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**Collecting, writing and performing urban nostalgias  
Looking for tomasons in Saint-Gervais, Geneva**

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**Abstract**

The aim of this article is to analyse how the conceptual and survey tools of geography can be used to perform urban nostalgias in the artistic domain. Starting with the concept of the tomason, an urban object that has lost its function but persists in the urban landscape, the text describes a geographical-theatrical research project to collect tomasons in the Saint-Gervais district in Geneva and transpose them to a theatre for subsequent performance. During a month-long immersion in this district, a theatre director, a sound designer, a geographer, and two actors went in search of tomasons, equipped with the tools of the social sciences (interviews, direct observations, participant observation and reflexivity) and the tools employed in directing actors in a theatre. The retrospective analysis of the survey in May 2021 explores the reciprocal effects of the use of tomasons for both the scientific and artistic fields: what is the impact of this dialogue between geography and theatre for survey practices around the spatial dimension of memory, and how does the production of a geographical-theatrical performance influence the practice of acting and narrative assemblage?

**Keywords:** tomason, nostalgia, memory, city, performance

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## Résumé

Cet article propose d'analyser la manière par laquelle les outils conceptuels et d'enquête en géographie peuvent être mobilisés pour performer les nostalgies citadines dans le domaine artistique. À partir du concept de tomason, qui désigne des objets urbains désuets qui demeurent dans le paysage urbain, le texte propose de rendre compte d'un projet de recherche géographico-théâtral qui s'attache à collecter les tomasons dans le quartier de Saint-Gervais, à Genève, pour ensuite les rejouer dans une salle de théâtre. Lors d'une immersion d'un mois dans ce quartier, une metteuse en scène, un géographe, deux comédien·ne·s et une créatrice sonore sont parti·e·s à la recherche des tomasons, muni·e·s des outils des sciences sociales (entretiens, observations directes, observation participante et réflexivité) et de ceux de la direction d'acteur·rice en studio. L'analyse rétrospective de l'enquête qui a eu lieu en mai 2021 interroge les effets réciproques pour les champs scientifiques et artistiques du recours aux tomasons : que produit ce dialogue entre géographie et théâtre sur les pratiques d'enquête autour de la dimension spatiale de la mémoire, et dans la fabrication d'une performance géographico-théâtrale, sur le jeu d'acteur et le montage narratif ?

**Mots-clés :** tomason, nostalgie, mémoire, ville, performance

## Acknowledgements

The two authors are associate researchers at La Manufacture – HES-SO in Lausanne and have benefited from a research funding for this project.

## Introduction

May 3, 2021, the Tomason project research team, consisting of a theatre director, a sound designer and a stage designer (all women), one male geographer and two actors, approach an imposing piece of modern architecture at the eastern end of the Saint-Gervais district in Geneva. The group moves in a phalanx towards the entrance and find itself facing a set of closed glass doors. Behind the doors, a ticket office, movie posters and the red carpet of a hall are still visible. Beyond that there is a glimpse of a huge auditorium, with some of its seats missing. At the back of the hall, the screen is still in place.

This group immersion is the first in a series of *dérives* (Debord, 1956),<sup>1</sup> part of a geographical and theatrical research project funded by La Manufacture theatre school in Lausanne,<sup>2</sup> and by Geneva's Saint-Gervais theatre.<sup>3</sup> The project team, a collaboration between artists and a geographer, created an artistic performance based on a survey inspired by social science methods and concepts drawn from cultural geography.

So far, the survey group can see that work has started to dismantle the Plaza cinema. This is the first vestige mentioned by inhabitants of Saint-Gervais: the district's last big movie house is being demolished to make way for a car park.

Saint-Gervais is one of those pass-through districts, seemingly designed and built for traffic flows. After the mass demolition of its ageing infrastructures in the 1930s, work began in the 1950s to rebuild it from the bottom up. Its architecture is modern, its roads wide and busy.

As the team roams the district, they increasingly wonder about all the urban spaces rebuilt in the second half of the 20th century: what do people remember when everything has been demolished then rebuilt?

