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AFFECTIVE CARTOGRAPHIES: **Using Space as a Translation Device** **in Collaborative Processes**

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Abstract

We don't live in abstract perfectly measurable space. We live in a material, fuzzy, and often ambiguous world. Yet urban analysis, design, and governance continue to privilege abstraction and quantification in their maps, metrics, and models at the expense of lived experience. This epistemic gap creates serious problems for the co-design and democratic governance of our cities, as it short-circuits our attachment to everyday environments.

The **PLHEBICITE** and **PLURIELLES** projects, developed at EPFL (2021–2024) in collaboration with the Commune of Vernier, Geneva, explored how this very gap between abstract and lived space might be employed as a site of dialogue for urban co-creation. For this, it built an Atlas of Affective Cartographies (<https://alicelandings.epfl.ch/plhebicite>) based on a series of walk-along interviews with neighbours to access, articulate and thus socialize atmospheres, attachments, and the micro-politics of place, all unquantifiable factors often missing in collaborative processes of urban transformation.

This paper will consider how by focusing on affects we can map the city otherwise, going beyond geolocations, quantities or the exact contour of things and onto the agency of said things. We will see how these affective readings can create a common ground for co-design processes. To do this, we will depart from the definition of affect by Baruch Spinoza and Gilles Deleuze to consider how this notion opens the way to a form of *affective mapping* attuned to the action of things rather than their form. From there, we will consider the need to rethink our representational tools and definitions at a time when visualizations abound, yet representations, understood as collective interpretations capable of enabling shared horizons of action, remain scarce. Then, we will explain how this method was applied within the framework of the **PLHEBICITE** and **PLURIELLES** projects. Finally, we argue that such an approach can be mobilized in urban co-design processes by operating space as a device of translation: rather than treating it as a neutral backdrop, space is understood as a mediating ground through which heterogeneous experiences, knowledges, and stakes can be rendered commensurable.

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AFFECTIVE CARTOGRAPHIES: Using Space as a Translation Device in Collaborative Processes

How far does the action of a seed go? A sunflower seed lost in a wall is capable of blowing out that wall. A thing with so small an outline. (...)
*Things are bodies, that meant that things are actions. **The limit of something is the limit of its action and not the outline of its figure.***
Gilles Deleuze, Course on Spinoza, 17/02/1981

From a matter of location to a matter of reach

To consider affect, we return to the work of the 17th-century Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza, who defined an affect as that which increases or decreases the power (*potentia*) of a body (E III, D2). While teaching a course on this in 1981, French philosopher Gilles Deleuze defined affect as a passage from one state to another, triggered by the touch of the world (Deleuze 2008, 293–324). He explained how as the sun touches your skin and you feel its warmth—affection—, your power increases—*affect*. Affect, then, is inseparable from the way the world touches a body. Thus, our world becomes larger the more affects it registers, that is, the more our bodies are entangled with the world: power becomes a larger material entanglement.

Three years before, Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet had connected this affective extension with the idea of the surrounding world of animals brought forth by the biologist Jakob von Uexküll at the beginning of the 20th century (2007). Uexküll wrote that the surrounding world of a given being is “a piece cut out of its surroundings”, like a “soap bubble” that extends around the body, containing “all signs accessible to the subject” (Uexküll 2010, 43). We can see, then, how this affective extension, this surrounding world that includes us and that which affects us and is in turn affected by us, all enfolded in a shared field of contact, can be understood as a body’s spatiality. This spatiality may be individual or collective: we can speak of the spatiality of a neighbour or of a neighbourhood, as well as that of human and more-than-human collectivities. (Jalón Oyarzun 2017).

To these notions, we should add another of Spinoza’s assertions which, although it has become something of a cliché in recent decades, retains real relevance for our subject: “no one has yet determined what the body can do” (III, P2, sch). That is, we cannot fully know the extent of a body’s surrounding world, i.e. we cannot fix it, locate it. Because of this, if we want to engage space from an affective perspective, we must shift from understanding form as the contour or silhouette of a body to grasping the immeasurable, yet effective, reach of its agency and its surrounding world.

In the already mentioned 1981 course, Deleuze spent some time considering the notion of the limit; precisely, how the “limit of something is the limit of its action and not the outline of its figure,” because “the question is not where a form ends, (...) already an abstract and artificial question. The real question is: where does an action end?” He goes on to consider the limit of a seed, “whose contour I can follow with my finger (...) [to] then learn that a seed lost in a wall can make it break apart.” Furthermore, he considers the limit of a forest. As we arrive to its edges, “we cannot say when we are no longer in the forest. (...) There was a tendency, and the limit is not separable from a kind of tension towards said limit. It is a dynamic limit (...), that of its power or action. The thing is therefore power and not form. The forest is not defined by a form, it is defined by a power: the power to grow trees until it can no longer do so.”

Still, our architectural representation tools and methods often recede into the well-known area of the measurable and the projectable, be that the coordinates that define a location, or the figure that clearly delimits any given entity and makes it manageable. And as we move deeper into an algorithmic milieu grounded in the *grammatization* of both material and immaterial phenomena, this issue has only intensified, further increasing abstraction⁰¹. Already in 1974, French philosopher Henri Lefebvre, pointed to the effects of that abstraction in our understanding of space and its relation to everyday life, as he differentiated between conceived, perceived and lived spaces, and contended how the multiplicity that defines social space cannot be reduced onto one single representation (Lefebvre 1991). For Lefebvre, representations were a tool of power and social domination, an expression of mathematical abstraction and the logic of instrumental reason, where exchange value is privileged over use value.

