Drawing and Writing in
the Atmospheres at Tram Stops

ALEKSANDRA IANCHENKO

In this paper, I compare two of my artistic research projects about the atmosphere of the city by sketching at tram stops. Public transport stops may seem uninteresting, but they can be vantage points for complex urban atmospheres. Atmospheres are made up of subjective impressions, feelings, and sensations of the observer, as well as of the material and sensory qualities of the environment. In the context of public transport, our atmospheric perception is influenced by our mood and travel experience, as well as by the properties of vehicles. Trams have some romantic and nostalgic flair beyond their merely utilitarian function of transporting from A to B. It can be due to their status as the oldest means of urban public transport and due to the peculiarities of the technology: rail-bound overground trams evoke associations with trains and long-distance travel. As a means to study this mix of different atmospheres, I propose on-site sketching which is both an artistic practice as well as a visual ethnography method. As this method allows freely incorporating writing elements, I discuss how field drawing and writing work differently in my project and how it helps to understand the atmosphere of the city, trams and tram stops.

Keywords: sketching in situ, atmosphere, city, tramway

Neste artigo, comparo dois dos meus projectos de investigação artística sobre a atmosfera da cidade através de esboços realizados em paragens de eléctrico. As paragens de transportes públicos podem parecer desinteressantes, mas podem ser posições estratégicas para observar atmosferas urbanas complexas. As atmosferas são constituídas por impressões subjectivas, sentimentos e sensações do observador, bem como das qualidades materiais e sensoriais do ambiente. No contexto dos transportes públicos, a nossa percepção atmosférica é influenciada pela nossa disposição e experiência de viagem, bem como pelas características dos veículos. Os eléctricos têm um toque romântico e nostálgico para além da sua função meramente utilitária de transporte de A para B. Isto deve-se ao seu estatuto como o meio mais antigo de transporte público urbano e às peculiaridades da tecnologia: os eléctricos sobre carris evocam associações com comboios e viagens de longa distância. Como forma de estudar esta mistura de atmosferas diferentes, proponho um esboço no local que é tanto uma prática artística como um método de etnografia visual. Como este método permite incorporar livremente elementos de escrita, analiso como o desenho e a escrita in situ *funcionam de forma diferente no meu projecto e como ajudam a compreender a atmosfera da cidade, dos eléctricos e das paragens de eléctrico.*

Palavras-chave: esboço in situ, *atmosfera, cidade, eléctrico*

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The projects I compare in this paper were done in different contexts. The first *Tram City Line* I did in 2016 in my hometown of Irkutsk in Eastern Siberia, Russia in the frame of the project "Gorod Inache" ("City Otherwise") by the Irkutsk Center of Independent Social Research. Later the project was published online and displayed in exhibitions in Russia and Germany. The second project *Weather Report* (2022) I did in Tallinn, Estonia, as a part of my PhD research embedded in the humanities-led project "Public Transport as Public Space in European Cities: Experiencing, Narrating, Contesting" (PUTSPACE). The idea behind both projects is similar: sketching at each stop along a tram line. In this paper, I discuss the relationship between writing and drawing in both projects considering on-site sketching as an ethnographic method of studying the atmospheres.

WHAT IS ATMOSPHERE AND HOW TO STUDY IT?

If in the natural scientific sense, the word atmosphere means the gaseous layer around our planet, then as a metaphor it means feelings that a person has in a certain spatial situation. In this sense, the term atmosphere was used as early as the period of romanticism in the 19th century. Later, based on the concepts of aura by Walter Benjamin and lived space by Hermann Schmitz, Gernot Böhme developed the notion of atmosphere as an in-between phenomenon arising in the relationship between "environmental qualities and emotional states" (Böhme 2017, p.30). Atmosphere is objective as the material configuration of the environmental conditions it. It is also subjective as it is perceived by those who are physically present in it. Atmospheres cannot be perceived at a distance and require bodily presence and engagement with all the senses: sight, hearing, smell, touch, and taste. Although we can distinguish individual elements of the atmosphere, such as a place's material or sensory characteristics, we perceive the atmosphere as a whole, as a totality. Atmospheres are "a holistic and emotional being-in the world", as Tonino Griffero (2014, p.15) defines

them. Atmospheres have a spatial character: they are "spatialized feelings, they are specific emotional quality of a given lived space" (Griffero 2014, p.36), as well as "tuned space, i.e. a space with a certain mood" (Böhme 2017, p.18).

