



More than maps: Larissa Fassler's cartographic drawings capture the complexities of a city

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More than maps: Larissa Fassler's cartographic drawings capture the complexities of a city

Samantha Cataldo Currier Museum of Art, USA (text)

Larissa Fassler Artist, Berlin, Germany (drawings)

Larissa Fassler elevates our expectations of what a map can reveal. Venturing beyond depictions of the physical landscape, Fassler visualizes complicated socioeconomic and cultural issues in her cartographic drawings. Fassler leverages the map's reputation as a factual diagram in her work. She also embraces the subjectivity of the mapmaker, who shapes a map through a series of strategic aesthetic decisions. In this way, she creates art that presents complex ideas of space and place by manifesting both the observable and intangible characteristics of a city.

The act of walking as a means of understanding one's surroundings has a long history in the arts, from Charles Baudelaire and the *flâneur* of the nineteenth century, to Guy Debord and the avant-garde Situationist International in the mid-twentieth century, to contemporary artists such as Francis Alÿs and Janet Cardiff. Fassler continues this through a mode of working that relies heavily on pedestrian exploration combined with rigorous research about a city's history, urban planning, socioeconomic issues and demographics. Her drawings relay the bodily experience of moving through space by representing her own visceral reactions, including her feelings of discomfort and displacement while she explores an unfamiliar environment. Fassler seeks to understand how a city's architecture affects its citizens—both physically and psychologically—and in turn how human behaviour shapes the built environment. Researched while Fassler was artist-in-residence at the Currier Museum of Art, the large-scale drawing series *Manchester, New Hampshire, USA* (2020) reflects her impressions of the city over several weeks during the summer of 2019. As Fassler began exploring

Note from the editor:

This curated article introduces a new format for Thinking Eye: 'In Conversation.' 'In Conversation' presents the work of two practitioners, artists or academics whose methods and interests are complementary and able to enhance one another.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Larissa Fassler is a Canadian artist who has lived and worked in Berlin, Germany, since 1999. Fassler creates drawings, paintings and sculptures based on long-term research and observation of international cities. She obtained a BFA from Concordia University, Montreal, Canada, and an MFA from Goldsmiths, University of London, UK.

Samantha Cataldo is senior curator of Contemporary Art at the Currier Museum of Art where she directs the artist-in-residence programme, organizes exhibitions and oversees the postmodern and contemporary collections. She obtained an MA in Art History and Museum Studies from Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, Ohio, USA, and a BA from Providence College, Providence, Rhode Island, USA.