A few years earlier, German philosopher Theodor Adorno had also criticized the idea of representation, here understood beyond the limits of spatial representation, as he believed it was subjected to capitalism’s *exchange principle* (*Tauschprinzip*): a tendency to render all things and dimensions of life commensurable, substituting identity for difference through exchange value (Adorno 1973). Within that framework, representation operates as a form of violent reduction: in attempting to render something present through conceptual or symbolic means, it risks erasing difference, those non-identical qualities of the thing represented. However, Adorno also pointed out how art could sometimes bypass these constraints, insofar as it operates through an idea of excess or remainder (i.e. that something that cannot be fully measured or accounted for). On top of this, he also underlined the importance of making mediations visible by highlighting the constructed nature of representation.

We want to close this reflection on the challenges faced by representational practices by considering the work of literary scholar Fredric Jameson. He considered representation was always in linked to ideology, for it is shaped by the material and symbolic conditions of capitalism. Just as representation increasingly fails to refer to real social relations, making the totality of capitalism ungraspable and thus producing an effect of disorientation and loss of political agency, he advanced the idea of cognitive mapping as an aesthetic strategy to figure the individual’s place within the social and global totality (Jameson 1991). He based this work on *The Image of the City* (1960) by Kevin Lynch, in which the American urbanist described the role of meaningful urban anchors in the creation of mental images that help orient users within space. Fredric Jameson extended this notion by addressing the disorienting

nature of capitalist space beyond the scale of the city, adding further layers to the concept of orientation. A concept which thus became not merely an operative, physical function, but a deeply symbolic one which highlighted the political nature of the images that allow us to situate ourselves, and thereby to establish possible paths of action, within contemporary space.

In recent years, as we have moved deeper into an algorithmic milieu built on ever-greater discretization, the epistemic gaps identified by these authors have only intensified, amplified by the spread of a culture of immediacy (Kornbluh 2024). In turn, this has made it more difficult to critically conceive spatial production under capitalism and work together on shared spaces. We have endless visualizations, but we lack representations understood as collective interpretations of a given situation that might enable a form of social orientation, and thus, possible shared horizons. If we see how a citizen experiences and conceptualizes her surrounds and how she situates the issues that affect her, and compare them to how they are conceptualized and operated upon both by the public institutions and private entities increasingly responsible for the production of space in our cities, we see a severe challenge to any credible possibilities for the democratic co-design of our cities⁰². These gaps short-circuit a socialized attachment to everyday environments, thus voiding the possibility of a shared responsibility towards their future. Our attachment becomes individualized, and thus dissociated from common issues or horizons, encouraging political detachment⁰³ as well as public resistance against change and policies that are often perceived as technocratic, unfair, and disconnected from citizens' everyday life⁰⁴.

We believe that a critical practice of representation needs to be reclaimed. In

what follows, we address this challenge through a form of *affective mapping* attuned to the action of things rather than their form, thus moving from a matter of form to a matter of reach. This form of mapping is attentive, not to the contour of buildings, parks and neighbourhoods, nor to the indexes, benchmarks and statistics abstracting any given situation into economic frameworks, but to the material entanglement of said matter and abstractions with a city's inhabitants to understand how they affect, that is, touch each other. We do this while retaining two key ideas from the aforementioned authors: on the one hand, the role these representations can play as social compasses to help position and orient communities within capitalism; on the other, the need to keep mediation processes present,

⁰¹ French philosopher Bernard Stiegler defined *grammatization* as "the transformation of a temporal continuum into a spatial discrete (...) with a view to reproduction." While Stiegler reduces this "process of description, formalization, and discretization" to "human behaviors (calculations, languages, and gestures)," our data-driven society is determinedly producing this grammatization in larger settings. See: <https://arsindustrialis.org/grammatization>.

⁰² See for instance the abyss between the urban indexes and benchmarks, or the digital twins statistically performing our cities (Kitchin et al. 2015; Herrero 2017), and the experience of energetic poverty and health issues multiplied by the extreme phenomena of climate changes (Economist Impact 2022; Ferrando Vitales 2025; Chaudhry 2024).

⁰³ We can consider here the term "anti-politics" which has come to describe phenomena that undermine politics as a necessary domain for democratic governance. It is linked to citizen disengagement, as well as mistrust of leaders, institutions, and the electoral process, and its expression might range from skepticism and estrangement to anti-establishment or anti-democratic attitudes (Fiket et al. 2022).

⁰⁴ We can see this in the French movement of Gilets Jaunes, where a series of climate adaptation policies, affected the everyday living conditions of the most vulnerable sectors of society, and specially of non-urban classes, leading to a movement of resistance that risks encouraging anti-climate change positions (Kinniburgh 2019). See also: (Plottu and Plottu 2009, 2021).

i.e. always making the constructed nature of representation visible, making the map not the goal, but the mediator of a larger dialogical practice at the core of our co-design strategies.

How far does a neighbourhood go?

Our research started with a basic question: how far does a neighbourhood go? Of course, there are administrative limits that tell us. In the case of Vernier, in the Swiss Canton of Geneva, we can easily download those from swisstopo, the Swiss Federal Office of Topography. It is a 35.3 MB GeoPackage file that contains all the administrative units and national boundaries of Switzerland. When loaded into our QGIS software, we get a perfect non-dimensional line showing the administrative limit of the municipality of Vernier. From there, and echoing Richard Long's exercises of walking a line, we attempted to follow that abstract line on site while tracing our path with the GPS of our phone. Of course, there were obstacles, and a new line appeared (Fig. 01): a non-dimensional line once more, but one that showed a trembling, fuzzy quality of particular interest. Cultural historian Bernd Hüppauf has reflected on this aesthetic fuzziness and how it "loosens the bond between a picture and the thing represented". As it breaks with the logic of imitation, the fuzzy image opens up a fertile field of uncertainty, its *unfinishedness* demands an active, compositional imagination, as it asks to be completed without ever being able to be finalised, thus implicating the body into a shared space of exploration (Hüppauf 2009). Can we then employ fuzziness as a way of bringing people into a shared process of territorial understanding? This initial experiment became a way for ourselves to understand the tension we wanted to inhabit, and led the way to the interviews, online survey and mapping exercises that followed.



