

# holding on

## *photography and reflexive ethnography*

Jean-Robert Dantou, Florence Weber & Ninon Bonzom - March 23, 2023

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• social inequalities • photography • image • sociology • relationship • migration • displacement • polarization • poverty • relegation • territory • rural • ethnography • mental strength • documentary photography

What resources do people facing great difficulties linked to the increase in social inequalities between territories use daily? Why do some people in precarious situations move from one region to another and not others? How do these relocations, endured or chosen, contribute to locking them in or giving them back control over their lives? A loss of income or the hope of an easier life may lead to residential relocation to areas where the cost of living is lower (rent, food), where relatives are available to share domestic tasks in the broadest sense. Staying put when neighbors leave, having to leave a neighborhood where the cost of living has risen sharply, seeing one's neighborhood become impoverished, empty, collapsed, seeing adjacent neighborhoods get richer: all these factors obfuscate attitudes towards the future and lead to emotions such as anger, shame, or sadness. These questions are raised by a collaborative social science study that examines the role of economic dynamics and public authorities in the selective collapse of portions of the French territory.

The photographic investigation conducted in *Tonnerre* between 2017 and 2022 is the first unit implemented by this collective research. It focuses on the conditions necessary for photography to be an effective heuristic tool in the service of scientific knowledge. Formally, the work is part of a lineage partially interrupted during the second half of the twentieth century, that of alliances between photography and social sciences forged a century earlier in Europe (Thomson and Smith), in Australia (Gillen and Spencer), and in the United States (Boas and Hastings). The project advocates the notion of photographic and ethnographic practice closer to a craft rather than an art form, a profession rather than an artistic gesture, for production of knowledge at the service of accretion of understanding and interdisciplinary cooperation rather than the competitive search for innovation.

On the *zoom.able* platform, the visual essay unfolds on three levels. The first layer presents a map of the city of *Tonnerre* that highlights the important structures for the survey: pictograms indicate the entry points to the territory, the caring institutions that allow people to survive, the vacant places that play a key role in the arrival of precarious populations, and the shelters that provide protection from the cold and rain.

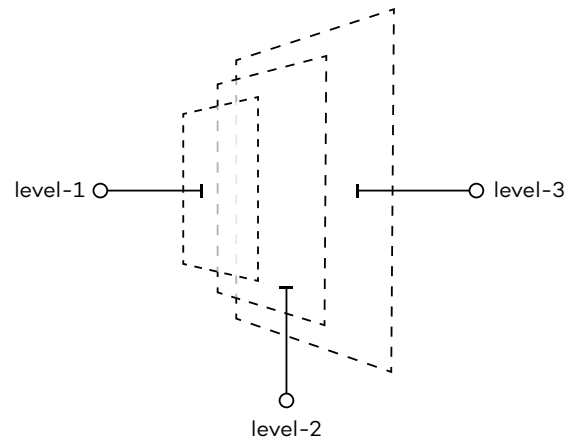
The second layer shows a selection of portraits, with captions providing information on the different ways in which people have settled in *Tonnerre* over the past ten years. The framework engages the people photographed at several stages of the production. They have chosen the places where the pictures were taken. They have also chosen the places to which their portraits are linked on the map, either because they spend time there, or because they have in those locations an emotional connection, related to their hopes and doubts. And they have also coauthored the captions accompanying the photographs, to explain their singular relationship to the area.

The third layer follows two rationales: the places identified on the map refer to photographic documentation of the territory, while each portrait refers to the resources mobilized to deal with daily life as well as photographic situations. From an epistemological perspective, this is about restoring the gap between the observed world and its photographic representation, a reminder that photographic materials, in order to be usable, must be related to the singular context of their production: the distance between photographer and subject; monochromatic effects; and things that are out-of-frame, such as the photographer's body language during the shoot.

This contribution was published on [www.able-journal.org](http://www.able-journal.org) in a zoom.able format:

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The user can zoom in or out of the content by scrolling and pan the image in any direction. By zooming in, layers appear successively in depth.



