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v a c u i



issue #5  
liminal experience



## EDITORIAL

In one of his writings, Los Angeles artist Allan Sekula (1951–2013) mentions the wind in relation to maritime transportation. For him, straight-line navigation allowed by new technology of the steam engine first, and later the diesel one, won over the zigzags demanded by the wind. The natural phenomenon was tamed by technology, an occurrence that coincidentally comes back as "wind-straightener" in Haseeb Ahmed's wind tunnel at Rib in Rotterdam, yet for different purposes.

This fifth issue of *Taming the Horror Vacui* publication deals with how an artistic practice can unfold another. It originates from a lecture by art historian Anja Isabel Schneider, who, following a two-year-long collaboration with Haseeb Ahmed, picks up a few elements from the work of Allan Sekula to provide further readings of Ahmed's work and vice versa. A void is filled when another is created.

The title of Schneider's lecture *Swell* (from the German word *schwellen*) references Walter Benjamin's definition of a threshold (*Schwelle*), significant to articulating space and time present in the way both Sekula thinks of the port and Ahmed the wind tunnel. Moreover, Schneider links Sekula's "staging (of) the wind" to Haseeb Ahmed's ongoing wind tunnel experiment at Rib, which was used for a test involving an unplugged vintage fan of the type used by Sekula in multiple occasions, set in motion merely by the largest fan of the testing machine.

This publication starts off with an extensive interview with Anja Isabel Schneider. Her answers shed light on the mutualities between Haseeb Ahmed, the program *Taming the Horror Vacui*, and Allan Sekula, expanding from her lecture. Furthermore, an original contribution by Frits Gierstberg, a Rotterdam-based curator and art critic, provides an introduction to the work of Allan Sekula and Rotterdam, spanning different themes from the artist's practice and places in the city. M HKA curator Lotte Beckwé annotates an image of the above mentioned experiment with the vintage fan at Rib, writing about surrealist inversion, wind, sea, farts and more. A wind tale by Marloes, an inhabitant of Charlois neighborhood in Rotterdam, reports on harbor life, polluting particles and narratives carried by the wind. Finally, an original map of *Taming the Horror Vacui* by Haseeb Ahmed gives a new take on the current installation at Rib.

Rotterdam, January 2021

Cover image: detail of Allan Sekula, *Finishing propeller shaft in the engine shop. Hyundai shipyard, from chapter 4, Fish Story (1989–95)*. Courtesy Allan Sekula Studio.