Figure 01:
GPS track of the initial walk trying to follow the administrative limit of the municipality of Vernier
superimposed on ALICE's Geneva base map.

Emmanuelle Agustoni, Aurèle Pulfer, Lucía Jalón Oyarzun, ALICE, 2022.



We organized fifteen walk-along interviews with neighbours from the different districts of the municipality of Vernier⁰⁵ (Fig. 02). These neighbours were enlisted through citizen associations and the *contrats des quartiers* (neighbourhood contracts), a tool employed by the municipality of Vernier (and others within the canton of Geneva), to mobilize residents, merchants, and associations to identify needs and implement concrete projects, financially supported by the town⁰⁶. This gave us a diversity of engaged interviewees, ranging from teenagers to elderly citizens, that helped us create a plural narrative of the territory, certainly not with sociological value due to its limited number, but truly effective to establish the basis for our mapping experimentation.

Walk-along interviews are done by a researcher walking along the interviewee,

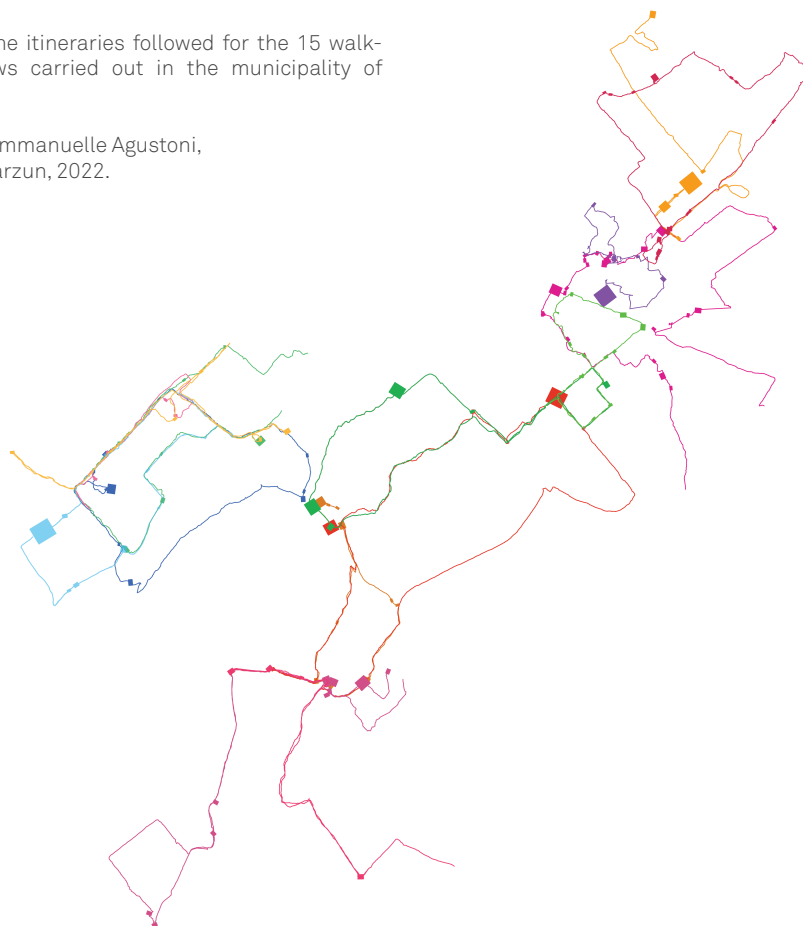
so that the environment traversed helps trigger her environmental know-hows and memories that might otherwise go unnoticed. In our case, the interviewees were asked to select a path that was relevant in their everyday activities, either the path to school, to buy groceries or that of leisure strolls. On top of that, we had an open and semi-structured set of questions prepared to launch or animate the conversation. However, it was often left aside to follow up on the environmental relations presented by the interviewee. These interviews were also recorded in audio and video, and their path tracked with a GPS app.

The interviews were then transcribed and analysed with the computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software *Atlas.ti* to produce a structured database of excerpts. These excerpts were then geolocated along the path followed by matching the GPS track

Figure 02:

GPS track of the itineraries followed for the 15 walk-along interviews carried out in the municipality of Vernier.

Aurèle Pulfer, Emmanuelle Agustoni,
Lucía Jalón Oyarzun, 2022.

