

Drawing in Space: Recording the Spatialised Feelings of Atmospheres

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Abstract

This presentation explores the notion of drawing as a means of recording the 'spatialised feelings' of everyday public spaces, aiming to enhance our awareness of pathically felt bodily experiences. Drawing upon the theory of new phenomenology, the research examines how the affective and expressive qualities of atmospheres, understood as corporeally felt impulses, influence the gestural drawing process. Focusing on sites in Ireland and Germany, the drawings, termed 'Affective Cartographies', are records of the phenomenological experience of site's atmosphere. Through this practice-based approach, the gestural line becomes a form of pathic knowing, revealing dimensions that are more felt than thought. This approach offers a deeper lived experience by encouraging us to sense ourselves pathically within our surroundings. The paper expands on how drawing, as an phenomenological act, can provide a meaningful account of what is usually perceived as 'in-situ', 'background' or 'environment.' By prioritising the felt body, this method of enquiry extends beyond the traditional five senses, offering a more holistic understanding of the spaces we inhabit and the act of drawing itself.

Key words: drawing, phenomenology, atmosphere, affect, embodiment, spatialised feeling

Where we are matters. We are always in relation, entangled with the spaces we inhabit, whether or not we consciously perceive them. Through drawing, I seek to reveal this emotional entanglement by making visible the spatialised feelings of place. This practice-based research positions drawing as a phenomenological act, one that offers a means to record the invisible, yet forceful, presence of atmospheres, or to use Tonino Griffero's phrase, 'spatialised feelings'. This research develops a method I call *Drawing in-Space* (DiSp), which attends to the atmospheric forces sensed through the felt body in situ. Grounded in the theory of new phenomenology (Schmitz 2019, Griffero, 2014, 2020), this paper proposes that atmospheres are not simply backdrops to our lives, but are deeply felt and expressive forces that impact our everyday lived experience.

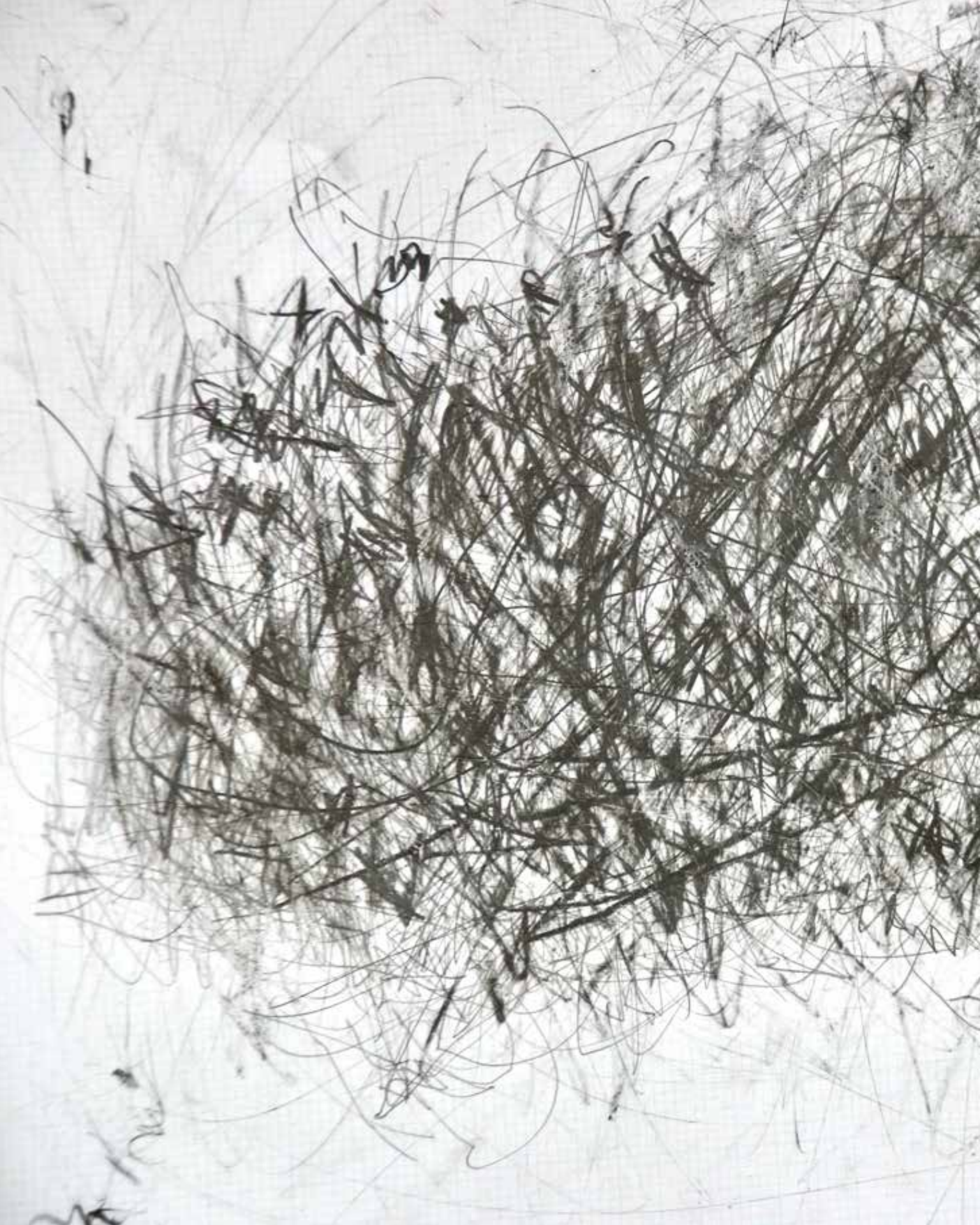
They operate through quasi-things, such as wind or sound, which act upon the felt body (Schmitz, 2019) and impress themselves perfectly. Drawing, in this context, becomes a means of attunement and a method of gestural recording of the pathically sensed environment.¹

