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Dust atmospheres: Perceptions shaping spatiality

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Abstract

This essay examines the aesthetic and phenomenological dimensions of dust, atmosphere and landscape, focusing on their interrelationships with spatiality and colour. Drawing on phenomenological methods, particularly those of Gernot Böhme, the study examines how dust functions as both a disruptive material and a prerequisite for atmospheric phenomena. Using historical examples, artistic practices, and theoretical considerations, the essay demonstrates how dust shapes perception, mood, and the experience of the environment. The discussion integrates insights from New Materialism and highlights the role of dust as an aesthetic medium and its ability to connect physical and emotional registers. Ultimately, the essay argues that dust is not only a sign of decay, but a formative element in the creation of atmospheric spaces.

Keywords: dust, atmosphere, phenomenology, felt-body (leib), landscape

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Dust: Between Disruption and Atmospheric Potential

The thematic intersection of spatiality and colour opens up a rich field of inquiry, encompassing theoretical and practical dimensions, as well as receptive and productive modalities. This essay approaches the subject from an aesthetic and phenomenological perspective, focusing on the interrelations between dust, atmosphere, and landscape.

Dust, as a material phenomenon, is both omnipresent and elusive. It disrupts environments in subtle and profound ways—accumulating quietly in domestic spaces, yet capable of manifesting as catastrophic dust storms. A striking historical example is the Dust Bowl of the 1930s in the American Midwest, where extensive agricultural practices and overgrazing led to severe ecological degradation (Fig. 1). Over an area of approximately 10,000 square miles, recurring sand and dust storms darkened the skies and rendered daily life precarious. This period, often referred to as the 'Dirty Thirties', prompted the emigration of nearly 60 percent of the local population. The fine particulate matter infiltrated homes, settled on skin and surfaces, and penetrated deep into the lungs, revealing the intimate connection between human activity and environmental transformation.[1]

Figure 1. Wind erosion carries topsoil from farmland during the Dust Bowl. Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture, circa 1930s.

[1] Joseph A. Amato, Dust: A History of the Small and the Invisible (University of California Press, 2000), 6–7.

The visual bleakness of this era is intensified by the monochromatic nature of its photographic documentation—images rendered in black and white, with gradients of grey replacing the vibrancy of colour. In this context, dust becomes a metaphor for loss, erosion, and the dissolution of the boundaries between the interior and exterior, and the self and the world.

Yet, dust is not merely a disruptive force. Dust reveals its multifaceted nature, for example, at the level of intercultural theological frameworks, from Judeo-Christian traditions to Arab-Islamic cosmologies, where it stands for traces of spatial presence or existential mortality. And while it can appeal to several sensory modalities in everyday life—touch, smell, taste—the following presentation focuses primarily on the visual dimension as a methodological starting point for a phenomenological approach.

The various dusts in indoor and outdoor spaces on a large scale are the condition for the possibility of colourfulness at all.[1] While commonly associated with greyness—such as the dust bunnies photographed in a Frankfurt fashion store (Fig. 2)—dust, when suspended in the atmosphere, enables chromatic phenomena. Dust is responsible for the radiant hues of sunsets, the formation of fog and rain, and the fertilization of distant ecosystems through transcontinental dust transport. The Sahara dust, for instance, not only coats urban surfaces with a yellowish tint, but also nourishes marine life and rainforest biomes across the globe.