## credits

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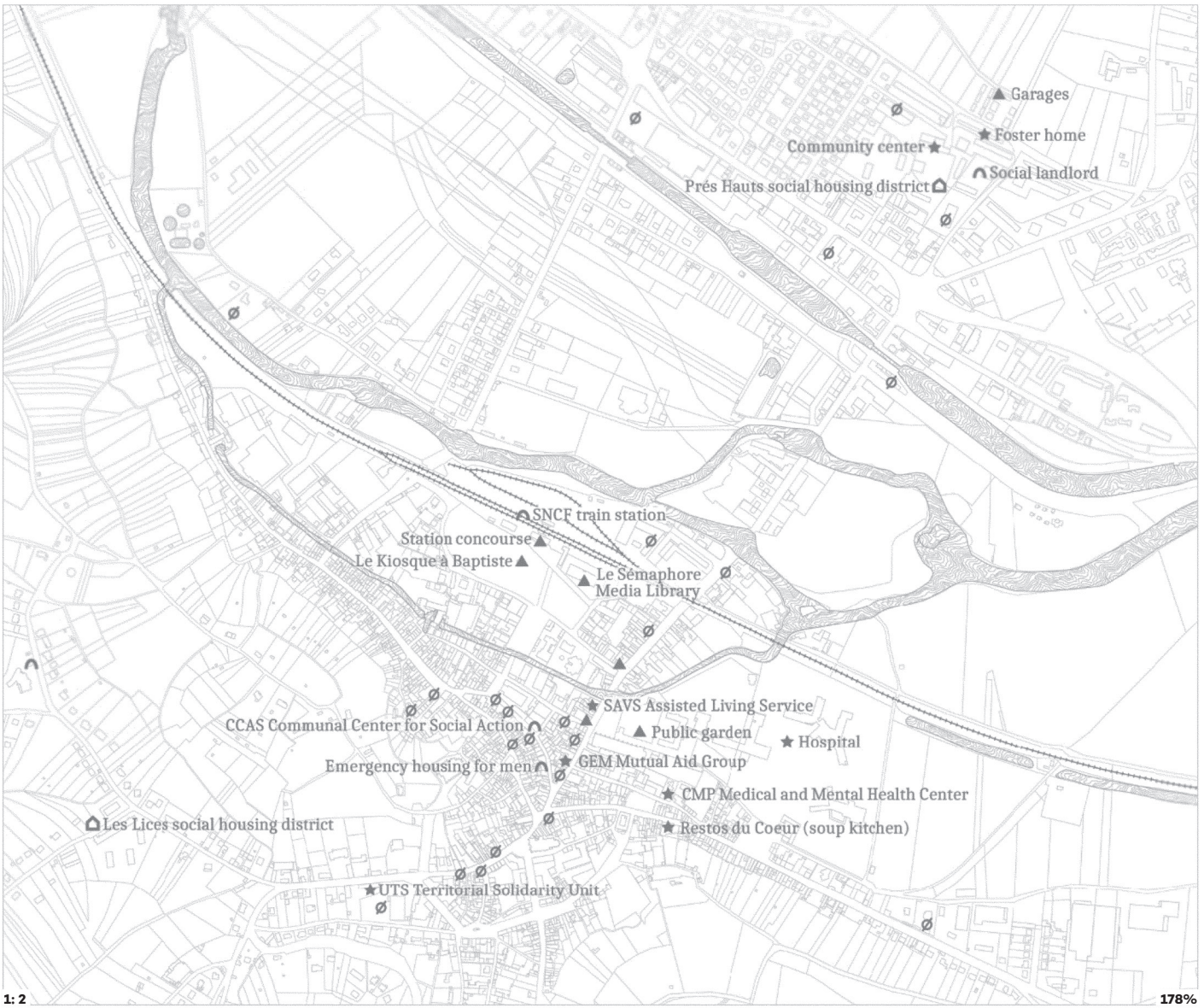
## about the authors

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**Ninon Bonzom** is a landscape artist working on the Plateau de Millevaches in France. She works with people living in rural areas and collects data during landscape surveys. From this collected data she creates handmade editions where drawings, cartographic works, and first-hand stories illustrate the inhabitants' perceptions of the landscape.

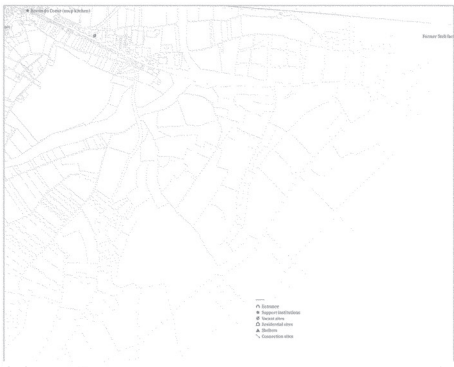
**Jean-Robert Dantou** is a documentary photographer and member of Agence VU'. Since 2019, he has been undertaking a SACRe thesis at the Ecole Normale Supérieure - PSL on the relationship between photography and social sciences. He explores the place of documentary photography in society by questioning the effect produced by the circulation of the photographs on the people and the territories photographed.