The origins of this enquiry lie in a local drawing group I led in 2016, where we explored heritage sites such as a derelict mill, castle ruins, and derelict famine structures through drawing in-situ. On one occasion, I invited participants to draw nearby the derelict mill on the Owen Beg River in Coolaney, Sligo, Ireland, without relying on sight. Despite their varied experiences in drawing, individuals recorded the same thing: a faint sound of dripping water. Moreover, we recorded this sound in similar gestural lines (Fig.1).

1 - For Griffero (2014; 2017; 2020) 'pathic' does not imply pathetic or pathological, instead it is a letting go, where one is 'subject to' rather than 'subject of'. In this way, we become open to what happens to us rather than focusing on what we do (Griffero, 2014; 2017; 2020).

Figure 1. Kiera O'Toole, The Sound of Dripping Water, River Walk, Coolaney, Sligo, 2016, pencil on paper.





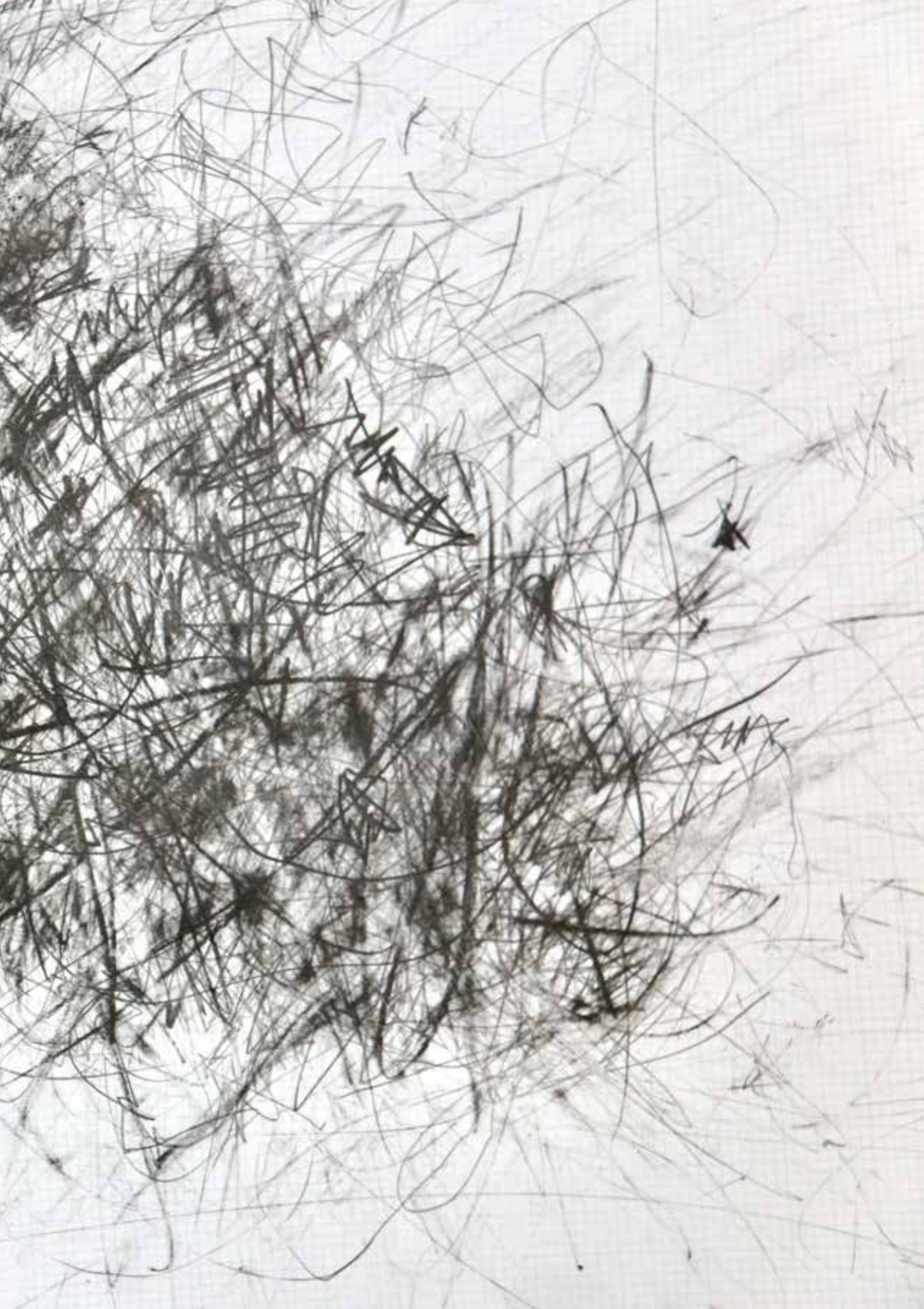


Figure 2. Kiera O'Toole, A recording of Wind, River Walk, Coolaney, Sligo, 2016, pencil on paper.

This moment stirred a critical question: What influences the act of drawing in-situ, as drawing comes into being? Returning alone to the same site, I stood with my back against the crumbling mill wall, attempting to draw without a fixed objective. Attuning myself to the atmosphere, I became aware of sounds that became amplified resonating through my body as a sounding board. In Griffero's terms, such sounds are "spatially poured out" into atmospheric space and understood as quasi-things which are elusive, lack borders yet they are more intrusive than physical things, coexisting with their qualities as they appear" (Griffero 2019, 2014). These affective entities contribute to the creation of atmosphere through their expressive characteristics.

On another occasion, a summer storm filled the atmospheric space. With pencil in hand hovering over the drawing surface, my gaze was outwards, not focusing on anything in particular. I sensed a feeling of heaviness (contraction of the body), yet also exhilaration (expansion of the body) (Griffero, 2014). Rather than interpreting the wind as meteorological data, I experienced it as a felt-bodily phenomenon. As the storms energetic form impressed upon my body, the pencil began to drift across the page, hesitantly at first, trying to follow a line's unknown path. The drawing that emerged did not represent bending trees or flailing leaves, instead, it recorded the emotive, gestural energy of wind, as a quasi-thing rendered as swirling, embodied marks (Fig. 2).

Another site of investigation was a dilapidated handball alley.