

t a m i n g \_ t h e  
h o r r o r  
v a c u i



issue #1  
inhaling the storm

## EDITORIAL

The first event of *Taming the Horror Vacui* was marked by uncanny coincidences. Revolving around the topic of the wind, Haseeb Ahmed's long-term program at Rib kicked off with windstorm Ciara blowing the streets of the neighborhood of Charlois in Rotterdam. This double wind, real and metaphorical, seemed like a sign. Visitors must have felt it too when they were asked by Ahmed's first guest Michèle Matyn to go for a dowsing walk in the windy neighborhood, looking for signs through magic rods, and practicing ritualistic breath-in talking afterwards.

The first issue of this publication is titled *Inhaling the Storm* in honor of those fruitful coincidences. For it, we have collected testimonies from those inhalers, as well as serendipitous references, spreading them over 8 pages. The central images of Ahmed's installation and collaborative work with Matyn and Rib have been framed by annotations that are not so much explanation of those images as they are complementation. The concept of annotations as commentary on a central content is gratefully inspired by the design of the recent republication of Bruno Munari's *Obvious Code* in *The Serving Library Annual*.

Among other things, in this issue we have asked workshop participants Roxanne and Rawad to share impressions from their dowsing walk; we have included some inspired words by Matyn about one of her drawings, crucially transferred onto the collaborative table top with Ahmed during an intensive working session; we have reported stories from citizens of Charlois about its windy streets; we have found a paragraph by South African photographer Santu Mofokeng about the efficiency of mystically chasing shadows; we have tried to show how Matyn and Ahmed's practices can be seen as an update of 200 years old theories, we have taken the well known deep breath one should take before commencing anything.

Rotterdam, March 2020





A giant loaf of bread and a ceremonial costume wait to be activated by Michèle Matyn during her workshop and performance. They stand next to a bushel of reeds brought by Haseeb Ahmed for his ongoing installation at Rib.

## INTRO

*I am interested in what is carried by the wind, the particles like sand, but also particular narratives and concepts.*  
- Haseeb Ahmed

The title of Haseeb Ahmed's long term program at Rib is *Taming the Horror Vacui*, an expression referring to how fluids in nature seem to fear the void, hence rushing to fill it. Ahmed's focus of the last 10 years of his research has been the phenomena of the wind, which he has researched from both the scientific and mythological perspectives.

For the inaugural event of the program at Rib, Ahmed invited Antwerp-based artist Michèle Matyn to reactivate these mythologies linked to natural phenomena, which are at the center of her art practice. She traced a possible origin of the wind. Breathing holes, both the real ones of persons and the allegorical ones found in caves and in the ground played a crucial role. The wind, the air, and the storm were helped in their escape from the void. They were left to fill the lungs of visitors and inhabited places of the gallery and city. The collaborative process between the two artists was made accessible in the gallery, involving the visitors by transforming them into workshop participants, attendees to a ritual, producers of knowledge.

The concept of *horror vacui*, the way nature seems to fear empty spaces hence filling them, traces back to Aristotle. According to late 1970s art historian Richard Ettinghausen, Islamic art follows a similar pattern of filling spaces that would otherwise be seemingly empty with dense ornamental patterns, suggesting yet another influence of nature on culture.

## THE TAMING OF THE HORROR VACUI IN ISLAMIC ART\*

**RICHARD ETTINGHAUSEN**

Consultative Chairman, Islamic Department, Metropolitan Museum of Art,  
Hagop Kevorkian Professor of Islamic Art, New York University

*(Read November 11, 1977)*

I would describe my experience as being confronted with how impatient I was with "finding what I am looking for" or to "find the north" from the location where we were standing. We are so used to have our phones doing that for us or to just ask around. Obviously, the sticks were not making it easy. First it felt (empty)/uncomfortable. However, from my perspective dowsing with the sticks is a good example of "practice makes perfect". If you dare to trust your intuition and make time to practice, I believe that eventually it will work and you could reap the benefits.

- Roxanne

Coming from a design background, in my work the first thing I ask is "why?" This question haunts me and many people in my professional surrounding, but it seems that Michèle Matyn relieved herself from it. And during the workshop, this was exactly what I experienced. During the two days, she presented work that embodies her own intuition and maybe serendipity. At the beginning I asked her if in the dowsing walks she was looking for something, but now that I think about it, it was another way to ask "Why?" I did not understand that it is the action itself that is the main element of the workshop and not the search for something, for an end. The walk was an immersive experience that needed to be done multiple times for the individual to familiarize themselves with it. For the two days that I listened to her and the conversations that were generated by her work, I felt also relieved from giving explanations, also relieved from the never ending search for meaning in art and maybe design. However that was only for two days, now I am back to asking why daily.