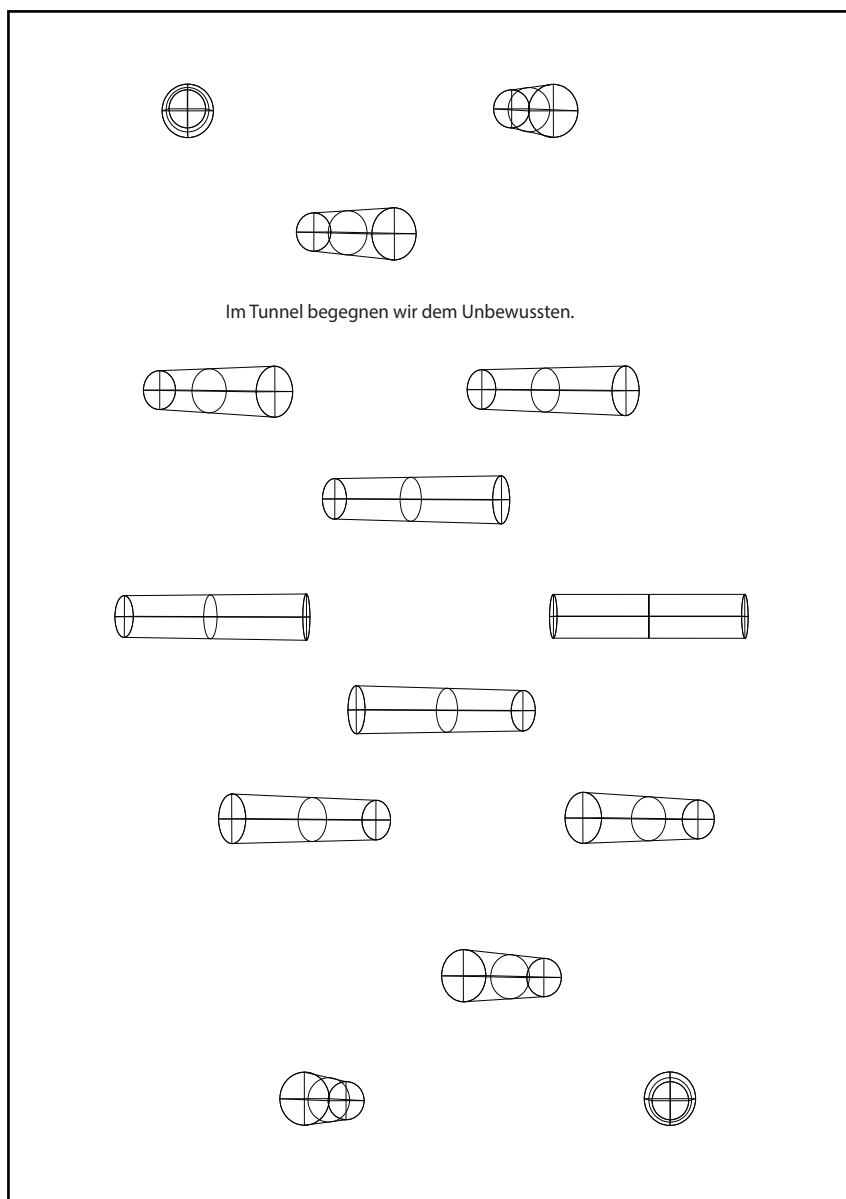
AN INTERVIEW WITH  
ANJA ISABEL SCHNEIDER

The metaphor of the threshold, especially drafted from a concept by Walter Benjamin and Sigmund Freud, underlies your lecture for *Taming the Horror Vacui*. Can you elaborate how you see this metaphor at play in both the work of Sekula and Ahmed at Rib?

Indeed, the trope that I focus on in the attempt to relate to the harbor in Allan Sekula's work and the wind tunnel in Haseeb Ahmed's practice concerns the metaphor of the threshold. In fact, we may understand the harbor as a liminal space (derived from Latin *limen* meaning "threshold") to start with. What is more, Sekula associates the port to Freud's notion of the uncanny: *heimlich-unheimlich*. In this reading of the harbor as a threshold, as a zone of transition and movement, the spatialization of intermediary states is foregrounded. This is where, it seems to me, Walter Benjamin's *Schwelkenkunde* comes in. More precisely, it is Benjamin's (etymological) reading of the German *Schwelle* (threshold)—*schwellen* (swell) that gave the lecture its title. For Benjamin, thresholds were significant in his articulation of space and time. This takes us to Haseeb Ahmed's work. At the most instantaneous level, Ahmed speaks of wind tunnels as thresholds in that "everything that moves through the air (vehicles), or moves air through it (engines), or moves a substantial amount of air around it (buildings) must pass through a wind tunnel before entering our industrially produced world." At the same time, I was struck by how—in the first session of *Taming the Horror Vacui*—the physical threshold at Rib was accentuated through Ahmed's spatial intervention [his installing a foil curtain to Rib's entry door, animated by the wind storm Chiara]. The wind thus literally penetrated Rib from the outset, bringing forth a dynamic relation between interior and exterior. Yet, I am also interested in how metaphor and metonymy play out in and through the wind tunnel test(s) conducted at Rib for this session and those to come.

You called the experiment with the vintage fan in the wind tunnel at Rib an "inversion". Can you elucidate this concept and how it relates to this context?