² On a bitterly cold morning in 2021, I stood within its concrete walls, hands numb, and began to draw. My gaze fixed, I quieted my senses as I attempted to probe the world beyond my physical body by pathically listening to pathically listening, which is an affective openness to "pick something up in the air". Initially, tracing the repetitive caws of unseen birds, my hand moved in sync with their rhythm, rising and falling as the sounds registered through my felt body. These gestural lines echoed each other yet retained their distinctiveness. In this act of drawing, the body is not a "chunk of space or a bundle of functions" (Merleau-Ponty 2005), but an intertwining of perception and movement. The drawing, as Deborah Harty (2009) suggests, is a phenomenological process where the hand becomes acts as a precise recorder of bodily movement and perception. As Diane Petherbridge (2010) notes, this gestural trace is inseparable from the affective response that produces it.

Yet these experiences still left a sense of something untraced, of the atmospheric spatialised feelings remained unnamed. The felt body is not a passive receptor but an active, affective sounding board through which atmospheres are sensed, spatialised and expressed. It perceives what belongs to me without relying on perception alone. In response, I devised the methodology, *Drawing in-Space (DiSp)* to describe this approach: a method of drawing that attends to the atmospheric emotive forces that move through and with the felt body. In May 2025, I drew in Altona, Hamburg, seated on a bench behind church walls. With my eyes closed, I attuned myself to the subtle rhythms of my body. My hand moved hesitantly across the page, tentatively probing the surface, guided by a bodily stirring. As pressure built in my chest and shoulders, the pencil's movement grew heavier, faster, and then stopped (Fig.3) I opened my eyes. The world seemed different somehow, yet the lingering sensation of weight remained.

2 - Handball alleys first appeared in Ireland in the 1700s. These vernacular structures typically consist of two short side walls and a high, wide front wall, often with a low rear wall to contain the court. Beyond their sporting function, handball alleys were culturally significant community spaces used for gatherings, events, and informal social life.



Figure 3. Kiera O'Toole, Affective Cartography, Altona, Hamburg, Germany, 2024, pencil on paper

The resulting drawing, what I term Affective Cartography, recorded a first-person pathic account of experience of relational emotional encounter. This act of drawing constitutes what Hermann Schmitz (2019) calls a 'subjective fact', which is a fact for the subject prior to cognitive self-identification. The drawing documents a subjective fact since any attempt by another person to redraw the marks would lack the affective involvement. It is not a recording of a psychological impression, rather it is a pre-reflective, affective inscription of being-in-the-world. DiSp repositions drawing as a form of counter-cartography, one that documents the atmospheric, affective qualities of place, rather than its measurable dimensions. It allows for a deeper understanding of where we are, a relational attunement to the lived force of atmospheres. Drawing records not how a space feels to me, but how it feels through me. It becomes a way to be in space, an act of becoming with the world.

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