From a physical standpoint, dust acts as a nucleus for condensation, facilitating the emergence of meteorological phenomena. Aesthetic reflections on dust further reveal its role in shaping perception. As Jens Soentgen elaborates, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe emphasized in his theory of colours the interplay of light, darkness, and cloudiness/turbidity. For him, dust was thus a source of the world's colourfulness and beauty, as it softens the light and creates a variety of colours. In this sense, the atmospheric turbidity acts as a mediating filter, altering our perception of reality much like a semi-transparent fabric. "Dust makes the world more charming, alienates it, just as a veil can make a beautiful face even more fascinating. The cloudiness [...] is the place of human life. [...] Through the intermediate realm of cloudiness, yellow

[1] Jens Soentgen, Staub: Alles *über fast nichts* (dtv, 2022), 82.

and blue and all other colours arise. [...] And Goethe explains in his remarks on the 'sensual-moral effect of colours' that yellow makes us cheerful, while blue is a rather distant, almost melancholic colour. Blue is darkness softened by cloudiness, yellow is light softened by cloudiness."[2]

Figure 2. Dust bunnies in Frankfurt.
Source: Andreas Rauh.

This entanglement of physical and emotional registers underscores the aesthetic significance of dust. Even the seemingly uniform grey of domestic dust reveals, upon closer inspection, a vibrant microcosm. Composed of textile fibres, skin flakes, pollen, and other minute particles, house dust contains a hidden spectrum of colours discernible under a microscope. Artist Sean Miller's *Art Museum Dust Collection* exemplifies this aesthetic potential, transforming dust samples from cultural institutions into visual artifacts (Fig. 3).

[2] "Staub macht die Welt also reizender, verfremdet sie, wie ein Schleier ein schönes Gesicht noch faszinierender machen kann. Das Trübe [...] ist der Ort menschlichen Lebens. [...] Durch das Zwischenreich des Trüben entstehen Gelb und Blau und alle übrigen Farben. [...] Und Goethe erläutert in seinen Ausführungen zur 'sinnlich-sittlichen Wirkung der Farben', dass Gelb uns fröhlich mache, während Blau eine eher distanzierte, fast melancholische Farbe sei. Blau sei die durch die Trübe gemilderte Finsternis, Gelb durch das Trübe gemildertes Licht." (Soentgen, 2022, 162–164; my translation).

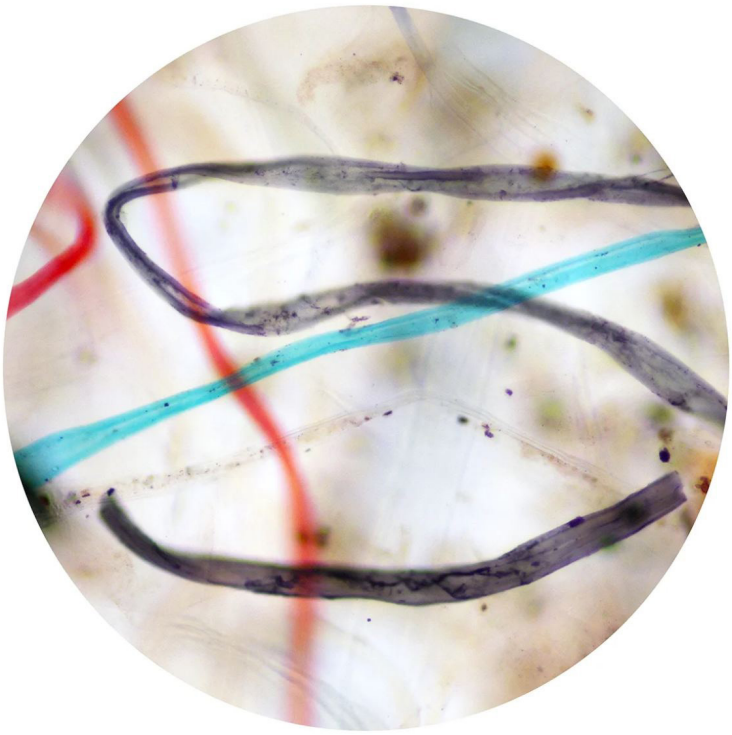

Figure 3. Microscopy of Dust Sample Collected from Salvador Dali Museum, St. Petersburg, Florida.
Courtesy of Sean Miller.

