



HISTORICAL PRESENCE IN VISUAL CULTURE Contemporaneity

Vol 7, No 1 (2018) | ISSN 2153-5914 (online) | DOI 10.5195/contemp/2018.260
<http://contemporaneity.pitt.edu>

“An Imagined Border of Safety, Humanitarian Relief, and Creativity”

J. M. Design Studio's *Other Border Wall Project*

Nicole F. Scalissi

Abstract

In April 2017, J. M. Design Studio—three Pittsburgh-based artists and designers—responded to the Customs and Border Protection's public request for proposals for a wall along the U.S.-Mexico border. J. M. Design Studio then announced its own call for more border "wall" proposals from other artists. The following commentary details these prototype concepts and tracks the executive policies and rhetoric that established a foundation for the border wall.

This commentary also shows how J. M. Design Studio's prototype submission and the subsequent artistic platform it initiated model how creative connection and the co-option of established public channels are themselves acts of political resistance in an era of disrupted democratic participation and ossified partisanship.

About the Author

Nicole F. Scalissi's research focuses on art produced in the United States since the 1970s that stages, performs, or fakes violence against marginalized communities as a means to call attention to the disproportionate and real violence committed against women and people of color in the United States. Nicole completed her Master's degree at Penn State with a qualifying paper on Andy Warhol's early career 3D-style paintings that depicted a 1950s "lady" wrestler and the specific challenges that her untraditional femininity presented to gender categories in the Cold War popular context. She is a doctoral candidate in the History of Art & Architecture at the University of Pittsburgh.

“An Imagined Border of Safety, Humanitarian Relief, and Creativity”

J.M. Design Studio’s *Other Border Wall Project*

Nicole F. Scalissi

From the earliest public moments of his presidential aspirations, Donald Trump conjured an image of the United States under attack by Mexico, describing the border as a dangerously porous zone through which drugs, crime, and “rapists” from the lawless south slip into the peaceable north, threatening the public safety, national security, and economic supremacy of the United States.¹ In his announcement of his run for president in June 2015, Trump made the pledge that would become the figurative and literal symbol of the “America First”

isolationism at the heart of his future administration: “I would build a great wall, and nobody builds walls better than me, believe me, and I’ll build them very inexpensively, I will build a great, great wall on our southern border. And I will have Mexico pay for that wall. Mark my words.”²

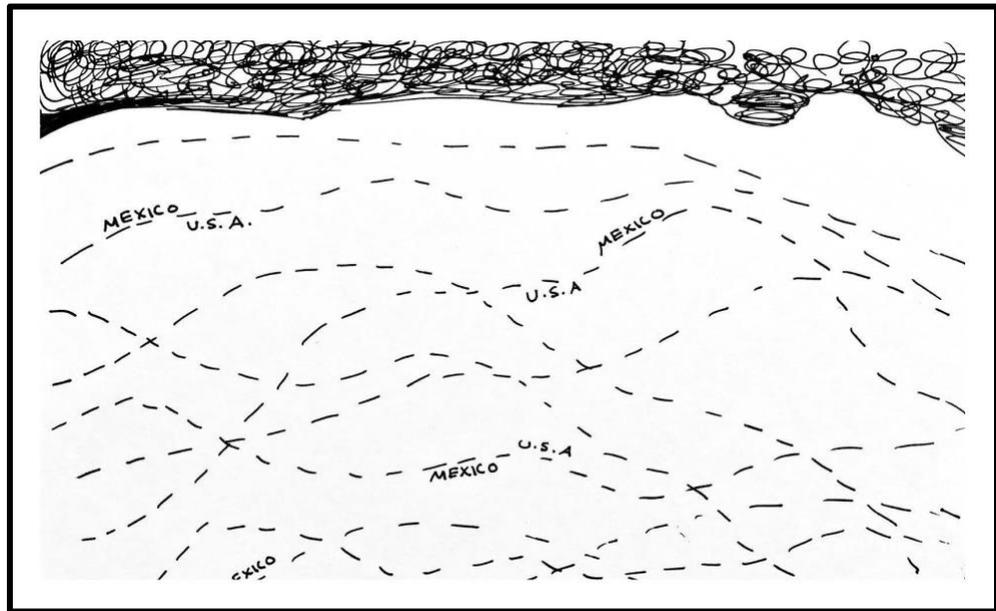


Figure 1

Detail from J.M. Design Studio, “Prototype #3 A Wall of Artists Redrawing Borders” from *The Other Border Wall Proposals* (2017). Digital scanned image of ink drawing on paper, text. 8 ½ X 11 inches. Collection of J. M. Design Studio.

