sense of our presence on the planet to provoke public controversy and critical discussion about the externalities and expulsions generated by not always visible infrastructures. The duo also explore the relationship between design and geography through new forms of geo-storytelling, seeking to better understand the implications of climate change, waste management, soil erosion, air pollution, freshwater shortage, and energy transition. In a similar manner, the nomadic design studio *Unknown Fields Division*, directed by Kate Davies and Liam Young, ventures into alienating landscapes – such as mines – to investigate how they are constitutive of particular social relations. These shadow areas, the ends of the world, are a forensic testimony of colonial legacies as much as of the ongoing devastation of our planet.

Like many anthropologists, we have been inspired by these modes of research-creation. We specifically wanted to learn from their inventive approaches to materiality and their inviting approaches to intervening. These designers are already opening up epistemic avenues for practising anthropology otherwise, inviting us to recursively question the how, the what, the with whom, as well as the when and where of our research. In the aforementioned cases, rather than a genius-led approach giving shape to the social, and instead of designing in service to somebody else's agenda, what we see

are situated engagements with the world as a way to inquire into it while taking part in its transformation.

Interventive research

While artists, designers, and architects have been bringing speculative ideas to life by translating thought experiments into materials and intervening through prototypes, probes, and installations, the resonances in social research elsewhere have been significant. The academic and corporate emergence of the field of Design Anthropology is one indication of this. When Wendy Gunn, Ton Otto, and Rachel Smith (2013) mapped and reflected on it in the edited collection *Design anthropology*, they characterized the field as a distinct interdisciplinary style of knowing. In so doing, they also questioned the 'one-sided' relationship between design and anthropology, with its emphasis on how anthropology, usually reduced to its iconic method – ethnography – can benefit design. The contributions to this volume were rather varied, ranging from corporate approaches to design thinking to Gatt and Ingold's approach of an anthropology by means of design, a radical proposal claiming that anyone involved in an investigation with others about the condition of being human is an anthropologist (Gatt & Ingold 2013). Continuing similar efforts but widening its gaze, the follow-up compilation, *Design anthropological futures* (Smith *et al.* 2016), invited a range of reflections of how design might be helping elicit novel understandings of anthropology and its uses. It provided a wide array of proposals on how Design Anthropology could pursue less unsettled futures. These compilations have certainly contributed to opening up the conversation and launching new and varied lines of inquiry.

In a similar vein, Adam Drazin (2013; 2021) describes how research in both design and anthropology involves trying to produce a surplus of ideas and pathways. He also outlines numerous differences between the respective practitioners, such as their distinct aims, expertise, skills, and motivations. For instance, Drazin foregrounds how anthropologists are not expected to construct better lives, but merely to comprehend them – an attitude that professional designers might take as a form of surrender. In turn, not all designers seek to develop analytical knowledge about how things work, nor do they inquire into the world in order to understand social practices. Generally, they try to develop situated solutions to already identified problems, actively seeking to improve on what exists and actualizing the future in the present by remaking worlds.

Even though design unequivocally happens in a given context, designers prefer to discuss things as they might be, elaborating scenarios (Gaspar 2013) more than seeking complex knowledge about how things are or problematizing the very framing of their design tasks (with their assumptions about what improvement might be). Yet in their collaborations with others, designers quite deliberately create suspensions of existing ways of doing, generating, as in anthropology, a surplus. Despite such promising directions, thanks to their corporate contexts of operation, many designers do face rather stringent ideas of what 'intervention', 'materiality', and 'the social' could be (Tonkiss 2017). Perhaps because of this some anthropologists have resisted design's appeal. For instance, critically reflecting on the kind of research that typically appears in connection with design practice and theory, Keith Murphy and Eitan Wilf (2021) have put forward the limitations of design methods for an updated anthropological toolkit.¹

All this suggests that anthropological impulses are already being pushed in different directions, enabling us to reconsider and eventually replenish our own modalities of ethnographic research. Over time, the discipline's habit of *simply* observing and

describing has distanced scholarship from life, ossified notions of what can be known and undermined the potential of our work to have public relevance. Invitations to bring speculative ideas to life through material means are, however, gaining traction among anthropologists. There are different attempts at relearning our practice in different contact zones (Holmes & Marcus 2006), pushing anthropologists to collaborate on different terms from those of more conventional fieldwork settings.² This terrain resembles design work, where it is explicitly geared towards creating social change. Our research may also benefit from involving ourselves, as anthropologists, in the practical and often dirty collaborative work through which aspects of the social are materially remade. This is a habit more familiar to artists and designers than social scientists, but it broadens out the range of what the social could be at the same time as opening up the practice of ethnography and the discipline of anthropology.

