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# Crossing maps: spaces of never-ending arrival

[#cartography](#) [#sensitive cartography](#) [#participatory cartography](#) [#migration](#) [#borders](#)

29 May 2015

“Crossing maps” is an undertaking in both research and creation that assembles visual and audio works addressing contemporary migratory experiences. As a participatory project, it has brought together 12 asylum seekers, two researchers in the field of geography and four artists to map pathways innovatively.

We reinvent the figurative meanings that generally reduce a border to a line and migration to an arrow, and take account of the political and practical complexity of the crossings: These are some of the many issues that find expression in this art-science experiment that forms part of the [antiAtlas of Borders](http://www.antiatlas.net/) collective (<http://www.antiatlas.net/>).

*By Sarah Mekdjian & Anne-Laure Amilhat Szary*

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*All photos are by Mabeye Deme*

## 1 – Space-refuge maps?

MARIE MOREAU, A VISUAL ARTIST, EXPRESSES THE OBSERVATIONS OF HER SISTER, A SOCIAL WORKER IN A DAY-SHELTER for refugees in Grenoble, France. Many people come to obtain lunch from this facility each day:

« She told me that at the end of the meal, disposable place mats were often used for drawing trajectories, covering the tables with fragmentary and personalised geographies. The “guests” used them to understand where others had come from, even when they didn’t speak the same language. She explained how some of the maps served as improvised city plans of Grenoble. These maps were passed from one hand to the next as a means of indicating important places of interest.

In this location of transient refuge, cartography serves as an act of communication and as an act of presenting oneself. Few words are used, mostly just features. Maps are also drawn to help others in the community: to show where to sleep, where to eat, and where to receive medical treatment in Grenoble. Cartography thus becomes tactical. On place mats made of paper, the city is reconfigured according to people’s needs...

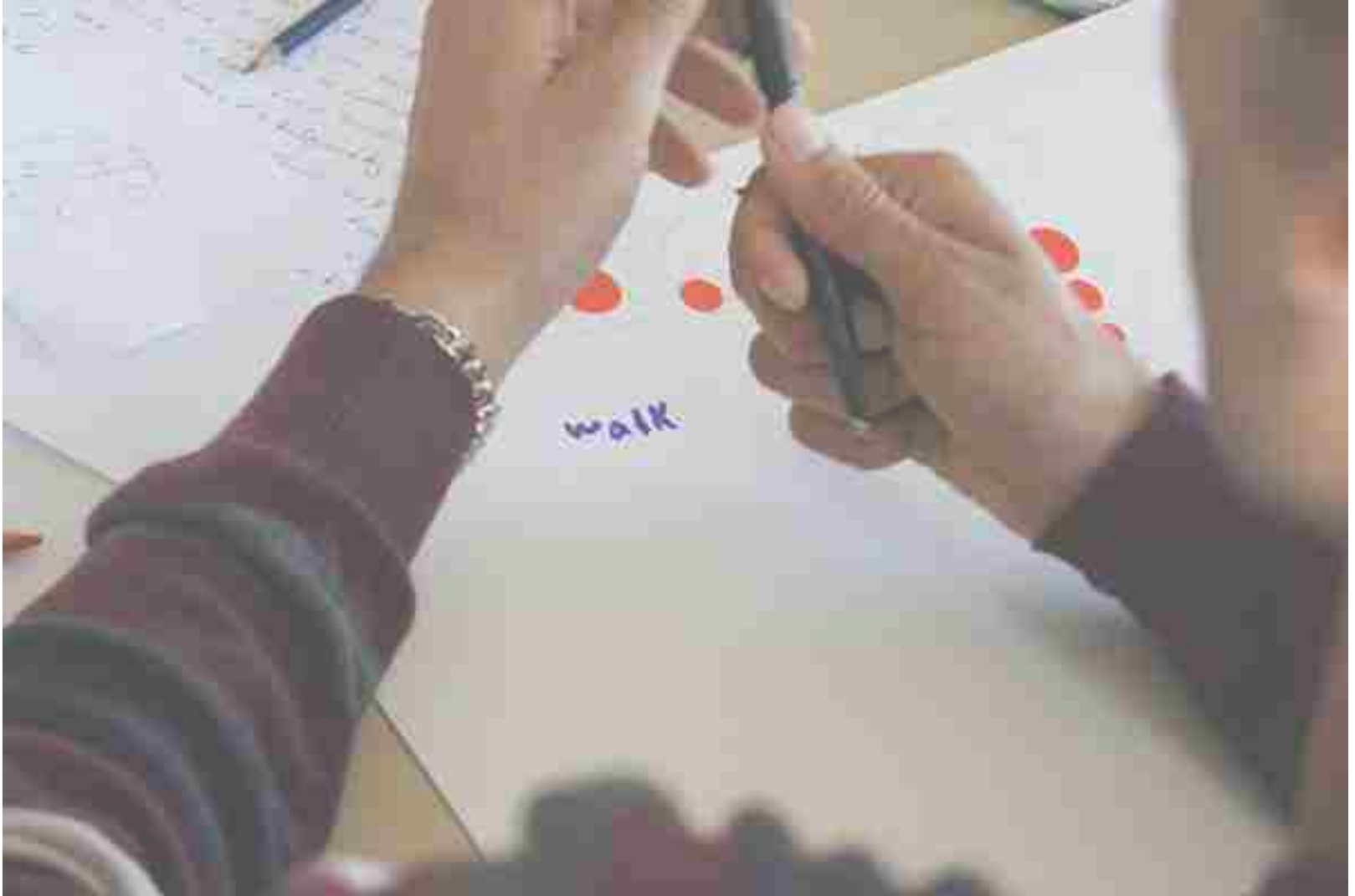


“The Workshop” — 2013

The cityscape is revisited at lunchtime on a table corner. Practicing cartography enables people to reinvent their relationship with the city during the time it takes to create their map. Mapping is a means of taming the city, and the map itself becomes a safe haven for its artist and others.

Cartography is used to communicate and reconfigure relationships to space, and to create a temporary refuge... This was the starting point of our project, which we performed with asylum seekers (or people who were just about to open their claim to asylum). These individuals were then teamed up with four artists (three visual artists and a photographer).

How do people communicate when neither one speaks nor understands the other’s language? How does one go about conjuring up the spaces one has traveled, where one lived, and places where suffering and disillusionment once occurred? In order for refugee status to be recognized, asylum seekers must provide an account of the violence and threats they have experienced. Complex administrative and judiciary procedures take place in France at the OFPRA (the French Office for the Protection of Refugees and Stateless Persons), and then, should the case continue, at the CNDA (the National Court of the Right of Asylum). As explained by Didier Fassin and Estelle D’Halluin, “in France, as immigration control increases, asylum seekers are more and more submitted to the evaluation of their physical sequels and psychic traumas, as if their autobiographical accounts were not sufficient”. In this political context of suspicion, we sought to bypass the classical narrative form and above all avoid replicating an “interrogation” that lead asylum seekers to present themselves as mere victims.