In Francophone urban studies, Jean-Paul Thibaut develops the related term "urban ambiance" as "a time-space qualified from a sensory point of view" which "involves the lived experience of people as well as the built environment of the place." (Thibaut 2011, p. 1). The urban ambiance is created not only by architects, urban planners, and designers but also by inhabitants through their daily practices. Distinguishing between tuned, modulated, and framed modes of urban ambiance, Thibaut emphasizes the intensity of the interaction between people and urban places. In the first case, the inhabitants are in harmony with the sensory environment of the place; in the other two cases, they can modulate or reframe it through their practices. On the other hand, Griffero points to the social component not in production, but in the reception of atmospheres: social institutions and ceremonies dictate their atmospheres, which, like habitus, "are unconsciously perceived as familiar" (Griffero 2014, p.72). Another related term "affective atmosphere" in human geography emphasizes the affective, transpersonal nature of the atmosphere when it is felt by different people in the same way and this feeling occurs at a non-cognitive, bodily level of perception. We feel atmospheres before being able to name them as "ill-defined indefinite something, that exceeds rational explanation and clear figuration" and "something that hesitates at the edge of the unsayable." (Anderson 2009, p.78).

Mobility studies emphasize that atmospheres can emerge and dissolve rapidly, they are perceived when we enter and move through them and the way we move affect our atmospheric perception. Some researchers focus specifically on atmospheres at places of mobility such as public transport. David Bissels (2010) makes a series of observations on an intercity train and points to the multi-component nature of the atmosphere there when it "emerge[s] through the coming together of specific objects, materialities, technologies, bodies and practices at particular time and in particular space" (Bissles 2010, p.276). He emphasizes that in the context of public transport, atmospheres are especially changeable: the train travels through different urban spaces and the scenery outside the window changes, new passengers enter and exit, and their appearance, conversations and behaviour affect atmospheres on board. In turn, Orvar Löfgren (2015) considers the atmosphere not in the train, but at the train station. It may seem that stations and stops are static places, but Löfgren shows that stations have a certain life cycle as "a constant interweaving of the ebbs and flows of people and their heavy luggage, the malfunctioning ticket machines, shiny hard floors, the unintelligible loudspeaker calls, or the smell of hamburger fat" (Löfgren 2015, p.191). In my turn, I extend the scope of the analysed public transport places and focus on tram stops. Unlike railway stations, a tram stop rarely takes a shape of a building and is usually articulated by a shelter and/or a bench with a sign pole. They are open to the city and, unlike, bus stops, are visually connected by rails like pearls on a string. They are static yet an essential part of urban mobility and circulation.

As means to study atmospheres, scholars discuss different forms of art noting that if atmospheres are "hard to define on a theoretical level, the atmospheric is nevertheless easy to identify in art." (Griffero 2014, p.83). Gernot Böhme (2013) employs scenography as an example of how atmospheres are staged through material and sensorial manipulations of sound and light. Anja Novak considers painting as "depicting and at the same time evoking the intense feeling of an increasing atmospheric charge" (Novak, 2019, p.136) and art installations as not to "represent a mood but rather stage[s] it – i.e. offer[s] conditions in which the mood is likely to occur" (ibid. p.139). By studying "representations of sonic experience through images", Elisa Moriselli examines how it is achieved in architectural photography (Morselli 2019, p.27). De Matteis et al. (2019) elaborate on the method of phenomenography which relies "on one or more