In his much-revered work, Arturo Escobar (2018) attempted an anthropological unravelling of design's world-making and ontological implications, beyond its tight coupling with the politics of modern knowledge and, therefore, with its epistemic violence. Following his trail of thought, in foregrounding interventive approaches we wish to acknowledge that anthropological explorations with making would better not assume to know in advance what it is to intervene, what is considered as materializing and what the social might be. This implies the need to reconsider who is brought into the field, how and for what purpose, as well as to ask what version of the social is at play in any ethnographic account. Furthermore, there is much to learn from similar explorations in Science and Technology Studies (STS), putting forward processual and recursive vocabularies of 'mattering' in the works of Donna Haraway, Karen Barad, and actor-network theorists.

Two examples are the volumes *Inventive methods* (Lury & Wakeford 2012) and *Inventing the social* (Marres, Guggenheim & Wilkie 2018). The former presents social research methods as performative and staged, highlighting a series of cases in which the social world, with its relationality and contingency, is investigated in context-specific ways that would be hard to reproduce or standardize. Indeed, the volume was explicitly resistant to providing a categorical analysis on a single approach to intervention or the materialities at stake, and instead delineated a diversity of research devices. *Inventing the social*, in turn, approaches social research as a process that cannot happen without inventing its own object of research. Hence, it displays experiments in knowledge production and intervention, forms of mattering grounded in the idea that social life is always to be invented through variegated forms of research.

In dialogue with these books, the compilation *Transmissions*, edited by Kat Jungnickel (2020), also features the work of different practitioners interested in exploring both inventive and interventive social research. The volume outlines a series of what Jungnickel calls transmission tactics, which emerge through a 'dialogic exchange between researcher and researched, theory and practice, invention and dissemination' (2020: 1, 8). By turning to practices such as poetry, performance, catalogues, interactive machines, costume, and digital platforms, the contributors do not simply blur modes of representation and means of doing research, they also explore new forms of relevance and attention.

Anthropologists have long been invested in pushing boundaries, specifically focusing on what our discipline could become (Comaroff 2010; Weiner 1995). In the same spirit of adventure, we turn now to our own efforts to contribute to the contemporary interest in world-making without pre-cooked solutions or assumptions

about the state of the social. We show how fieldwork can offer sites of material invention (Criado & Estalella 2023), hence generating articulations of devices and venues for inquiring with others (Estalella & Criado 2018). Indeed, for anthropology to invite is to honour a shared temporality – between the ethnographer and the worlds under study. The hosting gesture, we believe, is well suited to dealing with the troublesome reworking of what exists.

Hosting environments

Working as an urban anthropologist, Tomás has become invested in how to re-learn the practice of ethnographic inquiry from a wide variety of actors engaged in social interventions. These range from design activists to architects and artists making and unmaking their habitats with a wide range of purposes in mind. Appreciating that fieldwork can be effective without being solemn, he has been exploring with others the power of games, many times existing as vernacular genres in different fields of activist practice, to challenge established ontologies of the urban. Together with colleagues from the Stadtlabor for Multimodal Anthropology (Humboldt University of Berlin), Tomás has been captivated by the work of ‘material’ game designers (Germaine & Wake 2023), particularly those behind urban activist projects, like *Commonspoly* or the more speculative and puzzling artistic games, like Sebastian Quack and the *Invisible Playground* collective. These designers may feel constrained by the fact that they need to create ‘amusing’ or ‘fun’ situations – however defined by audiences and publics – but in light of the above discussion, their work with material props entails valuable analytic endeavours. Indeed, theirs is an artistic research through games, many times puzzling and speculative in kind, their games never closing down meaning-making.