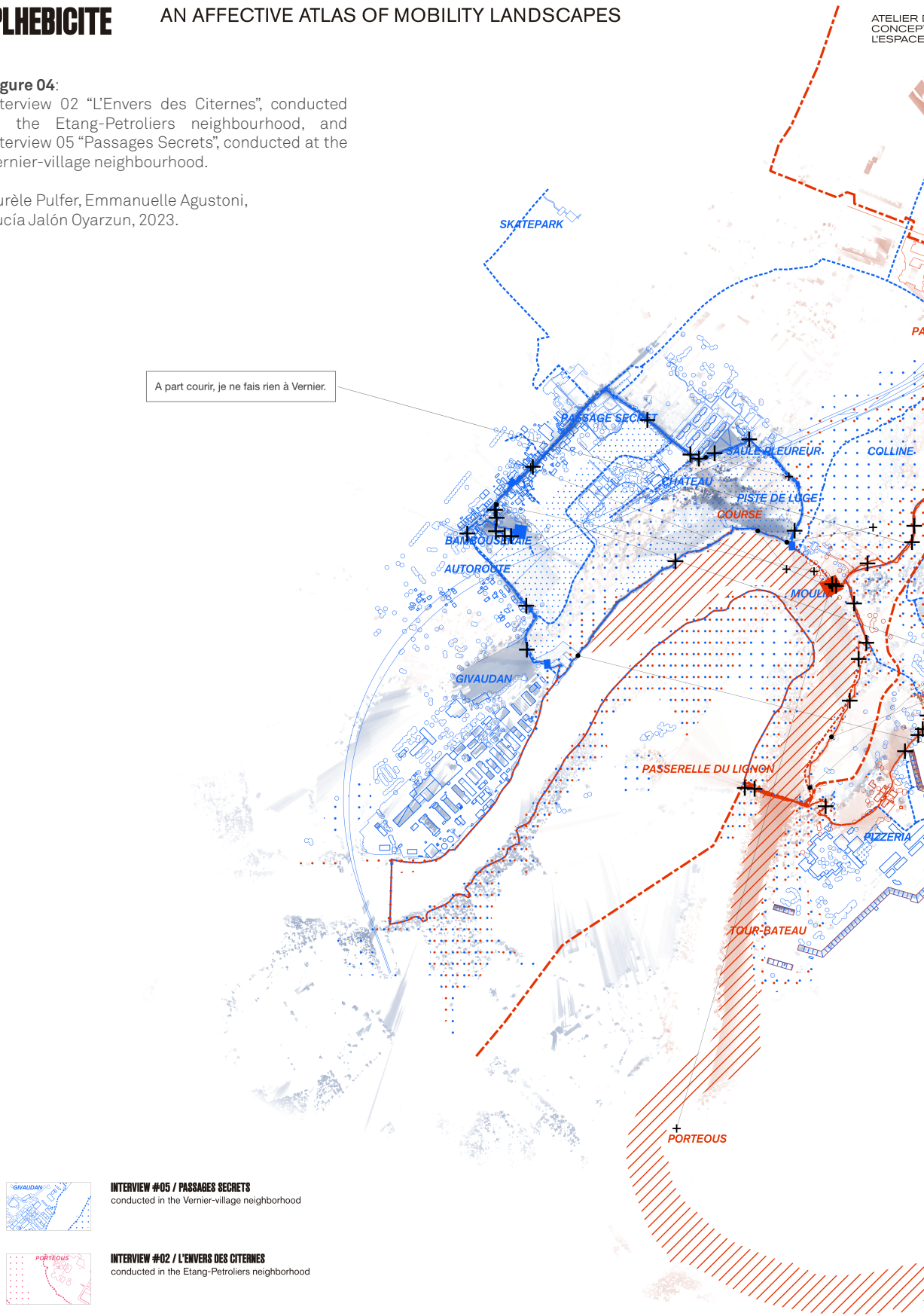


PLHEBICITE AN AFFECTIVE ATLAS OF MOBILITY LANDSCAPES

Figure 04: Interview 02 “L’Envers des Citernes”, conducted at the Etang-Petroliers neighbourhood, and Interview 05 “Passages Secrets”, conducted at the Vernier-village neighbourhood.

Aurèle Pulfer, Emmanuelle Agustoni,
Lucía Jalón Oyarzun, 2023.

A part courir, je ne fais rien à Vernier.



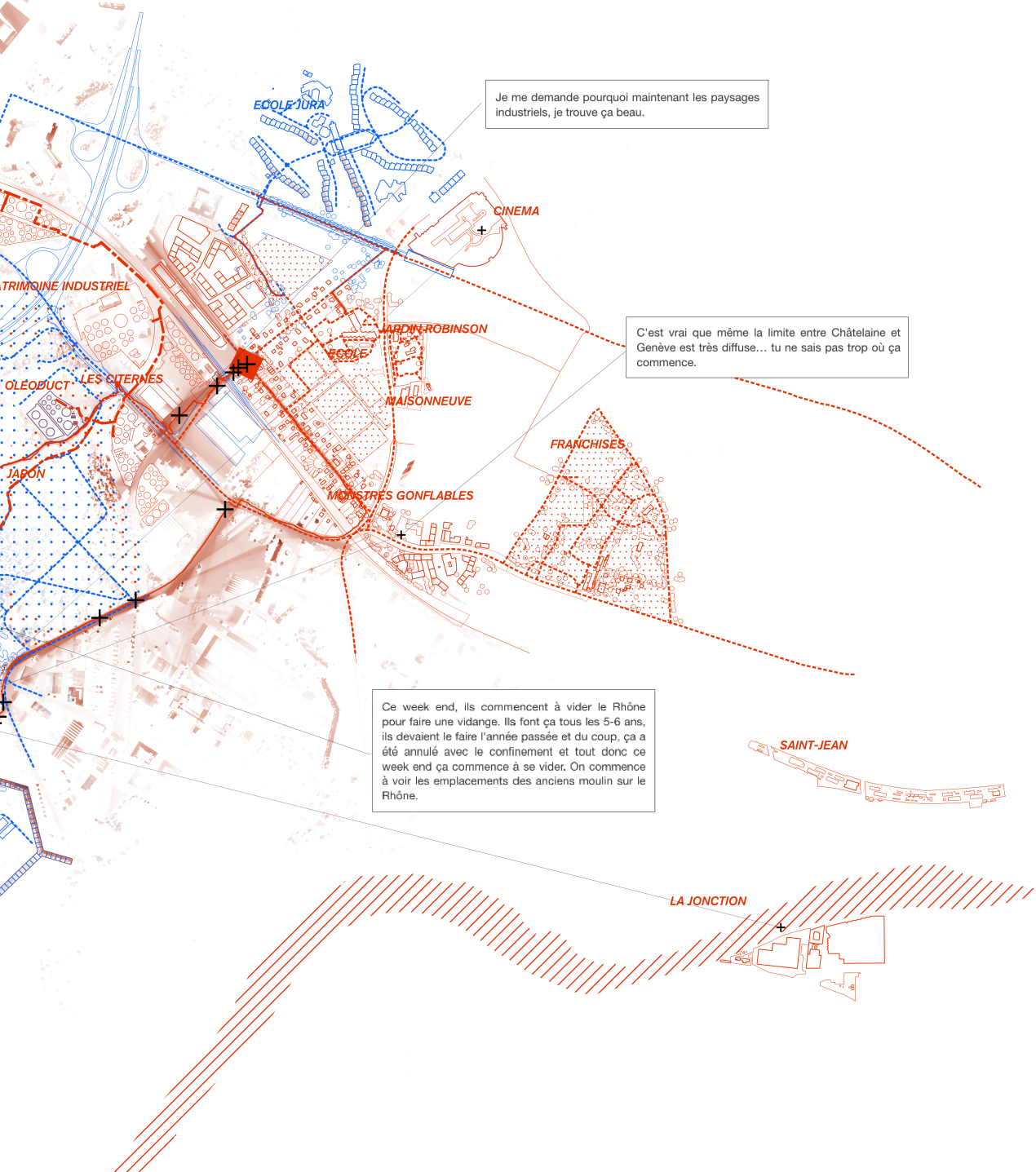
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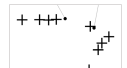
LUCIA JALON OYARZUN
EMMANUELLE AGUSTONI
AURELE PULFER