If we follow Henri Desbois (s.d.) and Philippe Gervais-Lambony (2017), the term for these material traces of these lost objects is "tomasons". It originally referred to the artistic collection of photographs of urban objects that have lost their function but still bear witness to earlier times (Akasegawa, 2009). Philippe Gervais-Lambony describes tomasons as traces "of a system whose other elements have been destroyed" (2017, § 25). They are collected in the form of photographs that act like fragments of memory, parcels of nostalgia (Cassin, 2013).

So in looking for examples of these obsolete urban objects, the Tomason project team sought to explore effects of transposing concepts from social geography to the artistic sphere. They see tomasons as traces of creative destruction at work in the city (Veschambre, 2007). From a theatrical perspective, their aim is to emphasise the value of forgetting in the practice of directing actors: the performers accumulate observations and lived experiences during the survey and transpose them to the stage by narrative alone, accreting layers with each new rehearsal. When finally performed, the study demonstrates the methodological and reflexive value of the combination of disciplines.

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1. A situationist practice, *la dérive* (drifting) consists in explorations of the city conducted each time under a different constraint. In this case, the actors were asked to wander around the city and approach potential accomplices.

2. A description of the project can be found on [the website of La Manufacture, HES.SO Lausanne](#).

3. [The Saint-Gervais theatre blog has two articles on the research project](#).

This account of the project begins by describing the search for tomasons in the Saint-Gervais district, setting out its scope and theoretical limitations. It then goes on to explore the benefit of using artistic methods to circumvent the limitations of the tomason concept. The final section of the article discusses the heuristic value of artistic performance as a way to report on the survey.

### Searching for tomasons, a geography of ghosts

In 2009, Genpei Akasegawa, the Japanese artist who coined the term “thomasson”,<sup>4</sup> paraphrased the Communist Manifesto by opening his *Hyperart Thomasson* in the following way: “A spectre is haunting Tokyo: the spectre of the thomasson” (cited in Desbois, s.d., p. 6). What is the connection between a tomason and a ghost?

#### *The tomason, a spectral and subversive figure*

Ghosts are “tools for understanding dissonant temporalities that are not necessarily linear, and their manifestations in a single place” (Barthe-Deloizy et al., 2018, § 6). And this is precisely what a tomason is: the presence of a door that leads nowhere, a dusty telephone kiosk with no ring tone, a faded store sign—all of them bear witness to the redundancy of their function, the result of rapid changes in the city. Making the analogy between tomasons and ghosts is also a way to highlight another of their characteristics: the lived experience of passing time and the building of memories, with its mix of continuities and discontinuities (Gervais-Lambony, 2017, p. 18). The materiality of tomasons is charged with symbols and memories for those who have unwittingly witnessed their gradual obsolescence to the point that they no longer notice them.

In this sense, the tomason is close to the “survival” described by Georges Didi-Huberman (2009) in connection with fireflies, those signals in the penumbra of countervailing powers. A survival is indestructible, it may seem invisible but remains latent, like a potential, and can therefore re-emerge elsewhere, in another form. Here we need to stress the subversive nature of tomasons, a trait already present when they were invented by Genpei Akasegawa:

“Far from being a conservative attitude in the face of urban change, hunting tomasons is also [...] a critique of the capitalist order. By its status as a trace without a

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4. The word was originally spelt in this way in reference to Gary Thomasson, a baseball player who missed every strike and was relegated to the substitutes bench, a shadow of his former self (Desbois, s.d.).

purpose, its pointlessness, its absurdity, its lack of commercial value, the tomason opposes the maximisation of profit and efficiency” (Desbois, s.d., p. 11).

### *Traces of the urban past*

To think of tomasons as ghosts is therefore a way to avoid thinking of them as “ruins [that maintain] memory”: they are rarely things that are preserved like heritage. Moreover, they are usually encountered by chance rather than looked for. They are more like signs of forgetfulness, consubstantial with changes to the city (Barthe-Deloizy et al., 2018). Following Carlo Guinzburg (1989, p. 24), to look for tomasons is to espouse a method of collecting clues that is central to the scientific method, in which urban space is seen as a palimpsest. Like a reminiscence that seems to signify our forgetting of the depths, the tomason signals the ephemeral and transitory nature of the urban, causing us to feel nostalgia for something that no longer exists.