- Rawad



Visitors to Rib taking the dowsing walk organized by Michèle Matyn. The sticks are tools for orientation.

## DOWSING WALK

Participants to the workshop of Michèle Matyn were asked to dowse, letting themselves be guided by thin metal rods. They embarked on a quest for directions and cracks in the ground of the windy Karel de

Stouteplein, from which water and knowledge might spill. We have reached a couple of those dowzers and asked for feedback about their experience with this old way of being efficiently on top of the task, surprisingly discovering that they compared it to contemporary technologies that do just so.



Coat hangers can be used as dowsing rods.

Image Courtesy: Penelope Quest





Haseeb Ahmed's intervention at Rib called *Welcome Ciara* stand against white radish, i.e., an ingredient of Michèle Matyn's whimsical soup used for her ritual. (Shadow unknown).

## ANIMISM

A focus point of this issue titled *Inhaling the Storm* is animism, stemming from both Haseeb Ahmed's and Michèle Matyn's interpretation of myths and cults linked to the act of personifying nature. To dig deeper into this concept, we have found an inspiring passage from South African artist Santu Mofokeng in the book edited by Anselm Franke on animism. It explains the ways shadows are more meaningful than they seem, what else a "shadow" can mean, and why it is worth chasing them.

While the expression "chasing shadows" has quixotic connotations in English, in [South African] indigenous languages the expression represents the pursuit of something real, something capable of action, of causing effects—a chase perhaps joined in order to forestall a threat or danger. Seriti in Sesotho (my mother tongue) does not readily translate. The word is often translated only as "shadow," unwittingly combining the meanings of moriti and seriti. The word "seriti" overlaps the word meaning "shadow," but the absence of light is not all there is to seriti. In everyday usage seriti can mean anything from aura, presence, dignity, confidence, spirit, essence, status, wellbeing and power—power to attract good fortune and to ward off bad luck and disease.

- Santu Mofokeng



Detail of Santu Mofokeng's *Animal Festoon*, Mautse Cave, Clarens, 1996.

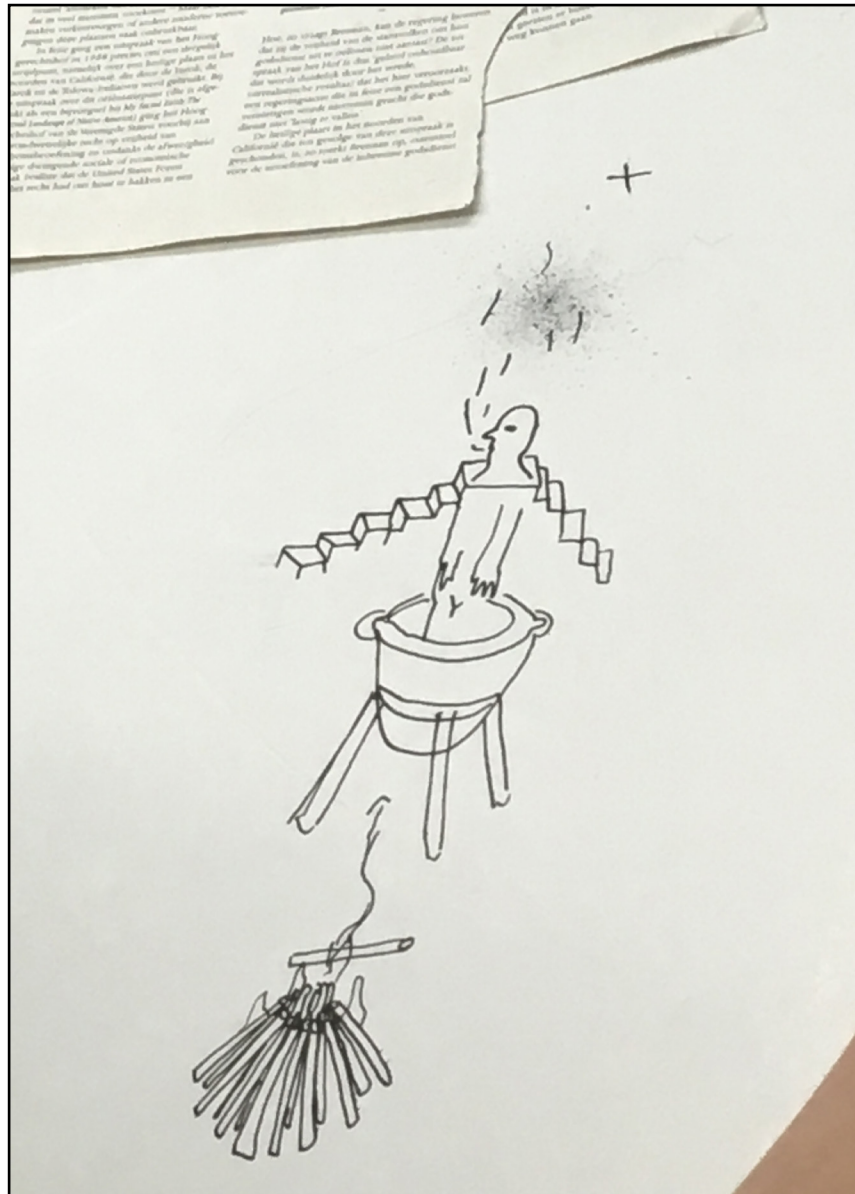
(C) Santu Mofokeng Foundation and courtesy Lunetta Bartz, MAKER, Johannesburg, and Steidl, Göttingen, Germany.

