

A Burning Desire to Remember Finding new relationships to the Vietnamese ancestor altar

Project Description

This project explores Vietnamese ancestor worship practices in a Western context, seeking innovative ways to preserve this tradition while adapting it to a globalized and digital world.

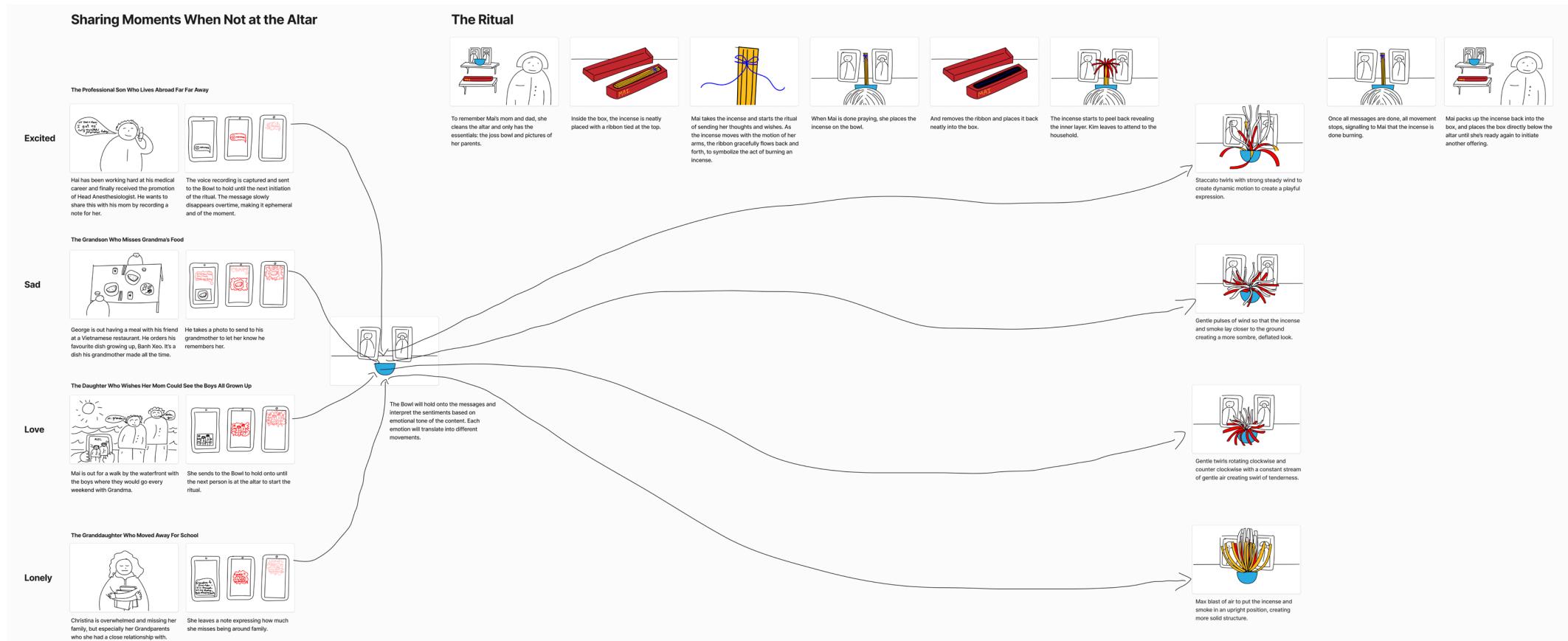
The redesigned altar is intended for individuals looking to connect with their Vietnamese heritage and honor their deceased family members. It addresses the challenge of family members living in different locations. Even when separated by vast distances, families can remain connected to the altar through their devices, enabling them to share everyday moments or special events via voice calls, text messages, or images.

When a family member begins the ritual at home, the altar interprets the sentiment of their messages and generates a series of symbolic «smoke signals.» Functionally, this modern «smoke» protects walls and ceilings, while spiritually, it continues the tradition of sending messages to the spirits.