It is precisely this disappearance that provokes nostalgia, because it “has less to do with the persistence of a memory than with the evidence of its erasure” (Roncayolo, 2003, p. 6). For her part, Barbara Cassin (2013) draws on *The Odyssey* to explore her own sense of nostalgia. The nostalgia Ulysses feels is formed in fantasy, in the call of a land that in a sense he no longer knows. So nostalgia here is more to do with the sensation of being unmoored, of suspended time. And it is precisely this sense of an unfinished journey, of a deterritorialisation (Deleuze and Guattari, 1980), that this performance seeks to explore with its audience.

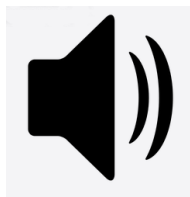
### **Deconstructing the ghost buster hunt**

The Tomason research project team worked to gather together this nostalgia during a three-week survey undertaken during a month of immersion in Saint-Gervais. The group began by drawing up a list of tomasons encountered in the early drifting sessions. However, this collection process revealed its limitations: from the first week, the outcome of searching for contingent objects in urban space was to extract the tomasons from their context, turning them into almost fetishistic objects (Harvey, 1981). Moreover, this said nothing about how the tomasons are perceived by their day-to-day observers, local people. This raises the question of how to work on memory using an inert fragment of the past without access to the narratives that accompany or produce them? Merely collecting tomasons led the team into a cul-de-sac.

As a result, the focus of the project shifted to the quest for accomplices, as recommended in geographical field surveys, in order to explore their relation to these

tomasons. A journalist, a street trader, a shopkeeper, two geographers, a writer, an archaeologist, a priest and a guard, took the time to share with the team fragments of their relationship to the neighbourhood and to its anachronistic objects. The words of these accomplices were captured not only for what they said about their spatial imaginaries, but also for their fictional potential. Speech is therefore exploited for what it reveals of feelings of nostalgia about a changing neighbourhood.

By way of example, here is what a retired shopkeeper, a key figure in the district, said about his arrival in Saint-Gervais in the 1980s (sound extract no. 1):<sup>5</sup>



[Sound extract no. 1: Interview with Mr. El Koury, a resident of the district](#)

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These words, which were part of the performance, are not just a personal story. As sound and as theatrical material (text, character, gestures), the words of the accomplices reactivate memory in a unity of time and place. The fiction constructed from their experiences is a way to invoke the ghosts of the district, using their words to produce narratives of past eras. These narratives draw on the material tomasons as a starting point, but quickly move beyond them, and the accomplices' words are sprinkled with memories that become "symbolic tomasons" which evoke citizen nostalgias (Gervais-Lambony, 2012). This shift to the symbolic register largely explains the use of sound, rather than vision, as a method of collection.

### *Sound as a means to escape the omniscient gaze*

Drawing on feminist geography studies, Anne Volvey, Yann Calbérac and Myriam Houssay-Holzschuch (2012) place emphasis on the status of sight as the primary means to objectify social relations and construct a kind of omniscient gaze. In their work, they argue that

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5. The sound extracts were all recorded live, during the survey that preceded the final performance, which can sometimes distort the clarity of the sound.

“The classic field survey, in which the collection and correlation of data are based on observation, is defined by feminists as “*a performance of power*” (Rose, 1996, p. 58)—particularly, “*an inappropriate performance of colonising power relations*” (Sharp, 2005, p. 306). The practice of *fieldwork*, inspired by the model of exploration, operates between possession by measurement, penetration by the gaze and control by the comprehensive coverage of an external space (*field* or *land*) (Volvey *et al.*, 2012, p. 447).

Influenced by these writings this research project sought to “move away from the hunt” for tomasons. The futuristic novel *Les Furtifs* (Damasio, 2019) imagines “stealthy” beings, beings that are invisible, a hybrid of flesh and vibration, which are thus able to escape the control of a dystopian society. A father is looking for his daughter, who has become one of these beings, and during his search discovers that they are made of vibrating particles, i.e., of sound. In the course of the novel, he learns to abandon the hunt.