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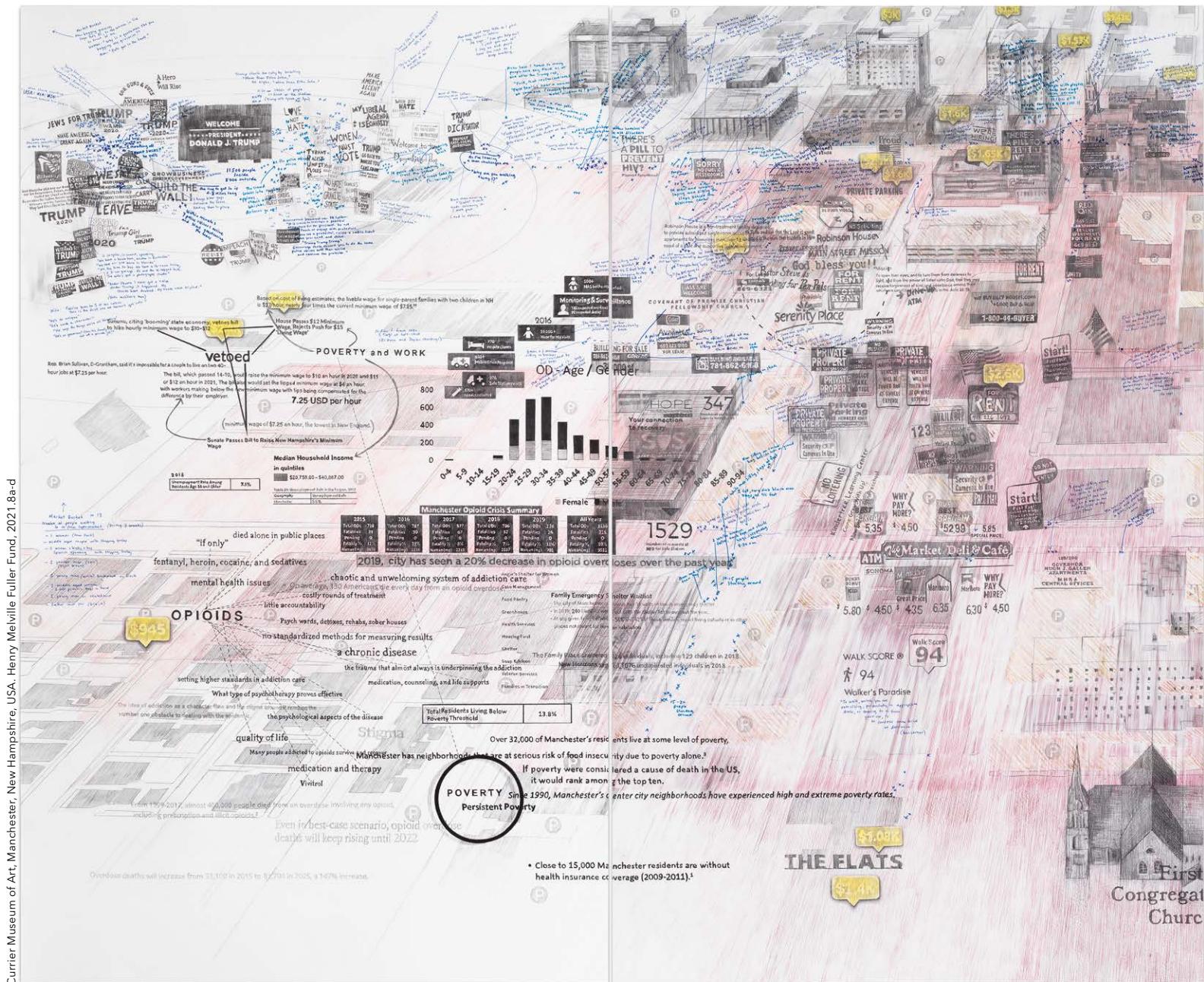