Take, for instance, one of the Stadtlabor’s projects, *Waste What?* This is an open-source board game that simulates the organizational challenges faced by circular economy activists and civic initiatives from Berlin: it advocates for the circular economy against consumerism and nurtures an appreciation of the value of discarded objects so as to give them new life. The game was the product of an intense one-year collaborative project – *Trash games: playing with the circular economy transition at the Haus der Materialisierung* – developed together with the engineers of the Chair of Circular Economy and Recycling Technologies of the Technical University of Berlin.³ From the onset, the project aimed to produce a game, but for over half a year the team devoted themselves to doing quick field visits to relevant sites where versions of the circular economy in the city were being enacted: from activist collectives repurposing textiles, repairing bikes, or creating inventories of second-hand materials (see Fig. 1), to diverse municipal experiments by the waste management authority of Berlin (BSR), where examples ranged from a waste incinerator facility producing fuel to second-hand shops using an IKEA-like aesthetics. These field visits sought to ascertain relevant discursive elements, as well as elicit attention to worries, rhythms, aesthetics, and spatial arrangements. That is, it was fieldwork seeking to identify analytical abstractions that might prove relevant for the abstraction that any gameplay or mechanic entails, or for other storytelling elements (see Fig. 2).

During the field visits, the team was captivated by two analytic obsessions that proved very relevant for thinking about the final gameplay (see Fig. 3). The first was the never-ending ‘avalanche’ of materials that these circular economy initiatives are constantly having to sort out while learning to deal with different artefacts and materials and, sometimes, to specialize in certain areas (e-waste, bikes, textiles). The second was the



Figure 1. The Haus der Materialisierung. (Photo: CC BY Haus der Materialisierung.)



Figure 2. Testing prototypes of the game with actors from the *Haus der Materialisierung*. (Photo by Tomás Criado, 2022.)

initiatives' fraught attempts to close down 'circles' or circular economy loops, which involved connecting people as they worked out ways to repurpose objects into materials, hybridize broken things into new objects, and simply try to make ends meet.⁴ Games help render thinkable, through modelling and simulating in different ways their spatio-temporal contractions, the complex layering and hierarchization of agents that they assemble, as well as their bottleneck effects. Considerable work thus went into managing the constraints of different game formats (cards, tabletop, role-playing, etc.) in order to produce different effects of simulation and immersion, both allegorical and realist. All these devices provided the grounds for a particular kind of open-ended storytelling, which always requires players – acting as either rule-followers or rule-breakers – for the story to appear in any given form.

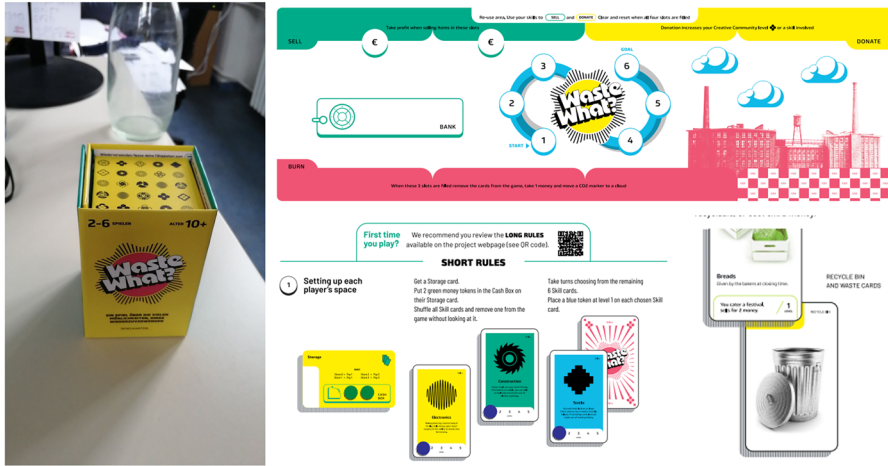


Figure 3. Collage of the package and components. (Photo: CC BY Trash Games.)

Working within a domain of more or less open-ended rules also provided an experimental analytic gaze through which to dissect, mimic, or simulate existing social rules in all their complexity. Game design, therefore, can be taken as a way of doing ethnographic research of rule-based worlds by producing tiny worlds of incomplete rules. Its iterative making allows practitioners to enter into relations of suspended abstraction (Fariás & Criado 2023), so that analysis happens through a variability of sensory registers and epistemic repertoires. Intriguingly, making ethnographic games in this way entails the incomplete material translation of a study of worldly rules into the rules of a game that stand for fieldwork experiences, developing into a strange proxy for a monograph, only ‘completed’ each time it is played. *Waste What?* was indeed inspired by anthropologist Joe Dumit (2017), who has pointed out the great pedagogical relevance of designing games of various types (rules, cards, board games, or role-playing games). As he explains, games allow us to think, simulate and analyse the intricate socio-material relationships of complex systems such as contemporary infrastructures.

