

# HASEEB AHMED RUACH NOT RAUCH

HARLAN LEVEY PROJECTS - APRIL 24 - JUNE 1, 2019



Haseeb Ahmed's transdisciplinary practice exists as clusters of experimental research, tangling us in science and myth. While drawing upon the hard sciences, the approach is not a 'scientific' one; that is, privileging the scientific method. Ahmed's use of contemporary technology and science emerge as a critique from within – directed at a society that imagines these fields to be their means of salvation – in the absence of emancipatory political narratives. Yet, Ahmed neither calls for a messiah nor is he nostalgic for mythic thought. The artist is an omnivore. Propelled by a sense of ambivalence, he pushes data-by-accumulation to excess.

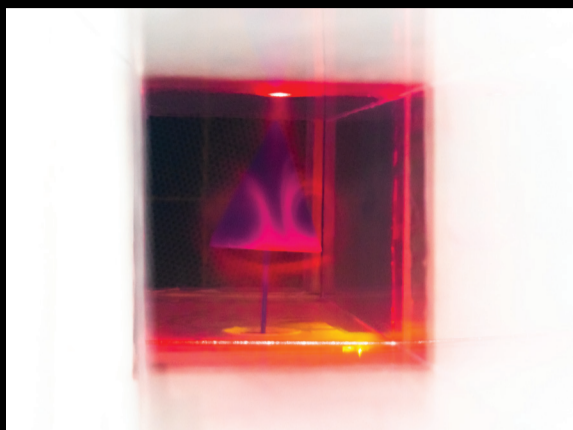
In "The Meeting of Myth and Science," anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss notes that, similar to mythology, science is the quest for "the invariant," meaning those aspects of our world and phenomenological experience that remain constant. This is sought to "find order in apparent disorder." Yet while mythology used narrative to organize the universe, it only gave the illusion of total understanding; science, on the other hand, has demonstrated it can order nature. The schism between scientific and mythical thinking dates back to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when scientists sought to show their field was the hidden key to intellectual progress and discovery, a means of capturing and subjugating the world. Science's mastery of, and divorce from nature (God-given, as it was commonly believed at the time) was necessary and successful at the advent of modernity, to give space for freedom of thought beyond ecclesiastic texts. Yet in today's citation-driven, evidence-based world, that call to think freely appears banal including degree of universality it has achieved. The scientific method builds theories from small proofs, operating on the probability of repetition and habitual knowledge. Yet science uses "a very limited amount of our mental power," in Lévi-Strauss's view, sealing itself off from the plasticity of human understanding and absurd variability of human cultures. In another decade, Thomas Kuhn wrote in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, that paradigm shifts are needed to correct scientific thinking's blind spots. When anomalies and errors outnumber the evidence, new configurations of thought are needed to embrace the unknown.

How might we outrun our current thinking? Ruach not Rauch – a space that unravels codes, exhausts the formal language of science and technology – reminds us that our freedom of thought remains at stake. Existing as an epilogue to ten years of Ahmed's research, the exhibition offers a series of cosmological rabbit holes to fall through, with propositions only leading to more questions. Akin to chaos, the pause before the creation of the Universe, Ruach not Rauch exists in a threshold structure, like a wind tunnel or tower of silence. It lives between hypotheses and conclusions, prior to our over-considered, industrially produced world. It is a disorienting place, confusing opposite and adjacent concepts. The title, a mix of Hebrew ('ruach,' i.e. the breath of God that created the World) and German ('rauch,' i.e. smoke arising from destruction) evokes the study of fluids a recurring element in Ahmed's exploration.

At the very core of Ruach not Rauch is the vulture, both a sign of death and a species rumored to have the capacity for immaculate conception.

## Research Redux

Ruach not Rauch restages elements of Ahmed's past research, and sees materials from an earlier phase of accumulation nest inside new work. This stacking strategy is indexical and appropriative of the contexts within which his research is presented, challenging the assumed neutrality of spaces such as the laboratory, gallery, and museum context. This interrogation of neutrality extends to the disciplines of history and scientific methodology. Materials recycled in Ruach not Rauch stem from experiments such as the *Wind Egg*, *A is for Albatross*, *A Tower of the Wind and Vulture* and the *Vortex-Faced Being* which inhabits it, and the *Wind Egg Scroll and Friezes*.