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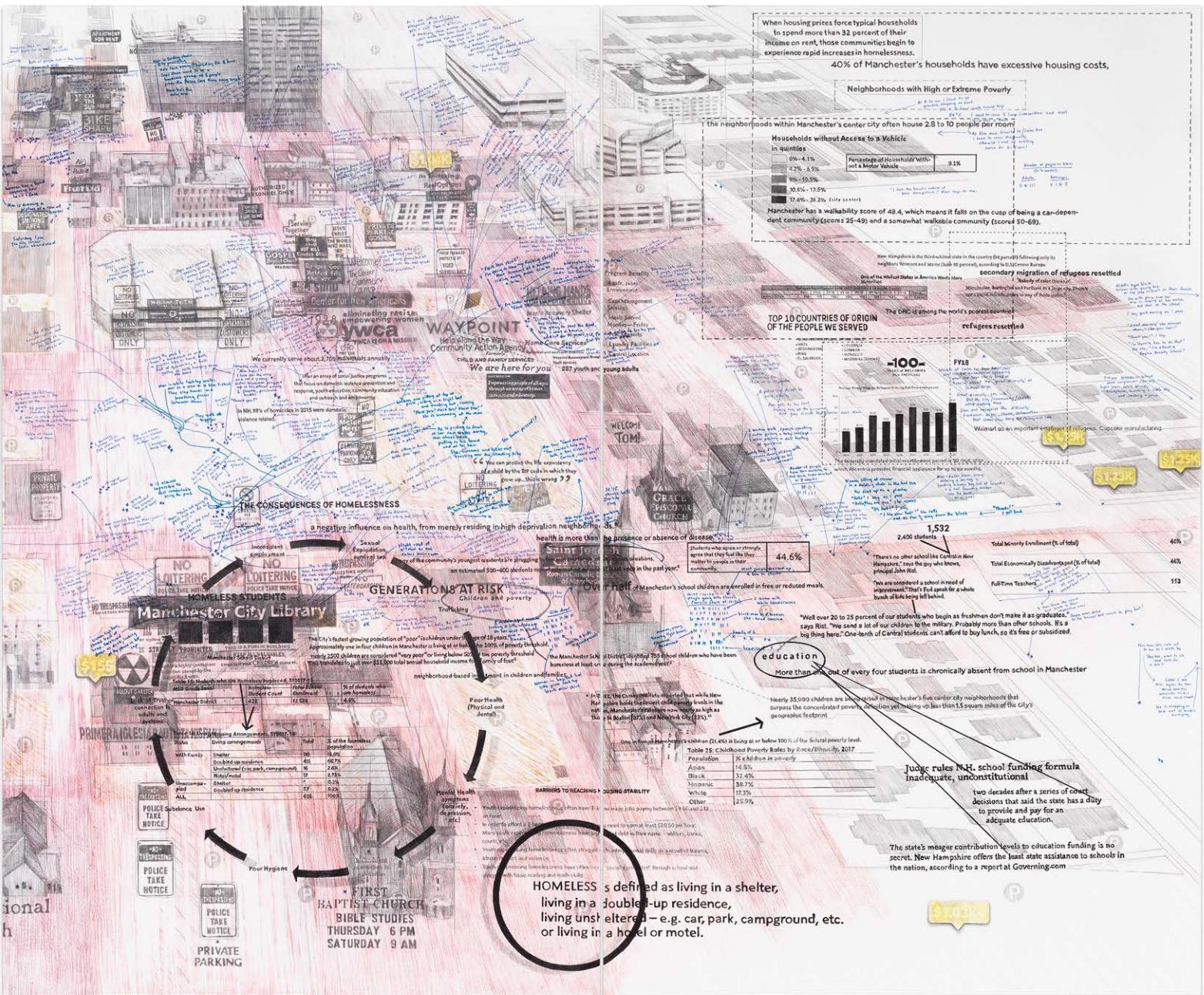
Larissa Fassler