Intrigued by a hatch in the floor that connected the exhibition space with the cellar through stairs, I wandered off the idea of stairs. I turned my car into a mobile studio and started a journey to the mythical stairs of Mycenae. I considered the basement as the underworld, a place where the unexpected can arise or disappear. I used the notion of 'stairs' as a metaphor for transition: a continuously shifting physical and mental state of being. I cut off parts of my mattress to make foam steps, and with these I made a costume that looked like a staircase that goes from one side to the other, as the idea that a person is always falling forwards and catching himself (dixit Laurie Andersson). While driving I had the time to daydream and connect stories I read about places, and ideas I had in my own mind. I was also passing through Delfi, drinking from the well. The cracks in the soil where wind and sound would come out worked as a portal which would be used by a priest to predict the future, inhaling and exhaling the air from them, becoming possessed and being able to get higher knowledge.

The smoke in the drawing is more like the translation of the oracle, the transformation, the breathing, a combination of things, the wishes and hopes of the people, the knowledge from the underground.

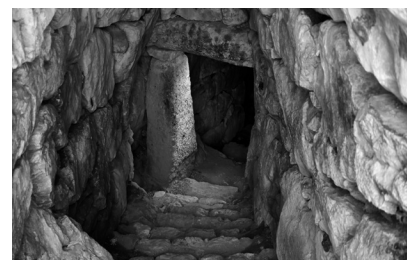
The person is standing in a pot of Oracle Soup, inhaling the hot smoke from it like the wind from the underground to give knowledge to humans. The soup is made of roots (carrots) and you drink it out white radish—vegetables from the underground, which is where the higher knowledge is supposed to come from. Eating carrots that are made in the dark would give a clearer vision of what happens down there. The soup is a metaphor, and it links to references from *The Golden Bough* by James Frazer, a study in magic and religion from all over the world.

We had a chat with Michèle Matyn about one of her drawings, and transcribed it here with loose edits. Animism, ancient mythologies, and personification of nature come back in her description of the drawing, which furthered the conversation and the collaborative production of the table top with Haseeb Ahmed during their one-to-one session.



A drawing by Michèle Matyn on Haseeb Ahmed's tabletop during their one-to-one session.

The staircase leading to the underground cistern of the acropolis of Mycenae. Image courtesy: Wikipedia.







Ceremonial fabric by Michèle Matyn and two fans for Haseeb Ahmed's installation at Rib.



The collaboration between Michèle Matyn and Haseeb Ahmed during the first event of *Taming the Horror Vacui* at Rib built on a number of references. We have collected some of them in the following short essay, which delves into three major and mutual tropes in their practice.

### **Magic plus Religion plus Science equals Art: Michèle Matyn and Haseeb Ahmed's Practices as Productive Syntheses.**

Magic, religion, and science are the crucial tropes in the artwork of Michèle Matyn and Haseeb Ahmed. Their practices can be seen as productive syntheses of these three concepts, which many consider mutually exclusive. Elizabeth Ann Pollard writes about the first two:

*The debate concerning how to define "magic" in general has burned hotly [...]. Much of this debate centers on how to differentiate magic from religion. Modern attempts simply to distinguish between what might be called magic and religion have focused on: the possible malignant goals of magic versus the beneficent intentions of religion, the individual as opposed to the corporate aspect, ritualism versus piety/ belief, the primitive as opposed to the evolved, the peripheral as opposed to the central, and similarly the foreign and hostile as opposed to the indigenous, activity by women and low-class men as opposed to social superiors, furtive/ clandestine versus public, coercive as opposed to supplicative, accessing supernatural powers (right or wrong) for right or wrong ends and the related illegal as opposed to legal. (Pollard 2014 p. 185)*

In regard to the "primitive as opposed to the evolved," she references the 19th century evolutionary argument of James George Frazer in his *The Golden Bough*, which mentions that "magic, based on the idea of a necessary and invariable sequence of cause and effect [...] directly prepares the way for science. Alchemy leads up to chemistry." (Frazer 1894 [1890] p. 36)

A similar 19th century progressivist approach distinguishes magic from metaphysical and ultimately scientific, separating the three concepts even further. In this regard, August Comte writes:

*If we study as a whole the phenomenon of the development of the human mind,*

(continues on page 7)

## STORIES OF THE WIND IN ROTTERDAM

We have collected a story about the wind in Southern Rotterdam from one of its citizens, an example of how mythologies are built by the inhabitants about their own place.