intersecting expressive media – including written narratives – encompassing the spatial, corporeal and affective spheres." (De Matteis et al. 2019, p.6). Authors stress that any description of atmospheres is subjective and "becomes tinged" as observers "resonate with the affectively charged space", but, by using a phenomenographic account one "can at once report the atmospheric qualities of the situation encountered and the biographical disposition of the reporter" (ibid, p.8). A relevant example is by Maxime la Calve and Olivier Gaudin, who, using "drawing and writing as ethnographic devices, [we] attempt to provide the reader with a trace of what happened at specific times and places" (la Calve, Gaudin 2019, p.3). In their study on atmospheres in public places in Berlin, authors employ on-site watercolor sketching as "a mnemonic tool for capturing atmosphere that allows descriptions to be reworked and textually augmented with additional layers of references to the history and geography of the place" (la Calve, Gaudin 2019, p.4). Therefore, their representation of atmospheres takes the shape of short stories based on their experience and observations linked with literature on social practices and the history of Berlin accompanied by colorful drawings which provide a reader with an immediate impression of what atmospheres there were like. It is aligned with a two-fold understanding of phenomenography as a descriptive practice of lived experience and as outcomes, in textual and visual, academic and artists forms, which can be "both an interpretation of reality, as an account of a perceived atmosphere, and itself produce atmospheric effects." (De Matteis et al. 2019, p.7).

Shanti Sumartojo and Sarah Pink (2019) provide an elaborated three-fold methodology that stems from the number of their empirical studies. They define atmospheres as

> "a quality of specific configurations of sensation, temporality, movement, memory, our material and immaterial surroundings and other people, with qualities that affect how places and events feel and what they mean to people who participate in them" (Sumartojo; Pink, 2019, p.6)

And further:

> "...this means treating atmosphere as a coming together of different and subjective ways of understanding a site or event, based on different memories, expectations or foreknowledge, sensory or bodily capacities, cultural understanding and familiarity and the immediate contingencies of the experience." (ibid)

This complexity urges a sophisticated methodology that consists of three stages: knowing *in, about* and *through* atmospheres. The first stage focuses on our immediate experience of atmospheres and employs autoethnography and field observations; the second stage includes a retrospective description and interpretation of atmospheres based on the materials from the first step together with secondary sources; and the final stage involves analytical considerations where the atmosphere can be used as "device through which to investigate, comprehend and potentially intervene in the world" (ibid, p.12). Each stage can involve creative or artistic approaches. Ethnography of knowing in atmospheres can be done involving photo, video and audio recordings, and, as I argue in this paper, on-site sketching. Knowing about atmospheres can include the creation of art pieces (e.g. an installation), public reception of which contributes to the third stage of applying atmospheric concepts to wider social phenomena. In analysing my sketching projects on tram stops, I will try to retrospectively apply this methodology and specifically discuss the relation between writing and drawing at each stage.

WHY SKETCHING *IN SITU* CAN BE A METHOD FOR STUDYING ATMOSPHERES?

In defending sketching in situ[1] as a method for studying atmospheres, I rely on the insights from ethnography where sketching is used in fieldwork. One of the early examples of using could be found back in the 19th century when Nicholas Miklouho-Maclay used drawing as a means to communicate to

1 I use interchangeably sketching in situ, on-site or on-location sketching, field, ethnographic or observational drawing meaning a process of making rapid graphic sketches outdoors.

the locals due to the absence of common languages (Ballard 2013). Soon after ethnographers embraced and began activity using emerging technologies of photo and video documentation which remain dominant tools for visual ethnography up to today (Causey 2017). However, since the 2010s, the field of ethnography has been experiencing a so-called 'graphic turn' largely inspired by Tim Ingold's ideas.

