

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



issue #2  
modeling nothingness



March 2020. Reeds from the River Rupel  
in a potential state before being set in  
motion at Rib.





Haseeb Ahmed's animistic installation *Welcome Ciara* at Rib in February 2020. The artwork personified an upcoming windstorm, inaugurating the program *Taming the Horror Vacui* and marking the first issue of this publication. Christiane Blattmann's text bridges the themes of the first iteration with the ones at hand here.

We open *Modeling Nothingness* with a text by artist Christiane Blattmann. Her reflection on organic architecture and personification of nature, mediated via architect Friedrich Kiesler and psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan re-introduces the topic of animism present in the

work of Ahmed and Matyn we exposed in the first publication. When coupled with her artwork, Blattmann's text also introduces the concept of models, not as ideal replicas but as abstract aids to a final object. It prompts the question of how a text can model an artistic practice.

## IN ABSENCE OF SPIRIT by Christiane Blattmann

*Do houses have a soul that dwells within? A place has a spirit – Why should a habitation, then, not have a soul? Can buildings contain evil?*

When I studied architecture for a brief period of time, I had a professor who was obsessed with Heidegger. Her lectures were poetic and heavy, and we had to spend hours looking at slides of her watercolors in which she tried to capture the spirit of places she would travel to on weekends. The *genius loci* of a site – she explained. *Der Ort*. She always said *DER ORT* in a religious way that I found puzzling – the me of first semester, who had never read a line of Heidegger (and still don't get much of it). Whenever she said *DER ORT*, I felt strangely ashamed, for I couldn't decipher the charge of her expression. I had a feeling that I didn't share in her religion.

What I could explain better to myself was the much older understanding my professor was referring to. The *genii* in ancient belief were protective spirits that guarded a place or a house. They would make the difference between a place and *DER ORT*: between an anonymous area on the map, a mere fenced-off field and a textured site, with history, character, a view, underground, traps, and inexplicable vibes to it. As a spirit is such an abstract concept for human minds, the *genius loci* was often depicted as a snake. A snake, who protects a place and is ever-present there.

In my mind, where someone protects, there must also be an antagonist. An evil that dwells within, or a malicious charge of a place or a house. I had not known anything about Heidegger in the first semester of architecture class, but I was already a dedicated admirer of another – more eclectic – male who left a big print on the mold of the modern art of building: Frederick Kiesler. After some effort, I recently managed to persuade the Kiesler Archive to give me access to his unpublished manuscript



Isn't something of this suggested to us by the insight of the poets in that myth of Daphne transformed into a tree under the pressure of a pain from which she cannot flee? Isn't it true that the living being who has no possibility of escape suggests in its very form the presence of what one might call petrified pain? Doesn't what we do in the realm of stone suggest this? To the extent that we don't let it roll, but erect it, and make of it something fixed, isn't there in architecture itself a kind of actualization of pain? (Lacan)



Haseeb Ahmed, *Turning Kiesler's Shrine of the Book into a Wind Tunnel Nozzle*, digital collage, 2020. Building up from the medium of the scientific poster, this artwork exposes the transformation of Kiesler's dome for his Shrine of the Book into the nozzle of a wind tunnel. The shrine houses the Old Testament, which states that the universe came into being by the breath of god (Ruach). The myth is materialized through reverse engineering by Ahmed.

While thinking of pain and buildings, the prospect of very real pain obscures Daphne's mythological agony and the Grenfell tower rises in front of my inner eye. That residential tower block in London caught fire in 2017 and subsequently caused the death of 72 of its inhabitants. It had been the

investors' and planners' decision to use cheaper but dangerously inflammable cladding. Decisions had been taken in favor of financial interests, not in favor of the inhabitants' protection.

I am trying to understand whether  
it's fair to hold up the predator





A house burns in the Bronx (1970s). Paolo Patelli's lecture for *Taming the Horror Vacui* included the failure of models in architecture and urbanism, like those that caused the fires and destroyed deprived neighborhoods in New York in the 1970s. Poor and biased modeling was also the indirect cause of the 2017 Grenfell Tower blaze in London, which killed 72 people.