In an attempt to avoid these *ghost buster* errors, the survey apparatus relies on the use of sound, from recordings of personal accounts to the ultimate performance. Sound functions by means of suggestion rather than assertion, as Vinciane Despret indicates:

“What is it that sound changes in our relationship to the world? [...] When we are in the visual register, we are in the dimension of certainty. [...] Visual truth is a referential truth: I see this thing and I know what it refers to. This is a register of truth in which a certainty will become established. [...] The quest for sounds is a curiosity-driven quest which respects the fact that we don’t know everything and we don’t have access to everything, whereas the visual gives us a sort of primacy of access. In the visual dimension, we are almost masters of the house, in sound we remain apprentices.”<sup>6</sup>

During the survey, as a methodological principle, the team chose not to take photographs so as to make sound a primary means of representing the ghost world.

### *Performing the mind map: observing, stacking, forgetting*

In parallel, at the start of the research, the actors were asked to produce a mind map of the district on paper.

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6. Transcript of an extract from the France Culture programme, *La Grande Table*, by Olivia Gesbert, episode broadcast on February 23, 2021 (<https://www.radiofrance.fr/franceculture/podcasts/la-grande-table-idees/vinciane-despret-une-ecologie-de-la-cohabitation-8519124>, listened to on May 12, 2022).



Figure 1: Mind map of the Saint-Gervais district  
 © project Tomason, 2021

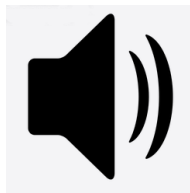
On this mind map, the Saint-Gervais district is given shape through its structural features: the Rhône in blue on the lower part, roads in the centre and the railway tracks on the upper edge. In addition, the map includes landmark places. From left to right: Saint-Gervais Theatre in red, the temple opposite it in mauve, followed by the Manor supermarket and, to finish, the Plaza cinema in brown on the right edge of the map. The map figures a constellation of noncontiguous urban objects linked by the memory of group drifting sessions.

This map (figure 1), inaccurate and imperfect as it is from a semiological point of view, inspired an acting exercise in which the director asked the actors to relate and act out their map in the rehearsal room. They didn't work from a text, but from oral experience alone and, because they only had access to the traces of past rehearsals in the form of sound recordings, it was by remembering the layout of the map in space that they were gradually able to improvise the movements and words to describe the district. Instead of accumulating comprehensive survey data by measurement or situating places, as would happen in cartography, the map performance becomes a



memory outcrop<sup>7</sup> of the experiences enacted, but also—and equally importantly—of the experiences forgotten. As the map is enacted, re-enacted, rehearsed, a succession of fragments of the actors' drifting experiences emerges. By the narratives and their emotions, the actors thus come to produce translations, inevitably always partial in both senses of the word, of the space. In this, their interpretation resembles the experience of a sensory tomason, as if, in order to perform a map in a theatre studio, they not only had—of course—to remember places, but also to let some fade away. This method links with the work of the theatre director Thom Luz in *When I Die* (2013), invoking the ghosts of great composers, where the musicians develop a particular emotional relationship with their instruments. Objects become the repositories of a relationship between the living and the dead, and the whole play is orchestrated around a dance of ghost objects and sounds.

In this performance, it is places that become the frames for the narrative, embodied and unconscious. Of course, they are no longer present in the lines spoken by the actors, but remain so in the way that the actors circumvent them, leave them unspoken. In the sound extract that follows (sound extract no. 2), the enacted map shows several stages in a process of ordinary cartography: delimitation of outlines, justification of borders, identification of nerve centres.



#### [Sound extract no. 2: Theatre studio recording of the spatialised map](#)

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Except that here, the cartography also includes what “doesn’t interest us” and would be impossible to represent on the map: discarded interview extracts, the building in front of us that we don’t know what to do with, and the tomason, which stands out for its anachronism and redundancy. In representing useless material on the map, the performance enacts material that is failed, makeshift, surplus, all the stuff that is central to the social sciences. Conducting a survey of tomasons is a way to incorporate and give visibility to sometimes abortive attempts in the construction of

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7. In geology, an “outcrop” refers to the appearance on the surface of an old geological layer generally deeper than those above it.

geographical knowledge, by looking for methods of writing that take this material into account.