Ingold sees drawing as a natural activity, "fundamental to being human – as fundamental as walking and talking" and compares it with handwriting as both processes leave traces on paper (Ingold 2011, p.177). By this comparison, Ingold questions the dichotomy between visual and textual ethnographic methods. In his view, ethnographic drawing is "an immensely powerful tool of observation, and given also that it combines observation and description in a single gestural movement" (Ingold 2011, p.222). Furthermore, he suggests thinking about a drawing not as an image but as "the trace of an observational gesture that follows what is going on" (Ingold 2011, p.225). This suggestion somehow releases drawing from an exclusive artistic aura, which sometimes might intimidate those without special training, and opens drawing for non-artists-ethnographers as a tool not for precise documentation of the field experience but rather for expressing their impressions. Similarly, in psychological studies, drawing is understood as:

> "a means to create a material trace or indicator of a more typically immaterial or inaccessible phenomenon: whether this is of a cognitive process, the generation of a creative idea, the visualization of an intangible concept or perception, or the development of an insight" (Lyon 2019, p.6).

For instance, in the "draw and talk" method, participants are asked to draw their feelings or thoughts and then verbally explain and discuss what they have drawn. This method "can offer very effective routes to the expression, articulation and analysis of thoughts, opinions, experiences, perceptions and behaviour" (ibid, p. 5). Philipa Lyon stresses that drawings must be accompanied by oral and written accounts and both processes of drawing and their explanation help participants understand how they feel. If drawings can help to capture immediate, often unsayable impressions, then their textual interpretation can understand them.

Anthropologist Michael Taussig (2011) notes that sketching helps to capture and document the immediate experience in the field which often gets lost at the next stage of writing a full article based on written field notes. Reflecting on the relationship between writing and drawing, Taussig notes "despair if not terror of writing, because the more you write in your notebook, the more you get this sinking feeling that the reality depicted recedes, that the writing is actually pushing reality off the page." (Taussig 2011, p.16). According to him, writing is always retrospective whereas drawing seems to be simultaneous with the event it outlines. On the other hand, unlike photography, field sketchbook allows for combining drawing and writing on the same page. Forde D. Shawn (2022) in his ethnographical study on soccer players went further and develop comic stripes based on his gestural field drawings and textual descriptions. Combining drawing and writing in one comic panel also helped him to process the obtained information and present it in an attractive and concise manner.

Writing and drawing can well accompany each other in capturing the complexity of atmospheres. For instance, Sue Heath during her study on the office environment, note that combining drawing and textual notes "allowed [us] to capture something of the atmosphere in which the sketch was produced: reflections on the weather conditions, for example; on incidents observed whilst sketching; or descriptions of the soundscape, including overheard remarks." (Heath et al 2018, p.720). Karina Kuschnir, an anthropologist and urban sketcher, notes that "auditory perception was enhanced while drawing, allowing [them] to capture ambient sounds better, as well as phrases and revealing conversations overheard in the observed setting" (Kuschnir 2016, p.123). Such overheard phrases can be easily written out and integrated into a sketch. Furthermore, Kuschnir defines sketching in situ

as a form of estrangement as it requires an attentive looking which can help to notice something which slipped from attention before. Drawing as a process engages not only the senses but also the whole body of a sketcher/observer who, besides being bodily present in the field and its atmospheres, has to correlate motion, vision and imagination while moving her hand over the paper. Sage Brice emphasizes how a sketcher-researcher *gets attuned* "to spatial, temporal, material and cultural relations" of the environment (Sage 2018, p.13). For her, observational drawings are not a mimetic tool for accurately depicting reality, but a means for expressions of how this reality is experienced by the observer. According to Caroline Lavoie, on-site drawing heights "the intimacy between a drawer and the landscape" and "helps to concentrate and focus on a sensorial response (seeing, hearing, touching, and smelling) to the landscape" (Lavoie 2005, p. 18). Without mentioning atmospheres per se, Lavoie uses sketching as a tool that "brings us closer to a more complete awareness of a sense of place" (ibid, p. 27).