Christiane Blattmann  
*Throwing Her Head Around*

2015, Latex, Pigment / latex, pigment,  
20,5 x 20,5 x 7,5 cm + 21 x 20 x 7,5 cm,  
Private Collection, Hamburg.  
Image: Volker Renner.

image that I used before, or whether the reversal of threat and protection performs at a different level here. I should apologize to our animal colleagues. Isn't it the very same drive that is at work in investors' minds, responsible for whole neighborhoods around the globe that are not designed to live in but to invest in? While we suffer housing shortages in most major cities, many large construction operations are not intended anymore to provide shelter – at least not to organic bodies but to streams of assets.

What does the snaky genius have to say about this? Can we use the spiritual wiggle stick here? It does have something to register:

THE ABSENCE OF ALL SPIRIT.

Christiane Blattmann  
*High Rise Boots (Tour Signal Competition)*

2019, reinforced resin plaster, pigment  
146 x 18 x 29 cm and 146 x 16 x 29 cm.  
Courtesy the artist and Damien & The  
Love Guru, Brussels.



## AN IDEA OF ORNAMENT

For the second session of *Taming the Horror Vacui*, Haseeb Ahmed and Rib invited Rotterdam-based artist Michiel Huijben to give a workshop and Ahmed produced a collaborative artwork with him. Normally the one-to-one sessions between Ahmed and guests take place at Rib. Their output is a series of collaborative tabletops. The Coronavirus epidemic imposed the closure of public places and enforced domestic confinement, hence the meeting between Ahmed and Huijben had to happen online. The tabletop became a digital canvas.

Huijben's practice is deeply influenced by architecture. His lecture performances and installations present references and stories from the discipline. The idea of *horror vacui* shaped into a discussion about architectural ornaments and patterns used to fill the empty space on building surfaces.

Here we have included an extract from their conversation during the fabrication of this digital artwork, in which the artists discuss geometrical ornaments as a models of themselves, insofar as a pattern contains its own replica for unrealized and infinite implementation.



The collaborative table top by Haseeb Ahmed and guest artist Michiel Huijben. A digital canvas took the place of a physical wooden surface, as the artists had to work on it remotely from the quarantine.

Haseeb Ahmed  
*I thought the idea of ornament would be really nice to go through together, as it is something we share in our practices.*

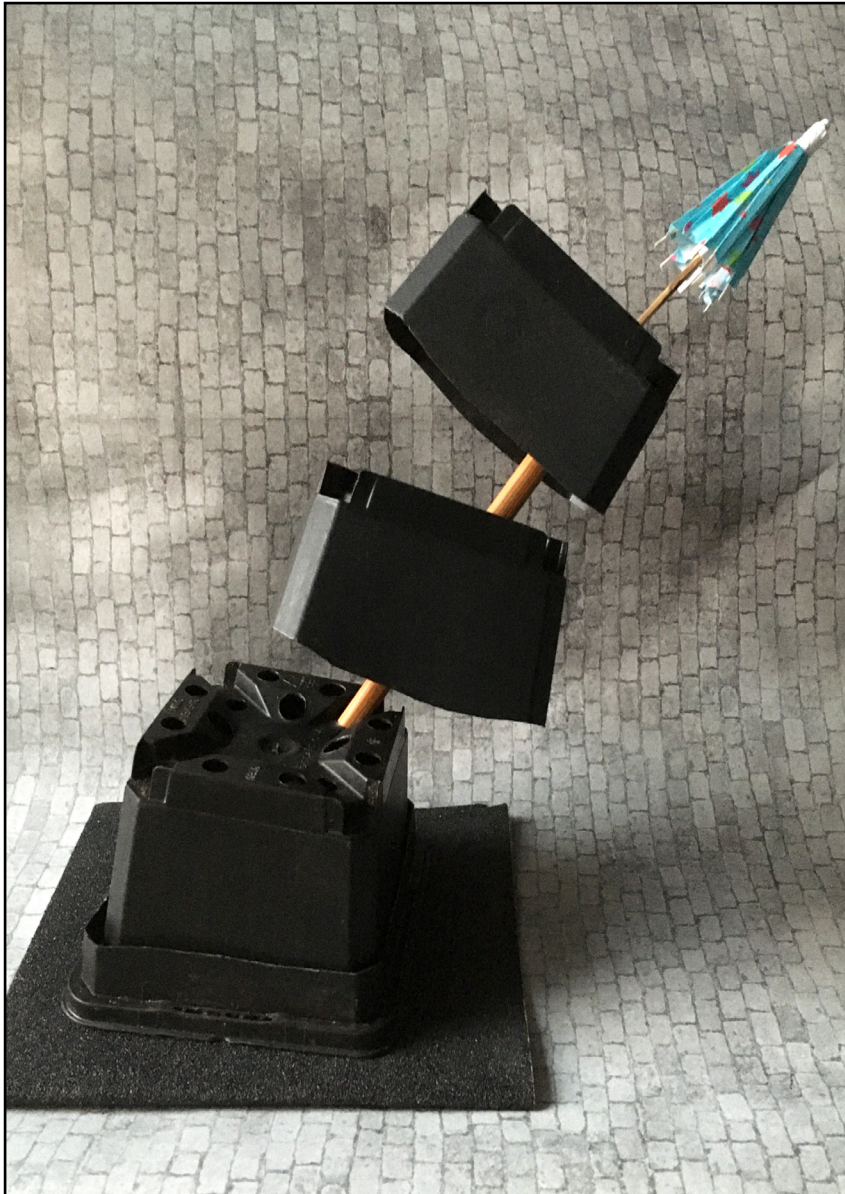
Michiel Huijben  
*I was thinking of two categories of ornaments. Some of them are geometric, and I wonder how they relate to endlessness, as you can repeat them forever following some*