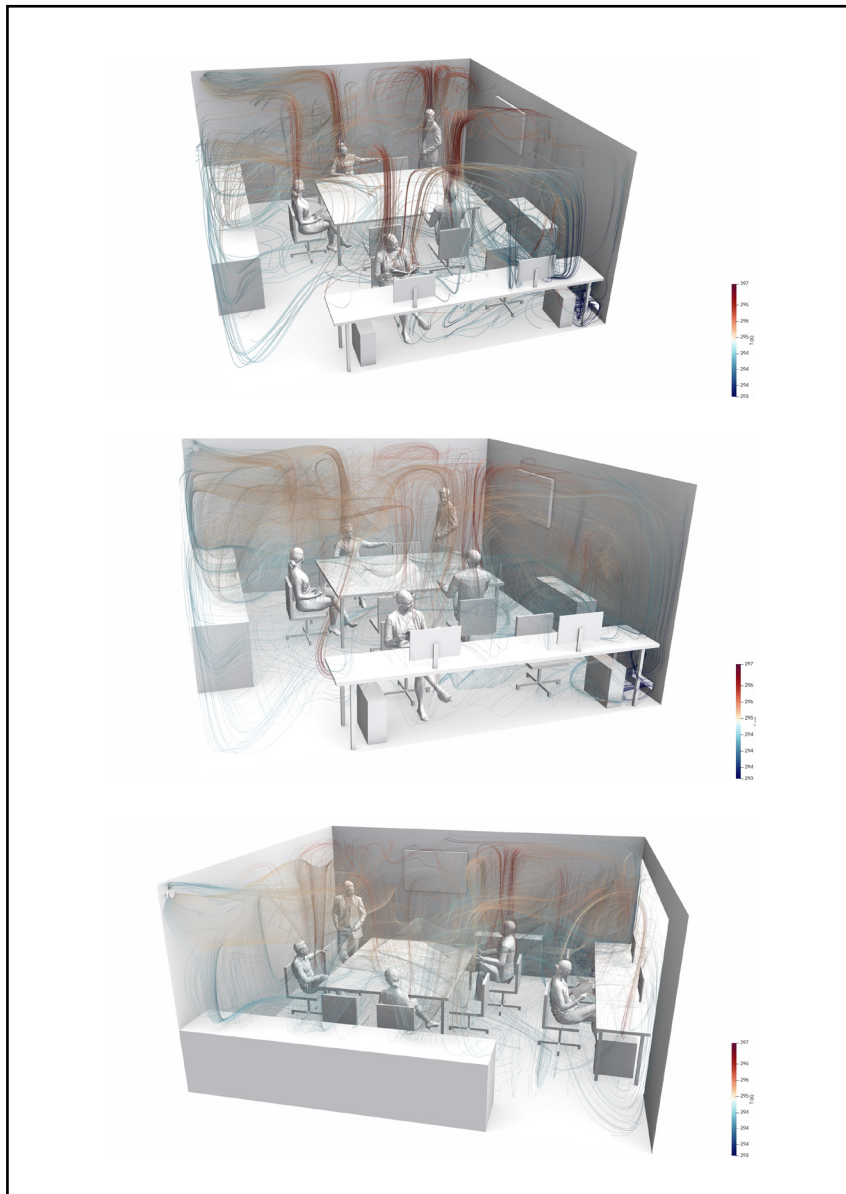
Yes, actually, Haseeb Ahmed called this specific test scenario, with the object to be tested, a tabletop vintage fan, specially sourced for this occasion, an inversion test. It is Ahmed's work and our collaboration that introduced me to the "Wind Tunnel World" to begin with. It seems important to recall here



The collaborative table top by Anja Isabel Schneider and Haseeb Ahmed. Because of the pandemic, this digital drawing was produced remotely by the art historian and artist as a substitute for the actual table top at Rib in Rotterdam. The sentence in German says "In the tunnel we encounter the unconscious." It is taken from dream interpretation.

the function of wind tunnels as they use their powerful fans to test objects, whether they'd be life size or models of objects in smaller scale. And in contrast to how these objects would move or be used outside of this setting, they are held stationary in the wind tunnel test. Perhaps the best way to describe this is to directly quote a statement Ahmed made: "The scale models of objects that

would normally move through the air are held stationary while air is blown past them at the velocity at which they would normally travel. I find this inversion of space and time very seductive. Space is eliminated and time becomes arbitrary." In our test scenario at Rib, the vintage fan was unplugged and thus initially static. The wind generated by the wind tunnel moved (sucked) air around the



Fluid Dynamic Simulation of air flow in an office space with workers, Alessandro Gambale and BuildWind with Haseeb Ahmed for *Pneuma Inside and Out*, 2020.

unplugged vintage fan, the very same model that Sekula purchased for *The Dockers' Museum* (2010–2013), part of M HKA's collection. As its blades were being turned by the wind tunnel's powerful fan, the relation of the vintage fan was inverted. Its moving was bound up in the conditions of the wind tunnel—in a kind of "performance of the fan."