It is worth mentioning some differences between on-site sketching and photography which are usually understood as competitive visual tools. First, it is different temporarily of the two. In his dramatic examples of drawing his dead father, John Berger uses life drawing as a mnemonic tool noting that "a photograph… has stopped time. A drawing or painting…encompasses time." (Berger 2005, 43). Furthermore, unlike photography (in the sense of taking photos with smartphones), on-site sketching requires a longer time to make it. In this respect, Kuschnir notes that sketching can actually anchor an observer in the field longer than any other form of observation. Secondly, sketching in situ has an interactive component: a person drawing in public sparks interest among passers-by which may lead to spontaneous conversations during which strangers may share their knowledge about the space and its atmosphere. On the other hand, their perception of the atmosphere at this particular place and time may change due to the unexpected encounter with a sketcher. Following

Thibaut's typology, the presence of a sketcher can potentially modulate the atmosphere or ambiance of urban public places. For a researcher, sketching can act as "a license to be present in spaces where to be merely a passive observer might otherwise have appeared rather odd." (Heath 2018, p.724). This entails an ethical aspect. As people are barely recognizable in drawings, it would not hurt their privacy. Furthermore, in my experience, people often come and ask to draw them, however, I am not sure they would ask me to photograph them on my smartphone. This is captured in two questions: "Can I photograph you?" vs "Can I draw you?" (Kuschnir 2016, p.125). Strangely, the first question sounds like an intrusion into personal life, whereas the second one is rather flattering.

Sumartojo and Pink (2019) understand atmospheres as not fixed entities that one can step in and out of but rather as ongoing, emerging configurations which have to be studied experientially, ie. conducting observations or knowing in atmospheres (the first step in their methodology). It includes such components as emergence (atmospheres are never fixed), uncertainty (they can be unexpected), reflexivity (they are influenced by the presence of an observer) and collectivity (and by the presence of others). I argue that sketching in situ responds to these four. It anchors one in the flow of atmospheres and allows one to capture their dynamics (emergence). Attentive looking while drawing opens up unexpected and previously not noticed aspects (uncertainty). By integrating written notes, one can also reflect on her experience (reflexivity) and communicate it with others, either with occasional onlookers in the field or later upon the public display of drawings.

Drawing and writing in sketching projects about tramlines.

In this analysis of two of my sketching projects, I discuss how the method of sketching helped me to understand the atmospheres at tram stops. The first project was *Tram City Line* (2016) I did in my hometown of Irkutsk in Eastern Siberia and the second project was *Weather Report* - later in 2022 in Tallinn, Estonia. If the first project was

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driven not by theories but rather by my artistic curiosity, the second one was based on theoretical and methodological considerations as well as years of sketching on different public transport places. Furthermore, the second project is embedded in my current PhD research. Both projects are based on a similar idea of sketching at tram stops along a certain tramline. In Irkutsk, I sketched at 30 stops of line number one, whereas in Tallinn, I covered the whole tram network which consists of 43 stops. In Irkutsk, I had a loose schedule randomly choosing a tram stop, whereas, in Tallinn, I consequently sketched one stop a day in a sequence spending around an hour there. Both projects take place in the summertime.

The cities and their tramways vary greatly. Larger by size and population, Irkutsk is a centre of the Eastern Siberian region, whereas Tallinn is the capital of the European country of Estonia. In Irkutsk, plans for the introduction of tram service were discussed already at the end of the 19th century, however, due to the turbulent times of the October Revolution and WWII, the construction began only in 1945. In the 1960s, line number one was extended, and today it is in operation together with six others. There is a discussion about profound repairmen if not the potential closure of tramways due to the poor state of infrastructure and consequently a high number of accidents. Today the city is served by old KTM-5M3 vehicles running from the late 1980s and newer KTM-19 which were discharged to Irkutsk from Moscow after a few years of usage in 2004. Tickets are collected by conductors on board.