Though reimagining a ritual is no small task, the goal of this object is to spark a dialogue about ancestor worship and its place in the future of spiritual and cultural practices.



User Journey



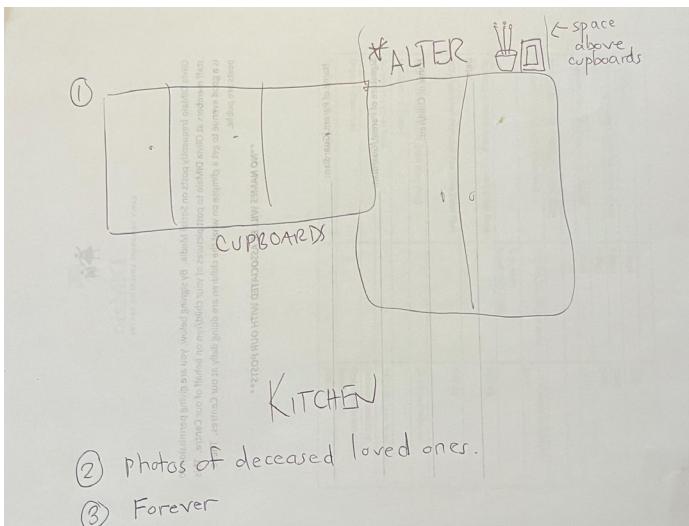
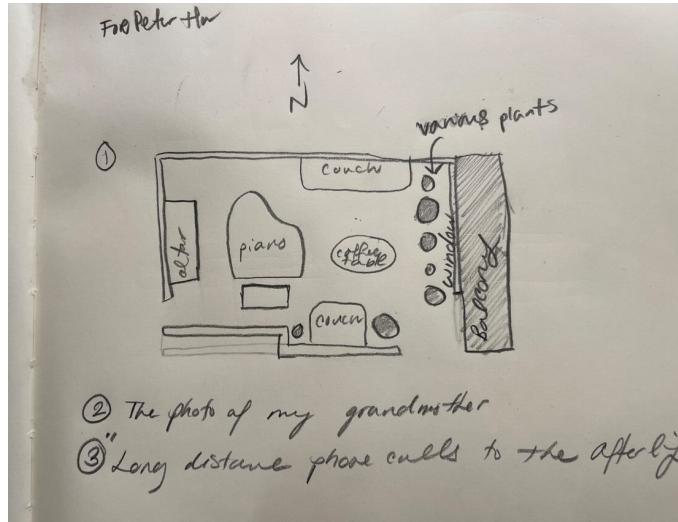
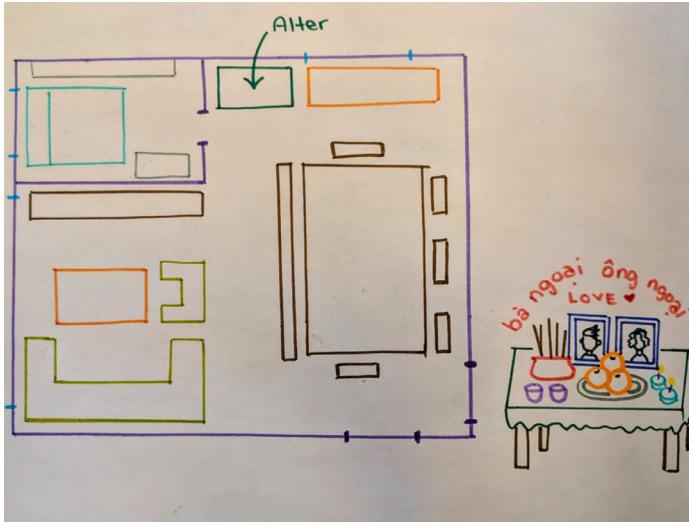
Field Observations

Taking a look at Vietnamese altars in a western context. Often times there's foil placed on ceilings to protect from smoke damage.



Field Observations

Asked research participants to draw where the altar is in their home or where they would place one if they didn't have one. Also asked them to list the most important object and to give a name to the altar.