**Florence Weber** (PhD) is Professor of Social Anthropology and Ethnography at the École Normale Supérieure. In the 1980s, she focused on the workers in large-scale industries in rural areas and then on the individual consequences of demographic transformations in contemporary French society.



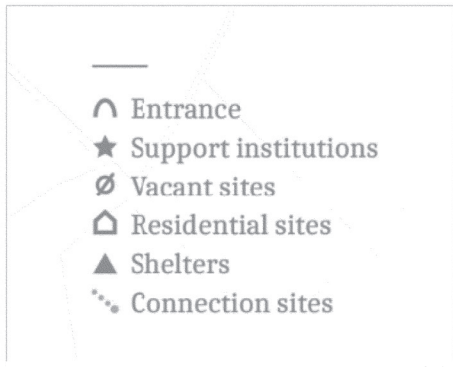
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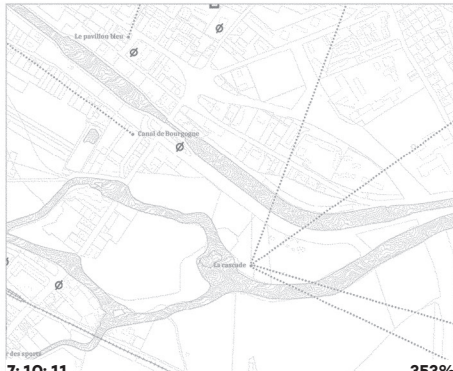
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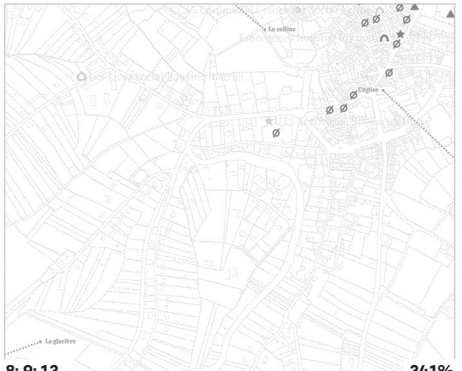
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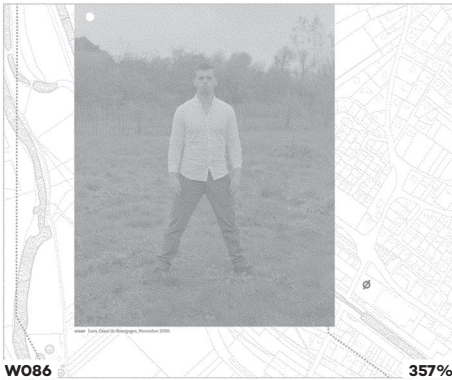
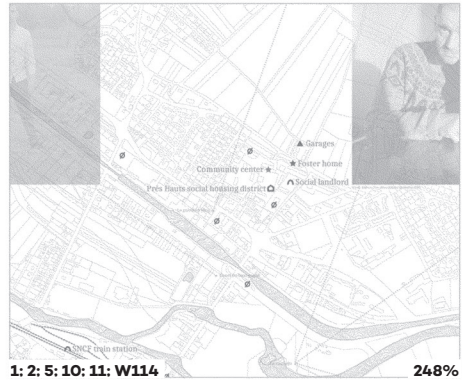
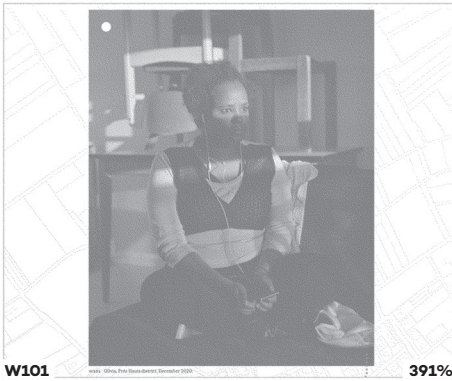
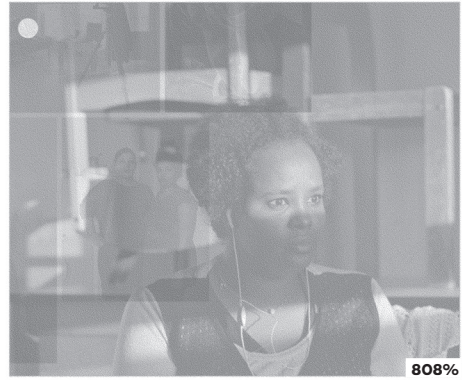
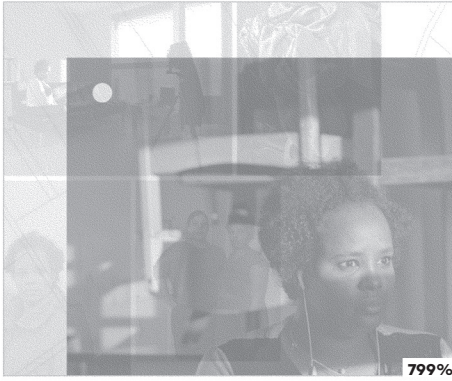
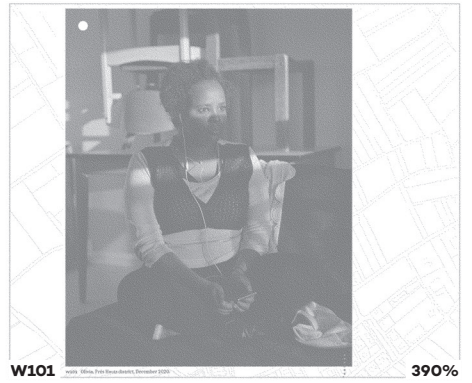
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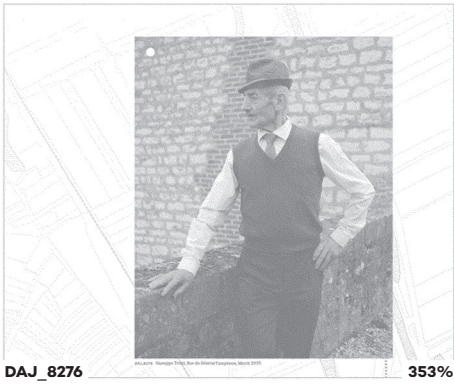
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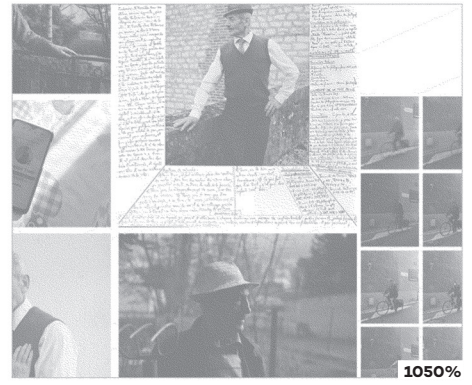