“Walk” — H.’s map — 2013

In the context of the workshop, cartography seems to become a shared gesture from which the categories of “asylum seeker”, “refugee” or “migrant” can be questioned and renegotiated — as well as notions of hospitality and spaces of refuge.

These “cartographic encounters” between people confronted with asylum application process, social science researchers and artists took place twice a week at the ADA (“Accueil Demande d’Asile”: Reception of Asylum Seekers) NGO in Grenoble, between May and June 2013. This association offers help with the writing of appeals within the framework of the asylum procedures, along with the assistance of social workers, lawyers, interpreters and numerous volunteers.

We organized alternate sessions for asylum seekers with artists Marie Moreau, Lauriane Houbey and Fabien Fischer. To foster conviviality, a set of drinks and snacks were offered, and people began to eat and draw. An uncertain cartography was born along the way, through features drawn on paper (but also on fabrics and wooden boards) from collective discussions, as well as through more intimate confidences made at the edge of the paper.

We never asked the participants why they sought refuge, nor what they went through, nor when they arrived in France... We invited them to express themselves on broad categories such as conditions of migrations, borders, daily life in Grenoble.

So, on the table, we set drinks and cakes, but also sheets of paper and some felt-tip pens. We also lay out maps of the world using different projections and perspectives (notably an “upside down” world map with a much a less common perspective on our planet).

Sarah Mekdjian:

*I begin a session by presenting myself and state that I don't belong to the ADA association, but that I am teaching geography at the University of Grenoble. I take my time and allow everyone to take a seat and have something to drink, in order to put hospitality into practice here and now.*

*I address the participants, thanking them for being there and make my intentions clear — I don't wish to understand how and why they left. I don't represent the administrations in charge of handing out the right of asylum, and I don't want to compile a case file that could retrace anyone's steps.*

*I talk about the arrows that are generally used to represent general patterns of migration on the maps. How can we give them substance? What could we draw about migratory experiences to promote a political and ethical reflection upon the limitations of asylum? Or on the strengthening of the borders of the European Union?*

*I explain how I would like us to work together to find a way of evoking migratory experiences — without it resembling one of the interrogations of the administration. Necessarily "spectacular" images or accounts are not needed here. Instead, the goal is to stimulate a political reflection about the current conditions of migration and asylum. The result of our work is intended for a wide audience.*

*Their individual and collective experiences of crossing borders and of displacement can stir reflection and lead to political action.*

*The discussions begin, and we exchange information in different languages. While we don't always understand each other, we start to get to know one another.*

## 2 — Keys to the journey

OVER THE COURSE OF SUBSEQUENT SESSIONS, WE BEGIN TO PREPARE A COMMON KEY, OR LEGEND, FOR THE MAPS. THE participants write down individual words — often in several languages — that reflect their experiences with migration and the right of asylum. We put all of these words on a board and regroup them while trying to translate them into as many languages as possible. We then give them a symbolic meaning with the help of some coloured stickers which different shapes and sizes correspond to the emotions felt during the migratory journeys.

# Les Légendes du voyage

 Danger


 Rencontre, amitié, amour /  
Friendship, love

 Soins Médicaux /  
Medical care

 Police

 Stress  
Faim - Fatigue /  
Hunger - Tiredness

 Chance

 Où? Comment? Where?  
Pourquoi? How? Why?