Dust, in this sense, becomes both a trace of human presence and a medium of artistic expression. The artist actively collects dust from major museums and other special places, and passively collects dust submissions from around the world. And the art world is full of dust—not only in the sense of the much-visited museums, where tourists leave traces of their presence in form of dust and abrasions from shoes and clothing. Historically, artists have employed dust-fine pigments—derived from materials such as ochre, chalk, and coal—to produce colour. While toxic substances like lead white were eventually replaced by safer alternatives such as titanium white[3], the materiality of dust remains central to the production and perception of colour in art.

Why devote such sustained attention to dust? Beyond its physical characteristics, dust possesses aesthetic qualities that contribute to the shaping of fundamental moods. As a material phenomenon, dust exhibits structural affinities with another aesthetic concept that is likewise grounded in physicality yet profoundly influential in the constitution of mood: atmosphere.

[3] Soentgen, Staub, 138–139.

Atmosphere, in this context, refers to a phenomenal space that envelops and connects both subjects and objects. It is not merely a perceptual or affective backdrop but a relational field in which entities reveal themselves as inherently interconnected—both on an aesthetic-phenomenological and a material-ontological level. From the microcosm of dust, we may extrapolate insights into the macrocosm of atmosphere. How do material properties, the perception of those properties (for instance, through colour), and the spatial configuration of environments coalesce to produce atmospheres—emotionally attuned spaces that shape our experience?

This inquiry explores the interplay between materiality, perception, and spatiality in the constitution of aesthetic atmospheres. Dust, in its subtle omnipresence, offers a compelling entry point into this investigation.

Felt-Body and Atmosphere: A Phenomenological Framework

Given the thematic breadth of the relationship between meteorological-physical and felt-bodily-aesthetic domains, phenomenology offers a particularly effective methodological framework. Its emphasis on the description of lived experience allows for a nuanced exploration of atmospheres as affective and perceptual phenomena. Within this framework, the approaches developed by Gernot Böhme[4] and Hermann Schmitz[5] are especially instructive.

Böhme's writings on atmosphere span a wide range of everyday contexts, employing accessible language to investigate how spatial environments exert emotional and affective influence on human life. His work demonstrates the conceptual utility of atmosphere across disciplines such as scenography, product aesthetics, advertising, architecture, art, and design.

In contrast, Schmitz embeds the concept of atmosphere within his 'New Phenomenology' and 'Theory of the Felt-Body', which has been

[4] See Gernot Böhme, Atmosphäre: Essays zur neuen Ästhetik (Suhrkamp, 1995), and also Gernot Böhme, The Aesthetics of Atmospheres (Routledge, 2017).

[5] See Hermann Schmitz, Atmospheres (Mimesis, 2023).

further elaborated in Tonino Griffero's concept of 'Atmospherology'.[6] Griffero emphasizes atmospheric perception as a holistic and emotionally embedded mode of being-in-the-world.[7] The analytical priority thus lies on felt-bodily sensation and the manner in which it shapes our affective structure. "What interests us here is *how* and not *why* we feel (in the felt-body) the way we feel."[8] The felt-body becomes a medium of affective resonance, where being affected transitions into behavioural initiatives, and where human experience is shaped by the structures revealed in felt-bodily communication. This original experience is pre-reflective and more intense than conscious sensory perception, for within felt-bodily phenomenological discourse, the felt-body space is experienced atmospherically as holistic felt-bodily being. According to Schmitz, an atmosphere is "a total or partial, but always substantially expanded occupation of a surfaceless space in which something is experienced as appearing."[9]

This felt-bodily orientation underscores the importance of both subjective and objective conditions in the formation of atmospheres. While individual perception plays a central role, the material constitution of the surrounding environment is equally formative. Accordingly, the material dimension must be addressed with appropriate ontological sensitivity. Tim Ingold's critique of abstract materiality and his call to attend to the specificities of materials in their own mode of being are particularly relevant here.[10] To further develop this material perspective, insights from 'New Materialism' prove valuable.[11] Although this field is vast and cannot be exhaustively treated within the scope of this essay, New Materialism's emphasis on the agency and vitality of matter offers a compelling lens through which to examine the aesthetic and ontological status of dust. Humans,