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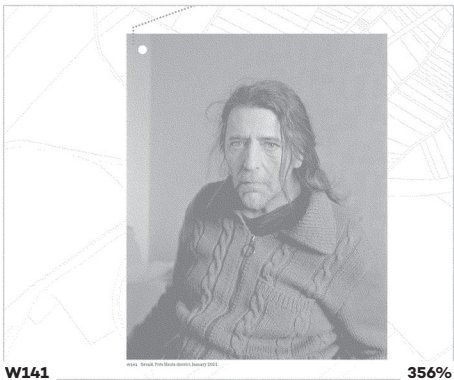
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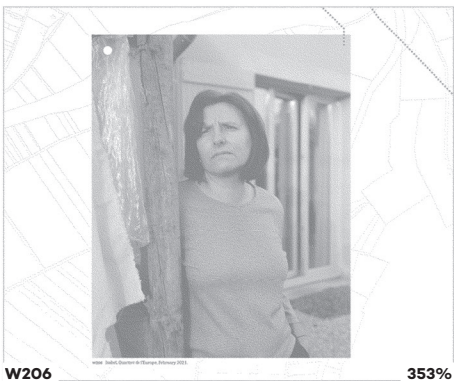
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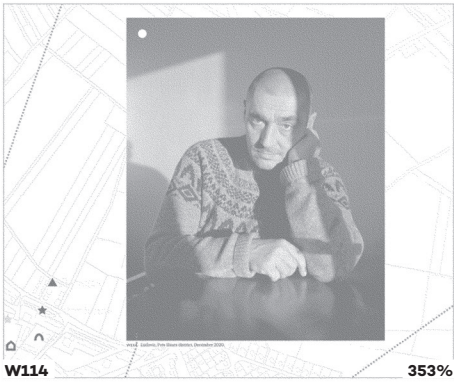
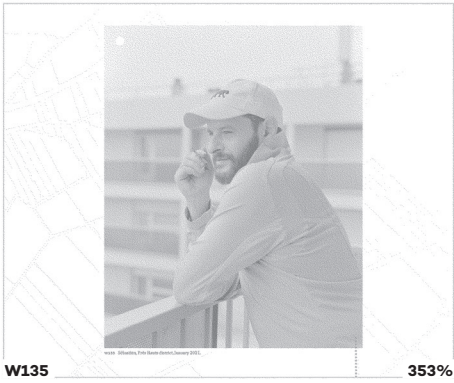
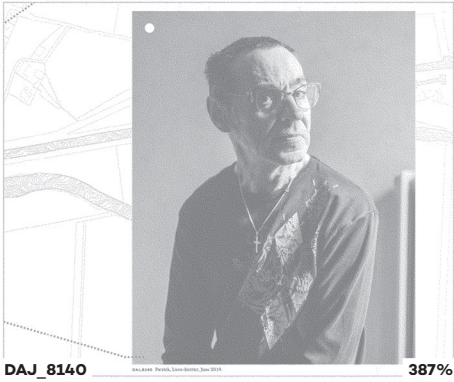