### **Representing nostalgia: a geographical-theatrical ritual**

It is November 17, 2021. Some thirty audience members stand sipping a pastis in the glass room on the 6<sup>th</sup> floor of Saint-Gervais Theatre. The lights of the city shine into the room, Julien Doré croons for a while before giving way to Bruce Springsteen's "My Hometown" (Gervais-Lambony, 2020). The temple bell tower behind the theatre strikes six, the sun is going down, but the silhouette of Mount Salève is still visible, watching over Geneva.

#### *Survey and fiction*

The research team has organised this drinks party as a tribute to Mr. El Khoury (sound extract no. 1)—a resident who had told us about his arrival in the district—as a way to bring closure to each performance. It punctuates not only the end of the study, but also of the geographical-theatrical ritual. On three successive evenings, the spectators have experienced nostalgic feelings about places that they have not necessarily visited, through immersion in sound and dramatic expression.

To achieve this, the researchers have tried to address the spatiality and nostalgias specific to each audience member. The location of the performance has proved crucial: Saint-Gervais theatre is at the heart of the district. This former youth and culture centre, with its modern architecture, is an iconic cultural space. The choice of the room on the 6<sup>th</sup> floor is also essential: it is a low-ceilinged rehearsal room, with glass on two sides and a panoramic view over the district. The parquet floor, the chestnut colour tones, the roller blinds, the plywood cupboards and the granular concrete columns create the atmosphere of a different time. The team places eight big white tables in the centre, in the front third of the room, reproducing an expanded version of our group office, as well as some thirty stackable plastic chairs (village hall style). A performance space is left free between this table and the glass rear wall (figure 2).



Figure 2: Photograph of the performance of *Tomason*, 2021

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The blinds are closed when the audience arrive, then are gradually opened during the performance. The neon lights are on and the audience is spaced around the table where mind maps, field notebooks and computers are laid out. A coffee machine gurgles into life several times at random moments.

The director introduces the project and each of the team members, as well as the types of address and speech specific to their speciality: actor, sound designer, geographer, director. Every stage in the research is covered: hypotheses, list of tomasons and accomplices, narratives and anecdotes about the drifting process (Calcine and Opillard, 2022), disagreements about how to proceed, failed encounters, theoretical references. Each member occupies a particular position: an actress who joined the process at the last moment constantly asks questions, an actor gives voice to his doubts as a researcher, fluctuating between what he knows and his attacks of paranoia (Boltanski, 2012), the director talks about the ups-and-downs of the survey, the geographer refocuses the debate on theoretical and spatial questions, and the sound director gives a summary of her sound log.

In parallel, one actor tries to delimit the scope of the research, in order to get the ritual off “to a good start”. In this way, for the audience, he circumscribes the research perimeter, in other words, the district, here concentrated within the microcosm of the room. In addition, a blurring between reality and fiction is visible in the choice of outfits: street clothes, but just slightly offbeat (the actor is dressed entirely in blue). A first mystery (Boltanski, 2012) arises: one actress, dressed in a multicoloured outfit and a hat, remains silent.

### *Sowing confusion*

Slowly, a slippage occurs from survey to performance. The spotlights are switched on, the neon lights switched off. The actors begin a live enactment of the spatialisation of their district maps (figure 3). The quality of the acting creates an effect of improvisation and error. They seem to be trying to remember observations, smells, anecdotes, to be making things up as they go along.



Figure 3: Photograph of the mapping performance, *Tomason*, 2021

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Traces of the survey are scattered through the performance and play on juxtapositions of fragmentary and secondary styles (Deleuze and Guattari, 1980). While the geographer and the sound designer speak from their professional stance, the actors shift from their own role to the composition of characters (figure 4), drawing their texts from the raw speech of the survey, their own words and the words of the accomplices and interviewees. When the actress who has so far been silent speaks for the first time, the words are visibly not her own, but those of a character talking about the district.