Je me demande pourquoi maintenant les paysages industriels, je trouve ça beau.

C'est vrai que même la limite entre Châtelaine et Genève est très diffuse... tu ne sais pas trop où ça commence.

Ce week end, ils commencent à vider le Rhône pour faire une vidange. Ils font ça tous les 5-6 ans, ils devaient le faire l'année passée et du coup, ça a été annulé avec le confinement et tout donc ce week end ça commence à se vider. On commence à voir les emplacements des anciens moulin sur le Rhône.



VOICE
Collects fragments of stories along the way, talking about directly visible places, near or far, that appear in the discussion.



CONSTELLATION
Gather a series of significant places for each narrative, showing the extent and discontinuous nature of our lived experience and the different territories this draws.



ITINERARY
The route of the interview conducted. The width fluctuates according to the walking speed. The interviews last between 50 minutes and 3 hours.



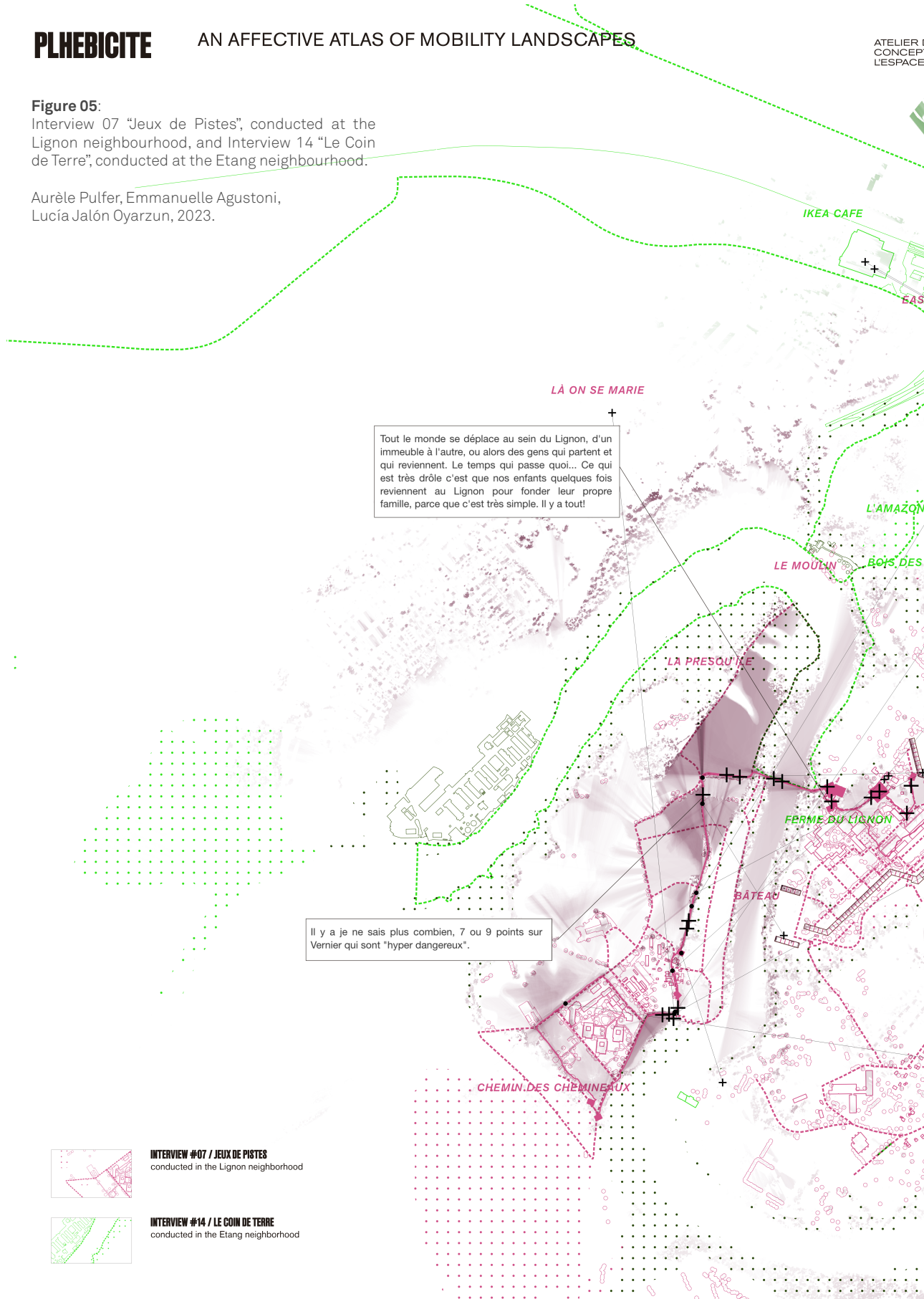
HORIZON
Succession of viewpoints visible from the route. Reveals the depth of the space affected by our mobility and the variable extent of the sight depending on the place.