*rules. This is not the case of the second type, which is representational and figurative ornaments.*

Haseeb Ahmed  
*It is as if geometric or symmetrical patterns have the possibility of reoccurring even when they are actually not reoccurring. It is in their DNA. They establish a rule for their own creation, some kind of self-modeling.*

Michiel Huijben  
[discussing Ettinghausen's essay *Taming the Horror Vacui*] *Abstraction allows for an infinite repetition. After traveling through an empty, endless desert, can we see the rules of geometry in patterns as signs of civilization?*





Michiel Huijben asked the workshop participants to produce models. They first had to choose a concept and a diagram of it, eventually creating a 3D version of those diagrams with what was available in their domestic environment. The models had no final purpose. They were neither replicas nor ideals. The image above is the model of the workshop participant Lisa.

#### FULL/EMPTY

The editors of *Accattone* magazine Sophie Dars and Carlo Menon have contributed to this issue with a text about models versus the lack of them. Responding to Huijben's workshop on models and Ahmed's interpretation of the filled void, Dars and Menon deal with models

through their metaphorical enemy, that is spit. A formless vacuum is filled with discipline and vice-versa, before realizing they can be synthesized into a single object: a weak model.

#### SPIT/MODELS

by Sophie Dars & Carlo Menon

Before attending Michiel Huijben's workshop we had never heard the Dutch term *spuugmodel*, or "spit-model." We are not Dutch speakers, so we don't know how technical or common such a word is. We understood it as the equivalent of an intuitive, fast sketch to fix spatial ideas; not on paper, but by assembling objects at hand: a metaphorical object synthesizing an idea yet to be developed in size, proportions or materials. Cheap and imprecise, but clear in its intentions.

Taking advantage of the privilege of being foreigners, we would like to propose another interpretation of this term, freely deviating from its practical meaning. Spit and model are indeed two antithetical concepts, whose contrast can be traced back to Georges Bataille's and Michel Leiris' interventions in their magazine *Documents* (1929). The spit stands for a "bestial monstrosity," which they oppose to the "architectural straitjacket;" formlessness versus order. "Spittle is finally, through its inconsistency, its indefinite contours, the relative imprecision of its color, and its humidity, the very symbol of the formless, of the unverifiable, of the non-hierarchical. It is the limp and sticky stumbling block shattering more efficiently than any stone all undertakings that presuppose man to be something-something other than a flabby, bald animal" (Leiris, *Spittle*, part II). "Man would seem to represent merely an intermediary stage within the morphological development between monkey and building. Forms have become increasingly static, increasingly dominant." (Bataille, *Architecture*)

Bataille's and Leiris' attack on architecture is absolute, as it also carries an attack to scientific knowledge and political authority. The urgency to organize systems, to fill the frightening void of the formless with concepts and hierarchies, "fitting what exists into a frock coat, a mathematical frock coat" (Bataille, *Formless*), is architecture's proper. It is manifest

in institutional buildings and urban design, but even before their construction, it is an attitude embedded in the very idea of the model. A model has diagrammatic qualities. But reality isn't diagrammatic. So the spit is the model's antithesis.