 Air chaud / Hot air

 Mort /  
Death

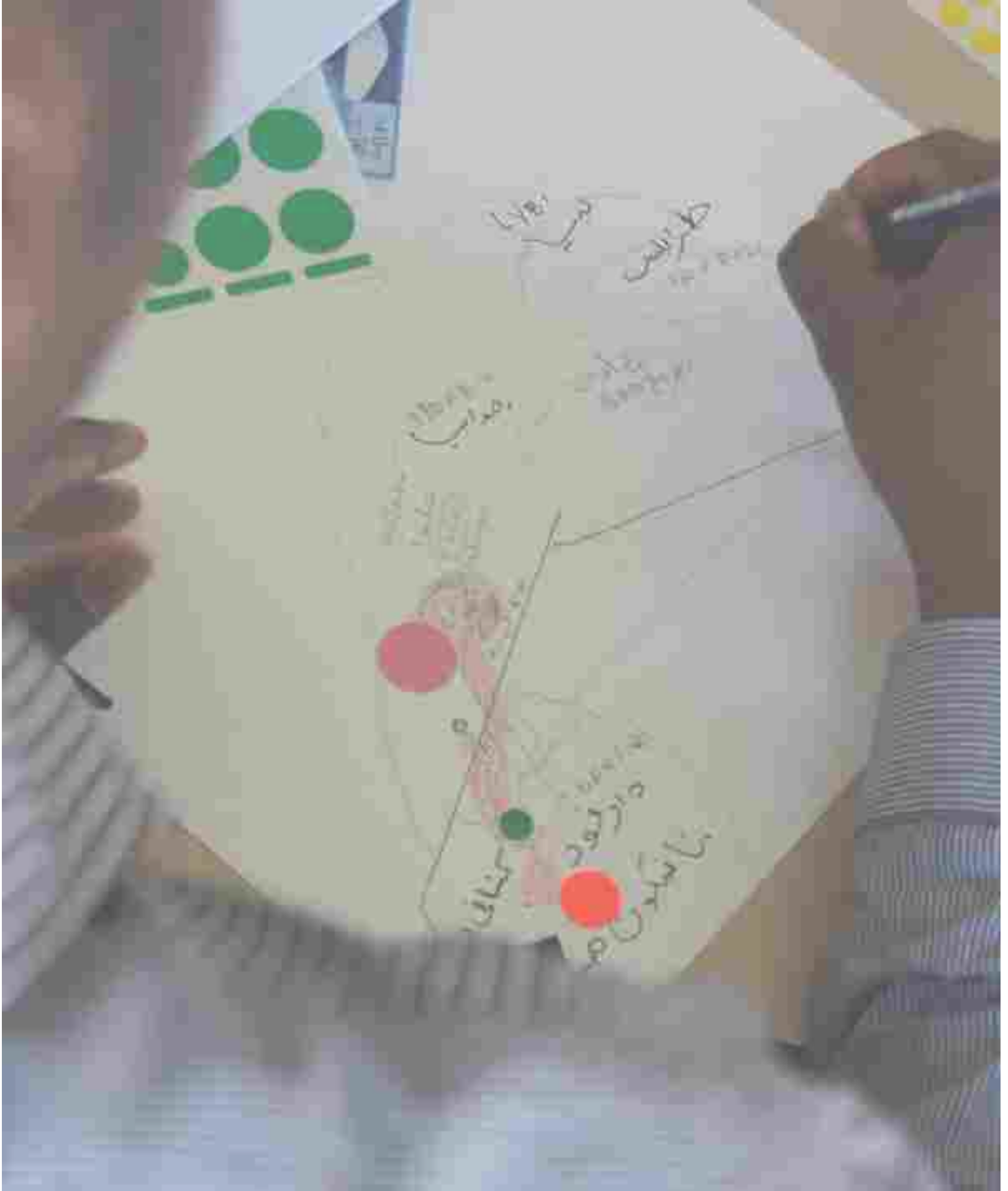
 Injustice

 Tranquille /  
Easy

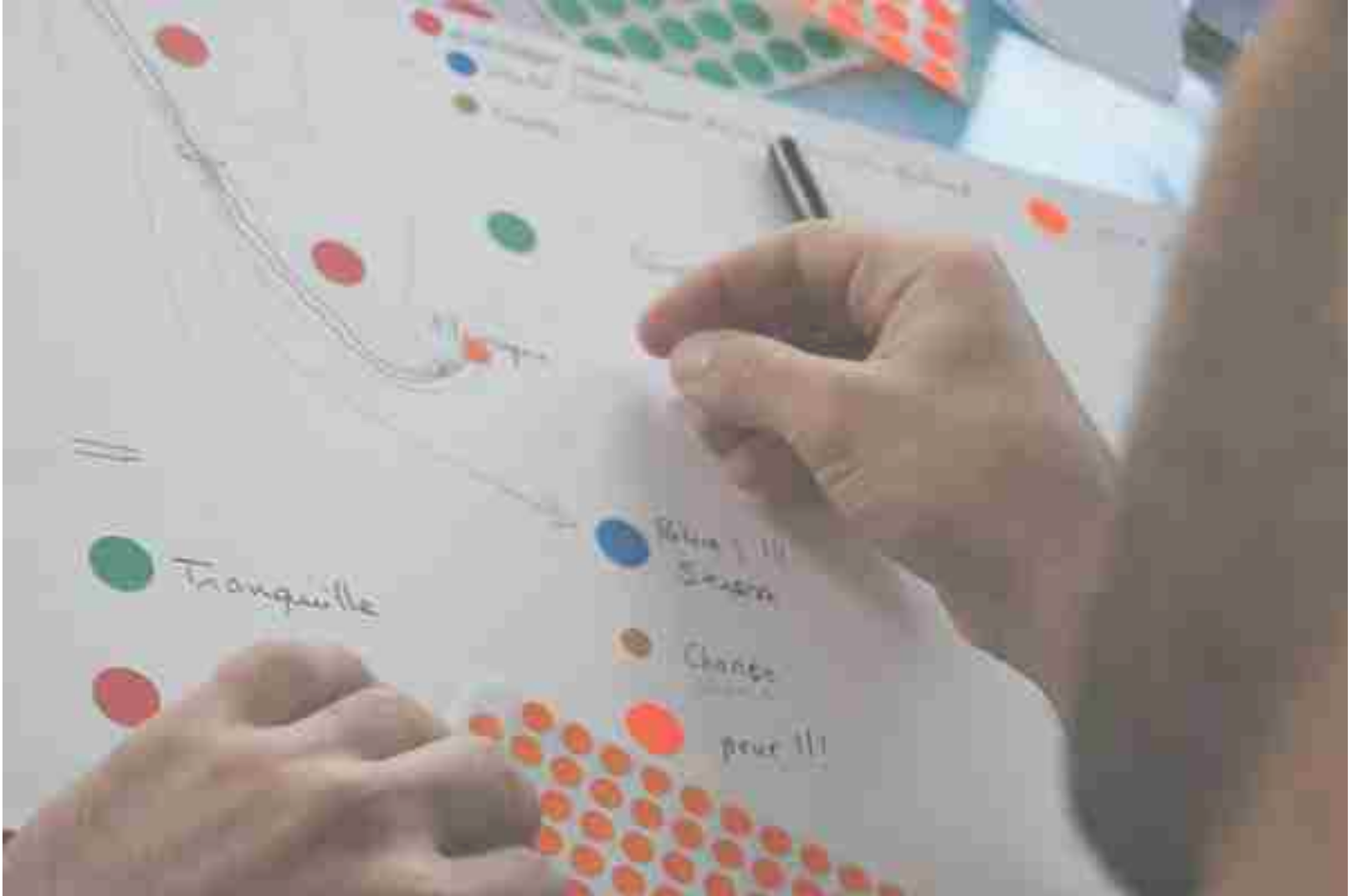
 Peur / Fear  
Atelier de cartographie  
Grenoble, 2013

"Keys to the journey" – 2013

Even when there was a consensus about individual words, not all experiences can be represented. Thus, "darkness / obscurité / ظلام" very quickly stands out because it represents an emotion as well as a material circumstance. Darkness occurs along the journey: in the back of trucks during nocturnal trips through the forests, following behind their smugglers; the absence of a horizon; and more generally the depressive state in which many find themselves. But no sticker can be chosen by the participants to express all of these feelings. These constitute emotions that cannot not be "mediatised", at least not at this stage of the project.



"From the Sudan to Libya", I.'s map — 2013



"Tranquil, police, stress, luck, fear", K.'s map – 2013

On the basis of this new “language” that we constructed together, each participant begins to draw the memories they have from journeys. They may choose to illustrate their own memories, those of their friends, or those that they have overheard and discussed. Then they add stickers to their sketches. Some will choose to build on the key by adding new symbols to it (a drop of water for tears, for example). But it is compelling to see how frequently our symbolic language is used on the drawings, even by those participants who ignored the collective code and instead created their own key.