Figure 4: Photograph of the re-enactment of the street trader, *Tomason*, 2021  
© Ivo Fovanna

The material collected has been transformed in the course of the rehearsals, partially fictionalised. This practice draws on the tools of documentary theatre and oral history, in the form of a re-enactment, then using an earpiece, as embodied by Julia Perazzini in *Holes and Hills* (2016), where the artist gives expression to the voices and bodies of phantoms of known or unknown women who cross her path. The performer surfs in the holes of a plural identity. Similarly in *Tomason*, we next hear scraps of the voice of a street trader in a sound design creation, while the two actors dance in the last part of the performance. As a result, these residues of the field survey are mysteries for the audience, who have no access to the initial experience from which they stem.

The audience sees only scraps and omissions. In this respect, they directly experience a sense of nostalgia, the appearance of tomasons.

In parallel, sound extracts from the survey are broadcast throughout the performance. They constitute an entry in an editing process, parallel but complementary to the stage entry, punctuating the narrative, providing a counterpoint, a cut, or a theoretical echo to this empirical experience of representation.

### *Saying goodbye to the district*

The last part of the performance gradually abandons speech. It first juxtaposes three stories, simultaneously, like a random and inaudible heaping of layers that culminates in a climax (figure 5), and ends with the two actors dancing in the semi-twilight.



### Sound extractor no. 3: The actors dance in the semi-twilight

© project Tomason, 2021

This dance (sound extract no.3) reproduces the encounters with two accomplices and expresses a feeling of nostalgia that is more connected with sensations, with the memory of the sound, smell, and touch associated with places.

Finally, the spectators are given iPods that broadcast an individual guided tour. They are invited to close their eyes. Some of them are led slowly to the windows, and open their eyes to see the city at night.

The tour offers to escort the audience through the district, guided by the pre-recorded voices of the actors. But rather than what might be expected in a scientific or documentary survey, the tour focuses on insignificant things: a plastic giraffe in a public garden, the noise of gravel, the sacred bodies that haunt the street of the same name. Through the play on perceptual juxtapositions (sounds of the city, bodies in the room, exterior lights and interior darkness) and this time through an effect of enlargement, the spectators have the experience of drifting while remaining within the auditorium. From this perspective, it can be said that the theatrical experience has itself become a tomason, made up of stacked layers of survivals, an assembly of borrowed

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nostalgias intended to echo those of the audience. Once they have opened their eyes, the drinks party enables the assembled spectators to adopt the position of new arrivals in the neighbourhood, the ritual is over, and a welcome drink is organised by and for the newcomers. It is both a welcome and a farewell.

## Conclusion

A concept originating in the arts world, then readopted by geography, has been employed here to construct a theatrical form enriched by methodological tools specific to the scientific discipline. In this way, geographical-theatrical ritual is used to give physical and tactile expression to the tinkering of the survey, making room for every start and false start in the research, while seeking to arouse in the audience emotions and nostalgic imaginaries even for places unfamiliar to them. That is the power of performative expression which, fleshed out by the geographical survey and fictionalised by theatrical writing, immerses the spectators in the complexity of geographical sensations and imaginaries, and summons up what they have in common.

Imagined in the district of Saint-Gervais, this geographical-theatrical ritual does not need to remain in Geneva, but rather seeks to take shape anywhere where enquiry is possible. Every attempt is therefore recorded on an interactive map, on which the results of the first two exercises can already be found.<sup>8</sup> The exercise was thus repeated in April 2023 with students on the Stage Production programme at La Manufacture, in Lausanne.

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8. [The interactive map of the project can be accessed online.](#)



Figure 5: The Tomason research team dancing on the credits of *Ghost Buster*,  
*Tomason*, 2021  
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### To quote this article

**Opillard** Florian, **Calcine** Sarah, 2023 « Collecter, écrire et performer les nostalgies citadines. En quête de tomasons à Saint-Gervais, Genève », [“Collecting, writing and performing urban nostalgias/ Looking for tomasons in Saint-Gervais, Geneva”], *Justice spatiale | Spatial Justice*, 18 (<http://www.jssj.org/article/collecter-ecrire-performer-les-nostalgies-citadines-en-quete-de-tomasons-a-saint-gervais-geneve/>).

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