**Among other things, Sekula's work seems to be about the emergence of the otherwise hidden evident, that is, the labour and economic mechanisms as acting infrastructures for human life. Do you see a similar concern in Ahmed's visualization of the otherwise invisible, i.e., the wind? To which extent can Ahmed's conception of the wind as an agent be related to the**

#### hidden acting mechanisms Sekula focused on?

Taking the "forgotten space" of the sea as subject matter for his work, Sekula developed his study into maritime economies from the late eighties onwards, chronicling the effects of global capitalism on specific workplaces, ecosystems and people, as part of his itinerant research process. He called into question the conditions of social life, all the while comprehending the solidarity that it calls forth. Sekula's interest in art's relationship to the political in a globalized world manifested itself in his work that was as much artistic activism as it was a form of pedagogical practice. Indeed, I see a similar concern in Haseeb Ahmed's visualization of revealing or exposing the otherwise invisible. The question of labor is equally present in one of his recent projects in which he employs "air as a medium to read the conditions of labor." In *Pneuma In and Out* (2020), Ahmed seeks to render visible both the otherwise invisible air and labor conditions at stake in work environments, such as in an office space. And looking at wind ontologically, as a cosmological force, both Sekula's and Ahmed's work address a reading of natural phenomena in conjunction to socio-political events.

**Lastly, following Benjamin's concept of "Schwelle" you interpreted the program *Taming the Horror Vacui* at Rib as an "intensification, a zone of experimental becoming, like a word that opens to other meanings beside itself, an open-ended zone of activation and insertion." Do you see Sekula's work operating in similar fashion and if so, would you consider it a model that other artists have used?**

How I understand *Taming the Horror Vacui* at large in relation to Benjamin's concept of "Schwelle"—in the intertwining of exterior and interior, of topographies and temporalities—is quite specific. I am not sure whether I can speak of a model here that other artists have used. Certainly, Sekula's work has been influential to artists and scholars alike and continues to be. With regard to Ahmed's program at Rib, it is conceived as a long-term project that is built cumulatively. It is research-based and process-oriented. It is built on dialogue. It engages with the local context in response to the current moment. I do think that both Sekula and Ahmed (and this is of course true for other artists, too) share these aspects in their approach.



## AN INTRODUCTION TO ALLAN SEKULA AND ROTTERDAM

Art critic and curator Frits Gierstberg comments on a few key themes from Allan Sekula through the artist's engagement with Rotterdam and its politics.

Most likely, it was Rotterdam's Perspektief Center for Photography that invited Allan Sekula in 1987 to Rotterdam for the first time. It meant the beginning of a long relationship between the Dutch city and the photographer, critic, theorist and filmmaker from Los Angeles. In that exhibition, Sekula showed a part of *Geography Lessons: Canadian Notes* in the framework of an exhibition that reflected on new developments in documentary photography, *Foto(Con)Text*.

In *Perspektief* magazine in 1986, the artist, curator and poet Michael Gibbs had already written about Sekula's groundbreaking collection of essays titled *Photography Against the Grain* (1984), thereby introducing his work to a Dutch audience. Sekula was an artist and writer who played a major role in the ongoing discussions about 'the documentary and its discontents', a topic that dominated the program at Perspektief at the time. He was one of the major theorists and voices in the debate.

The Perspektief's exhibition *Critical Realism* (1988) presented the work of artists that responded critically to social issues such as AIDS, the power of the media and the changes caused by the transition from a modernist to a postmodernist reality. In this context, Sekula showed what would become the very first part of *Fish Story*. In the catalogue, he presented an image-text work in which he referred to his own youth and the experience of growing up in a port city. At one point in his critical lamentation on the disappearance of the traditional port and the visible, audible and olfactory movement of goods, he wrote: "The old harbor front, its links to a common culture shattered by unemployment, is now reclaimed for a bourgeois reverie on the mercantile past."