In Tallinn, trams have been running continuously since 1888. They have experienced technological transitions from horse-drawn and steam to electric trams like in other cities where trams were introduced at the end of the 19th century. However, Tallinn trams have successfully avoided Tram closure, a major discounting of the tram network worldwide in the 1950-the 60s due to the abundance of cars and buses (Bouquet 2017). Today the city is served by four tram routes. In 2017, tram line 4 was extended to the airport, and now there

are plans to continue developing the city tram networks. In Tallinn, there are older trams Tatra KT4D from the late 1970s and their newer low-floor modifications, new tramcars of CAF Urbos AXL, and peculiar Retro trams brand new cars that resemble the style of the 1930s. All public transport in Tallinn is free of charge for residents, yet when on board, they are required to validate their cards connected to their IDs.

In both cities, tram networks connect several districts. In Irkutsk, the tram line starts in Studgorodok, a neighbourhood around the technical university then goes to the main train station and over the bridge across the river Angara, then it passes through the historical city centre and loud Central Market, and finally makes a loop not far from the City Dam. In Tallinn, all four tram lines cross at Hobujaama, which is a major public transport hub in the city centre. From there, tram lines run to four final stations in different parts of the city: the airport, Kadriorg, a park established by Peter the Great in the 18th century, which now hosts museums and the residency of the Estonian president, the remote Northern part of Kopli, and to the business area along Peterburi chausse.

Both projects become a graphic exploration of the mix of atmospheres - of the city and its trams as well as of a tram stop as a public space where different people run into each other. I tried to express the richness of my experiences of sketching along the tramlines in both drawing and writing which work differently in the two projects. In the first case, sketches have minor written components such as names of the tram stop and short observations like "waiting" or "smocking break" (Fig.1-3). However, after finishing sketches at all 30 stops, I understood that they needed some explanations and that many things remained outside of the frame. So I wrote short texts about each stop. Following the methodology by Sumartojo and Pink, sketching at tram stops was the way of knowing in atmospheres, whereas the next stage of writing became the way for reflecting and thinking about them. If drawings capture visual elements such as buildings, people at stops, objects of tram infrastructure, etc., then in

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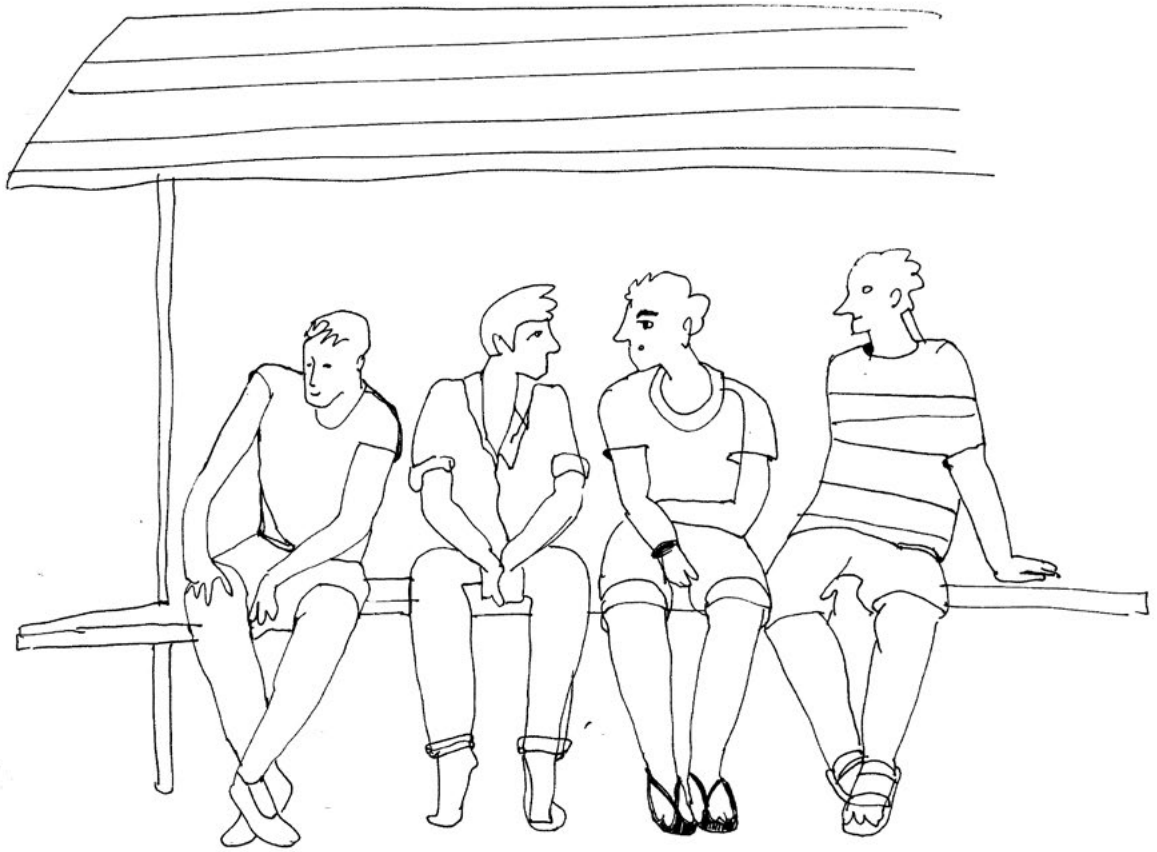
texts, I reflect on my observations, feelings and impressions as well as memories about the city where I spent ten past years.