In the first days of his administration, Trump began to make good on his campaign promise by setting the wall’s foundation in Executive Order #13767, “Border Security and Immigration

¹ *Time Magazine* staff, “Here’s Donald Trump’s Presidential Announcement Speech,” *Time Magazine*, June 16, 2015, <http://time.com/3923128/donald-trump-announcement-speech/>

² *Ibid.*

Enforcement Improvements,” which established policies to “secure the southern border . . . through the immediate construction of a physical wall,” and detain then “remove promptly” individuals found to be in violation of state or federal immigration laws. EO #13767—his third since taking office just five days earlier—further mandated hiring five thousand additional Border Patrol Agents, conscripted local law enforcement into performing the “functions of an immigration officer,” and—in a vague and mean-spirited Section 11—tamped down on the “abuse of parole and asylum provisions currently used to prevent the lawful removal of removable aliens.”³ Despite the Republican Party’s longstanding criticism of the previous administration’s issuance of executive orders as “overreach”⁴—not to mention Trump’s own statements that President Barack Obama’s executive orders were “major power grabs of authority”—Trump’s immediate use of the executive order was positively received by the Republican Party, and his action allowed for swift changes to law enforcement practices at the border without the approval of Congress or the American people.⁵

“a contiguous, physical wall or other similarly secure...impassable physical barrier”

Over the following weeks—during which the futures of the recipients of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), known as “Dreamers,” were held hostage as Trump bargained their citizenship for funding for the wall; the government temporarily shut down; and Trump became embroiled in emerging scandals related to affairs with adult entertainment stars—the Secretary of Homeland Security began the logistical process of wall-building. As the opposition took up signs saying, “Build Bridges, Not Walls” to protest the administration’s early actions on immigration and travel bans, the U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) began publicly promoting its pro-wall vision. In the video *Walls Work*, which became the agency’s refrain,⁶ Border Patrol Agent S. Lubin (who, as a legibly African American woman, represents two groups significantly underrepresented in the CBP)⁷ describes how existing sections of “border barriers” have “made a world of difference.” At the barriers, she claims, “apprehensions”

³ “Executive Order: Border Security and Immigration Enforcement Improvements,” The White House, January 27, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/executive-order-border-security-immigration-enforcement-improvements/>

⁴ In response to President Barack Obama’s November 2014 executive action on immigration policy, then-chairman of the Republican National Committee, Reince Priebus, released a statement: “The Constitution does not grant the President the power to act as a one-man legislature when he disagrees with Congress and with voters. The last time the President issued a politically motivated executive order to change our immigration laws, he precipitated a crisis at our border, leaving thousands of children at risk and ripping apart the families he claims to want to protect. Granting amnesty does not secure our borders.”

“Statement on President Obama’s Executive Overreach,” *Republican National Committee* website, November 20, 2014, <https://www.gop.com/rnc-statement-on-president-obamas-executive-overreach/>

⁵ For an accounting of Trump’s early use of EOs and collection of his statements on EOs, see Christopher Ingraham, “Six Times Trump Said Executive Orders Were Bad Before he Decided They Were Actually Good,” Wonkblog at *The Washington Post*, April 25, 2017,

https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2017/04/25/six-times-trump-said-executive-orders-were-bad-before-he-decided-they-were-actually-good/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.29ea84067bda

⁶ In his March 30, 2018, briefing, Acting Deputy Commissioner Ronald Vitiello reiterated the CBP’s support of the project: “Walls work and agents know it.” See “U.S. Customs and Border Protection Briefing,” C-Span, video 19:42 (quote at 4:40), <https://www.c-span.org/video/?443273-1/border-protection-official-briefs-construction-wall&start=157>; *Walls Work*, U.S. Customs and Border Protection website, March 7, 2017, <https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/video-gallery/video-library/walls-work>

⁷ Lubin identifies herself as a border patrol agent in *Walls Work*. According to the most recent workplace demographics of the CBP, “Females represent 5.0% of BPAs . . . Black or African Americans represent 1.9% of BPAs.” No statistics track two identifiers (such as agents who are both female and Black/African American. *Office of the Commissioner Privacy and Diversity Office FY 2013 Annual Report*, 18, <https://www.cbp.gov/sites/default/files/documents/pdo-fy13.pdf>

dropped by 87 percent, “natural habitats damaged by illegal migration” recovered, and “neighborhoods and businesses replaced what was once lawless wasteland.” In short, she tells us, “walls do work” (Figs. 2 and 3).⁸



Figure 2 & 3

Screenshots by author from *Walls Work* video. U.S. Customs and Border Protection website. March 7, 2017. <https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/video-gallery/video-library/walls-work>.