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Manchester, she was particularly struck by the city's downtown core, just blocks away from the Currier Museum. She noted it had a variety of public spaces including parks, libraries and schools; private spaces like businesses and residences; and related 'non-spaces' that do not function to serve any community, such as the many parking lots that pervade the area. She observed that many citizens using the public spaces appeared unhoused, possibly dealing with substance use disorder and relying on these communal spaces for shelter and respite. Further, there are several non-governmental service organizations working within this community to address these very issues. From these initial impressions she began to research housing, schooling, poverty, food insecurity, immigration and refugee resettlement, substance use disorder response and other related topics.

All this information is represented in these dense, composite drawings, which explore the use of public spaces, the role of community organizations in supporting the needs of citizens and the effects of poverty on physical and emotional health. The visual overload of myriad layers of objective truths and subjective observations reflects the complexity of Fassler's experience in Manchester. While on display at the Currier Museum of Art in late 2020 and early 2021, these works of art engendered conversations among citizens, community organizers and civil servants, including city planners and even the city's mayor. Fassler's work proves that, at its best, visual art has the power to communicate multifaceted ideas, raise important questions and encourage critical dialogue about our landscape in a way that mere maps cannot.



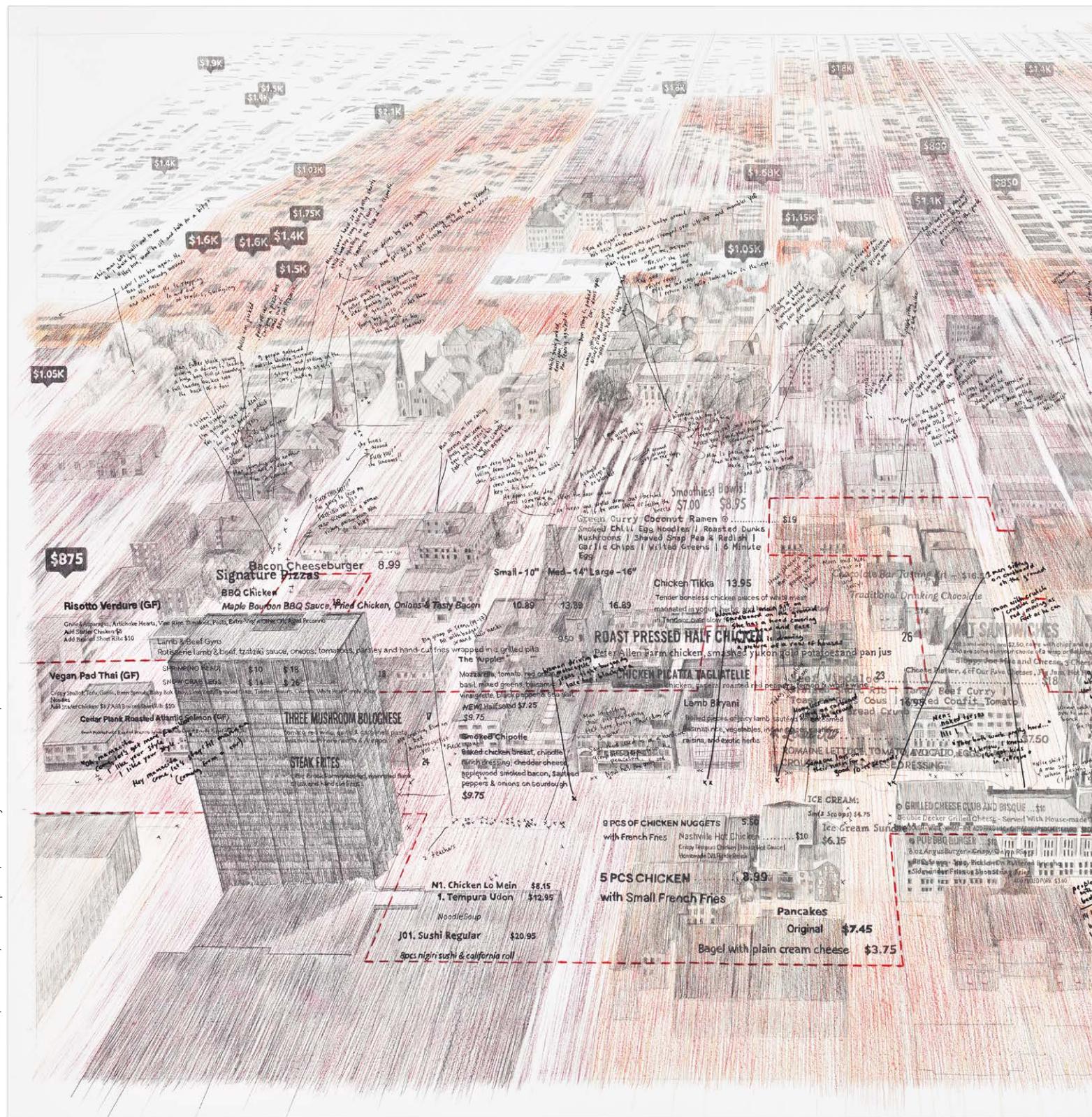


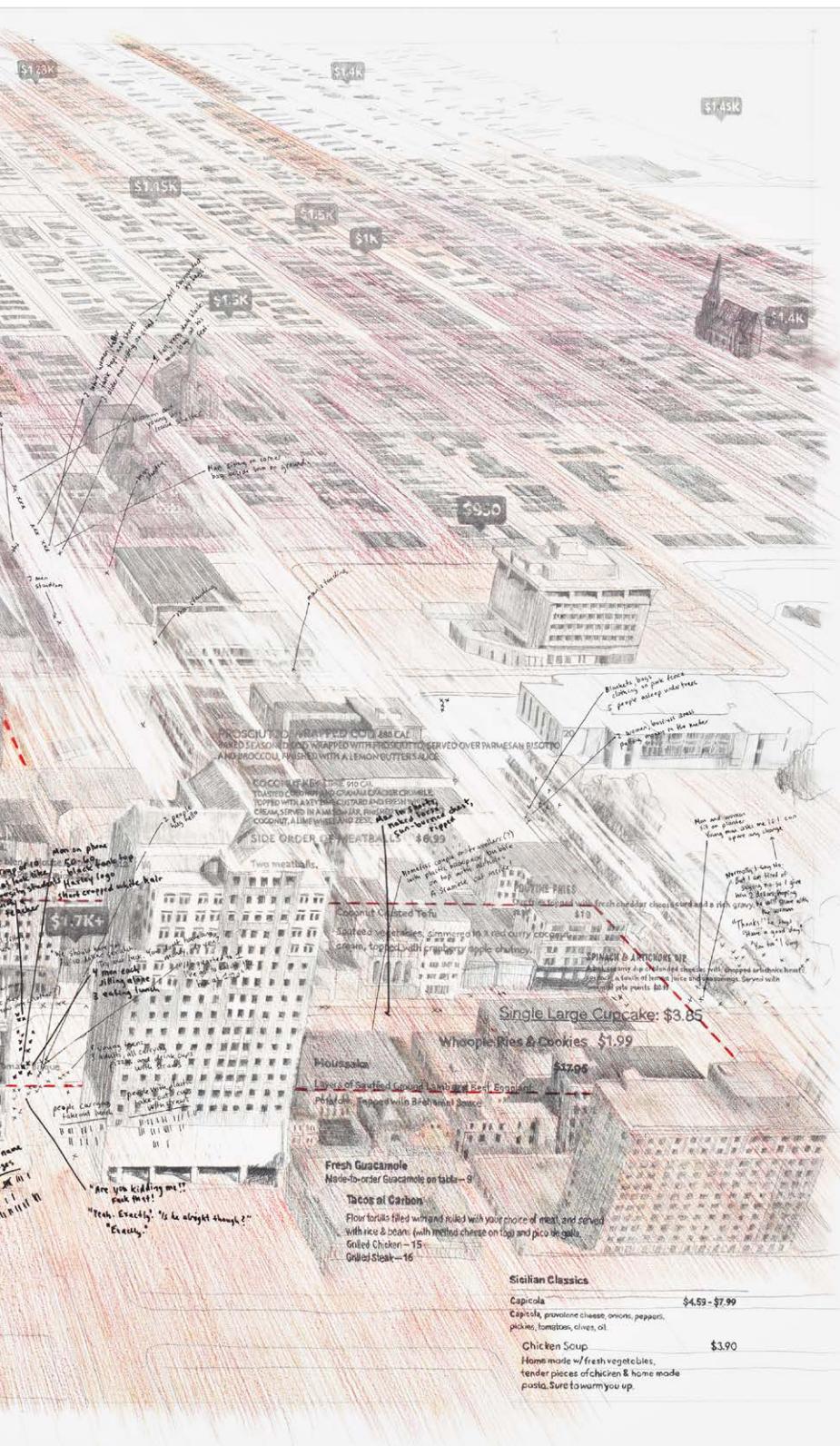
Manchester, NH, USA I

2019-2020

Pen, pencil, and pencil crayon on paper,
158 x 360 cm

Fassler's handwriting appears, in blue or black, throughout the drawings to reveal her personal observations (including overheard conversations), while public signage and data pulled from city reports and news sources are drawn as black printed type. Yellow icons appear intermittently to illustrate housing pricing throughout the area. Increasing shades of red indicate areas of low to high reported crime. These tones take on a bruise-like association, fittingly marking areas of hurt and struggle. Smudged or erased portions of the drawing indicate spaces and populations the artist perceived as overlooked or marginalized.