6 Tonino Griffero, Atmospheres: Aesthetics of Emotional Spaces (Ashgate, 2014), 101.

7 Griffero, Atmospheres, 15.

8 Griffero, Atmospheres, 27.

9 Schmitz, Atmospheres, 35.

10 Tim Ingold, "Materials Against Materiality." Archaeological Dialogues 14 (2007): 7.

11 Katharina Hoppe and Thomas Lemke, Neue Materialismen zur Einführung (Junius, 2023).

places and materials are entangled, deliberately challenging traditional anthropocentric hierarchies between subjects and objects.[12] At its core, New Materialism argues that humans should not be understood as autonomous entities separate from the world, but as ontologically interwoven with it. Likewise, materiality is not to be conceived as passive. Rather, the active agency of non-human elements—be they natural or artificial environments, architectural structures or even qualitative aspects such as air or soil—is recognized in the shaping of environments.

Dust, as a paradigmatic material, exemplifies the bridging potential between physical and aesthetic domains. It is not merely a passive substance but an active participant in the constitution of atmospheric spaces. Whether in natural landscapes or architectural environments, dust interacts with light and colour to shape perception and emotional tone. It thus functions as both a physical phenomenon and an aesthetic medium, contributing to the design and experience of space. This bridging quality is also evident in the phenomena of atmosphere and landscape. Each operates as both a discrete entity and a component of a larger whole. In the philosophy of perception and aesthetics, a central debate concerns whether materiality is perceived first and subsequently interpreted affectively, or whether affective atmospheres precede and condition the perception of material elements.[13] Systematic investigations often propose hierarchical models, yet these models reveal the interdependence and relationality of autonomous subsystems—suggesting that perception is always already embedded in a network of material and affective relations.

Atmospheric Spaces: Perception, Mood, and Design

What, then, constitutes an atmosphere? Etymologically, the term derives from the Greek *atmos-sphaira*, which literally means “steam-sphere,” and originally referred to the gaseous envelope surrounding a celestial body. In the case of Earth, the atmosphere is a vital condition for life, situated between the inhospitable vacuum of space and the terrestrial surface. It envelops the planet entirely and contributes to phenomena such as air pressure and climate regulation.

12 Hoppe and Lemke, Neue Materialismen, 12.

13 Böhme, Aesthetics of Atmospheres, 19.

This physical-material dimension of atmosphere points directly to its aesthetic-material counterpart. Human beings are not merely surrounded by the qualities of natural and architectural spaces—they are embedded within them through their felt-body, which mediates sensory presence and emotional resonance. Thus, individuals inhabit space in two distinct yet interrelated ways[14]: through their *where-being*, which denotes spatial coordinates and physical presence, and through their *how-being*, which refers to the qualitative mood they bring into and receive from the space. These dual modes of being interact dynamically, producing atmospheres that are emotionally charged and perceptually rich. Atmospheres, in this sense, resemble meteorological phenomena in that they envelop, permeate, and co-shape both people and materials. Böhme articulates this relationality from an aesthetically sharpened phenomenological perspective[15], anticipating later discussions on spheres by thinkers such as Peter Sloterdijk[16], or by practitioners such as Peter Zumthor[17], who discusses various criteria and materials for architecture with regard to their atmospheric qualities.

Böhme defines atmosphere as the medium that "mediates objective factors of the environment with aesthetic feelings of a human being."[18] The ontological status of atmosphere is thus marked by its in-betweenness, by "the relation between environmental qualities and human states. This 'and,' this in-between, by means of which environmental qualities and states are related, is atmosphere."[19] This inconspicuous conjunction reveals atmosphere as a relational phenomenon, characterized by vagueness and affective intensity.[20] It can fill a space with emotional tone, influencing behaviour and

[14] Andreas Rauh, Concerning Astonishing Atmospheres: Aisthesis, Aura, and Atmospheric Portfolio (Mimesis International, 2018).