In this instance, an inviting anthropology understands knowledge production as materializing situations of joint problem-making that can be mobilized for the collective speculation of alternative ways of being in the world. Using hosting devices, like games, it involves learning to attend in new ways to what appears as the social, evoked every time someone sits down and plays with them. Instead of assuming that as anthropologists our role is primarily to produce complete and detached cultural descriptions to be published or, in a corporate context to gather user data effectively, an inviting anthropology is poised to take on, together with designers, the challenge of intervening in the social, even in the incomplete and open-ended way a game suggests. It can do this by collectively creating material settings, like games, where more or less speculative conversations around how we might consume, repair, and take care of the lives of discarded things can be hosted.

Hosting is perhaps familiar to a discipline based on forcing uninvited ethnographic visits on countless hosts around the world. Elsewhere, anthropology has pursued sophisticated discussions of how a professional stranger might translate across worlds through, for instance, ‘controlling equivocations’ (Viveiros de Castro 2004), in

decolonial attempts affecting the languages and practices of the moderns. However, the kind of gesture that the aforementioned games as hosting environments do is of a different sort: it entails producing a situation for others to enter, more or less frictionally. This idea draws on linguist Émile Benveniste's (1969) etymological musings; he traces *hospes* ('host/guest') to the compound *hosti-potis* ('master of strangers'), from *hostis* (stranger/enemy) and *potis* (power/mastery). Ambiguously, this might seem like the exertion of some sort of control, but might also appear as an abuse of the host's generosity. And as has been pointed out recently by anthropologists and philosophers of the encounter, hospitality is a complicated endeavour: ripe with strange encounters, confusion, and potential for hostility (Bandak & Knight 2024; Candea & da Col 2012; Derrida 1994; Serres 1982). In any case, an inviting anthropology might be required to accommodate even those who risk ruining the space of hospitality.

In the anthropological tradition, we have long been engaged in the observation and description of relations, whereas in what we call an inviting anthropology, a great part of the fieldwork is dedicated to the making of devices that might generate different kinds of relations altogether, with a certain prospective and open-ended flair. As per the etymology just mentioned, to create hosting devices might suggest tricky feelings of deceit, as if we were building traps (Corsín Jiménez & Nahum-Claudel 2019). For when we bring in our ethnographic counterparts across well-policed epistemic boundaries and fixed research questions, our hosting devices could appear to resemble a sort of Trojan Horse: a deceitful wooden trap camouflaged as a collaborative but also extractive device for the researcher. But this is far from what we're suggesting. An invitational anthropology, by contrast, entails materially enabling zones of mutual uncertainty among a multiplicity of human and non-human guests, to instil generative puzzlement without imposing our discipline on others.

Ethnographic guests

In the field, the anthropologist is traditionally seen as a stranger within the gates, someone who lives within the bounds of a social entity but irremediably is, in some sense, not entirely part of it. Here, in turn, we are proposing to act as a host extending invitations, creating peculiar environments for that to happen. As we linger with *our* guests, we can still use correspondences and descriptions to investigate relations and patterns (Strathern 2020). Francisco, for instance, has been testing forms of relating by materializing an expanded ethnography with different artistic and designerly guests, where taking, gleaning, and disrupting are not failures but part of social research (Martínez 2025b). As curator of a dozen art projects, he has taken notes throughout the process of collaborating with designer Viktor Gurov, who was an ethnographic guest in three of these art projects, *Life in decline* (2021), *Keeping things in the dark* (2023), and *Ex libris* (2024).

To prepare the respective art installations, 'host' and 'guest' visited Eastern Estonia together over thirty times, undertaking archival and field research, entering into mining tunnels, abandoned buildings, energy plants, bunkers, military museums, landfills, and waste-recycling labs. In fact, host and guest are somewhat fluid identities given how Francisco and Viktor shifted across several roles in the process. All the while, they were attentively discussing the kinds of values that they wanted to transmit, through particular colours, typefaces, and lines for the visual identity as well as the materials of each exhibition space. This activity was challenging not simply for the recursive discussions and extensive research it entailed, but especially because of the site-specific

aims of their intervention. Indeed, the spaces they worked with provided both form and format for our collaborative mode of investigation, reminding us that when it comes to research, sites, like people, have their own constraints and enabling conditions.