Interview Quotes

«Unnecessary electrical items should not be on or around the altar.»

- Be, Cousin, Vietnam

«Don't have an altar at home because it's a flat and we don't want to burn incense in there.»

- Andy, Friend, Switzerland

«Brought photos of our grandparents to our wedding.»

- Phuong, Friend, Canada

«Only one main altar to avoid confusion with the spirits.»

- Thoa, Sister-in-Law, Canada

«We had a small altar on a shelf in the corner.»

- Hanh, Friend, Canada

Academic Papers

To supplement my field observations, took a look at what academic papers have explore around this topic. Main insights that influenced my project is the commercialization of the afterlife, the concept of tradition and the fading practice in a Western context.

Interview Quotes

Hüwelmeier, Gertrud. "Cell Phones for the Spirits: Ancestor Worship and Ritual Economies in Vietnam and Its Diasporas." *Material Religion* 12, no. 3 (July 27, 2016): 294–321. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17432200.2016.1192149>.

Szymanska-Matusiewicz, Grazyna. "Is Ancestor Worship a Vietnamese Tradition?" *Asian Anthropology* 12, no. 2 (December 2013): 156–71. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1683478X.2013.833041>.

Tran, Giang Thi Thanh. "Sharing Cultural Values across Generations in Vietnamese Australian Families," n.d.

FIG 5
Cell phone and credit card made from paper. Hanoi 2013. Photograph: Hüwelmeier.



New media technologies

The producers of paper votive offerings keep up with the times and provide paper versions of luxury goods, such as photo cameras, radios, TVs and tape recorders, as well as of more recent devices, including computers, iPads, and cell phones (Figure 5).

Scholarly work on trance mediumship and new media has illustrated that Korean shamans, for example, represent themselves via photography, video and DVD, and in cyberspace on shamans' own home pages (Kendall 2015, 131). Similarly in the Vietnamese context, cult members were recording parts of performances of spirit mediums on smartphones and sending the clips to group members who had not been able to participate. Mrs. Thu, a spirit medium who is not part of the cult group mentioned above, told me she paid a camera crew to produce a DVD of her *lên đồng* performance in a temple outside of Hanoi. She uses this DVD to distribute to her friends and for advertising purposes. When she shares the DVD with other mediums, she discusses various questions with them, such as what she can improve during future performances. Several times, she emphasized in our conversations, she became possessed by spirits while watching the DVD at home, which points to the fact that a possession ritual can maintain power even when mediated via a screen. The use of video cameras and film cameras in various religious settings, such as in trance rituals (Zillinger 2015) and in Pentecostal gatherings (De Witte 2010; Hüwelmeier 2015a; Meyer 2015), is of increasing importance in popular religious practices such as in soul-calling rituals in present-day Vietnam. Recording technology is also common among Hanoians who employ the services of fortune tellers. When I took part in such sessions, clients were explicitly encouraged by the fortune teller to record her sayings and advice. Clients wanted to be able to listen to the messages again at home and to share their visit with family members and friends. The use of digital technol-

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FIG 6
New media technologies. Hanoi 2013. Photograph: Hüwelmeier.



Cell Phones for the Spirits: Ancestor Worship and Ritual Economies in Vietnam and Its Diasporas
Gertrud Hüwelmeier