[15] Böhme, Atmosphäre, 21–22.

[16] Peter Sloterdijk, Sphären. Makrosphärologie: Globen (Suhrkamp, 1999), 147.

[17] Peter Zumthor, Atmospheres: Architectural Environments, Surrounding Objects (Birkhäuser, 2006).

[18] Böhme, Aesthetics of Atmospheres, 1.

[19] Böhme, Aesthetics of Atmospheres, 12.

[20] Rauh, Concerning Astonishing Atmospheres, 25–28.

perception—consider, for instance, the distinct atmospheres of banks, churches, or hotels.

Atmosphere produces a sensory unification of spatial perception, akin to how a landscape integrates natural and cultural elements. A forest is not merely a collection of trees, nor a city a sum of buildings; rather, each is experienced as a coherent perceptual situation with a characteristic mood. Artworks and landscapes, too, are perceptible atmospherically.

Figure 4. Caspar David Friedrich, The Lonely Tree, 1822.
Source: bpk / Nationalgalerie, SMB / Jörg P. Anders.

Even for a landscape painting, it remains vague where the plain ends and where the mountain begins—especially when the landscape is composed to evoke certain moods, and the foreground, middle ground, and background are assembled from various landscape sketches—for example, in the painting *The Lonely Tree* (1822) by Caspar David Friedrich (Fig. 4). The painting depicts a pre-alpine landscape with pastureland, hills, and distant mountains, arranged to produce depth and movement. Even without an (art)historical viewing of the painting, movement suggestions in the image become perceptible, illustrating a

swaying back and forth. The central tree, with its gestural branches, anchors the composition and gestures toward various zones of the image, creating a rhythm of visual flow. The landscape becomes a resonant space for the viewer's mind, inviting affective engagement.

Atmospheric perception encompasses all sensory modalities—visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory, gustatory—and integrates them into a felt-bodily aesthetic experience. In order to articulate this phenomenon, Böhme redirects attention from the objective properties of objects to their dramatic value by thematizing their *ecstasies* "to indicate the way things are radiating into space and thus contributing to the formation of an atmosphere."[21] This reframing shifts art experience from art-historical, iconographic, or semantic analyses to experiencing and sensing affective qualities.

The relationality of colour impressions as ecstasies can be tested in situ. Every picture in a museum is displayed against a background, whether it be a white or coloured wall, a painted surface, or a fabric covering, directly or indirectly illuminated with reflections in protective glass or on the oil varnish of the canvas. As much as attention is focused on the content of the picture, the museum environment introduces a multitude of perceptual stimuli—crowds, lighting, noises of all kinds, spatial restrictions—that shape the experience. The ideal of contemplative viewing gives way to a saturated perceptual field, where atmosphere becomes a decisive factor.

Importantly, Böhme emphasizes not only the receptive dimension of atmosphere but also its productive potential. He introduces the figure of the "aesthetic worker"[22]—a term encompassing professions dedicated to the design of atmospheres. Böhme himself resorts to practical tools when he quotes from Christian Cay Lorenz Hirschfeld's work on garden design.[23] The art of stage design also serves him as a frequently mentioned prime example of the creation of atmospheres.[24] Things are "put in the right light," spaces are furnished, and moods are staged: The transferability and equipment of environmental qualities

[21] Böhme, Aesthetics of Atmospheres, 5, 18, 95.

[22] Böhme, Aesthetics of Atmospheres, 73–74.

[23] Böhme, Aesthetics of Atmospheres, 21, 61, 92, 129.