Although Sekula wrote this phrase in Los Angeles, he described exactly what he saw happening in Rotterdam too. By the end of the 1980s, a small part of port activities was still visible and tangible on the Wilheminaapier and Katendrecht, and Sekula was very much interested



Allan Sekula, *Man salvaging bricks from a demolished waterfront warehouse. Rijnhaven. Rotterdam, the Netherlands. September 1992* (detail), from chapter 2, *Fish Story* (1989–95). Courtesy Allan Sekula Studio.

in how the shipping of goods and the first phases of urban (re)development happened together in time and space.

Sekula's main project on global economy and the maritime space, *Fish Story*, had its international premiere in 1996 in Witte de With, center for contemporary art (recently renamed Kunstinstituut Melly). Out of the

ninety-six photographs in the book *Fish Story*, ten were shot in Rotterdam during at least four visits, in August and December 1990, September 1992 and November 1993. The port of Rotterdam interested him not only because of its size, but also because it is a transit port, where the newest technologies for fast loading and unloading of ships were put into practice (often at the cost



Allan Sekula, *Ship of Fools*, as presented in *The Voyage, or Three Years at Sea, Part IV*, installation view (detail), Charles H. Scott Gallery, Vancouver, 2012. Collection M HKA / Collection Flemish Community. (C) Photo: Scott Massey. Courtesy M HKA and Allan Sekula Studio.

projects from the period between 1972 and 1996, from *Untitled Slide Sequence* (1972) till *Dismal Science* (1989-1992). For the occasion, Sekula added a new work called *Dead Letter Office* (1996-1997).

For the 2000 Foto Biënnale Rotterdam, Sekula produced a site specific work on the construction fence for the new extension of Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen. On this wooden fence, he created a repetitive image-text piece that consisted of three photographs on offset posters and a typewritten letter to Microsoft owner Bill Gates, commenting on his recent acquisition of a Winslow Homer painting called *Lost on the Grand Banks* (1885), depicting two fishermen in a rowing boat lost at sea. In an ironic way, Sekula questions Gates' motives for paying 30 billion US\$ for a painted scene of people in despair by making the comparison with surfing on the Web and getting lost on the Internet. In one of the photographs we see Sekula swimming in the sea, right in front of Bill Gates' villa on the Californian coast. The risks that are inherent in both economic investment and seafaring, were again a theme in his documentary film *The Lottery of the Sea* (2006).

Allan Sekula would return to Rotterdam several times to work with filmmaker Noël Burch on a second extensive filmic essay called *The Forgotten Space*. The second Maasvlakte and the Betuwe Train Line that starts there to connect the port with the German hinterland were substantial topics. It had its Rotterdam premiere in 2010 in LantarenVenster with both authors present.

Frits Gierstberg

of jobs). Full automation of container shipping happened early in Rotterdam. Sekula considered this development a part of the globalizing economy and the movement of goods, labour and capital over the planet. It was the strong and historical interconnection between the global economy and the maritime space that he made visible and discussed in his work. For him, this maritime space

was 'the forgotten space', as it remained mostly invisible in art, economic theory, literature, politics and photography.

Less than a year later, Sekula's major retrospective exhibition organized by the University Galleries, Illinois State University, was hosted by the Nederlands Foto Instituut in the Witte de Withstraat. It contained eight different



## ELECTIVE AFFINITIES

*One night, I woke up in a room in which a cage with a bird sleeping in it had been placed. A magnificent error caused me to see an egg in the cage, instead of the vanished bird. I then grasped a new and astonishing poetic secret, for the shock which I experienced had been provoked precisely by the affinity of two objects—the cage and the egg—to each other, whereas previously this shock had been caused by my bringing together two objects that were unrelated.*

This quotation is from a 1938 conference by René Magritte entitled *La Ligne de vie* in the Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp, in which he explains his thoughts for the first time to the public. He is referring to the painting *Les affinités électives* (1933), which shows an egg inside a cage. He continues by stating that in the following years, this revelation prompted him to search for an "answer" to every given object. The resulting painting would be the "solution" of the "problem" he thus created.