Ten days later, on March 17, the CBP issued two Requests for Proposals (RFP) to the public for “the design and construction of a . . . wall prototype and various miles of border wall along the southwest border,” from San Diego, CA, to Brownsville, TX. The first, RFP HSBP1017R0022, solicited offers for a “solid concrete prototype.” The second, RFP HSBP1017R0023, or “Other Border Wall Prototype,” sought proposals for a wall constructed of other materials. The solicitations mandated nearly the same requirements for either prototype, including that the “other border wall”

- “shall be physically imposing in height,” ideally 30-feet tall but no less than 18-feet
- “shall not be possible for a human to climb”
- “shall prevent, for at least 30 minutes, a physical breach of the wall by pick-axe, chisel, Oxy/acetylene torch, etc.”
- “The north side of wall (i.e. U.S. facing side) shall be aesthetically pleasing in color, anti-climb texture, etc., to be consistent with general surrounding environment”
- “Incorporating a see-through component/capability to the wall that facilitates situational awareness but does not negate the requirements listed above is operationally advantageous.”⁹

⁸ The Secure Fences Act of 2006 was signed by President George W. Bush in October 2006, and mandated “systematic surveillance” of U.S. land and maritime borders through technology, manpower, and several sections of physical barriers extending miles on either side of ports of entry in CA, AZ, NM, and TX. See <https://www.congress.gov/109/plaws/publ367/PLAW-109publ367.pdf> Transcript of *Walls Work* can be found here: <https://www.cbp.gov/video/opa/cbp-walls-work.srt>

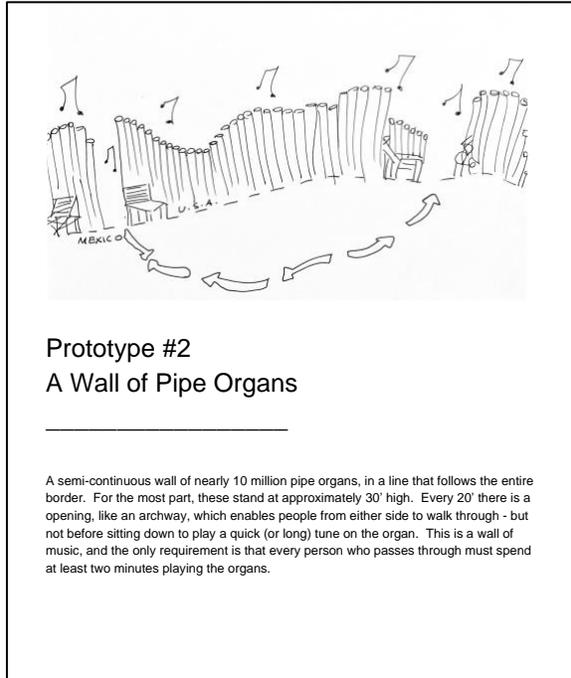
⁹ “Other Border Wall RFP,” *Federal Business Opportunities* website, https://www.fbo.gov/index?s=opportunity&mode=form&id=db624ab3e7356ff358bbf40cdde5c721&tab=core&_cvview=1, page 2 of “Attachment #1 SOW” in HSBP1017R0023 document.

The guidelines for the “Other Border Wall” RFP also stipulated “fully developed drawings, details or specifications are not desired or required,” allowing the designers some flexibility in approaching their prototypes.¹⁰ Along with supplying prototype images, all applicants or “offerors” were required to demonstrate, as part of their submission, their qualifications in terms of experience with large-scale projects and competence to bring the design into fruition.