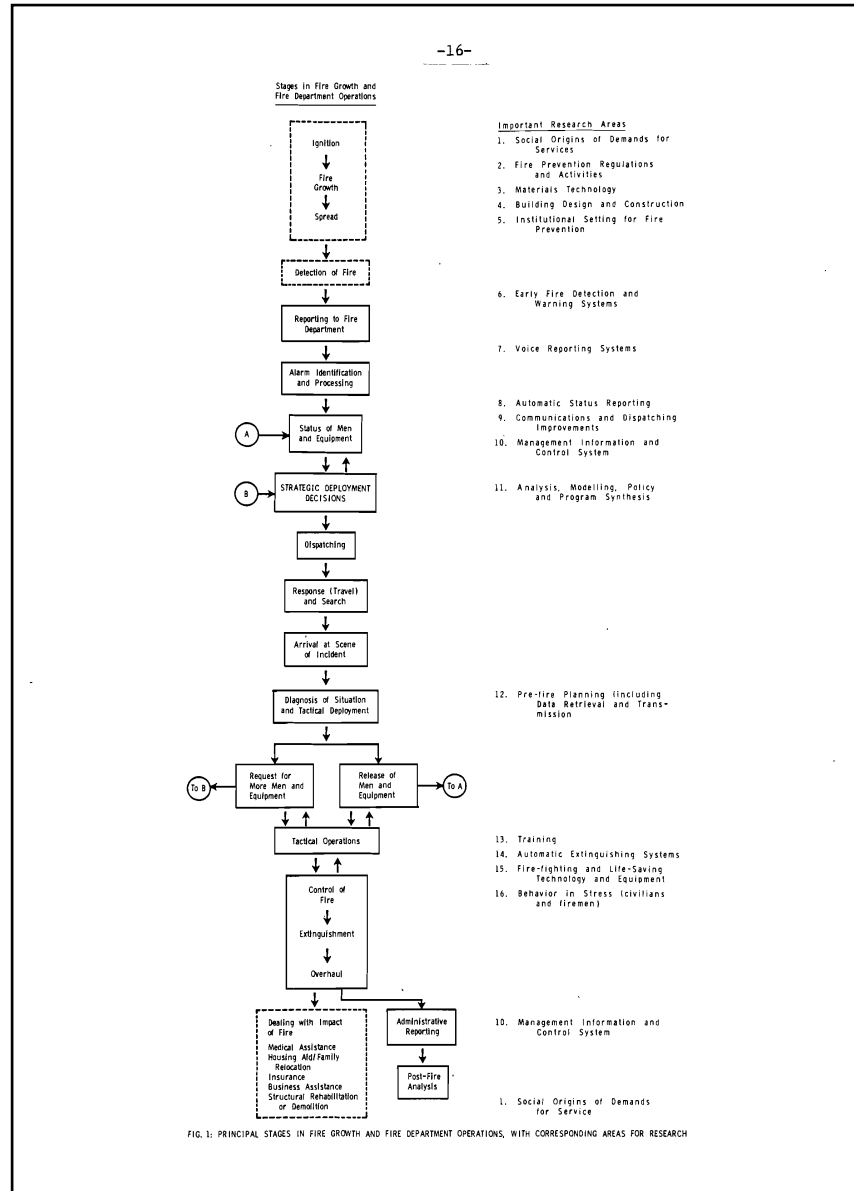
A second thought on the spit-model stems from the photographs that Michiel Huijben publishes on his Instagram account. They frame buildings and architectural details that usually go unnoticed but which express, in themselves or through the eye of the photographer, the cruel and tender irony of the real. The passer-by-as-witty-observer-of-the-everyday collects side stories, counter-stories, and "other" stories than those fitting the established and authoritative discourse. He looks for the spittle amidst what is orderly organized: the vernacular, the odd, the ugly.