*The storm of '53, that's what comes to mind. It was the biggest windstorm of them all. We had the biggest storm in the history of Europe, here in Rotterdam. Then we had another one I believe, and that was last year. Let me see what year that was, 2098? No, that's not it - wait, it's 2018! I can say no more about that event. Oh, but I remember that event so clearly. What a bad storm we had in 2018. Everything about it was way worse than the first one. Roofs worse, they all flew off, everything was just gone. And more you can't say if you didn't live through it. Even I, who have lived through it, what more can I say about this?*

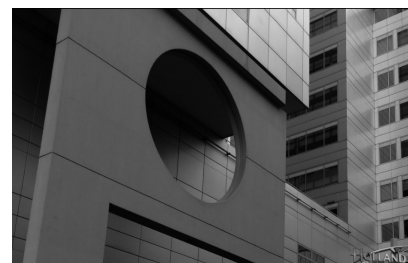
*Roof gone, swept away. But I wasn't swept away. Almost happened though. And the most important thing about this storm, here, I wish I could show you this picture but I can't find it. See, this storm happened in the Landmanstraat, and I was there. I'm trying to find a picture of the important thing there - my scooter. All this roofing fell in on it, onto my scooter. The storm bashed in on my scooter, see? This is a picture of my scooter.*

- Citizen encountered at the Spiegel Bar in Charlois, Rotterdam

As collected, adapted, and translated into English by Jakob van Klinken.



Journalist Kevin Krajick on a quest an Ademgaten in the archaeological site of Hierapolis in modern Turkey. Ademgaten are breathing holes from which the wind and prophecies are supposed to originate. Cities have countless hidden Ademgaten. Image source: Atlas Obscura and Rib Instagram account.



A breathing hole in Rotterdam.





Rib's director Maziar Afrassiabi wears Michèle Matyn's ceremonial dress during her workshop, while participants eat an oracle soup prepared beforehand.



(continues from page 5)

whether by the rational method or by the empirical method, we discover beneath all the apparent irregularities a fundamental law to which its course is necessarily and invariably subject. This law consists in the proposition that the human intellectual system has necessarily assumed in turn three distinct characters: a theological character, a metaphysical character, and lastly a positive or physical character. [...] From supernatural agents, to abstract forces residing in matter, to invariable natural laws (Comte 1998 [1825] p. 145)

Developing dichotomies and progressivism are fruitful heuristics to grasp the concepts of magic, religion, and science, but they are not the only ones. Let's think of the practice of Michèle Matyn and Haseeb Ahmed as an heuristic too, building on two separate productive syntheses. On the one hand, both their bodies of work incorporate these concepts formally and intellectually, synthesizing them into a novel form of knowledge. This can be seen as the production of new beliefs about the world that are justified apart from the traditional epistemology of magic, religion and science. On the other hand, the artist's practices can be joined in a sort of comparative study of how they exploit magic, religion, and science in their own way, indirectly offering a non-progressive approach to the analysis of those concepts. This double synthesis shows how the equation in the title of this essay can be read both ways.

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## INAUGURATING THE CONCEPT

Haseeb Ahmed's long term program is also an ongoing installation in the gallery of Rib. Elements of it respond to the specificity of the invited guests. During the first event in the program (February 2020), the artist fixed a curtain to the door of the building, creating a visualization of the storm blowing outside and entering at the same time. The door became the first breathing hole a visitor would encounter, hinting at the events happening inside during the two days and beyond.

The *Welcome Ciara* banner of birthday balloons greeted the wind as it was a person, or a visitor among others. Animism came back in this act of giving a name to a natural phenomenon, suggesting the very human cognitive phenomenon: our tendency of anthropomorphizing things. The process of nature becoming us was repeated in the embodiment of the underground during Michèle Matyn's workshop and ritual.



Details of Haseeb's installation *Welcome Ciara* at Rib, February 2020.



Haseeb Ahmed's installation at Rib enters phase two in March 2020. The ongoing construction will be presented throughout the *Taming the Horror Vacui* program and publication.



Storm Ciara blows Haseeb Ahmed's curtain at Rib during the workshop by Michèle Matyn, February 2020.



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*Taming the Horror Vacui*

*Publication issue #1: Inhaling the Storm*

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