PLHEBICITE AN AFFECTIVE ATLAS OF MOBILITY LANDSCAPES

ATELIER
CONCEPT
L'ESPACE

Figure 05:
Interview 07 "Jeux de Pistes", conducted at the Lignon neighbourhood, and Interview 14 "Le Coin de Terre", conducted at the Etang neighbourhood.

Aurèle Pulfer, Emmanuelle Agustoni,
Lucía Jalón Oyarzun, 2023.



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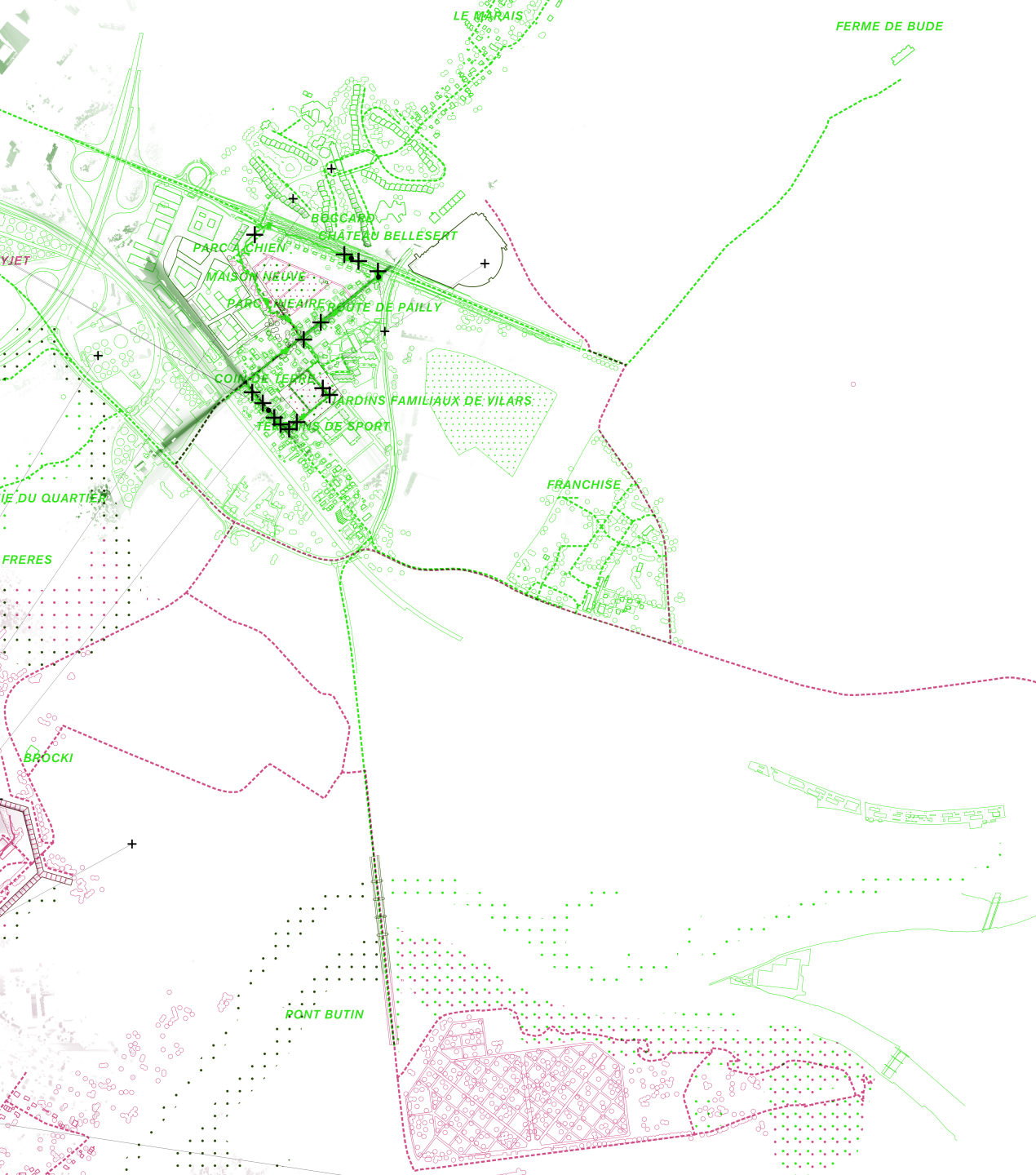
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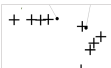
LUCIA JALON OYARZUN
EMMANUELLE AGUSTONI
AURELE PULFER



LANCY

LEGEND.

SAINT-GEORGES



VOICE
Collects fragments of stories along the way, talking about directly visible places, near or far, that appear in the discussion.



CONSTELLATION
Gather a series of significant places for each narrative, showing the extent and discontinuous nature of our lived experience and the different territories this draws.



ITINERARY
The route of the interview conducted. The width fluctuates according to the walking speed. The interviews last between 50 minutes and 3 hours.



HORIZON
Succession of viewpoints visible from the route. Reveals the depth of the space affected by our mobility and the variable extent of the sight depending on the place.