The first site was a former administrative building next to the Kohtla mine, which had been closed since 2001; the second was the Sillamäe museum (an institution charged with telling the history of a town that used to be secret because of enriching uranium for Soviet nuclear weapons). The final exhibition took place in the former School No. 1 of Sillamäe, in a building that had been abandoned for nearly twenty years. All these locations are in Eastern Estonia, a region socially, demographically, and ecologically shaped by extractive activities, and nowadays affected by unemployment, outmigration, environmental damage, half-emptiness, incomplete belonging to the ethnonational Estonian Republic, and corporate restructuring associated with EU Green Deal regulations (Martínez 2025a).

Conventional approaches to participant observation and fieldnote taking were insufficient to capture the wicked relations of collective loss, pollution, mistrust, secrecy, stigmatization, and hopelessness taking place, so Francisco decided to invite Viktor and ten local artists to investigate and make perceptible together an experience of negative capability that resisted translation into words. This form of expanded ethnography, in which different professionals were borrowing each other's epistemic positions, involved a critical revision of research practices in the field. As they were preparing the exhibition by constructing a hosting environment, Francisco and his guests were in fact testing new forms of knowledge production and dissemination. This invitational anthropology created a time-space of experimentation among both participants and visitors, altering the conditions of research while arranging the field as a plural (or promiscuous) formation of questions. The exhibition was thus a knowledge event itself, materializing concepts, putting research questions into circulation and suspension, while disseminating analytical insights via the senses (Martínez 2023b).

In this sense, an invitational anthropology is not simply to juxtapose a plurality of modes of knowing. Rather, it constitutes a hosting environment through which, with our ethnographic guests, we can reach new forms and fields of knowledge by exploring other possibilities for relating empirically and analytically (Sansi 2015). For instance, Viktor and Francisco made use of the existing signage of former mining sites for the show's graphic design. For the spatial design they decided to preserve the existing twilight atmosphere of abandonment, undefined and intermediate as it felt. This way of making the experience of negative capability perceptible through design was indeed noted by some of the comments written in the exhibition's guest book. For instance, someone remarked: 'it feels as if workers had just left the building'. Also, art historian Elnara Taidre noted 'a healthy amazement, not colonial exoticization', a sentiment that contrasts with how this region is most often represented in public discussion.

While putting together *Life in decline*, and after some prototypes and several iterations ('the ping-pong part', as Viktor called it), we had to choose between two sketches for the graphic design (see Fig. 4). One was more 'organic', employing a typeface resembling handwriting alongside handmade lines in pink and purple colours to emphasize the fragility of things that humans construct. The second sketch appeared as more dominating, somewhat colonial with references to the afterlife of harmful energy infrastructures, here represented with the straight lines of the engineering documents we found in the former administrative building. Finally, we decided to combine both

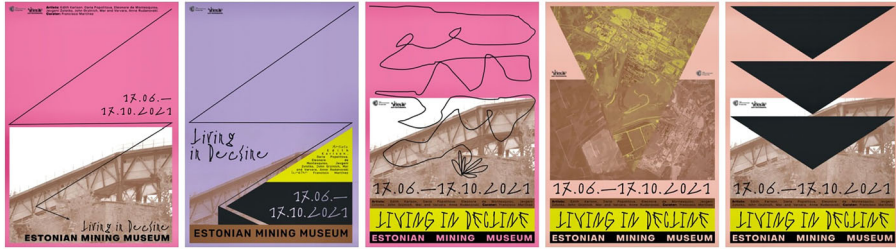


Figure 4. Design sketches by Viktor. (Photo by Francisco Martínez.)



Figure 5. De-installing the *Life in decline* exhibition with Viktor. (Photo by Francisco Martínez.)

designs and to add another layer representing pollution and the mine's working culture by using specific tones of green and yellow inspired by the workers' vests.