Architectural models are made to perform a concept. They come with a hypothesis for the future. Huijben's photographs present models with no hypothesis, solutions to no problems. Dysfunctional, weak, broken models. Spit-models. These are models stripped of the frock jacket of their political function, with no other purpose than deviating from the streamlined models imposed by official culture. Mies Van Der Rohe No More. MVRDV No More. Whether the spit-model will resist becoming a new canon – History, Hysteria, Hipstory, the frivolous uncanny – or remain a critical practice for educated eyes, it is up to its ability to evolve in opposition to the ever-changing codes of bigotry.

## Bibliography

Georges Bataille, 'Architecture', Documents no. 2 (May 1929), p. 117, English transl. in *Encyclopaedia Acephalica* (London: Atlas Press, 1995), pp. 35–36.

Georges Bataille, 'Formless', Documents no. 7 (Dec 1929), p. 382, English transl. in



Still from Paolo Patelli's lecture for *Taming the Horror Vacui*. The image shows a diagram of the RAND Institute for computer models that replicated when, where, and how often fires would break out in New York City. Among other things, Patelli's lecture dealt with the failure of these models, which caused widespread fires and deaths in deprived NY neighborhoods in the 1970s.





Haseeb Ahmed, *The Realm of Forms Expanded: From Platonic Solids to Calibration Objects*, sculpture, 2020. Things like the Stanford Bunny, a 3D test model that has become a standard reference object for computer graphics, are now added to the list of Platonic Ideal Forms by Haseeb Ahmed and some scientists. By inventing new ideal forms, both the evaluative and abstract senses of the concept of models can be philosophically engineered.

#### AN IDEA OF IDEALS

The word "model" has many different senses. One of them has a prescriptive overtone rather than descriptive. In this sense, a model might mean an ideal one should aim to. Plato's theory suggests that all that exists is a faulty copy of its ideal form.

For Plato, our table is but the bad version of the materially unattainable ideal table. But if everything that exists in our world is a copy of something, what is nothingness a copy of? Can nothingness be modeled? Does it exist at all? Here We have included

Can [we] believe that there are holes in our Swiss cheese? The holes are where the matter is not. So to admit the existence of holes is to admit the existence of immaterial objects!

One response is to paraphrase 'There is a hole in the cheese' as 'The cheese holes' or, to be a bit easier on the ear, as 'The cheese is perforated'. What appeared to be a wild existential claim has been domesticated into a comment on the shape of the cheese.

But how are we to distinguish between the cheese having two holes as opposed to one? Well, some cheese is singly perforated, some cheese is doubly-perforated, yet other cheese is  $n$ -perforated where  $n$  equals the number of holes in the cheese.

Whoa! We must be careful not to define 'n-perforation' in terms of holes; that would re-introduce the holes we set out to avoid.

Can holes be evaded by confining ourselves to the process of perforation? Single-hole punchers differ from triple-hole punchers by how they act; singly rather than triply.

The difficulty with this process-oriented proposal that the product, a hole, is needed to distinguish between successful and merely attempted perforation. Furthermore, the paraphrase is incomplete because it does not extend to holes that arise from processes such as looping. If the universe popped into existence five minutes ago, then most holes formed without any process.

From Sorensen, Roy, "Nothingness", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2020 Edition)

a passage from philosopher Roy Sorensen about nothingness and how to model it with a cheese.