## An Exploded View

The wind constantly touches our surroundings, pervading our streets and weathering the buildings of our cities. It flows through and supports all living things; yet maintains power to destroy that which it permeates. Across many cultures, the wind is associated with creation. In the first verses of Genesis, a void of dark waters was said to precede the world we now know, but the breath of God, known as Ruach in ancient Hebrew, initiated the Universe. Ruach not Rauch presents as a small, controlled explosion of content about the wind, enacted both in the architecture of a sacred, myth-bearing space, and through the ornamentation of industrially produced construction materials such as steel, fiberglass, aluminum, and EPS foam. We find ourselves in an interstice between conception and death.

The Wind Egg, a five-year project preceding this exhibition, sought to test an ancient cross-cultural myth of the wind's fertility using modern wind tunnel technology. The notion of a 'wind egg,' that is, an egg fertilized by Immaculate Conception, has its roots in 3,000 years of Arabic, Chinese, Egyptian, and Greek. Through the background literature, Ahmed discovered that wind eggs were most commonly known across cultures to be female animals that only reproduced with the wind, the most prominent of which was the vulture. Moving from antiquity to astrobiology, the Wind Egg proposes, what if animals and people could be fertilized by the wind, just as plants are? Could humans reproduce with the wind and without men? From this, a sequence of logical questions followed: Is the wind male? Does the wind have a face? Can the wind communicate with us? A team convened at the von Karman Institute in Brussels, Belgium, to conduct multi-staged experiment. The facilities included a vulture aviary, an aero-acoustic wing egg insemination wind tunnel, a wind egg incubation wind tunnel, and a wind personification laboratory. Experiments were conducted with Sparta, a female White-backed African Vulture. The project grew into a trilogy offering the possibility to register how the conditions of the von Karman Institute (VKI), an aerodynamics facility on the outskirts of Brussels; Harlan Levey Projects, a commercial gallery; and MHKA Antwerp, a museum setting, might produce variable content as the research developed.



## Wind Tunnel Tower of Silence

Here, Ahmed brings together the wind tunnel, and the tower of silence. Ahmed creates the wind tunnel as a site of incubation for the near future in our industrially produced reality. Whereas, a tower of silence is a funerary structure dating to the 9th century C.E. made to preserve the purity of the sacred elements of fire and earth from tainted human flesh.

At the back center of the gallery, we see a floor piece with a whirling pool of water, evoking the primordial void from Genesis. This whirlpool is situated in the drainage pit of the tower of silence which surrounds it. A channel from each rectangular emplacements for bodies leads to this drain. The first of the three rows from center is for children, followed by another for women, and finally men. Using 3D modeling software and 3D

printers, Ahmed reconstructed Mumbai's Parsi Tower of Silence or Dakhma from colonial era drawings. This was facilitated by the dominance of Cartesian geometry in both the drawings and the software/printers created 200 years later. The tower is also cast of pigmented polymer containing aluminum. Hovering just above the black whirlpool is a faceted red ball. Its shape is that of helium ignition in its first milliseconds. The contributing scientist, Dr. Frouzakis Christos Emmanouil, could not analyze the data to derive its topology using algorithms available to him in the study of combustion and instead turned to molecular biology. Algorithms used to predict cell division in embryos were able to give form to the first instances of an explosion. Ahmed further processed this information to be able to materialize it in a resin print.

The same Cartesian operation is used to split a cylinder into four and spread them equidistant apart. The fiberglass walls that enclose the space originate from the Wind Egg Incubation Wind Tunnel, previously appearing in *The Wind Egg* exhibition at MHKA in late 2018, and based off of the wind egg incubation chamber at VKI, used in 2016. The mantra-like, meditative reverberation of RUACH NOT RAUCH is inscribed along the edges of the fiberglass walls, ushering a sense that world-creation has been paused, in-process.