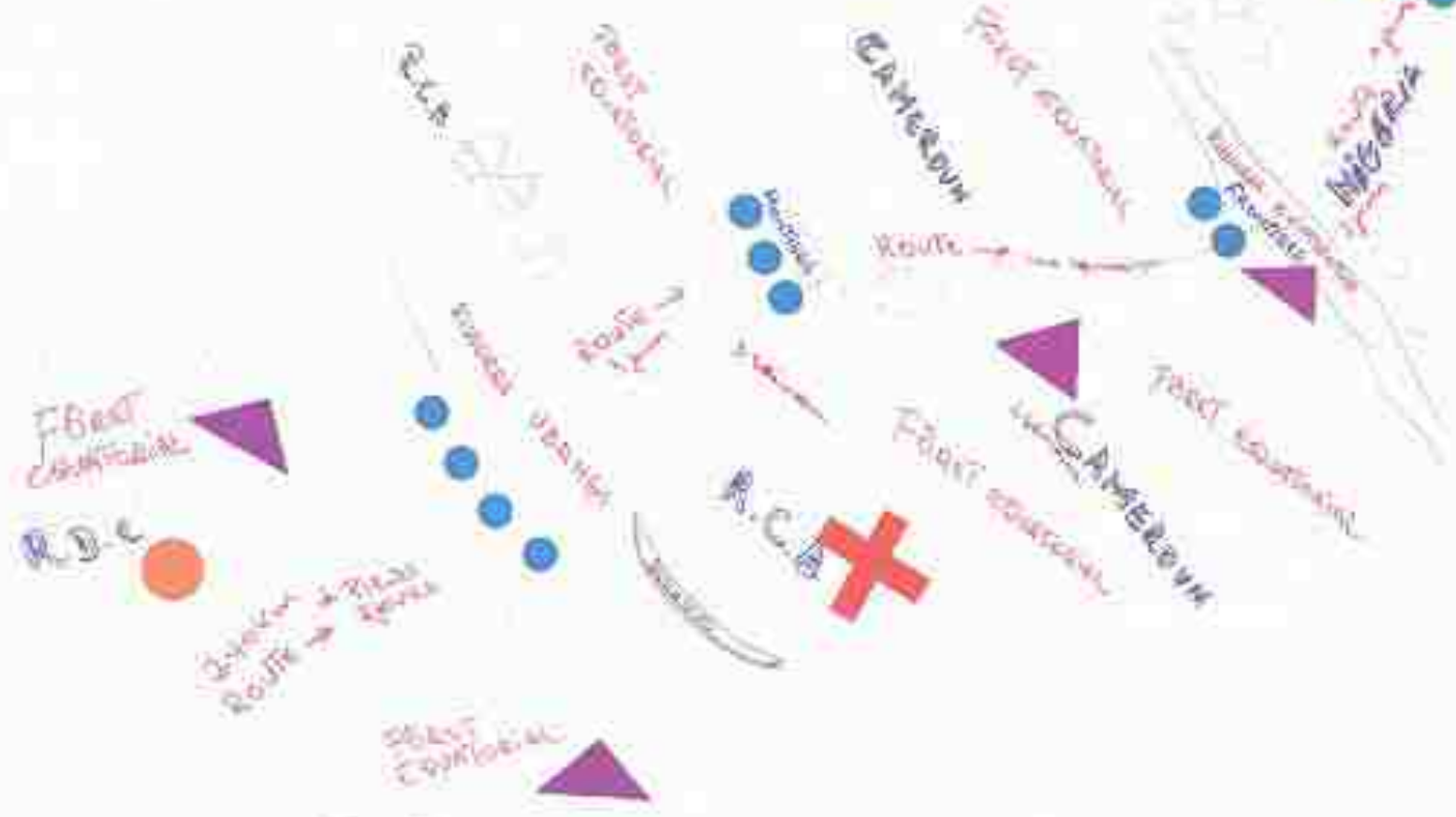
Little by little, as time goes by, the maps begin to take shape. Each time, new steps from their journeys come into view. We don't ask them to complete, nor to specify, nor to explain. We let the blank spaces on the maps expand as needed. By changing the format of the paper sheet or the focus (for example, through a series of successive zooms), new elements from the personal stories come up to the surface.



PALEK/ KOSKODWA  
SALOMON

# CHAPTER I

R.D. CAMEROON on BENIN



"From the DRC to Benin", S.'s map — 2013

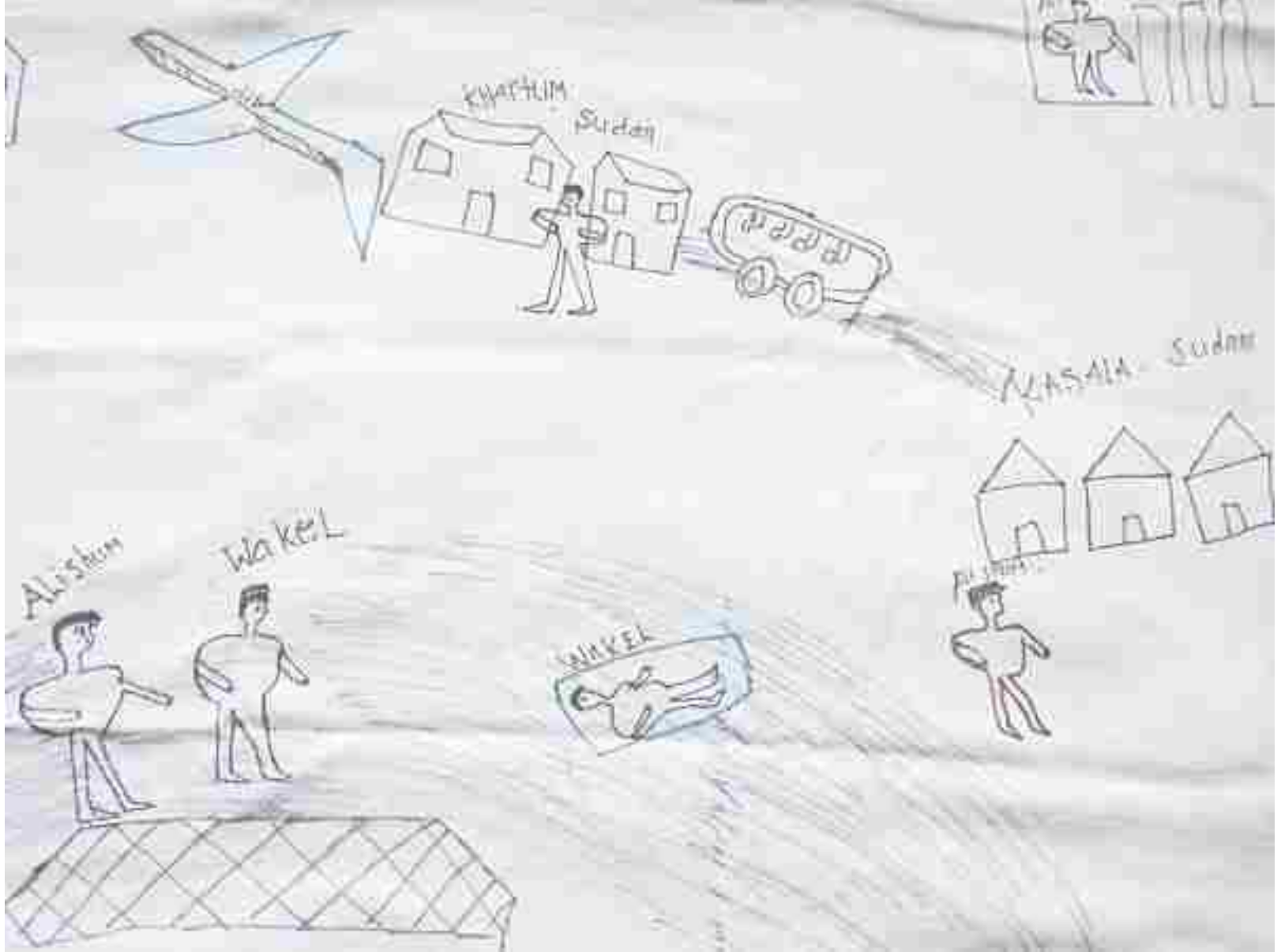


“Tablecloth” – 2013

Besides the “sticker maps”, Marie Moreau also suggests drawing on tablecloths and embroidering them, an approach she has already used in a local Atlas (exhibited at the *Laboratoire d’Art d’Aujourd’hui* in Grenoble in 2012 as part of the *Interior Geographies* exhibit).

The use of fabric as a new medium for art production generates discussion. The white fabric calls to mind the shrouds in which corpses are covered according to Islamic tradition. It often evokes, with some violence, the memories of friends and companions who died en route on the journey.

Those who nevertheless decide to draw or embroider frequently confront some very painful memories.