In parallel to these interviews, we launched an online survey using the tool *Maptionnaire* which enabled us to pose questions based on maps where respondents could draw, pinpoint and detail their answers. It allowed us to echo online the triggering effect of the environment in the walk-along interviews. More than 300 residents of the municipality of Vernier took part in it over the course of three months. Their responses were translated into a series of cartographies that explored themes ranging from meaningful communal spaces to the perceived boundaries of their neighbourhoods. This last question proved especially significant: by layering together the diverse answers from the survey, we constructed a composite image—a kind of constellation—that echoed, at the scale of the neighbourhood, the trembling line traced

in our first walking experiment along the town's administrative border. What emerged was a collective and inherently fuzzy picture that challenged the rigid, legal demarcations of the official districts or *quartiers* of Vernier (Fig. 06)

Space as translating device

In this final section, we argue that a mapping approach attentive to affects and to the diverse forms of place attachment that permeate everyday experience can be mobilized within urban co-design processes. Rather than treating space as a neutral backdrop, this approach understands it as a mediating ground through which heterogeneous experiences, knowledges, and stakes can be rendered commensurable. It does so in two complementary ways: first, through the creation of new



urban figures as collective images of the city capable of translating and re-articulating fragmented realities; and second, through the notion of an embodied territory, understood as a material interface where, when brought into shared situations, diverse actors and concerns become entangled and open to negotiation.

Regarding the first trajectory, we see how an affective approach to space enables a form of representation, understood not just as a mimetic reproduction of a given situation, but as a political construct ingrained with a narrative dimension: a form of *figuration*. Rossi Braidotti has used this term to refer to “materialistic mappings of situated, i.e., embedded and embodied, social positions” (Braidotti 2011). For instance, the emerging figure of the neighbourhood as a constellation of place attachments can operate as a *translating or mediating device* capable of articulating concerns across disciplines, languages and communities. Therein, *space* becomes the common denominator between these different layers, enabling their integration into accessible, shareable forms.

Furthermore, *figurations* help us move beyond mimetic frameworks of architectural representation onto agential ones; Donna Haraway explains how although “figures pertain to graphic representation and visual forms in general, (they) do not have to be representational and mimetic, but *they do have to be tropic; that is, they cannot be literal and self-identical. Figures must involve at least some kind of displacement that can trouble identifications and certainties. Figurations* are performative images that can be inhabited. Verbal or visual, figurations can be condensed maps of contestable worlds. (...) (1997, 11).

One of the questions of our *Maptionnaire* survey might help us see these ideas

in action. We asked participants to locate and qualify relevant spaces within the municipality according to **a)** places where people from different neighborhoods gather, that is, common grounds between quarters; **b)** symbols, meaning elements in the environment, either material or immaterial like histories or trees, that are key to define the identity of Vernier; and **c)** important places of the everyday, either because they are regularly visited or because they offer a meaningful experience. We then composed those answers per *quartier* in a series of nine maps, one for each neighbourhood, where the places mentioned more often are those that appear more intensely (Fig. 07). Personal attachments come together to reveal a bottom-up plural *figure* that, when discussed and worked upon collectively, can offer grounds to new kinds of public conversation and action. Is co-design possible without collective figurations of our cities? And, can we imagine this kind of composite as a basis for new forms of *natureculture* contracts within our communities⁰⁷?

For the second trajectory, we move to the project **PLURIELLES**, developed one year after **PLHEBICITE** in collaboration with the municipality of Vernier and the independent artistic curator Hélène Mariéthoz.

Figure 06:

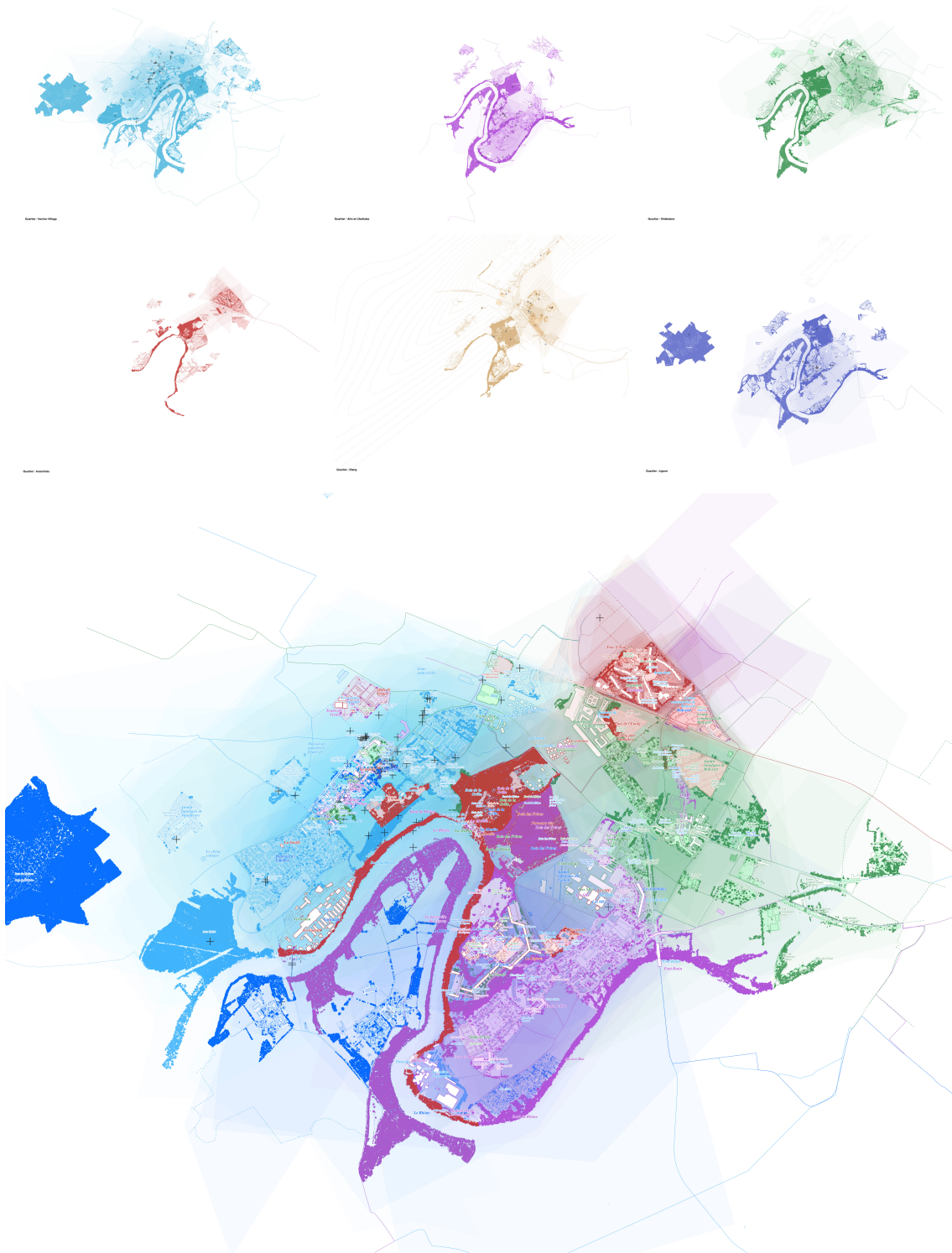
Composition of the answers received to the question “Could you sketch the limits of your neighborhood? We are not looking for a precise answer marking the administrative boundaries, but rather your perception. How far, to what places, does your experience of the neighborhood extend?”.