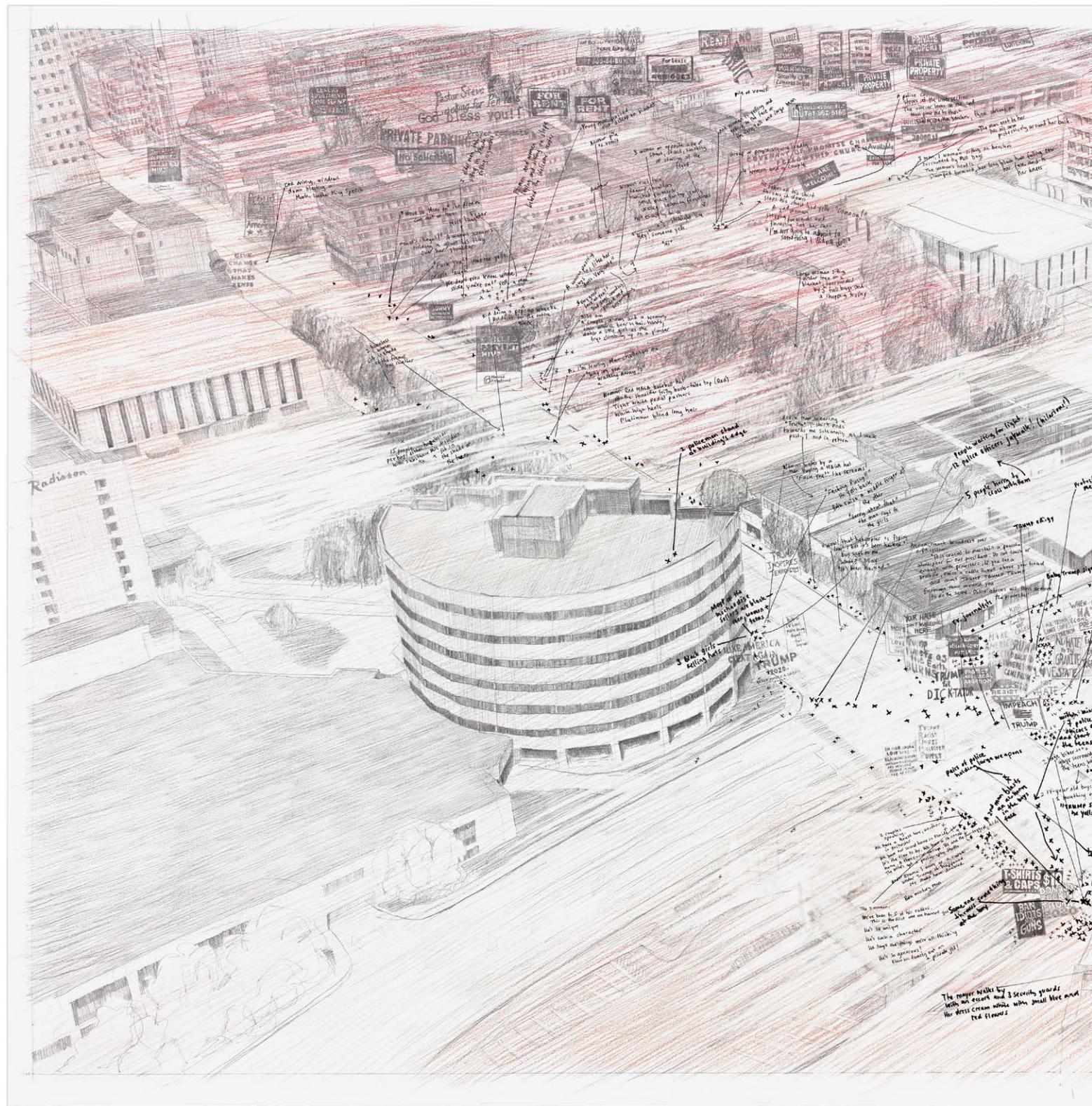


Manchester, NH, USA II

2019-2020

Pen, pencil, and pencil crayon on paper,
113 x 178 cm

Perspectives on what physical location or intangible qualities define the core of a city shift drastically based on one's own socioeconomic position. The issue of financial accessibility rises to the surface of Fassler's bird's-eye view of Manchester's downtown. Wealth disparity and affordability are highlighted by prices of random menu items at each restaurant on the street, as well as by rental prices for apartments in the area. Fassler records her observations that this space is primarily populated by people who live or work in that area, and that she frequently encountered people asking for money on the street.