Interestingly, the host/guest relation is very easily reshuffled during the process. So, the field does not necessarily remain under the host's control and, in some instances or stages of the research, the ethnographer might end up, paradoxically, taking the role of the guest. In *Life in decline*, Francisco was 'a client' of Viktor, who was commissioned and paid to design the visual identity of the exhibition (see Fig. 5). For the next two projects, their relations were arranged in a more horizontal way. With no service provision they faced all the tasks of research and exhibition-making on equal terms, alongside two more collaborators – artists Anna Škodenko and Darja Popolitova. As part of the process, they visited thirty-seven basements on the border between Russia and Estonia. The intensive exchange of ideas and field experiences resulted in a collective installation and four parallel artworks. Viktor, who has a background in street art, engaged with the existentialist forms of expression encountered in the basements, for instance by printing on a linoleum carpet a half-poetic, half-archival collage entitled 'Sartre downstairs'. He also created a ceiling with *fumage* aesthetics, resonating with the post-industrial landscape with its highly noticeable chimneys, pipes, and factories.

In parallel, Darja built an audiovisual sculpture, in which a *Nevalyashka* (a Russian doll) was 'liberated' to start assessing the contemporary world through the eyes of a past cosmology. Anna, in turn, unveiled the repair activity of local resident Jelena



Figure 6. Installing the wall text of the *Ex libris* exhibition. (Photo by Francisco Martínez.)

Mutonen with a song and a video. Jelena lives in a building that stands on the hollow ground of an abandoned oil shale mine in Kohtla-Järve being considered for potential demolition. She has been refurbishing the entrances, basements, and attics of the building with creative mosaics, handmade from leftovers taken from nearby construction or demolition works. ‘I want to make the lives of people less stressful’, says Jelena, herself re-designing the social through tinkering.

The third collaboration between Francisco and Viktor was the exhibition *Ex libris* (see Fig. 6). In this art project, they used different storytelling devices to show the different temporal, cultural, and ecological transmissions (some of them with no meaning and done by non-human agents) taking place in the left-behind, Soviet library of an abandoned school in Sillamäe. Overall, these examples also show that making use of designers’ and artists’ ways of intervening in reality allows anthropologists to engage with emerging problematics and to have a more creative public voice in contemporary issues. This can be achieved by appreciating art, design, and architecture certainly as a source of methodological inspiration, an add-on to the ways we practise ethnography, but also as a material practice that attempts to both understand and participate in what we study.

The analytical encounters described here point to how, as anthropologists extending invitations, we too are doing things, constructing social questions while intervening in what we study. More distinctively, an inviting anthropology is a promiscuous practice of ethnographic openings: one engaged in hospitable material transformations that actively suspend existing ways of doing as a way of social inquiry. We do not want to collapse the broader anthropological heritage into some free-for-all hype around creativity, but nor do we support suffocating approaches to academic identity politics, defending anthropology at all costs. Not everyone in our discipline has found this so exciting, and many discussions in recent years have stressed the renewed ‘patchwork’ conditions of knowledge production that speedier and shorter forms of fieldwork, like those of design practitioners, entail for our discipline (Günel & Watanabe 2024). Indeed, ethnography in corporate contexts is often labelled as ‘rapid’ (Handwerker 2002; Johnson & Vindrola-Padros 2017; Millen 2000), or ‘focused’ (Knoblauch 2005; Wall

2014). Without denying anthropology's traditionally difficult relationship with shorter and quicker approaches to fieldwork (Beaulieu 2010) – with its bearing on typically slower work of gaining trust, building relationships, and writing ethnographies – our examples show that it can be complementary.⁵

Concluding thoughts: a field of invitations

Anthropologists have always taken 'the field' as a practice of going to the encounter of others. The long story of our genuine interest in many other ways of doing resides in an attempt at learning from these encounters. From rather colonial approaches to more symmetrical attempts, the conditions of the encounters have varied greatly. In this article, we have discussed a renewed attempt at entering into ethnographic relations by working in the vicinity of artists, designers, and architects, from whom we have learned the importance of material interventions hosting alternative ways of understanding the world. We have shown, specifically, that once anthropologists intervene in the field by creating hosting environments, this allows us to expand the range of interlocutors – now turned into ethnographic guests – and enrich analysis and observation. There is, thus, no need to be afraid of intervening or redesigning things. Indeed, the kind of research we have discussed can and perhaps should work back on anthropology by being more open to learning from the material and social forms through which others already intervene in their worlds.