"Crossing the desert, Eritrea, the Sudan, Libya", A.'s map – 2013



"Crossing the desert, Eritrea, the Sudan, Libya" (close-up) – 2013

Gladeema Nasruddin decided not to draw on the fabric. He made his map out of clay. It is a technique that, as he confided in us much later, he picked up in the Sudan where he worked with sand during his childhood.

He started with a boat representing the crossing of the Mediterranean Sea from Libya to Italy... and then constructed his map out of clay to recount his journey from Africa to Europe.



"The boat", Gladeema Nasruddin — 2013

He called his map "The World is Stopping Us". Refugees are represented facing a red light; for them, it is impossible to go back to the country from which they fled (the Sudan, in this case), and there is uncertainty of being welcomed elsewhere or being officially recognised as a refugee. His work turned out to be a monumental map, one of the most evocative creations produced in our workshops.



"The World is Stopping Us" in the making, by Gladeema Nasruddin — 2013



"The World is Stopping Us", Gladeema Nasruddin's map – 2013

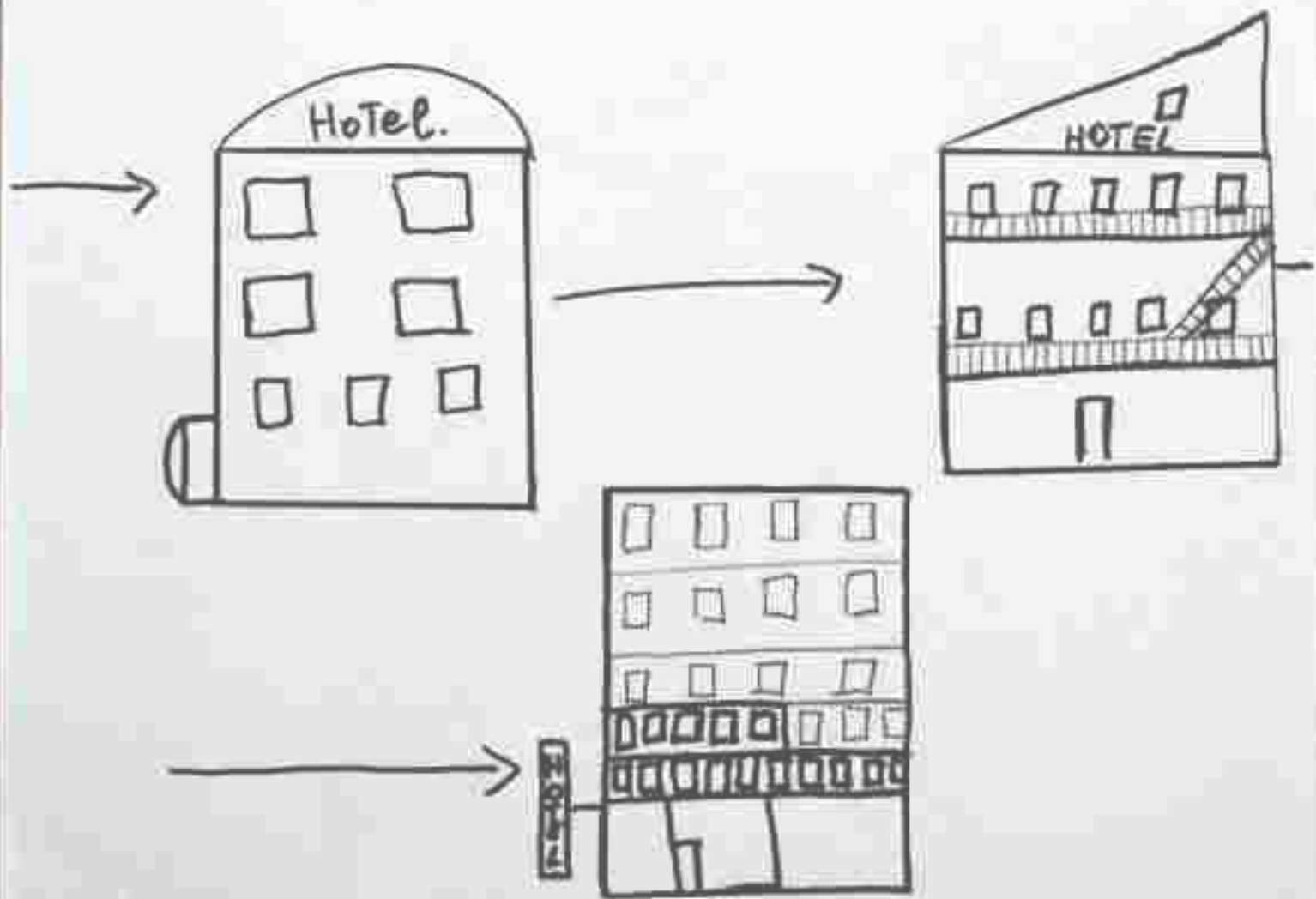
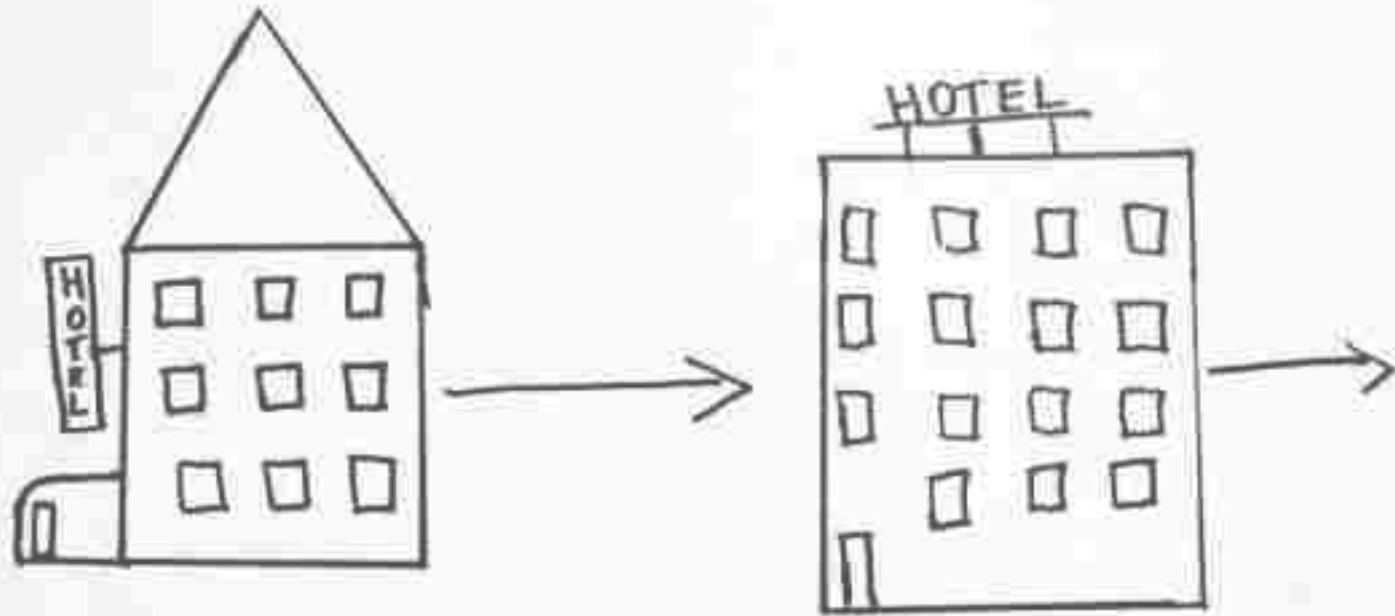
During the months of the workshop, the participants return on a regular basis despite tenuous living conditions (some of the participants are homeless).