[24] Böhme, Aesthetics of Atmospheres, 28–29, 183, 217.

succeed through the implicitly learned use of all available design elements, such as light, sound, colour, objects, signs, and materials, which "is supposed to show itself, [...] to help shape the atmosphere in which we live."[25]

The perception of landscapes and landscape paintings shows how individual perceptual elements can shape the actually perceived spatiality. In design contexts, particularly in painting and architecture, colour plays a central role in atmospheric composition. Due to ocularcentrism—the privileging of visual perception—colour becomes a primary medium for embedding materiality within affective space. Materials, when captured chromatically, can act as non-human agents, acquiring a quasi-autonomous presence. This applies to dust on a micro scale and to atmosphere on a macro scale.

Yet, aesthetic design carries the risk of homogenization. Changes in spatial, cultural, or intentional contexts may reduce individual colour elements to a structured but seemingly unstructured grey—like mixing all the colours in a paintbox. The grey of historical black-and-white photographs, while partly a result of chemical limitations, also evokes associations with age, memory, and dust. Dust and grey converge in the figure of the dust bunny, a composite entity whose perceived greyness masks its underlying chromatic complexity (Fig. 5).

Figure 5. Dust bunny in Frankfurt.
Source: Andreas Rauh.

[25] Böhme, Aesthetics of Atmospheres, 142.

This process of generalization—from individual particles to the concept of "dust bunny"—mirrors the abstraction inherent in atmospheric discourse. When we describe an atmosphere as "pleasant" or "tense," we condense a multitude of specific materialities, perceptions, and affective states into a singular term. The richness of colour and sensation is subsumed under a general impression—a grey that results from the mixing of all colours.

From the perspective of New Materialism, particularly Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO), such generalizations may be problematic.[26] OOO interrogates the ontological status of objects and the role of humans among them. If the greyness of a dust bunny is intrinsic, then microscopic revelations of colour are merely human projections. This tension invites further theoretical investigation into the material and perceptual dimensions of dust.

Figure 6. Blasting of the AfE Tower in Frankfurt-Bockenheim on 2 February 2014. Source: Sven-Sebastian Sajak.

Artistically, Berlin-based artist Stefan Klein has explored dust as an aesthetic medium. On the one hand, grey dust samples become exhibitable traces of former buildings and thus witnesses of the past; on the other hand, they also represent the constant transformation of

[26] Hoppe and Lemke, Neue Materialismen, 31.

one material into another and ultimately into dust. The work AfE is reminiscent of a former building by exhibiting collected material traces of dust. In addition, the work AfE also alludes to a (now disproved) theory about the weight of the soul with the specific statement that it contains 21 grams of dust, elevating the dust trace to the soul of the demolished Frankfurt AfE Tower of the Bockenheim campus of Johann Wolfgang Goethe University, which housed the departments of social sciences, education, and psychology (Fig. 6). AfE is an acronym for Abteilung für Erziehungswissenschaft (Department of Pedagogy). While the work is not directly related to the demolition or the direct documentation of the demolition, it refers to the whence and whither of the building, including its core essence—dust.

In his long-term project, *Archiving the Universe*, Klein collects dust samples from around the world (Fig. 7). No matter how different their origins, they are placed on photographic paper, which is then exposed. Thus, black-and-white images are created, which remain black-and-white upon appropriate enlargement and have lost their original potential colourfulness. However, these images are elevated in their pictorial appearance above all earthly things and suggest a view into the universe, from the smallest to the largest.