If the solution of the cage is the egg, the solution for wind could be a windmill or a ventilator. There's something silly about this simile. It doesn't make sense, as for the wind is no object and could only be made visible by lines suggesting movement. Wind is sensual rather than visual. In that sense a fart would be a much better solution.

Throughout the books of sixteenth century medic and writer Rabelais, the fart appears mostly as a festive aspect of humanitarian society, social, bodily and founding. In March 1983, *Libération* magazine urged the French Minister for Women's Rights to place Rabelais' *Pantagruel* on its index for public incitement to sexist hatred. The ASKB (General Secretariat for Catholic Libraries) in Antwerp banned both *Gargantua* and *Pantagruel* in 1938. I couldn't find the official argument. The most offensive fart nowadays might be *Pantagruel*'s earth trembling wind with which "he begot above three and fifty thousand little men, ill-favoured dwarfs, and with one silent fart that he made as many little women [...], he called them pigmies." *The Times They Are a-Changin'*.

In 1869 for example, in Maldoror's song of praise to the ocean, the farts are gone. We're left with a furious wind that tore the sails to shred and the beauty of the coincidental encounter of a sewing-machine and an umbrella on a dissection table. The good laugh goes hand in hand with a worship for algorithmic waves that generate randomness and destruction, throwing the world out of balance. The divine sea



Inversion test: the blades of a vintage fan are turned by the wind generated by the wind tunnel at Rib, as homage to Allan Sekula's use of wind as animator. This test was made as a collaboration between Anja Isabel Schneider and Haseeb Ahmed for *Taming the Horror Vacui* program. Photography: Maziar Afrassiabi.

monsters that arose at the end of the nineteenth century today go by names as Royal Dutch Shell, Exxon Mobil, BP, etc.

I woke up this morning in a room with Sandro Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus* on the wall. A magnificent error caused me to see Allan Sekula whistling the song of cynics, instead of Zephyr the

wind god blowing Venus towards the shore.

Lotte Beckwé



Allan Sekula, *The Dockers' Museum*, installation view (detail), Lumiar Cité, Lisbon, 2013. (C) Photo: DMF Fotografia, Lisbon. Collection M HKA / Collection Flemish Community. Courtesy M HKA and Allan Sekula Studio. The fan is used to diffuse the smell of dry codfish into the air. As suggested by Anja Isabel Schneider in her lecture, the shape of the fish resembles the seminal painting by Paul Klee *Angelus Novus*, which was interpreted by Walter Benjamin as a metaphor of destructive progress.

There's this super cool nature reserve behind the Wielewaal, it's more of a weird dike with houses on it here and there. Anyway, it looked really cool, I was taking a long walk over there, which I do more often now since there isn't much else to do, and I was walking with a friend and we were wondering how life here would be. You imagine living here would be sort of pure. The houses are nice, there is green and so the air must be good too, no? I mean, you're totally not envious, the green just makes you wonder! And then you realise the big harbor is on the other side, so could it really be that healthy living here? That's the question. It looks like it's all good and dandy, but that illusion is kind of ruined when you remember it shares the same air with every place around it. Now I can't help but wonder about how polluted the air is in the whole of Rotterdam, and even further out than the city. And so you zoom out even further and further.

This story is told by Marloes, inhabitant of Charlois, Rotterdam. Edited and transcribed by Jakob van Klinken.