Even though the principal theme at the heart of this project remains “the voyage”, the participants were pleased to escape their administrative status as “asylum seekers” during the time of the workshops. Without any pretence that this collectively-constructed act could help them obtain their right of asylum, it did produce a shift in the relationship towards the procedures and administrative processes. For a few hours, the participants became cartographers and autonomous asylum “researchers”. We tried to step back from the forms of domination created by procedures. However, inter-individual relationships were not always consensual. For example, one participant refused another homeless participant access to his collective lodgings because they did not have the same geographic origin.

### 3 — A voyage that never ends

THE DIVERSE MEDIUMS OF EXPRESSION USED IN THE EARLY STAGES OF THE WORKSHOP (FABRIC, CLAY, SOUND) permitted a return to paper, in order to recollect memories in greater detail. We asked the participants to “zoom in” on parts of their previous drawings and, by changing the scale, other dimensions of their socio-spatial experiences were revealed.

aura tout ça, plus tard



les années à l'hôtel

"Years at the hotel", drawing by T. (detail) — 2013

Anne-Laure Amilhat Szary:



*We are in the middle of May, and I am surprised to see the workshops still as packed. Everyone is now working on their own project in a rather autonomous way.*



*I meet the gaze of a young woman who looks distraught. I met her when she first visited our workshops, and she has already produced two maps that retrace her journey from Armenia. These maps contain few contextual details but are instead focused on her psychological distress. She hesitates greatly before taking the plunge to zoom in.*

*She first begins to explain verbally, and I feel I have to make notes, become her scribe, and not only because she does not write French very well. What she says is hard to depict, and she does not really know how to complete her account (nor whether she should even tell it). It is not about discussing her country of origin or her journey, but the way she was welcomed — or rather, not welcomed — in France.*

*She explains, “Sometimes my son asks me why we don’t have this or that. It is complicated to explain to a child. Sometimes, I try; sometimes, I tell him we will have all of that, later on.”*

*In my writing, I attempt to reflect her feelings, but after a few lines, she starts to draw rather frenetically. On the sheet of paper, first one, then two, then three, four, five hotels appear, all linked by arrows. The drawing is exact, and any observer would recognise the big hotel chains whose buildings pepper our industrial zones. This familiarity inevitably questions us in as much as we never see this landscape the way she does.*

*We end with a word tree linking up important words to her story and condensing her message. The words “papers, money, apartment” are poignantly positioned next to the emotions of “fear, difficulty, crying, not speaking, hurting”.*



“From Tripoli to Nice”, L.’s map — 2013

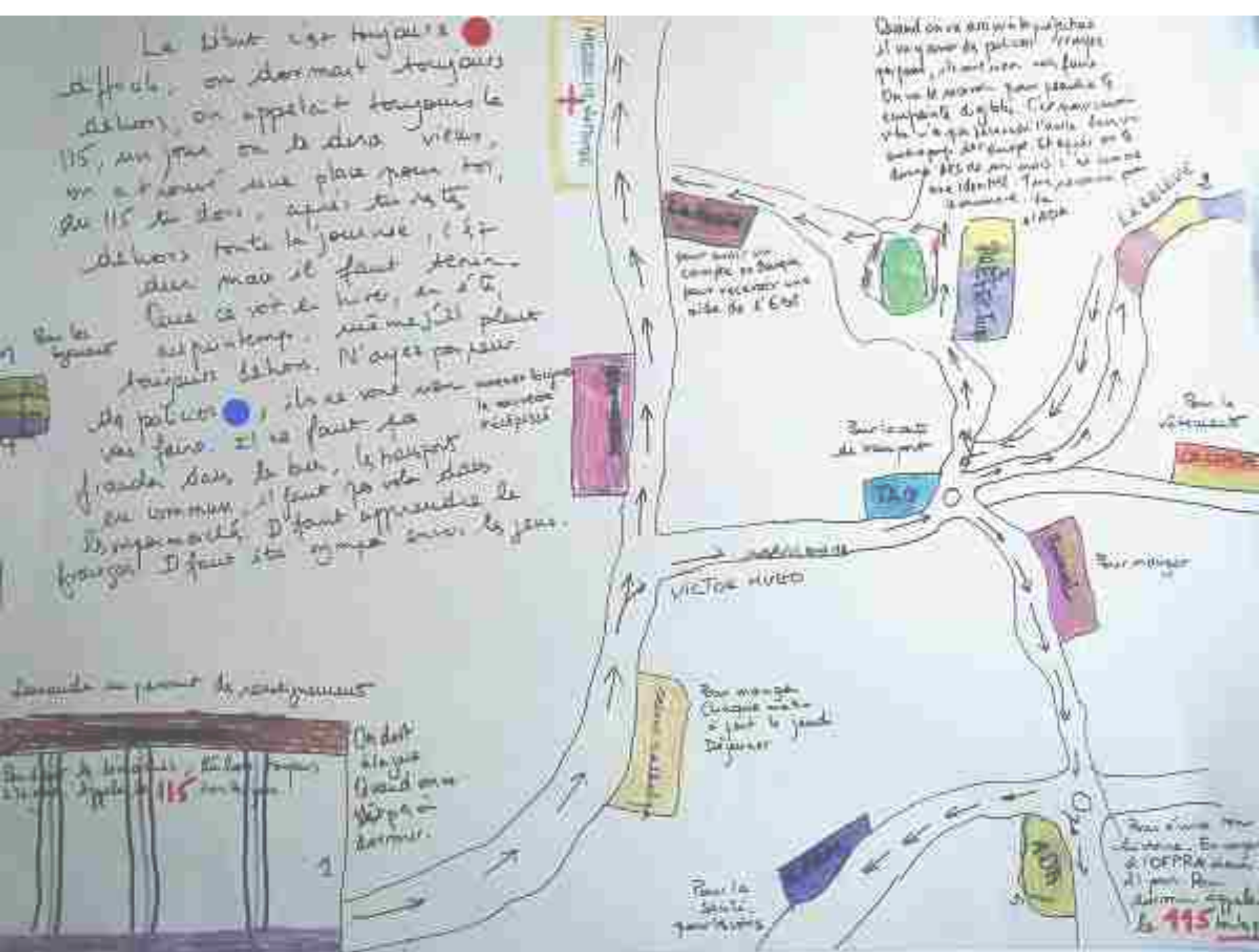
During the last sessions of the workshop, we decided it was necessary to shift the focus of our maps to a familiar space: that of Grenoble. The idea was to create — with participants working together — a guide for newcomers. In the end, the drawing was finally born from the work of six hands. It is a map without any background layer that positions key places on the route of asylum seekers. The mental links between these places are more important than their exact physical location within the city. They appear in a sequence materialised by numbers (from 1 to 7), similar to a board game.