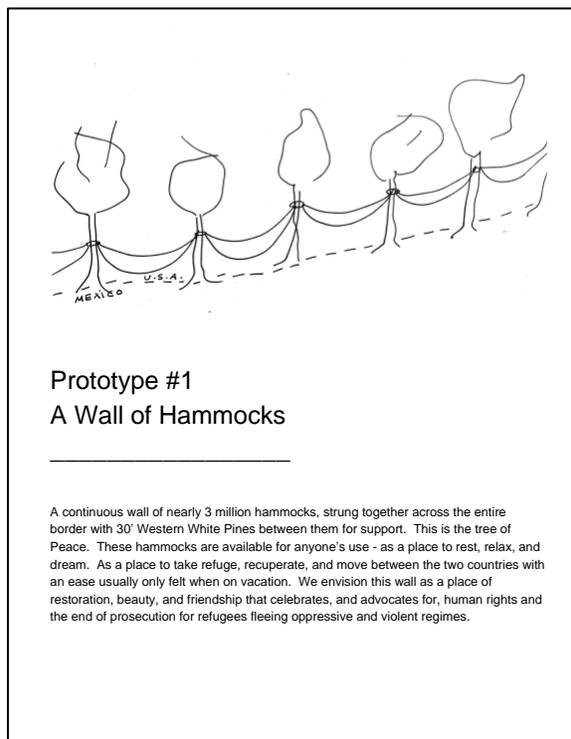
In April 2017, three Pittsburgh-based artists and designers—Jennifer Meridian, Leah Patgorski, and Tereneh Idia—did just that, submitting their qualifications as “designers, artists, and creatives” under the name J. M. Design Studio, along with six prototype concepts, to the “Other Border Wall” RFP (Figs. 1, 4–8).¹¹ In some illustrations, reproduced here, J. M. Design Studio deployed whimsicality as opposition, following the CBP’s guideline of reaching an “physically imposing” height, but doing so with massive pipe organs or White Pine trees, which support a two thousand-mile line of hammocks strung from their thirty-foot trunks (Figs. 4 and 5). Other prototypes make the danger of a restricted border zone explicit: a “wall” comprising a million gravestones becomes a dotted line between the countries, a memorial to the migrants and refugees who have died trying to cross. Or, with hope toward preventing similar deaths, the artists proposed a bastion of lighthouses to guide travelers through the “inhospitable” desert toward safety (Figs. 6 and 7). Beyond satire and the knowing implausibility of their proposals, J.M. Design Studio’s drawings are embedded with a radical reconceptualization of the border as something other than a barrier—ductile, bi-nationally lucrative, and responsive to the shifting needs of the environment and its transnational community. “A Wall of Clean Water” for example, literalizes their optimism for a “fluid border” by offering an oasis and refuge to travelers in the deserts of both nations (Fig. 8), while “A Wall of Artists Redrawing Borders” shows the border to be based in imagination and, ultimately, arbitrary, negotiable, and propositional at best when confronted in real, physical space (Fig. 9).

¹⁰ HSBP1017R0023, 39.

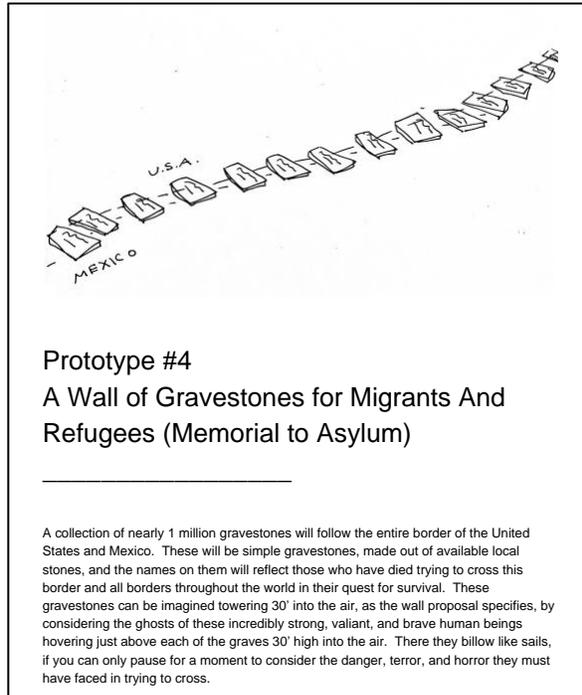
¹¹ See J. M. Design Studio’s full proposal, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5a28a74fa9db09d65c2b097f/t/5a5436b453450a6b369cfab1/1515468469699/JMDESIGN-STUDIORFPHSBP1017R0023PHASE1.pdf>