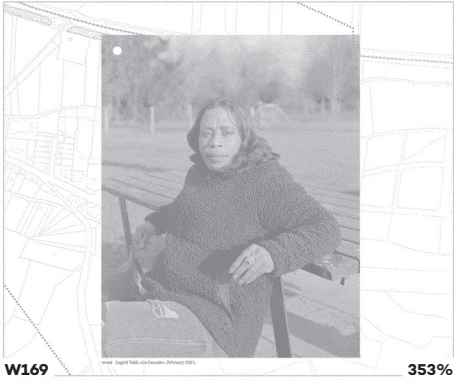
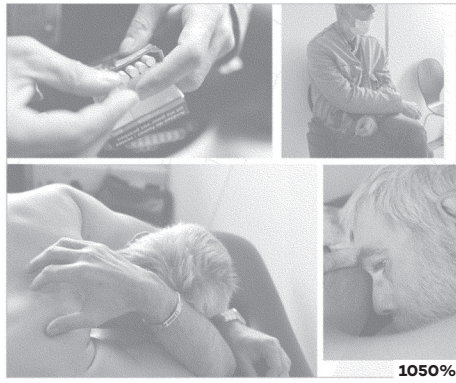
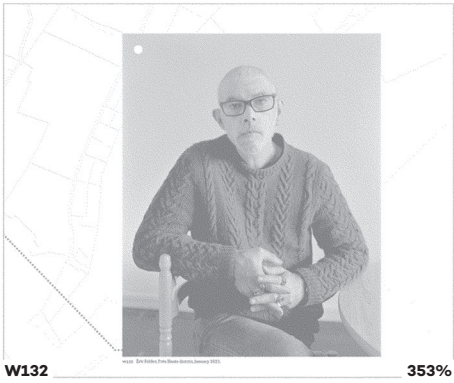
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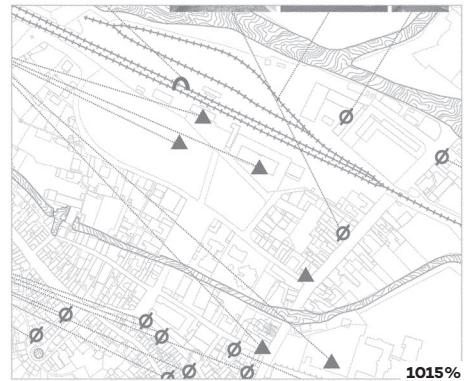
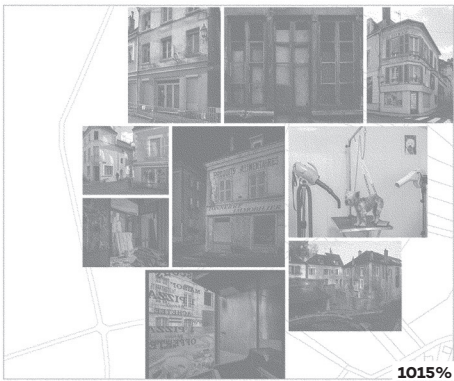
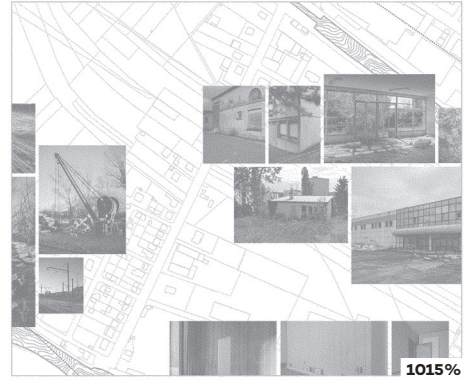
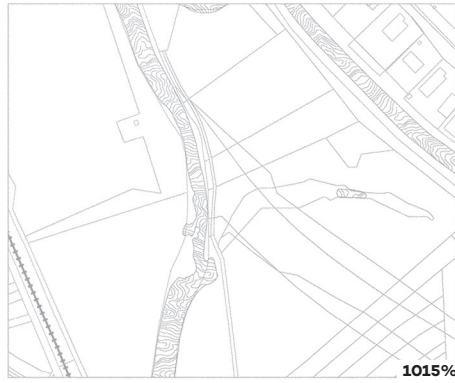