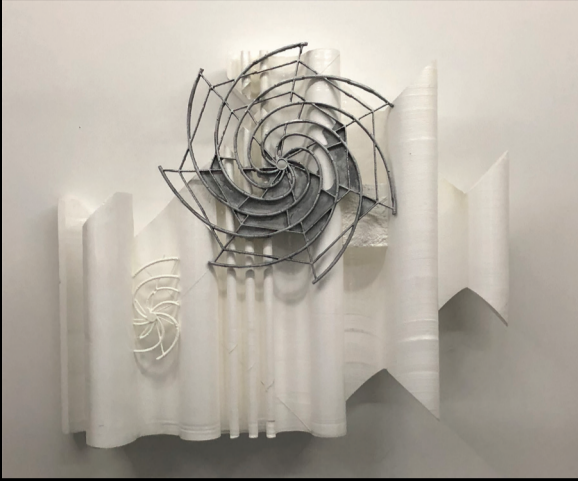
## Holographic Sparta

The steel ring that once bound the fiberglass wind tunnel together is now elevated above it. Its closed circle recalls the wind tunnels former shape. It has a new purpose: to suspend light. A hologram of the vulture, Sparta, revolves as if weightless. At times her body is multiplied and the birds confer with one another around the face of the wind. Sparta's appearance is a recurrence of *Wird*, Ahmed's last solo exhibition at Harlan Levey Projects, where the vulture appeared in the flesh, though concealed from direct view and viewable only through a mirror on the ceiling located where the hologram now resides.

The animal so closely associated with death now appears ghost-like and semi-transparent. Ahmed captured Sparta in a 3D scan at the facilities of Inzert Graphics in the village of Hulshout. Imagining the LED lights of the camera array to be the sun, she spread her wings to bask.

Composed of light the Sparta's form emerges as the result of the human eye's persistence of vision. Just like her companion, the *Vortex-Faced Being*, Sparta's semblance is created by the spinning blades of a fan. On the opposite quadrant of the circle, a specially designed LED lamp by artist Adrien Lucca illuminates the embryonic explosion at the center of the tower of silence. The steel ring hosts more lights around its perimeter to illuminate the reliefs surrounding it.





### Wind Egg Friezes I, II, and III

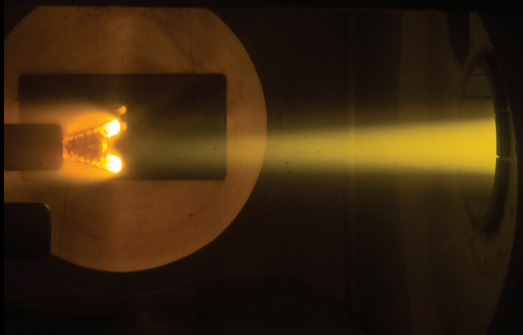
Intervening in the gaps of this spliced wind tunnel are three Wind Egg Friezes – a series of works centered on the wind. The friezes are made from EPS foam, typically found inside of the walls for insulation. The foam in this case was made from remains recovered from the construction of the Tower of the Winds and Vulture at MHKA, a replica of the ancient Greek Tower of the Winds, thought to be among the world's first weather stations. As a "grammar of ornaments," the friezes can be understood through the association of their individual components and as a collection of shapes and objects.

Some of the ornaments are taken from molds made directly on site while others are aggregates of reverse engineered elements composed by Ahmed. Each frieze depicts the iconography of the wind and Wind Egg in various 'faces of the wind,' found throughout Brussels and elsewhere, models of wind tunnels, and instances of the wind's erosion of man-made architecture. The ornamentation evokes religious architecture, such as the honeycomb vaulting of a mosque's mihrab. The undulating curves of the foam evoke ripples in sand in the shallows of a beach or curtains at rest after a gust of wind. The casts are embedded within these folds as if accumulated in the movement of this flow.

They also resemble the polyphonic pipe organs found in Christian churches. Sound is often associated with the wind in iconography, especially to herald a great change. The spiral in line with the central axis of the gallery is a reverse engineered

microphone array, a kind of camera for sound retrieved from the von Karman Institute. The aluminum polymer cast is common in the aeronautics industry.

"The face of the wind appears on facades like evil eye or talisman; to prevent it from harming you, you have to acknowledge its existence," says Ahmed. During the Wind Egg, Ahmed initiated a Wind Personification experiment, to interact with the wind itself as the other agent of conception (an extended description is found on The Face of the Wind poster in the gallery interior), and was able to render the face of the wind itself. This Vortex-Faced Being can be seen in a small wind tunnel to the left of the gallery entrance. Its "facial expression" is replicated in the Wind Egg Friezes, and incidentally, are likely to be seen again on the facades of buildings upon leaving the gallery.