Taking the epistemic practices of our ethnographic guests seriously allows us to work out differences and variations without seeking consensus or uniformity. It is also to retrain ourselves – aware that disjunctions and frictions are an intrinsic part of both anthropology and working with people. This acknowledgement, in addition to taking the discipline into new sites, might also help us to foreground anthropology's relevance: showing that it is possible to work and learn alongside practitioners invested in material interventions through engaging in ad hoc conversations and collaborations (Berglund 2022). In anthropology, there have been engaged discussions about the need to delineate the spatial and temporal coordinates of 'the field' for heuristic purposes (Candea 2007), supporting the sense of epistemic dislocation that remains important in anthropology, alongside awareness of our partial perspective and varied accountabilities.⁶ Our point is that the field can be bounded in different ways. To move towards a more inviting anthropology, we need to render modes of operating in adjacent disciplines and practices, knowable, actionable, and inhabitable within our discipline in a proactive way.

But what does an inviting anthropology have to offer when it does so? We have argued that when acting as hosts, we depart from more classical anthropological functions, like seeking to compare cultures or represent different forms of the social. The more experimental contours of setting up spaces to invite others to possibly strange or frictional encounters are also very distant from corporate design approaches setting participatory processes to ease the experts' work or acting as theoretical guides for designers to work better. As we see it, an inviting anthropology points to a different kind of interventionist practice: an activity where possible social relations as well as what might become knowable can emerge through materializing peculiar environments to think and do in the vicinity of our guests. This is indeed a fieldwork practice that makes relations matter, in a literal sense, opening up possible new material roles for anthropologists beyond observation and description. In materializing these hospitable environments what emerges is a different contour of the field: a field of invitations, where experimental and open-ended forms of inquiry happen through transformative

spaces where we learn together with ethnographic guests, remaking our worlds in a joint search for relevance.

Through a series of examples, we troubled established distinctions between knowledge production and intervening in what we study, learning from material practitioners from across disciplinary institutions already accustomed to interventive work. We also surveyed the work of colleagues, to emphasize that anthropology is already being fleshed out in inspiring ways by kindred practitioners working within as well as in the vicinity of our discipline. We aimed to create grounds for conversations between a more designerly, artistic, and architectural anthropology, while accounting for the capacity of these fields to experiment with re-designing social issues and their relevance. An inviting anthropology thus looks recursively at how we can participate in hospitable forms of generative knowledge-making in a collaborative way. The discussion of how to reconfigure what our discipline could be by practising fields of invitations is an important contribution to ongoing methodological discussions at the meeting point of social sciences, art, design, and architecture; not just because we appreciate certain fields as a source of inspiration, but as a way of materializing hospitable environments to facilitate experimental attempts to understand what we study while entering into generative transformations together with ethnographic guests.

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This joint endeavour has been very long in the making: first drafted as a book proposal in 2019, it slowly grew into a positional essay, which has had many lives before its current instantiation. We have benefitted from the very constructive feedback of JRAI's editorial team and peer reviewers, whose insights have allowed us to bring it to fruition. Our work has also benefitted from wonderful conversations with Adolfo Estalella, Ignacio Farías, Andrea Gaspar, Rachel Harkness, and Guy Julier, as well as our colleagues from the Collaboratory of Ethnographic Experimentation, an EASA network. We wish to thank them all accordingly. Tomás Criado's work has been supported by the Trash Games project, funded by the Berlin University Alliance 2021-2022 and a Ramón y Cajal fellowship (RYC2021-033410-I) of the Spanish Research Agency. Francisco Martínez has been supported by the Ramón y Cajal Excellence Program (RYC2023-044038-I) of the Spanish Research Agency.

NOTES

¹ This gesture is common in 'militant' styles of Public Anthropology. It reverberates with critical design studies, retracing the genealogies of Design Anthropology and 'socially motivated' social design where the 'social' operates largely in the service of dominant economic interests even if individuals and projects go against the grain (Julier & Kimbell 2019).

² Despite the discipline-based modes of description and analysis that dominate such situations, they also generate critical joint efforts to live with and even transform the 'contradiction, exception, facts that are fugitive' and other puzzles proliferating in them (Holmes & Marcus 2006: 237). This is a kind of unlearning analogous to venturing out into the world with others, as Tim Ingold (2018) might put it, being affected by other actors in a process of joint attention and response. This epistemic aspiration requires thinking beyond existing disciplinary boundaries and engaging publicly with messy spaces of knowing (Berglund & Kohtala 2021; Puig de la Bellacasa 2017).