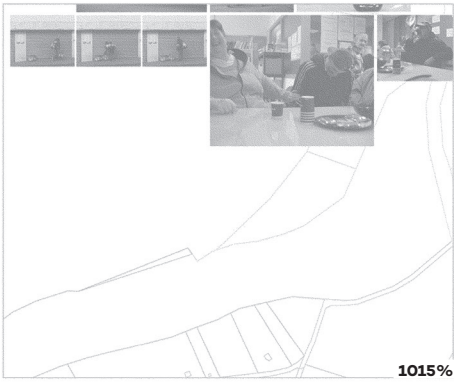
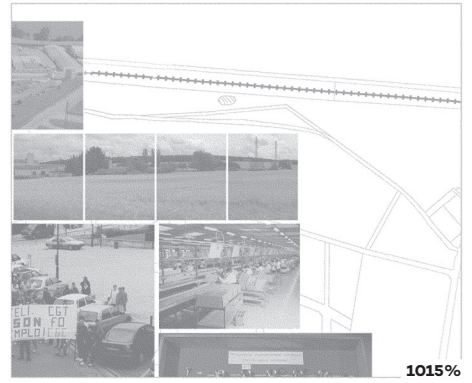
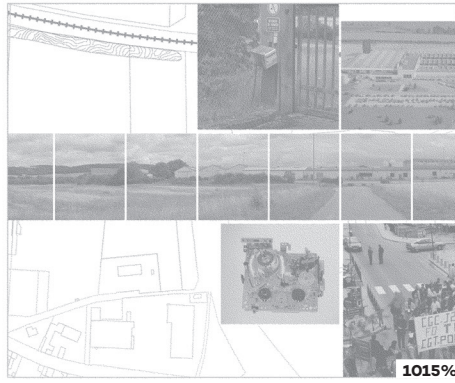
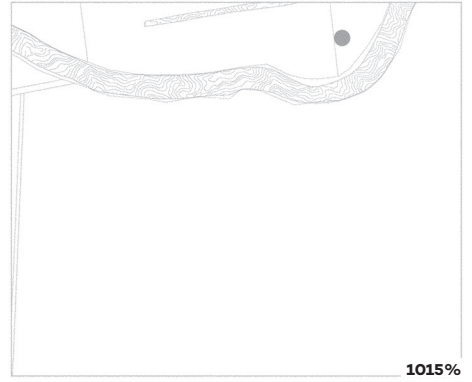
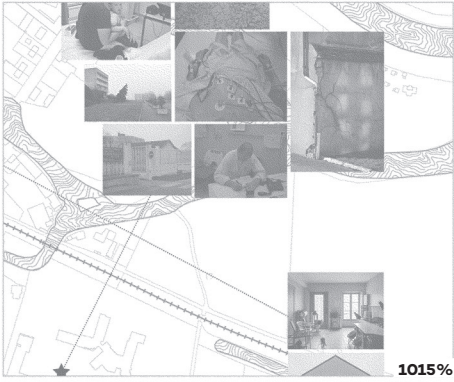
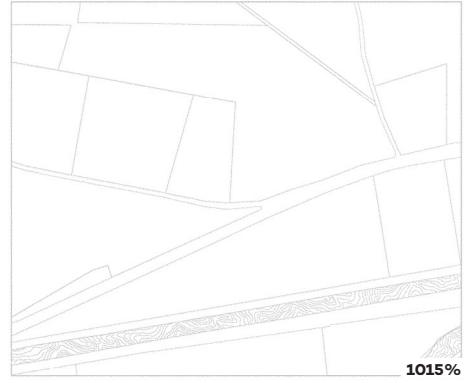
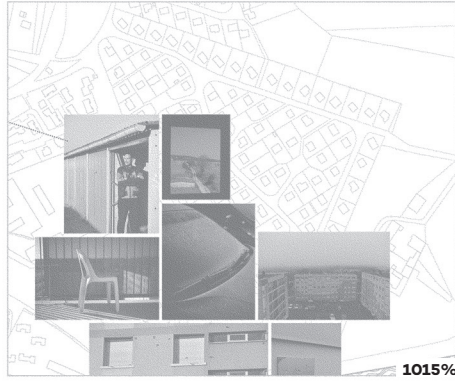
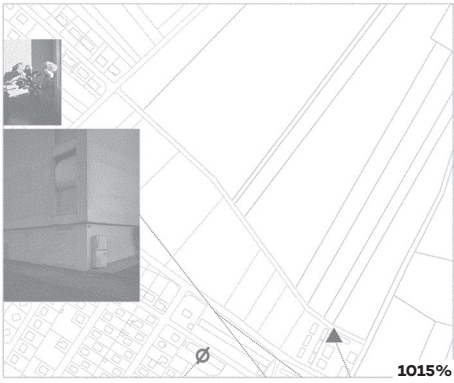
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## image captions