**Figure 4**

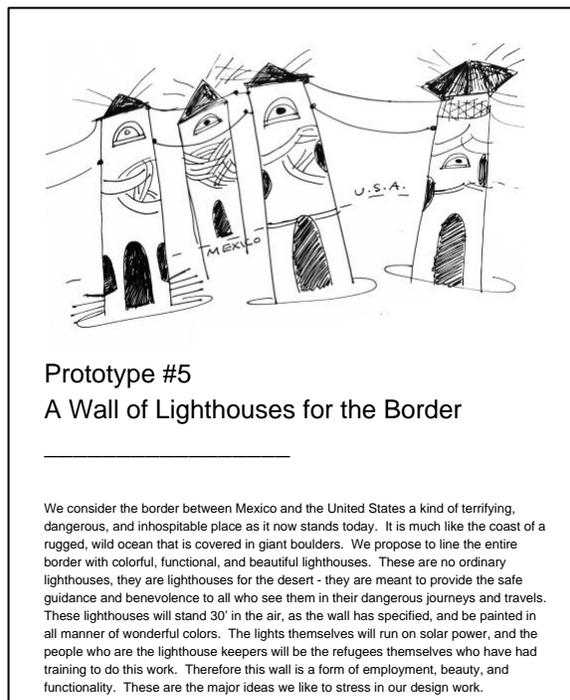
J. M. Design Studio, "Prototype #2 A Wall of Pipe Organs" from *The Other Border Wall Proposals* (2017). Digital scanned image of ink drawing on paper, text. 8 ½ X 11 inches. Collection of J. M. Design Studio.

**Figure 5**

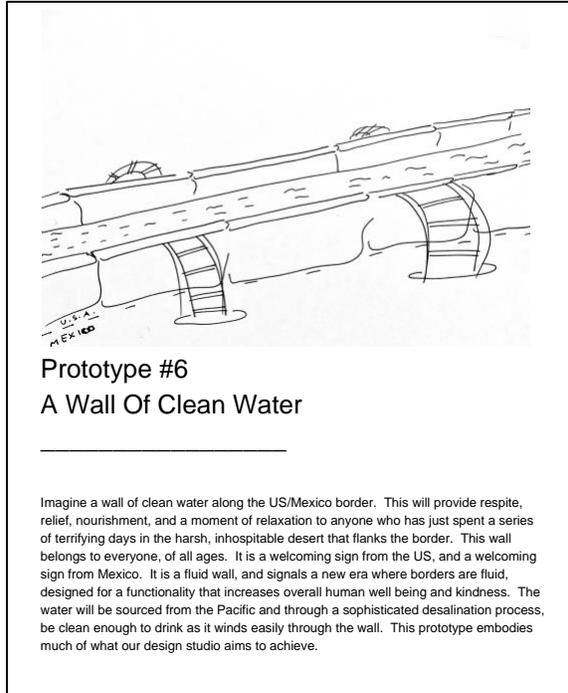
J. M. Design Studio, "Prototype #1 A Wall of Hammocks" from *The Other Border Wall Proposals* (2017). Digital scanned image of ink drawing on paper, text. 8 ½ X 11 inches. Collection of J. M. Design Studio.

**Figure 6**

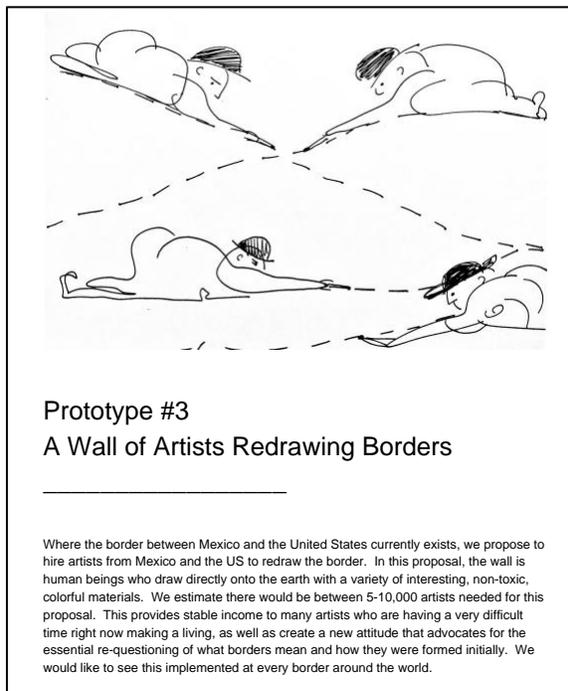
J. M. Design Studio, "Prototype #4 A Wall of Gravestones for Migrants And Refugees (Memorial to Asylum)" from *The Other Border Wall Proposals* (2017). Digital scanned image of ink drawing on paper, text. 8 ½ X 11 inches. Collection of J. M. Design Studio.