## NOTHING AS SOMETHING

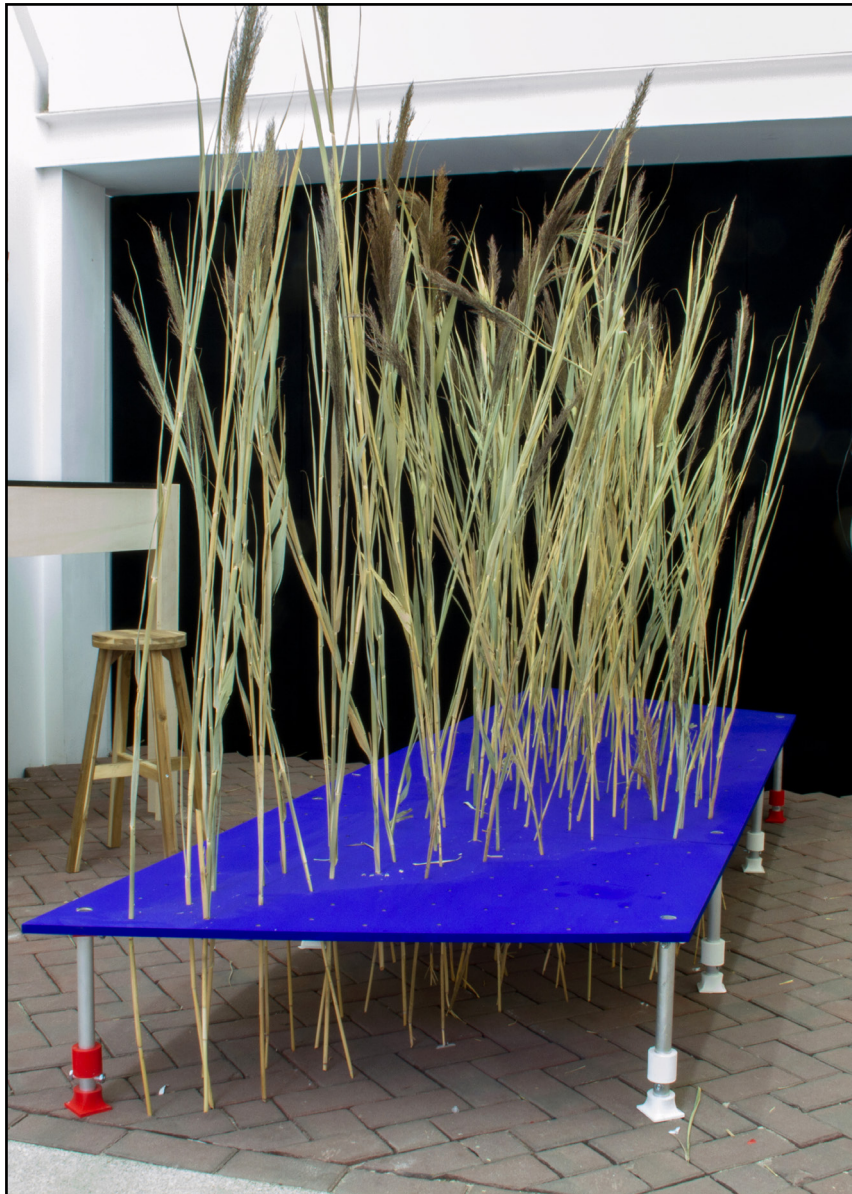
Emptiness, nothingness, vacuum and void can be words describing the anguish we feel in a time where cities have been emptied by the threat of an invisible disease. Rotterdam and its neighborhood of Charlois, home to Rib, are not different.

The installation of Haseeb Ahmed at Rib has come to a standstill in the middle of the lockdown. No visitor can come, there is no movement. Yet there is activity. There is an invisibility that defeats void. The wind from ventilators was supposed to shake the reeds in the installation now blows through stories from confined citizens. We have included one of them, collected, edited and translated by Jakob van Klinken.

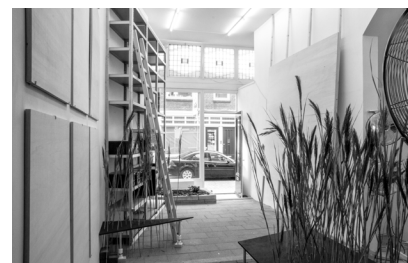
*Daniel, my neighbor-boy, is a very normal boy. He has a dislike for rain and a fondness for wind, when it blows from behind him at least. But yesterday was unfortunate for the wind kept blowing straight in his face while he was walking over the beach. He thoughts of owls, and how they were fond of winds like this. Owls fly against the wind. They remain in control of their flight this way, since their eyesight is pretty shit. That last bit is really unfortunate for security firms who use owl-eyes in their logo as a symbol of alertness. He felt his thoughts wonder off while he walked bending over to remain standing.*

*He tried to have a good time on the beach now that he didn't have to go to work. You would think everyone would be indoors these days, but a lot of people had the same idea as Daniel. As a result the beach was quite packed with people. People who, just like Daniel, were all leaning forward against the wind. A couple of jokers tried playing games with the wind, throwing themselves against the current with their jackets open. A lot of jackets, hats and caps were blown away that day. Daniels fishing cap had blown away as well. Imagine how winds like this could perhaps blow sins away too.*