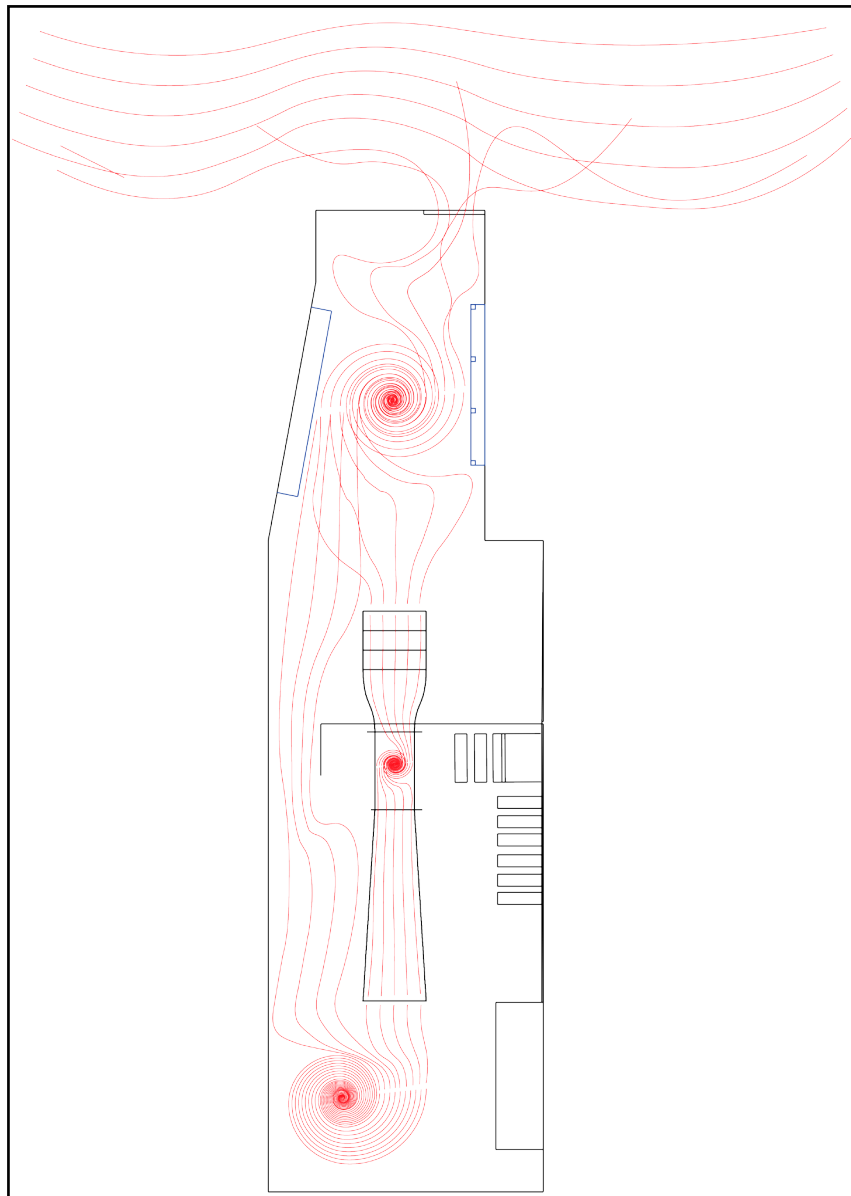
**This wind tale from Charlois is a snapshot of life in a harbor city. The pollutants carried by the wind described by Marloes are narratives of port technology across the city, clashing with the narratives of the good life (idyllic new neighbors) sold to citizens. It stinks.**



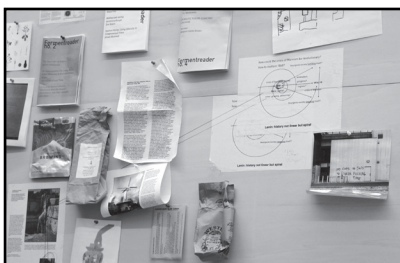
The Library of the Winds...  
...gathers all source material related to the movement of air and the particulates and particular narratives that it carries. The collection is organized on the billboard to reflect upon the collection.

The Wind Tunnel...  
... focuses the air from the atmosphere, filtered through the city of Rotterdam, the library of the winds, and into its test section. Here aspects of the atmosphere are reproduced as a model to be observed.

The Walls of Rib...  
... contain the air that has moved from the city, through the library of winds, and into the wind tunnel and out. It feeds this air back into the library of the wind to sustain the cycle against entropy.



Haseeb Ahmed's map of *Taming the Horror Vacui (Rib)*, with his annotations. December 2020. Similar to the inversion from the test carried out in the wind tunnel in collaboration with Anja Isabel Schneider, the entire exhibition space becomes the container of a circular movement of air.



Details of the current state of the installation *Taming the Horror Vacui* at Rib by Haseeb Ahmed. (Left: growing research board. Right: growing library of the wind).

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*Taming the Horror Vacui*

*Publication issue #5: Liminal Experience*

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