**Figure 7**

J. M. Design Studio, "Prototype #5 A Wall of Lighthouses for the Border" from *The Other Border Wall Proposals* (2017). Digital scanned image of ink drawing on paper, text. 8 ½ X 11 inches. Collection of J. M. Design Studio.

**Figure 8**

J. M. Design Studio, "Prototype #6 A Wall of Clean Water" from *The Other Border Wall Proposals* (2017). Digital scanned image of ink drawing on paper, text. 8 ½ X 11 inches. Collection of J. M. Design Studio.

**Figure 9**

J. M. Design Studio, "Prototype #3 A Wall of Artists Redrawing Border Walls" from *The Other Border Wall Proposals* (2017). Digital scanned image of ink drawing on paper, text. 8 ½ X 11 inches. Collection of J. M. Design Studio.

Their submissions were reported by national news outlets that recognized the prototypes as protest, sometimes comparing their deliberate absurdity to the unintentionally absurd concepts submitted in earnest by actual contractors—such as the wall compound comprising a thirty-foot wall, a chain-link fence, motion sensors, a one hundred-foot deep trench lined with “holding cells for nuclear waste processing,” and working train tracks, proposed by the Clayton company, also based in the Pittsburgh area.¹² From more than four hundred submissions, the CBP selected eight prototypes to be constructed, at tax-payer expense, in the San Diego border community of Otay Mesa in the fall of 2017. (Unfortunately, J. M. Design Studio was not among them.)

Other Border Visions

In its commitment to continued resistance, J. M. Design Studio distributed its own Request for Designs online in January 2018, “Other Border Wall Project: How to Build a Non-Wall.” The collective sought “visions for the border between Mexico and the United States as a site of connection, creativity, and humanitarian support . . . signaling possibilities for what the future of walls, and borders, can become” as a means to “dismantle the view of the border as a fortified, insurmountable, and destructive barrier.”¹³ Its public solicitation created a platform for connection and an opportunity not just to think critically and creatively about Trump’s order and the practicalities of such a wall (price and at whose cost, impact on border cities’ environment and families, etc.) but also for reconceptualizing “borders” and “walls” in the first place, calling for others to imagine new possibilities for these zones where neighbors meet. The call yielded both ludic pitches that met the folly of CBP’s solicitation with farce as well as rich meditations of a transnationalist future beyond current U.S. isolationism.

The collective received more than fifty submissions, a selection of which is reproduced here. Many had read the CBP/Trump’s original call as bizarre and performative, responding in kind with jocular “designs” such as Sofia Caetano’s *The Border Collie Wall*, a herd of collies lined up and sitting at attention, perhaps facing south (Figs. 10 and 11). The *Porcelain Poodle Patrol* looks and sounds no more menacing; each pup in the single-file line of glossy bubblegum-pink poodles sits alert with one fluffy paw raised, not a “HALT!” so much as performing “shake” in hopes of a treat.

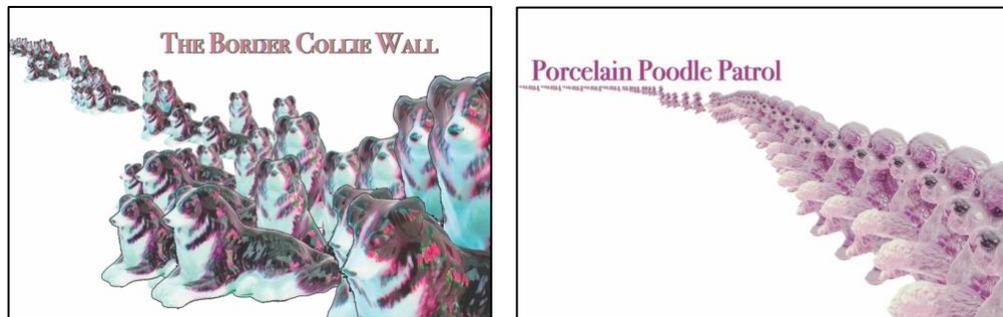


Figure 10 & 11

Sofia Caetano, *The Border Collie Wall* and *Porcelain Poodle Patrol* (2018), digital renderings for *Other Border Wall Project: How to Build a Non-Wall*, 2017.