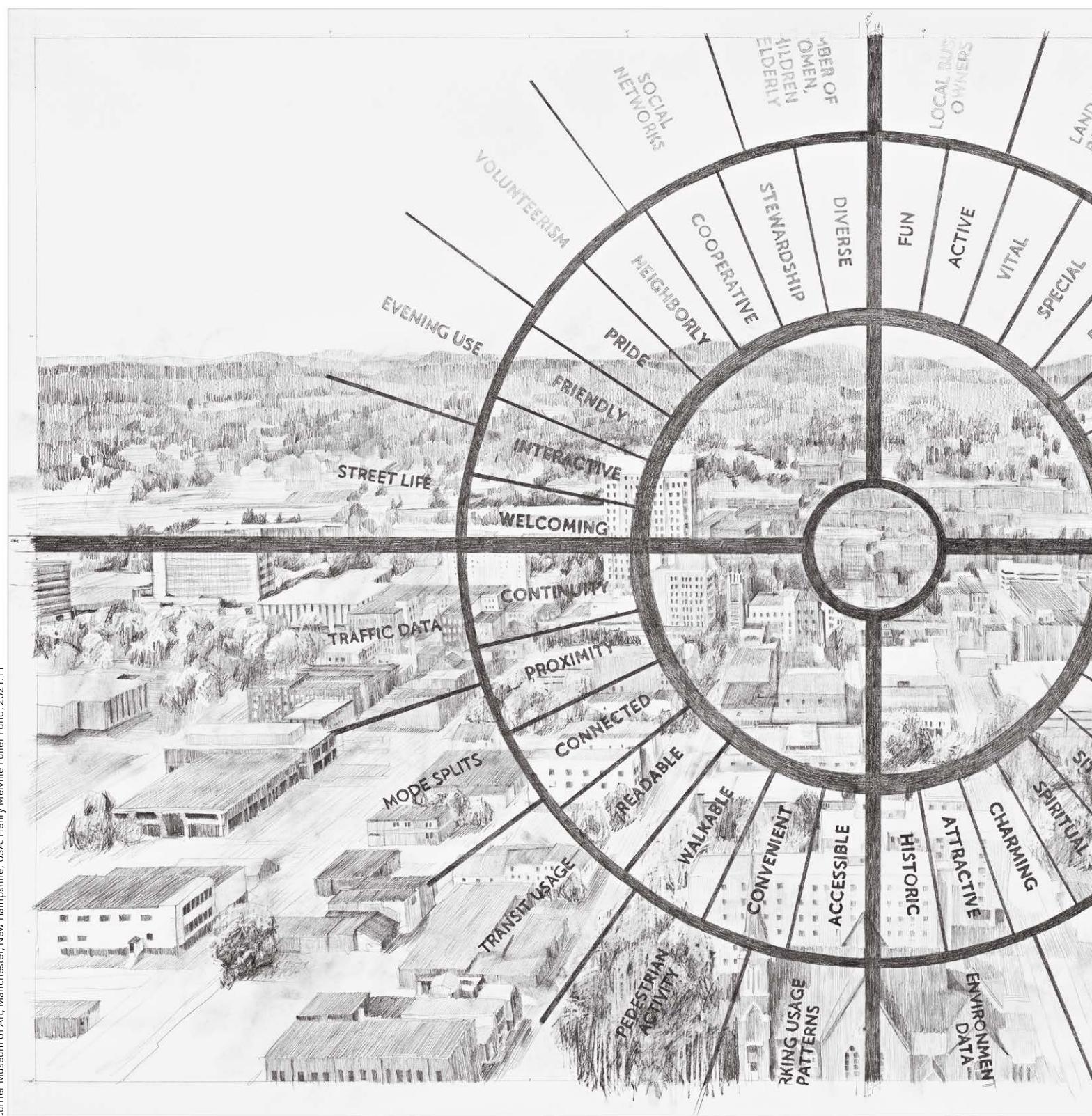
Manchester, NH, USA III

2019-2020

Pen, pencil, and pencil crayon on paper,
113 x 178 cm

Fassler explores the city as a site of civic discourse. As a political battleground state, New Hampshire takes centre stage in the United States' presidential elections.

Fassler, a Canadian who has lived in Europe for the last twenty years, took advantage of the opportunity to witness a manifestation of this in a rally for former President Donald Trump on 15 August 2019. Unlike other drawings in this series, which combine her observations gathered while repeatedly exploring the same space over several weeks, this drawing records her outsider experience of a single event that gathered thousands of citizens on one normally vacant city block.





Manchester, NH, USA IV

2019-2020

Pen, pencil, and pencil crayon on paper,
113 x 178 cm

An infographic presenting many of the elements that contribute to successful place-making forms a target over this more rural Manchester landscape. Place-making is a community-centred approach to city improvement, a collaborative process that hinges on the connections between people and their common environments to ensure that civic spaces function well for all citizens. Fassler has purposefully left the central quadrants blank to encourage viewers to consider how they might complete the diagram, thus finishing the work in an individualized way.