³ Project funded by the Berlin University Alliance 2021-2022 call for Experimental Science Communication Laboratories. Team: Vera Susanne Rotter (Project lead), Tomás Criado (Project co-lead), Ignacio Farías (Project co-lead), Isabel Ordóñez (Research and Development), Johannes Scholz (Project Coordination), Petra Beck (Artistic research and documentation, game development), Sebastian Quack (Game design), Marisol Escorza (Graphic design), Sophie Wulf (Student assistant) and Adriana Flores Franz (Video documentation). URL: <https://www2.hu-berlin.de/stadtlabor/project/trash-games/>

⁴ In fact, these things became central to the game, with players needing to embody the conundrums of these civic initiatives, trying to sort things out and keep them in use whilst simply staying afloat (e.g., needing to pay a monthly rent for the storage space). This happened through interweaving: gameplays and their rhythms; graphic elements and their narratives; the material scenographies provided by instructions, as well as other suggestions for players to take roles or to perform them openly.

⁵ Others like Luke Cantarella, Christine Hegel and George E. Marcus (2019) have vindicated the powers of perhaps quicker but immersive 'scenographic' situations like the ones articulated by artistic installations where 'productive encounters' can ensue.

⁶ The boundary-making gesture supports a 'cutting' of reality in order to refine our ways of seeing (Strathern 1996). Most often, the ethnographer establishes a complex back-and-forth relation to the field, to the point that Strathern (1999) talks of studying, as it were, two fields simultaneously, one dedicated to analysis and the other to observation.

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Pour une anthropologie accueillante

Résumé

Les pratiques des arts, du design et de l'architecture sont récemment devenues une source d'inspiration, voire de fascination, pour les anthropologues, qui y voient un moyen de renouveler les modes d'engagement de l'anthropologie et l'appréhension de sa pertinence, notamment dans la manière d'aborder le travail de terrain ethnographique. Après avoir travaillé chacun pendant une bonne dizaine d'années à cette croisée des chemins, les auteurs réfléchissent à la recherche d'une pertinence anthropologique par des matérialisations collaboratives sur le terrain, dans des situations où les anthropologues vont au-delà des gestes de la critique culturelle et de l'observation des participants. Il s'agit de créer des environnements d'accueil dans lesquels nos interlocuteurs ne sont pas seulement co-ethnographes ou co-penseurs mais aussi, et surtout, des invités ethnographiques. L'idée est familière, dans une discipline fondée sur le fait de s'imposer chez les gens partout dans le monde sans y avoir été invité. Dans leurs explorations matérielles, les auteurs envisagent une voie différente : pour eux, accueillir est un mode d'investigation qui inaugure une anthropologie plus ouverte, dans laquelle les zones d'incertitude mutuelle entre une multitude d'acteurs leur permettent de susciter une perplexité générative sans imposer leur discipline aux autres. En conclusion, ils plaident pour une anthropologie pratiquée comme un champ d'invitations, dans l'espoir de refaire le monde avec leurs invités ethnographiques.

Tomás Criado (corresponding author) is an anthropologist and STS scholar, especially interested in urban environmental phenomena. He works as Ramón y Cajal Senior Research Fellow at the CareNet group, Open University of Catalonia. In his ethnographic and public engagement work, he has inquired on different forms of material and knowledge politics in environments where care is invoked as a mode of urban intervention. He is co-editor of *Experimental collaborations* (Berghahn, 2018) and *An ethnographic inventory* (Routledge, 2023).

CareNet Research Group, Open University of Catalonia, Rambla del Poblenou 154, 08018 Barcelona, Spain. tomcriado@uoc.edu

Francisco Martínez is an anthropologist dealing with contemporary issues of material culture through ethnographic research. His research was awarded the Early Career Prize of the European Association of Social Anthropologists. He currently works as a Ramón y Cajal Senior Research Fellow at the University of Murcia. Martínez is the author of four monographs and his new book – *The Future of Hiding* (Cornell University Press) – explores how secrecy intersects with energy infrastructure and identity politics in Eastern Estonia.

University of Murcia, Campus de Espinardo 11, 30100 Murcia, Spain. francisco.martinez14@um.es

Eeva Berglund works at the intersections of design culture, environmental policy, and lived experience. She has pursued methodological questions through, for instance, #Colleex Collaboratory for ethnographic experimentation, an EASA network. Her recent work has focused on modern, material infrastructures and conceptions of knowledge and nature.

Department of Design, Aalto University, Otaniementie 14, 02150 Espoo, Finland. eeva.berglund@aalto.fi