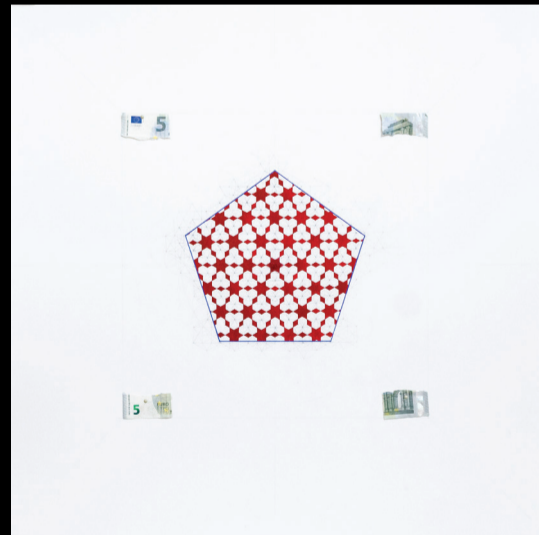


### A is for Albatross

According to Islamic, Jewish, Christian, and certain polytheistic religions, language descended from the heavens to the Earth by God's will, allowing for a direct connection to a literally and metaphorically higher reality. Can language descend from the heavens to Earth and connect the two? This photograph and burned "A" are artifacts of a test conducted in the VKI's Plasmatron, one of two existing in the world.

The Plasmatron is a specialized wind tunnel made to reproduce the conditions of reentry into the atmosphere of Earth or another planet. A piece of synthetic cork, the same material used in the hulls of space shuttles, carved into the letter "A" was placed in the Plasmatron's test section. No device yet exists to measure the heat generated in this transit, but it is considered roughly equivalent to Sun's surface. The letter "A" survived the test positively evidencing the possibility for language to descend from the heavens to the Earth.

In Ahmed's perspective, the developing international law and policy applied to space travel and territories are derivative of existent international treaties. This allows for historical colonization to be reenacted in space. This test can be considered to serve as a preliminary study for future forms of colonization and other missionary work beyond the Earth.



### 4, 5, 5, 6

Playing on sacred geometry, an architectural plan, and an altarpiece, Ahmed's drawing is a form of counting and

Playing on sacred geometry, an architectural plan, and an altarpiece, Ahmed's drawing is a form of counting and contradiction in form: four torn pieces of a five Euro bill t, surround a five-sided pentagon and this pentagon contains a six-fold pattern. Thus we arrive at a form of clouting 4, 5, 5, 6.

This counting is full of discrepancies and contradictions: something that is valued at five is also four, while a pentagon cannot fit a six-fold pattern. At the center is a resin print of the "Vortex-Faced Being," seen to make a facial expression, however it is this passage from the rational to the irrational that allows one to perceive a face of the wind in a mere turbulence pattern.

### Bio

Haseeb Ahmed (b. 1985, US) is a research-based artist living and working in Brussels. His work is often collaborative and draws on tools and techniques from the hard sciences to produce artworks. Ahmed has received his PhD in the Arts from The University of Antwerp in conjunction with Sint Lucas Antwerp School of Art and Design, the von Karman Institute for Fluid Dynamics, and the Zurich University of the Arts. He holds a Masters in Visual Studies at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), and a Bachelor of Fine Arts at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in sculpture and architecture. As a researcher at the Jan van Eyck Academy in Maastricht, the Netherlands (2011-2012), Ahmed won the "Designers and Artists 4 Genomics Award" with his work « The Fishbone Chapel » and initiated the project "Has the World Already Been Made?", which has been exhibited internationally and featured in the GIBCA (Goteborg International Biennial for Contemporary Art) in 2017. The trilogy of exhibitions surrounding his work « The Wind Egg » concluded with a solo exhibition at The Museum of Contemporary Art (M HKA), Antwerp curated by Nav Haq. Ruach not Rauch, the artist's second solo exhibition at Harlan Levey Projects in 2019, is an epilogue to this trilogy. His work is to be included in the Werkklitz Festival 2019 (Dessau, DE) to honor the 100th anniversary of Bauhaus. Ahmed is a 2019 Fellow at the Basis voor Actuele Kunst (Utrecht, NL).

Contributions from:

Adrien Lucca, artist; Roalt Zuidervaart, fabricator; Pieter Heremans, hacker; Wing Lam Kwok, Harlan Levey Projects team; Dr. Staf Van Tendeloo, director of EMAT Center at University of Antwerp; Dr. Frouzakis Christos Emmanouil, Institute for Energy Technology, ETH; Sander Diels, founder of Inzert Graphics; Dr. Beatrice de Gelder, Brain and Emotion Laboratory at the University of Maastricht (NL), Ertan Ümit and Prof. Olivier Chazot, engineers of the von Karman Institute for Fluid Dynamics (BE); Piero Bisello, philosopher and programmer; and Rasso Hilber and Clara Herrman of Academie Schloss Solitude Schloss (DE)