The itinerary begins at the railway station...

« During the administrative procedures, you always sleep at the station. Call 115 [the telephone number of the local SAMU, the humanitarian emergency service] every day. You can sleep at the station when you don't know where else to sleep.

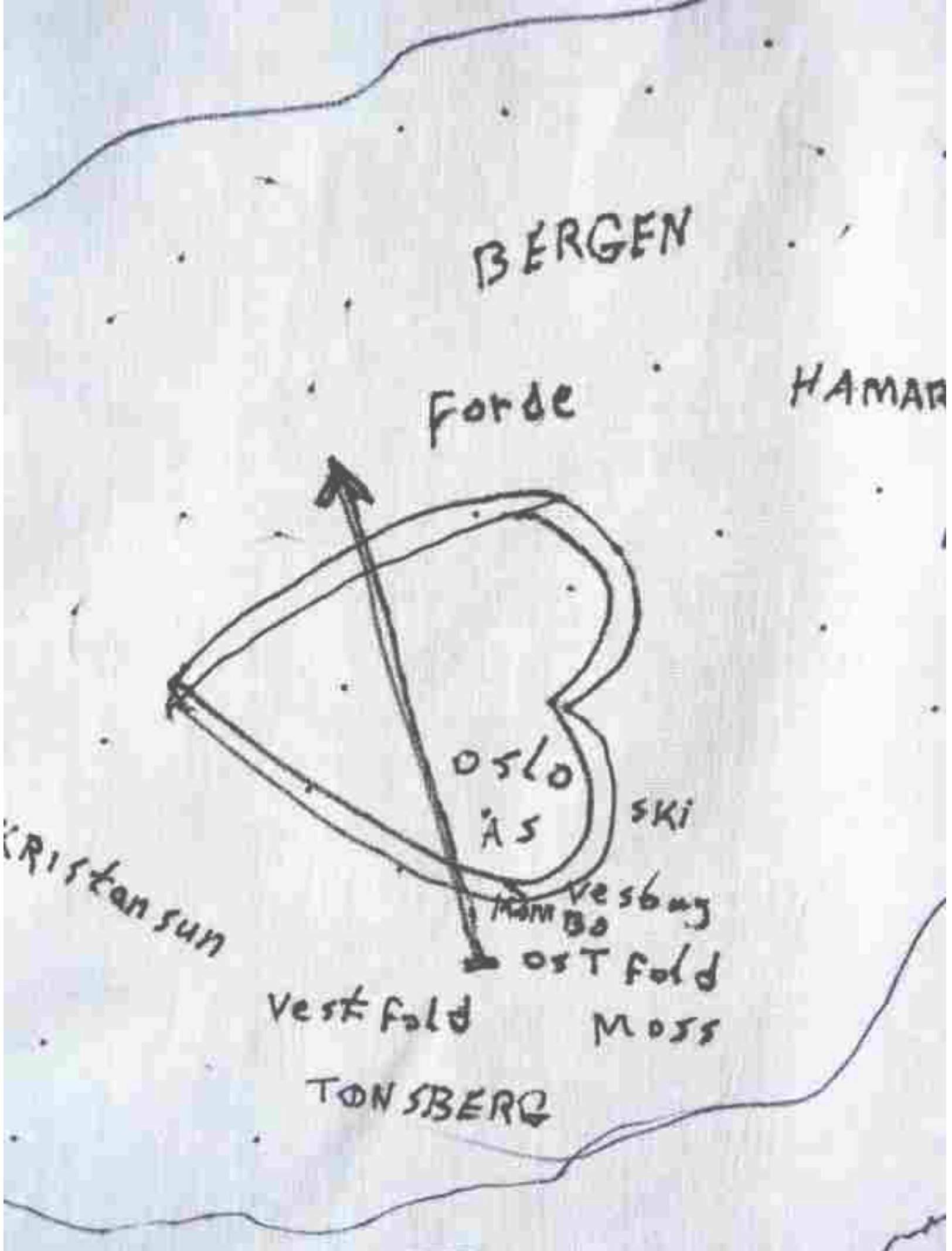
...Go to *Relève*, an administrative branch of the city where the applications are registered, and continue to the *Préfecture* [local offices of the central government where strangers' right of admission to French territory are processed and identity papers are delivered]...

« When you arrive at the Prefecture, there will be police officers. Don't be scared; they won't do anything to you. You will be asked for your fingerprints. That is to find out whether you have asked for asylum in another country in Europe. Afterwards, they will give you an APS ("Autorisation Provisoire de Séjour"; temporary authorisation to stay) for one month. It is like an identity. You are "recognised" for now. Go to the ADA.



"A new-comers' guide to Grenoble", K.'s and S.'s map — 2013





"Encountering love in Norway", H.'s map — 2013

#### 4 — Exhibiting: showing, saying, risking

AT THE VERY BEGINNING, WE AGREED THAT THE WORKS MADE IN THE WORKSHOP WOULD BE SHARED WITH THE wider public. This was not without obstacles, as questions relating to the status of the maps were raised, both in terms of material and intellectual property. To whom do creations belong when they are produced by a temporary collective? Who should preserve them, and how? What roles do the artists' play in the process? The project was made possible by financial support from the CNRS PACTE Laboratory, a partner of an important

European research programme focused on conceptual changes in the notion of borders. This support enabled us to purchase necessary materials and to remunerate the professional artists with whom we worked. The status of the participants as asylum seekers does not give them the right to work in France, and so they participated as volunteers. However, in light of participants' daily needs, workshop organizers were often able to personally contribute.

In view of its mediatisation, the judicial service of the CNRS was put to the test, having never before had to face such a scientific operation, bringing together people from such diverse horizons in view of an extraordinary experimental *modus operandi*! An agreement was signed between the researchers and the artists, the asylum seekers being included as such.



A visitor to "Crossing maps" installation during the "antiAtlas of Borders" exhibition, Aix-en-Provence, Musée des Tapisseries, 2013

It was stipulated that the textile creations and the audio recordings would remain the property of the three visual artists, while the drawings and models belonged to the CNRS and the asylum seekers. The contract stipulated explicitly that the works must remain permanently accessible to all members of the collective for different events, provided the parties involved are all publicly acknowledged.

This element of accessibility, which seemed secondary to us at the beginning of the project, ultimately proved to be essential. These works initially endowed with a personal value and serving as an eyewitness account for the participants, were then valued for their intellectual and documentary quality by the researchers. Finally, these same pieces took on a complex artistic dimension for the workshop's visual artists.

The exhibitions provided moments of reflection on the aesthetic, political and didactical status of the "Crossing Maps" project. The diversity of places where the project was presented and exhibited made it possible to reach a large and varied audience.