¹² For a description of the Clayton proposal, see Anya Litvak and Chris Potter, “Local Firm Envisions a Nuclear-Waste Moat for Trump’s Border Wall,” *Pittsburgh Post Gazette*, April 8, 2017, <http://www.post-gazette.com/local/north/2017/04/08/Local-firm-envisions-a-nuclear-waste-moat-for-Trump-s-border-wall/stories/201704080097>. J. M. Design Studio’s submission was covered by National Public Radio, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Slate*, and others. See <http://jennifermeridianstudio.com/press/>

¹³ From J. M. Studio’s Request For Designs. See <https://www.otherborderwallproject.com>

Susanne Slavick's "Other Border Wall" is more properly a row of gateways that entices border crossings, and perhaps re-crossings, with its sensual feather turnstiles. Others re-envisioned the border as a junction, a useful space for exchange and bread-breaking, such as Barton Schindel's Food Booth Wall or Emma Brown's two-thousand-mile double-sided banquet, which reminds us that the United States and Mexico are in a permanent contiguous relationship with the neighborly advice: "Build a longer table, not a higher fence" (Fig. 12). Others recharged the wall with literal humanity, suggesting that people stand along the border or that the wall itself be made flesh, a soft but eerie membrane.



Figure 12

Emma Brown, *Border Table* (2018), watercolor paintings for *Other Border Wall Project: How to Build a Non-Wall*.

Some artists took direct aim at Trump and the "alternative facts" on which his administration has based itself. The App Expo group proposed the *AppGlass™ Augmented Reality Border Wall*, an awkward glass cone that, when worn over the head while facing the "general direction of Mexico," shows the wearer "an alternatively factual wall in your own unique reality," constructing the wall only as figment in one's (i.e., Trump's) imagination (Fig. 13).¹⁴



Figure 13

The App Expo, *AppGlass™ Augmented Reality Border Wall* (2018) digital rendering for *Other Border Wall Project: How to Build a Non-Wall*.

¹⁴ Counselor to the President Kellyanne Conway used the phrase on NBC's *Meet the Press* as she disputed host Chuck Todd that Press Secretary Sean Spicer had lied and inflated the crowd size at the 2017 Presidential Inauguration: "Don't be so overly dramatic about it, Chuck. What you're saying, it's a falsehood. . . Sean Spicer, our press secretary, gave alternative facts to that [estimated inaugural crowd size]." See transcript of *Meet the Press*, January 22, 2017, nbcnews.com, January 22, 2017, <https://www.nbcnews.com/meet-the-press/meet-press-01-22-17-n710491>

Beyond levity and sly critique, many submissions proposed a new ecology at the border, critically thinking through the “other border wall” as a bi-national site responsive to the pressing issues of environmental and economic sustainability in the context of a globalized economy and hastening climate change. Helen Cardona, for example, proposes a “fluctuating border” that shifts along, and sometimes over, the meandering Rio Grande. By redeveloping the existing border barriers with retractable fencing and renewable energy production capabilities, Cardona’s plan envisions an “infrastructure that leads to healthy environments, social equity, and sustainable economies” on both sides of the border (Figs. 14–16).

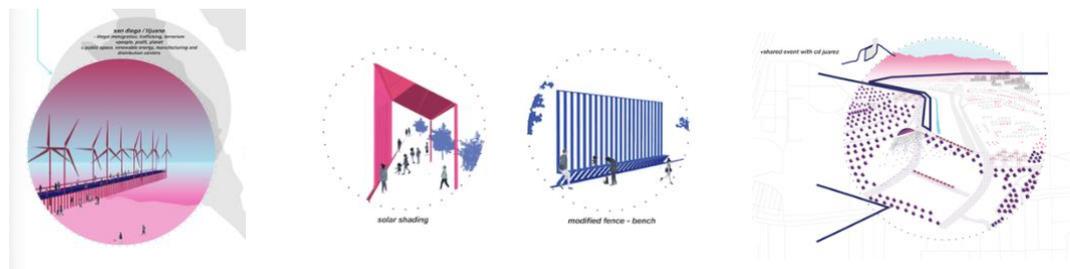


Figure 14-16

Details from Helen Cardona, *Fluctuating Border* (2018), digital rendering for *Other Border Wall Project: How to Build a Non-Wall*