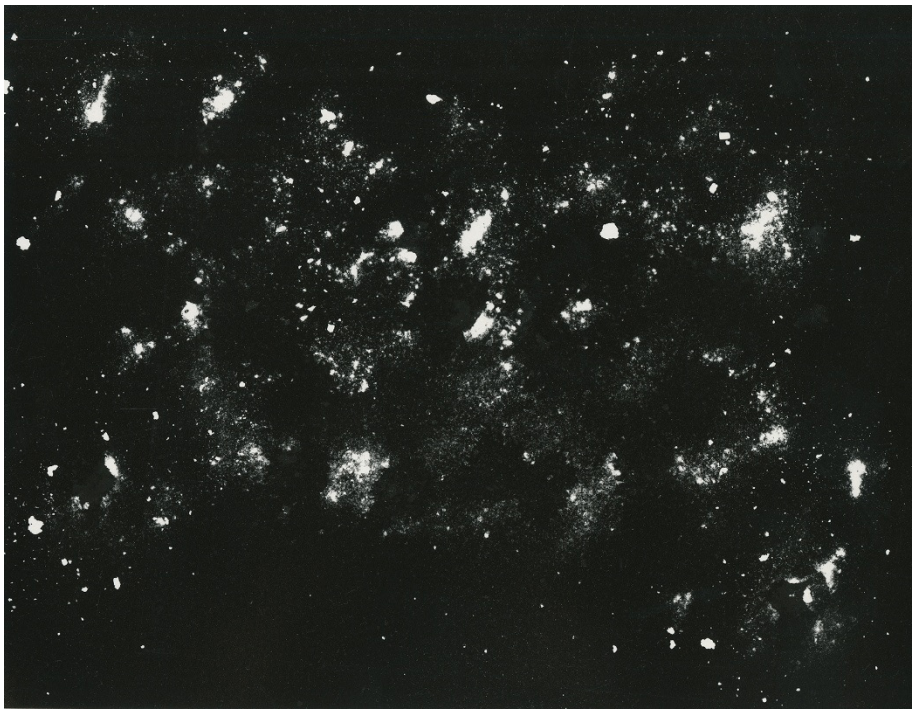

Figure 7. Evaporated Snowball (Archiving the Universe), 2023.
Courtesy of Stefan Klein.

Dust Reconsidered: Formative Rather Than Disruptive

What insights emerge from these essayistic explorations of dust, atmosphere, and landscape? How are aesthetic atmospheres and material phenomena interwoven, particularly in relation to spatiality and colour?

Focusing on atmospheres entails attending to felt-bodily presence and its entanglement with the emotional qualities of spatial environments. Within these environments, a certain greyness is always present—dust is ubiquitous. As an everyday material, dust exemplifies the unnoticed yet structurally significant components of perception. In large quantities, dust can evoke abandonment and decay, as in the Dust Bowl, where dust rendered spaces inhospitable and visually desolate. Such environments acquire impression qualities that often fall within the negative spectrum of aesthetic judgment.

In different quantities, however, dust also contributes to the emergence of various qualities.[27] It plays a crucial role in phenomena such as sunsets, where its presence in the atmosphere enables chromatic richness. Similarly, in landscape scenes, dust modulates light and colour, shaping the mood and perceptual tone of the environment. These atmospheres are actively sought and studied in architecture and landscape design, serving as models for future spatial compositions. Historically, architectural renderings and design models have favoured dust-free scenes, privileging sterility and clarity. This ocularcentric bias rendered atmosphere a blind spot in design disciplines. However, contemporary practices increasingly incorporate patina and signs of wear, acknowledging the aesthetic value of material aging. The passage of time, which grinds material into dust, is now embraced as a contributor to atmospheric depth.

As an independent, everyday, and ubiquitous material, dust in its inconspicuousness points to the atmospheric relationality that must be repeatedly emphasized in practice-oriented perception theories. In its material composition, dust exemplifies how the aggregation of diverse coloured particles—from textile fibres to pollen—produces an apparent greyness that masks underlying chromatic complexity. Moreover, dust's ubiquitous yet inconspicuous presence gestures

[27] Andreas Rauh, "Material–Art–Dust. Reflections on Dust Research between Art and Theory," Open Philosophy 7 (2024): 8–9, https://doi.org/10.1515/opphil-2024-0011.

toward a mode of aesthetic-atmospheric perception that operates below the threshold of conscious awareness, preceding deliberate social action. Yet, when embraced as a material with aesthetic potential, dust can acquire the dignity of patina—signifying age, transformation, and embeddedness in time.

In this sense, dust is not always disruptive. Sometimes, it is formative.

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Figure 2. Dust bunnies in Frankfurt. Source: Andreas Rauh.

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