The project was published online[2] where users could take an imaginary journey through Irkutsk while accessing texts and drawings. The feedback followed the publication: some people recognize their travel experiences and were surprised that mundane moments became subjects for drawings, one person admits that the project conveys a calm and cosy atmosphere of the tram lines in the summer; another got inspired and took a tram ride. Although my portrait of the atmosphere of Irkutsk along the tram tracks is rather intimate and full of my personal memories, many people found it familiar which confirms the affective qualities of atmospheres that are perceived similarly by different individuals. Later, the project was shown at exhibitions in Tomsk, Russia, and Berlin, Germany where drawings were placed together with texts as labels (Fig 4.) Universal characters of public transport and familiar experiences of waiting at tram stops help people who have never been to Irkutsk to sense the atmosphere of this city through drawings and texts. In Sumartojo and Pink's methodology, the online publication and exhibitions of the project can be seen as a form of knowing *through* atmospheres.

In the second sketching project, I deliberately included writing from the start. The choice of material supports it - drawings are made with a black marker, whereas texts are with a pencil. It allows

sketches to remain monochrome but keeps texts and images visually on different layers. Though it was an intuitive decision, in the end, it helped to make the drawings airy, otherwise, they would look like a thick lace of black lines (Fig. 5-8). My choice for a marker is similar to Caroline Lavoie's choice for an ink: "there is no erasing, pure line: pure commitment, precision or my perception and interpretation" (Lavoie 2005, p.28). With a marker, I indeed draw my first impression, my hand moves quickly and captures what I see. In this sense, I agree with Taussig that writing cannot catch up with the event in the field. Sometimes, I manage to draw a person before she took a tram, whereas my written description of her would continue long after she is gone.
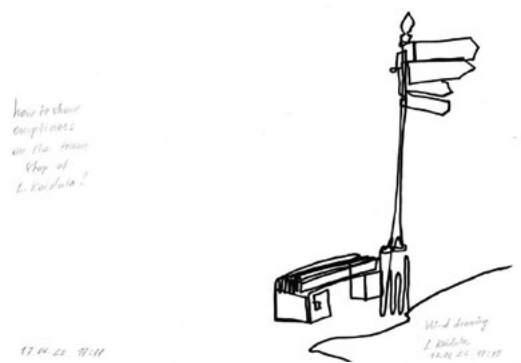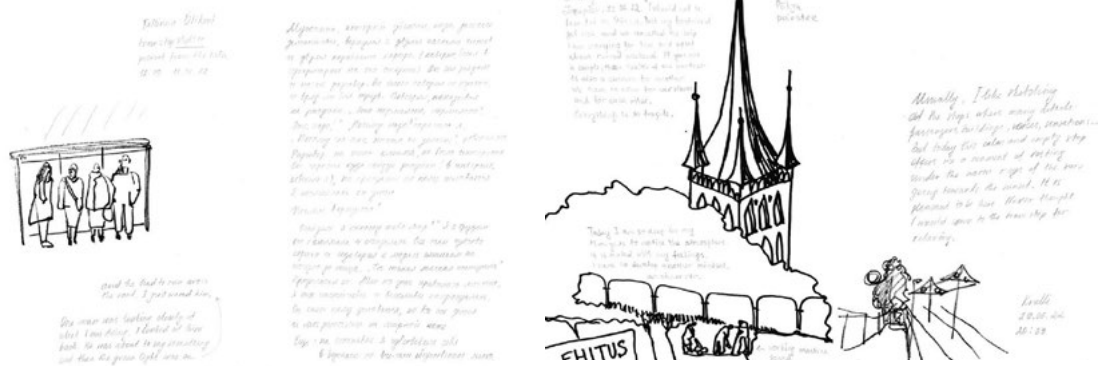