reading direction from left to right  
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**1.** Garages, Foster home, Community center, social housing authority, Prés Hauts social housing district.

**2.** SNCF train station, Station concourse, Le Kiosque à Baptiste, Le Sémaphore Media Library, SAVS assisted Living Service, CCAS Communal Center for Social Action, Public garden, Hospital, GEM Mutual Aid Group, Emergency housing for men, CMP Medical and Mental Health Center, Les Lices social housing district, Restos du Cœur (soup kitchen), UTS Territorial Solidarity Unit.

**3.** Former Steli factory

**4.** Entrance, Support institutions, Vacant sites, Residential sites, Shelters, Connection sites.

**5.** La cascade

**6.** La rue Campenon

**7.** Le bar des sports

**8.** La colline

**9.** L'église

**10.** Canal de Bourgogne

**11.** Le pavillon bleu

**12.** Hauteurs de Tonnerre

**13.** La glacière

# rights and references

## illustration rights and references

Jean-Robert Dantou, Florence Weber and Ninon Bonzom. *Map of the city of Tonnerre*. 2021. Credits © 2021 Ninon Bonzom. Reproduced with permission.

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Jean-Robert Dantou. *Portraits from the photography series "Photographier"*. 2021. Photos © 2021 Jean-Robert Dantou/SACRe ENS PSL/Agence VU'. Reproduced with permission.

**W152.** Bouchra, Prés Hauts district, January 2021.

**W101.** Olivia, Prés Hauts district, December 2020.

**W114.** Ludovic, Prés Hauts district, December 2020.

**W132.** Éric Felder, Prés Hauts district, January 2021.

**W135.** Sébastien, Prés Hauts district, January 2021.

**W141.** Gérald, Prés Hauts district, January 2021.

**W086.** Luca, Canal de Bourgogne, November 2020.

**W206.** Isabel, Quartier de l'Europe, February 2021.

**DAJ\_8140.** Patrick, Les Lices district, June 2019.

**W100.** Bachir, Tonnerre Heights, December 2020.

**DAJ\_8276.** Giuseppe Trotti, Rue du Général Campenon, March 2019.

**W169.** Luginid Valdi, "La Cascade", February 2021.

**W152.** Bouchra arrived in Tonnerre in February 2020, at the age of 43, after spending several months in a night shelter in Migennes. Her portrait appears on the map at the level of the limestone cliff that overlooks the city, which corresponds to the horizon she sees from her bedroom window, from the Prés-Hauts district. She describes this hill as a "horizon to overcome," a metaphor for the daily difficulties of leaving her room and apartment. Behind her portrait appears a series of screenshots that put into perspective the long time it took to take the picture.

**W101.** Olivia arrived in Tonnerre in September 2020, at the age of 30, after a long hospitalization in Auxerre. Her portrait presents an ordinary everyday scene, during which she listens to Ethiopian music on her cell phone. Olivia wanted her photograph to appear on the map at the Pavillon Bleu, a brasserie where she goes almost every day to buy her tobacco and meet a friend.

**W114.** Ludovic arrived in Tonnerre in 2010, at the age of 40, after several years on the street. His portrait was taken at his home at the end of the day, in December, in the winter light, at the table where he explains he used to sit to think. His portrait is attached to some photographs from the series *Photographier* taken at a place called La Cascade, which question the issue of distance in the photographic relationship.