In addition to its online archive and social media presence, J. M. Design Studio presented the *Other Border Wall Project* to the public in an early 2018 exhibition at the Flatland Gallery in Houston, Texas. The original six prototype sketches and the dozens of submissions it had received for Phase 2 *How to Build a Non-Wall* were on view, alongside an array of maps showing the different ways the border has been drawn over the years, a new large-scale chalk drawing by Meridian that referenced the current narratives at play, and an interactive installation that invited visitors to draw their own “other border wall” proposal and post them to the exhibition wall.¹⁵ At the time of this publication, J. M. Design Studio is in the process of finalizing Phase 2 (which officially ran from January 1 to May 31, 2018), which includes a published book of selections and highlights from both Phase 1 and 2, a limited edition poetry broadsheet collaboration, and the preliminary plans for Phase 3.¹⁶ Additionally, they plan to indefinitely extend the open call process for the public to submit its ideas for alternate border visions. The collective remains committed to keeping in step with the Trump administration’s ongoing general anti-Mexico agitation, such as NAFTA-breaking trade restrictions and high tariffs and the crisis of reuniting children separated from their parents

¹⁵ Jennifer Meridian, email message to author, June 5, 2018.

¹⁶ The collaboration resulted in a limited edition broadsheet of the poem “The Wall” by poet Anita Endrezze, <https://www.otherborderwallproject.com/broadsides-for-sale/>

upon entering the United States seeking asylum (a crossing that does not constitute breaking the law).¹⁷ Simply by keeping the Phase 2 call active so that “that anyone can continue to submit ideas . . . if it helps them to process and make sense” of the administration’s ideology and policies, J. M. Design Studio extends the project and models yet more ways to work against the wall and its divisive function by creating opportunities for potential collaboration and opening up the lines for extended connection.

In an era of disrupted political participation since the weakening of the Voting Rights Act in 2013,¹⁸ foreign influence in the 2016 general election,¹⁹ the increased exercise of unilateral presidential power through the executive order function as well as the failure of social media to allow for democratic access to public participation,²⁰ *The Other Border Wall: How to Build a Non Wall* is not only a model for artistic dissent, contribution, and discussion but also a refuge of creative connectivity in a time of contested civic engagement. Perhaps more important, *The Other Border Wall Project* models to citizens and artists a powerful and productive way to resist by using the ideological circuitry of this—or any other—administration.



New articles in this journal are licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 United States License.



This journal is operated by the [University Library System](#) of the [University of Pittsburgh](#) as part of its [D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program](#), and is co-sponsored by the [University of Pittsburgh Press](#).

¹⁷ Brian Naylor, “Trump Administration Imposes Steel, Aluminum Tariffs on EU, Canada, and Mexico,” *NPR* online, May 31, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2018/05/31/615753031/trump-administration-imposes-steel-aluminum-tariffs-on-eu-canada-and-mexico>

¹⁸ By Supreme Court decision, states would be allowed to change their election laws and procedures such as enact voter identification laws, move or eliminate polling locations, and draw redistricting maps without advance federal approval. Adam Liptak, “Supreme Court Invalidates Key Part of Voting Rights Act,” *New York Times*, June 25, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/26/us/supreme-court-ruling.html>

¹⁹ A January 2017 report from the office of the Director of National Intelligence assesses that “Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered an influence campaign in 2016 aimed at the US presidential election. Russia’s goals were to undermine public faith in the US democratic process, denigrate Secretary Clinton, and harm her electability and potential presidency. We further assess Putin and the Russian Government developed a clear preference for President-elect Trump.” See *Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent US Elections*, January 6, 2017, https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ICA_2017_01.pdf

²⁰ Facebook’s privacy and communication procedures came into question when it became public that they had allowed the firm Cambridge Analytica, associated with the Trump election campaign, to harvest user data. See Michael Riley, Sarah Frier, and Stephanie Baker, “Understanding the Facebook-Cambridge Analytica Story: QuickTake,” *The Washington Post*, April 11, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/understanding-the-facebook-cambridge-analytica-story-quicktake/2018/04/11/071f8c84-3d97-11e8-955b-7d2e19b79966_story.html?utm_term=.5d9df284fa69