The “launch” took place in a social centre in downtown Grenoble close to the ADA on World Refugee Day, June 20, 2013. It was a momentous festive occasion that brought together all the participants and others close to them. The contrast with the very official presentation at the AntiAtlas of Borders exhibition in the Musée des Tapisseries d’Aix-en-Provence was particularly conspicuous (this other exhibition took place within the framework of the Marseille–European Capital of Culture 2013 celebrations). At the heart of a larger project focused on the role of technologies of control in the governance of borders, “Crossing Maps” shifted the focus towards individual experiences of crossing borders. In doing so, the project helped to re-humanize what surveillance tools have sought to dehumanize. We ensured that at least one of the participants and asylum seekers was present during each of our question-and-answer sessions in the exhibition spaces. This was the case in Grenoble (at the social centre and the Festival Migrant’scène, 2013), in Aix-en-Provence, and also in Geneva (“Rencontre Frontières et migrations. Chercheurs, praticiens et artistes croisent leurs regards (<http://www.unige.ch/sciences-societe/geo/frontieres-migrations/fr/>)”) as well as in Pontcharra (International Solidarity Week).

The participants’ maps have provided support for discussions between participants and a very interested public. Sessions with high-school pupils and university students have been particularly productive.

The project paradoxically found “disciplinary validation” at the International Festival of Geography in Saint-Dié des Vosges (exhibition at the Pierre Noël Museum in October 2014), where pupils, students, university professors and teachers valued the heuristic functions of the maps.

While the mediatization of the project has made it possible to increase the dissemination of the “Crossing Maps” creations, the risk of aestheticisation remains forceful. Furthermore, displaying painful experiences and individuals’ emotional responses to them in no way guarantees a political response. Sometimes, it is quite the opposite. The mediatization here nonetheless finds its origins in the evocative cartographic and audio material. The latter contrasts with some of the sensational images (often incriminating or re-victimizing) disseminated by the media, a situation that is often reinforced by administrations dealing with the right of asylum.

## Epilogue

THIS CARTOGRAPHIC AND ARTISTIC EXPERIMENT HAS EXPLORED NEW WAYS OF APPROACHING MIGRATORY EXPERIENCES. Maps, drawings and audio recordings created during the workshop draw on polyphonic narrations that assist us in seeing and hearing the multiple points of view on contemporary border crossing and asylum.

Through our acts and practises, we sought to create conditions suitable for the transmission of knowledge and artistic production. The collaborations between researchers and artists have helped to shift and denaturalise the classical methods of inquiry in the social sciences. Geography, cartography and art here share a critical ambition. If “Crossing Maps” did not contribute to the administrative regularisation of its participants, nor to an acceleration of asylum seekers’ procedures, it nonetheless permitted a destabilisation of the sensational images of migration one finds in the media.

We also sought to give some depth to border lines and migratory arrows in order to promote a consideration of the politics of freedom of movement and the right of asylum. This consideration is particularly important for a general public that is not necessarily very familiar with these questions and concepts.

The “workshop participants”, “drawers-cartographers”, and “artists” whose creations were exhibited have helped to shift the “asylum seeker” stereotype into something to study, question and subvert. This creative cartographic gesture also allowed for a methodological reconsideration within the worlds of science and art, as well as a reconsideration of the ways in which we communicate our stories.

## On the same topic:

- *Qu'est ce qu'une frontière aujourd'hui ?* ([http://www.puf.com/Autres\\_Collections:Qu%27est-ce\\_qu%27une\\_fronti%C3%A8re\\_aujourd%27hui\\_%3F](http://www.puf.com/Autres_Collections:Qu%27est-ce_qu%27une_fronti%C3%A8re_aujourd%27hui_%3F)), Anne-Laure Amilhat Szary , PUF, Paris, 2015.
- « *Cartographies* » (<http://www.actes-sud.fr/catalogue/arts-du-paysage/carnets-du-paysage-n-20-cartographies>), Les Carnets du paysage n° 20 p. 5-9, Jean-Marc Besse, Actes Sud / École nationale supérieure du Paysage, 2011.
- *GeoHumanities: Art, History, Text at the Edge of Place* (<http://www.routledge.com/books/details/9780415589802/>), sous la direction de Michael Dear, Jim Ketchum, Sarah Luria et Doug Richardson, Routledge, New York/Londres, 2011.
- « *Comment on juge l'asile : l'institution comme agent moral* » ([http://www.cairn.info/resume.php?ID\\_ARTICLE=RFS\\_534\\_0657](http://www.cairn.info/resume.php?ID_ARTICLE=RFS_534_0657)), Didier Fassin et Carolina Kobelinsky, Revue française de sociologie, p.657-688, volume 53, 2012/4.
- *La question morale, une anthologie critique* ([http://www.puf.com/Autres\\_Collections:La\\_question\\_morale.\\_Une\\_anthologie\\_critique](http://www.puf.com/Autres_Collections:La_question_morale._Une_anthologie_critique)), sous la direction de Didier Fassin et Samuel Lézé Fassin, PUF, Paris, 2013.
- « *De l'artification - Enquêtes sur le passage à l'art* » (<http://lectures.revues.org/8155>), sous la direction de Nathalie Heinich et Roberta Shapiro Heinich, EHESS, Paris, 2012.
- « *Figurer les entre-deux migratoires : une expérience scientifique et artistique d'ateliers de cartographie participative* » ([http://www.carnetsdegeographes.org/carnets\\_terrain/terrain\\_07\\_01\\_Mekdjian.php](http://www.carnetsdegeographes.org/carnets_terrain/terrain_07_01_Mekdjian.php)) Sarah Mekdjian, Anne-Laure Amilhat Szary, Marie Moreau, Lauriane Houbey, Mabeye Deme, Coralie Guillemain et Gladeema Nasrudden, Carnets de géographes, numéro spécial sur "Les espaces de l'entre-deux", 2014
- *Border As Method, or, the Multiplication of Labor* (<https://www.dukeupress.edu/Border-as-Method-or-the-Multiplication-of-Labor/>), Sandro Mezzadra et Brett Neilson, Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 2013.
- *Voir, faire voir* (<http://www.regards.fr/acces-payant/archives-web/marie-jose-mondzain-qu-est-ce-qu,3163>) Marie-José Mondzain, homo spectator, Bayard, Paris, 2013.
- *Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice* (<http://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674724655>) Martha C. Nussbaum, Belknap Press, Cambridge, MA, 2013.
- *Géosthétique* (<http://www.lepeuplequimanque.org/geoesthetique>) under the supervision of Kantuta Quirós and Aliocha Imhoff, B42, Paris, 2014.

In 2015, Sarah Mekdjian and Anne-Laure Amilhat Szary also published a blog post on the [Géoconfluences](http://geoconfluences.ens-lyon.fr) (<http://geoconfluences.ens-lyon.fr>) website:

« [Carte à la une : les frontières vues du sol et du ciel, navigation dans un itinéraire migratoire](http://geoconfluences.ens-lyon.fr/informations-scientifiques/a-la-une/carte-a-la-une/carte-a-la-une-les-frontieres-vues-du-sol-et-du-ciel) » (<http://geoconfluences.ens-lyon.fr/informations-scientifiques/a-la-une/carte-a-la-une/carte-a-la-une-les-frontieres-vues-du-sol-et-du-ciel>), February 2015.

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