Aurèle Pulfer, Emmanuelle Agustoni, Antoine Foehrenbacher, Lucía Jalón Oyarzun, 2023.

⁰⁷ Donna Haraway introduced the term *natureculture* in her *Companion Species Manifesto* (2003), to overcome the dominating dualism of Western modernity that considers nature and culture as two separate realms. With this term, she sought to highlight the inseparability of both nature and culture, as living beings, technologies, meanings, and environments are always produced together in hybrid assemblages.

There, we wanted to highlight precisely how key sociocultural aspects, from local urban intelligences based on the citizens' direct experience of their environment to shared cultural meanings like those explored in our previous project, resist easy quantification and are subsequently often overlooked

in co-design processes, leaving their potentials untapped. Once more, we looked at space as translating device. However, we sought to frame it, this time, not from the perspective of represented space, but of lived material space. Thus, we asked how the territory, as lived and practiced in its everyday could work



once more as transdisciplinary *lingua franca* for environmental conciliation and encourage an efficient inclusion of these qualitative elements.

With this in mind, we organized a series of interviews, walks, workshops and visits with neighbours but also city officials, professionals, thinkers, civil leaders, etc., where, not just representations of space but actual lived space, was used as a material interface to make cultural identities and immaterial practices linked to the territory appear through a collective setting. This way, specific spots throughout Vernier, from a newly instated pedestrian street to the overwhelming oil tanks at the core of the town or a refugee centre, allowed us to weave together a multiplicity of stakes, affects, concerns, approaches, memories, know-how, desires, and forms of expertise. This material fabric became synthesis, and *figure*, through its elaboration into a fanzine that collected all encounters and was shared with the city neighbours (Fig. 08) in parallel to a series of art interventions that took place to activate these places.

Figure 07:

Composition of the answers received to common grounds between neighbourhoods, symbols of the town and everyday places of relevance.

Aurèle Pulfer, Emmanuelle Agustoni, Antoine Foehrenbacher, Lucía Jalón Oyarzun, 2023.

Conclusions

Out of these experiences, we can turn back to our theoretical framework and see how by pushing against the quantification imperatives ingrained in our drawing tools, we have been able to enrich it and expand it. If Spinoza and Deleuze allowed us to move from contour to action as a way of understanding the limits of any given thing, either a neighbour or a neighbourhood, the mappings have revealed the fragmentary nature of this extension

and the inherent allegorical nature of its continuity or synthesis: the extent of someone's affective extension must be re-composed out of these fragments through figuration. Similarly, if Lefebvre warned against the reduction of lived space into abstract representations, we have shown that their silencing is not necessary. Our work suggests that existing forms of representation, often even coded into our drawing tools must be critiqued and pushed to their limits, so that representation can be reconfigured as a site where affect and lived experience are present and actively negotiated. Indeed, we have shown that, even working with digital technologies, the partial and "fuzzy" quality of the mappings, specially achieved through the notions of horizons and constellations, preserves what, inspired by Adorno, we have called a remainder: those non-identical aspects that resist full capture. Finally, we have built on Jameson's concept of cognitive mapping to bring it back to its urban origins while retaining the force of its allegorical and political dimensions, acknowledging that without collective figurations of our cities, no co-design is possible.

Finally, throughout this process we have confirmed space's ability to translate and assemble worlds through its power of embodiment, either physically as in the interventions of **PLURIELLES** or figuratively as in the mappings of **PLHEBICITE**. Embodiment *implicates* us, it brings us into the fold of a shared reality. In his unfinished *Political Treatise*, Spinoza wrote that we cannot think of us, humans, as an *imperium in imperio* (TP 2.6), that is, we cannot think of ourselves as separate from the world: we cannot remain untouched. That's why we believe that touch, reclaimed by an affective approach to space and a politically conscious approach to representation, can work both as path and compass to new forms of architectural knowledge and spatial co-production.



Figure 08:
PLURIELLES fanzine.

Emmanuelle Agustoni,
Antoine Foehrenbacher,
Léonore Nemeč,
Aurèle Pulfer,
Lucía Jalón Oyarzun, 2023.

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Figures

All of the drawings and photographs included in this piece were produced by the author[s] and Contributor[s].



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