**W132.** Eric Felder arrived in Tonnerre in 2010, at the age of 42, after having lived in a hostel in Auxerre for two years. His portrait appears on the map at the Bar des Sports, where he likes to stop for a coffee on the terrace: "This morning I had eight or ten coffees. I drink one, smoke a cigarette, and order another." Eric doesn't like his portrait very much; he thinks he leans his head too much, that it's unbalanced. His portrait is linked to photographs from the series *Photographier* a reflective documentation of the operation of cutting up the world which the photographic act does.

**W135.** Sébastien arrived at the Résidence Accueil in the Prés-Hauts district in 2020, at the age of 43. He wanted his portrait to appear on the map at the Cascade: "I don't like it, Tonnerre, there is no work, it's dead. The only quiet place is the Cascade." His portrait is attached to photographs questioning one of the paradigms of the photographic relationship: the choice of background.

**W141.** Gérald is originally from Tonnerre; he arrived at the Résidence Accueil in the Prés-Hauts district five years ago, at the age of 47. Here he poses on the bed in his room, which he describes as the place where he spends most of his time. Gérald wanted his portrait to appear on the map at La Glacière, a cave near the house where he arrived in Tonnerre at the age of three. His portrait is linked to photographs from the series *Photographier* in a reflexive documentation of the photographic gesture.

**W086.** Luca arrived in Tonnerre at the end of October 2020, at the age of 20, after a month spent on the streets of Auxerre. His portrait is linked to three forms of resistance that are part of his daily life: regular weight training, a knife to defend himself, and drawing. Luca left town a few days after we met, and we have since lost contact with him. His portrait appears on the map at the location where the photograph was taken.

**W206.** Isabel arrived in Tonnerre from Portugal in August 2013, at the age of 41, to join her husband, who had found a job in the vineyards in Chablis a few months earlier. She describes her exile and arrival in Tonnerre as a difficult ordeal. Her portrait is attached to a sequence of photographs taken moments later, for which she brought together her children and husband. Her portrait appears on the map at Notre Dame de Tonnerre Church: "Every Sunday or so, I come to light a candle and say a prayer so that one day I can go back to my country."

**DAJ\_8140.** Patrick arrived in Tonnerre with his partner Céline in May 2015. He was 60 years old at the time, and she was almost 40. Originally from the inner suburbs of Paris, they arrived in Tonnerre after staying with a cousin in Saint-Ouen for several years. They got married in Tonnerre on May 14, 2016. Patrick's portrait appears on the map at La Cascade, where they like to go for a walk, meet friends, or have a picnic. The last layer shows a series of photographs presenting both the circulation of photographs in the investigation and Patrick's close family (his wife, brother, and nephews).

**W100.** Bachir arrived in Tonnerre at the end of November 2020, at the age of 54, after staying for a few months with friends in a nearby town. He was only in Tonnerre for few days before finding social housing about 50 kilometers away, in the town of Joigny. Two photographs appear behind his portrait: a scene of rest on the cell phone in the emergency housing of the Centre Communal d'Action Sociale and a portrait dressed for boxing, a sport he practices daily to keep fit and stay in shape. His portrait appears on the map at the location where the photograph was taken.

**DAJ\_8276.** Giuseppe Trotti has lived on Rue Campenon for about sixty years. Regarded as one of the best dancers in the city, he poses here in March 2019, in ballroom attire in the street in front of his home. Almost every morning, Giuseppe rides his bike to buy bread and run a few errands, before returning to make lunch for his wife. He wanted his portrait to appear on the map at the level of Rue Campenon, which he describes as the place where he founded his family. His portrait is linked to a series of photographs from the *Tenir* series which, on the one hand, depicts a morning routine structuring his days, and on the other hand, refers to the rhythm of the fieldwork relationship: Jean-Robert Dantou spent approximately one week every six weeks in Tonnerre, and each of his field days begins with a photograph of Giuseppe on his bicycle, at the same street corner, usually between 8:30 and 9:00 am.

**W169.** Lugrid Valdi arrived in Tonnerre in March 2020, at the age of 40, after several months in a parenting center in Auxerre. Her portrait is linked to a series of photographs taken a few minutes later, on the banks of the Armançon River, where she likes to walk. Lugrid wanted her portrait to appear on the map at the train station: "I wasn't used to seeing an abandoned train station. It affected me not to find an agent to ask what time the train was passing. I was used to Paris; I was completely lost here."

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