Written components in this project serve several purposes. First, I recorded conversations with those who talked to me at the stops. Second, if my mind

2 https://en.gorodinache.org/tram-line-no1-irkutsk/

Fig.6-8

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wanders, I wrote down disturbing thoughts (e.g. "I am tired" or "I worry about my sick friend") and that helped me to stay focused on the process and maintain an attentive looking. Third, like in the first project, writing helped to add some background information which remains outside of the frame of a sketch (e.g. "café is around the corner"). Fourth, I took notes when some methodological, conceptual or practical questions arose (e.g. "How to express emptiness?" or "How to draw people in motion?" or "How do trams smell?"). Finally, I simply recorded the information of the name of the tram stop, the date and time, and later the temperature. On-site sketching is indeed a corporeal experience when a sketcher is bodily exposed to the atmospheres of the place in metaphorical and directly meteorological senses. Sometimes, I had to adjust or even interrupt my sketching process due to unbearable heat or piercing cold wind or sudden rain. Like the atmospheres of the city and the tram, the weather became a co-author of my project which is reflected in its title of *Weather Report*. Completing the project of sketching at all 43 tram stops in Tallinn took me around two months and resulted in 318 sketches.

As a concluding remark, I reflect on two projects through the lens of Sumartojo and Pink (2019) three-steps methodology. In the first project, drawing and writing are in different steps when sketching was the primary tool to access the atmospheres at tram stops, whereas writing was a tool to reflect on the field experience afterwards. In the second project,

I employ both drawing and writing as ethnographic modes to document my immediate experience in atmospheres. I find this approach more integrated as it allows me to capture those aspects of atmospheres which could not be fully expressed in drawings (e.g. overheard voices, conversations, and background information of the location). Using two expressive modes, i.e. conducting phenomenography – also helped to document more fully sensorial, emotional and corporeal aspects of atmospheres (smells and sounds at tram stops, my feelings and body sensations). At the moment of writing this paper, the project is yet awaiting its next stages of analysis such as knowing about (thorough analysis) and through (public display) the atmospheres of the city, trams and tram stops.

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ALEKSANDRA IANCHENKO

Aleksandra Ianchenko, an artist who works with painting, drawing, performing in public space and filmmaking. Completed MA in Monumental-Decorative Art in Irkutsk, Russia and MA in Art Management in Moscow and Berlin, she currently is pursuing a joint PhD degree at Tallinn University, Estonia and at Åbo Akademi University, Finland.

Aleksandra Ianchenko é uma artista que trabalha com pintura, desenho, actuação no espaço público e realização de filmes. Completou o Mestrado em Arte Decorativa-Monumental em Irkutsk, na Rússia e o Mestrado em Gestão de Arte em Moscovo e Berlim. Está atualmente a obter um doutoramento conjunto na Universidade de Tallinn, Estónia e na Universidade Åbo Akademi, Finlândia.