- Citizen from the confinement in Charlois, Rotterdam

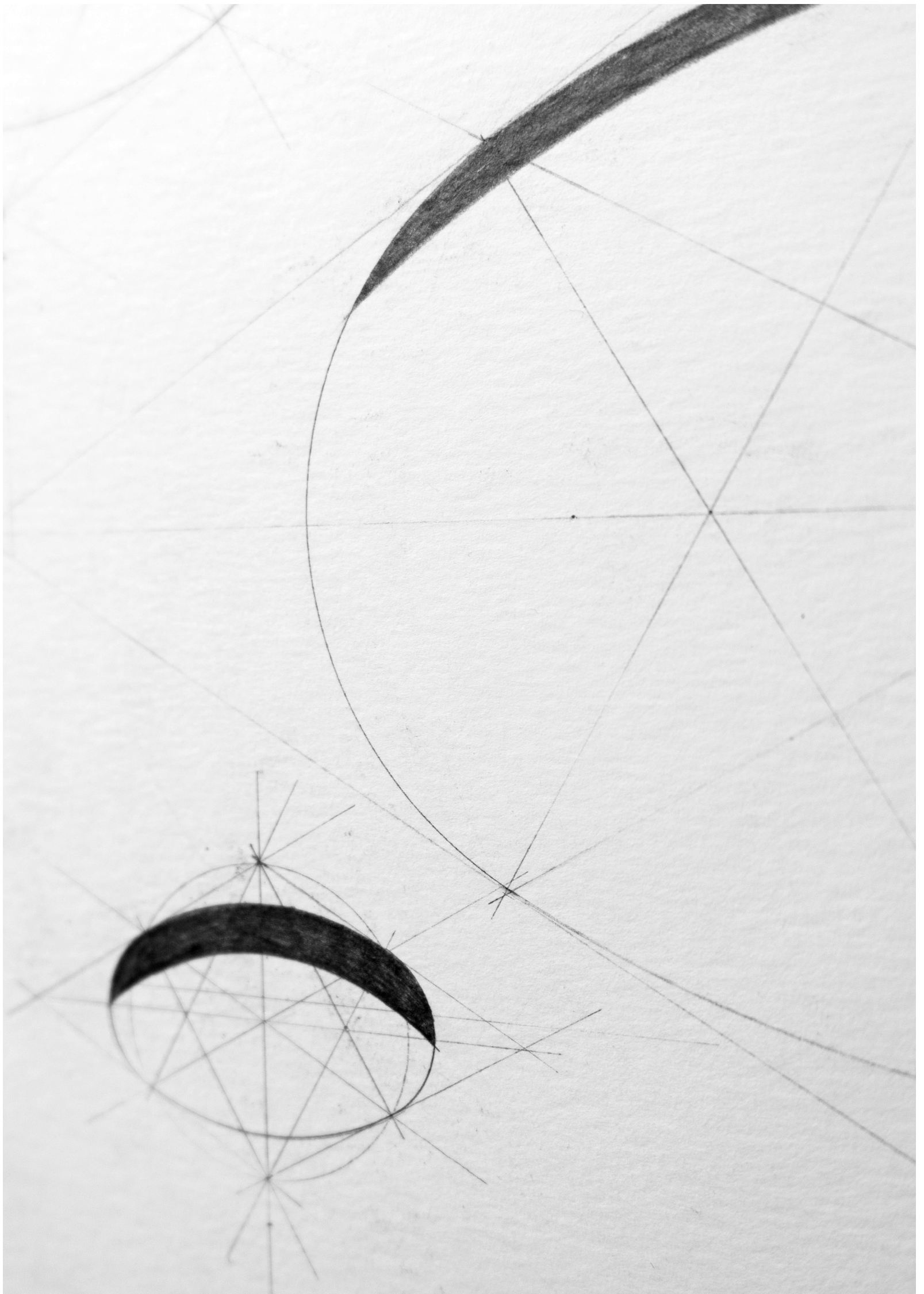


The state of Haseeb Ahmed's kinetic installation at Rib as of April 2020. Reeds stand paused in the unaccessible yet active space of Rib.



The library of the wind by Haseeb Ahmed is now part of the installation at Rib. Its shelves will be filled up with materials from workshops, contributors, and guests of the program.





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*Taming the Horror Vacui*

*Publication issue #2: Modeling Nothingness*

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