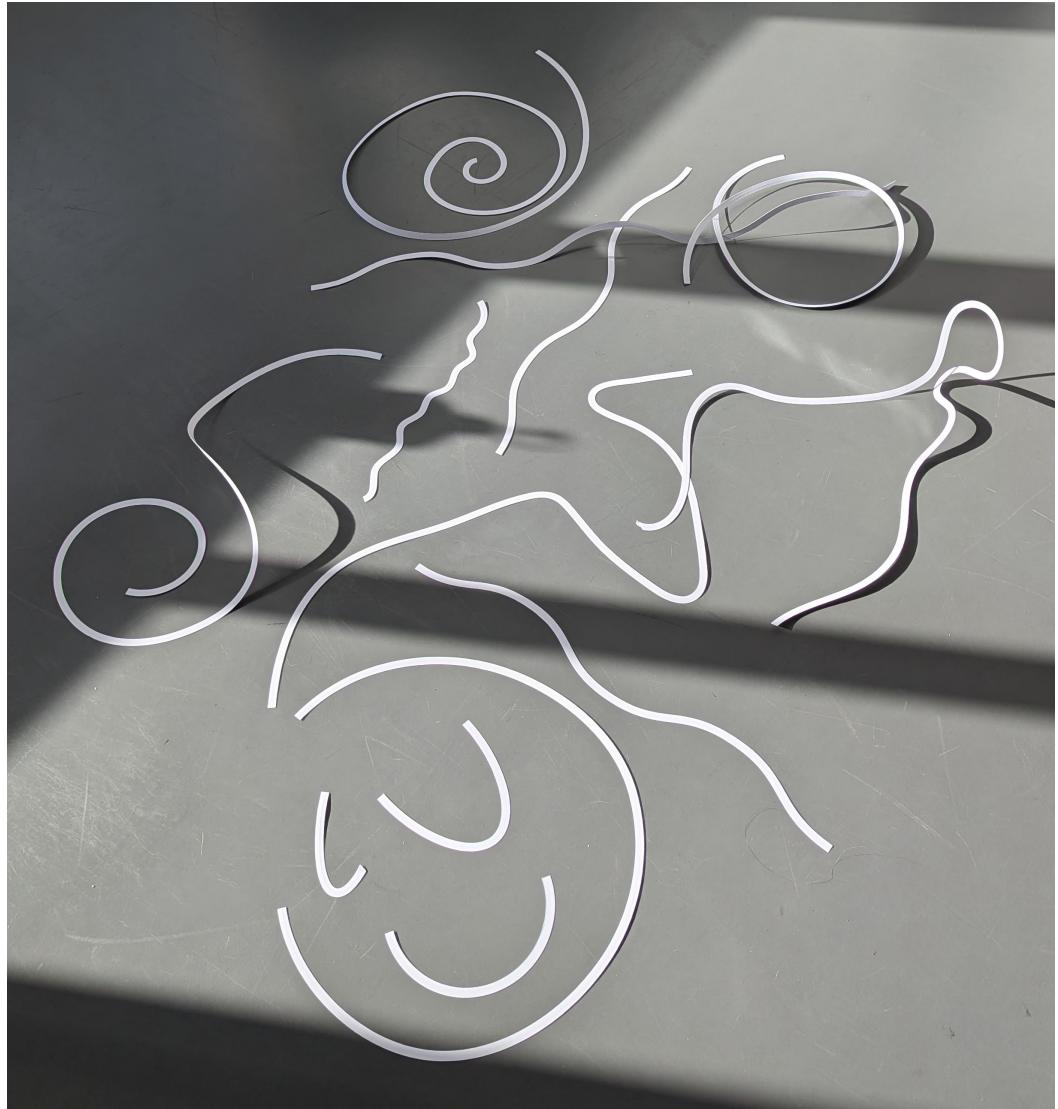
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ogy (Figure 6) in the world of the living enables the communication of data by electronic means, usually over some distance. Transmitting or receiving information electronically in a digital form is part of the everyday lives of the majority of Vietnamese today and therefore considered to be a prestige good for the deceased.

New technologies, and cell phones in particular, are required to organize business in the afterlife, "just as we as traders use one or two mobile phones in our daily activities," a retailer explained to me. As many petty traders cannot afford a computer or an iPad or find it not convenient due to their constant movement throughout the city, the cell phone is the most important object for the maintenance of family ties as well as for creating and maintaining business connections. Indeed, cell phones with brand names such as Nokia or Samsung, along with Apple iPads and smartphones, are recent additions to the inventory of the shops trading in votive paper offerings (Figure 7), which came up in the past decade. As

Visual and Material Moodboard



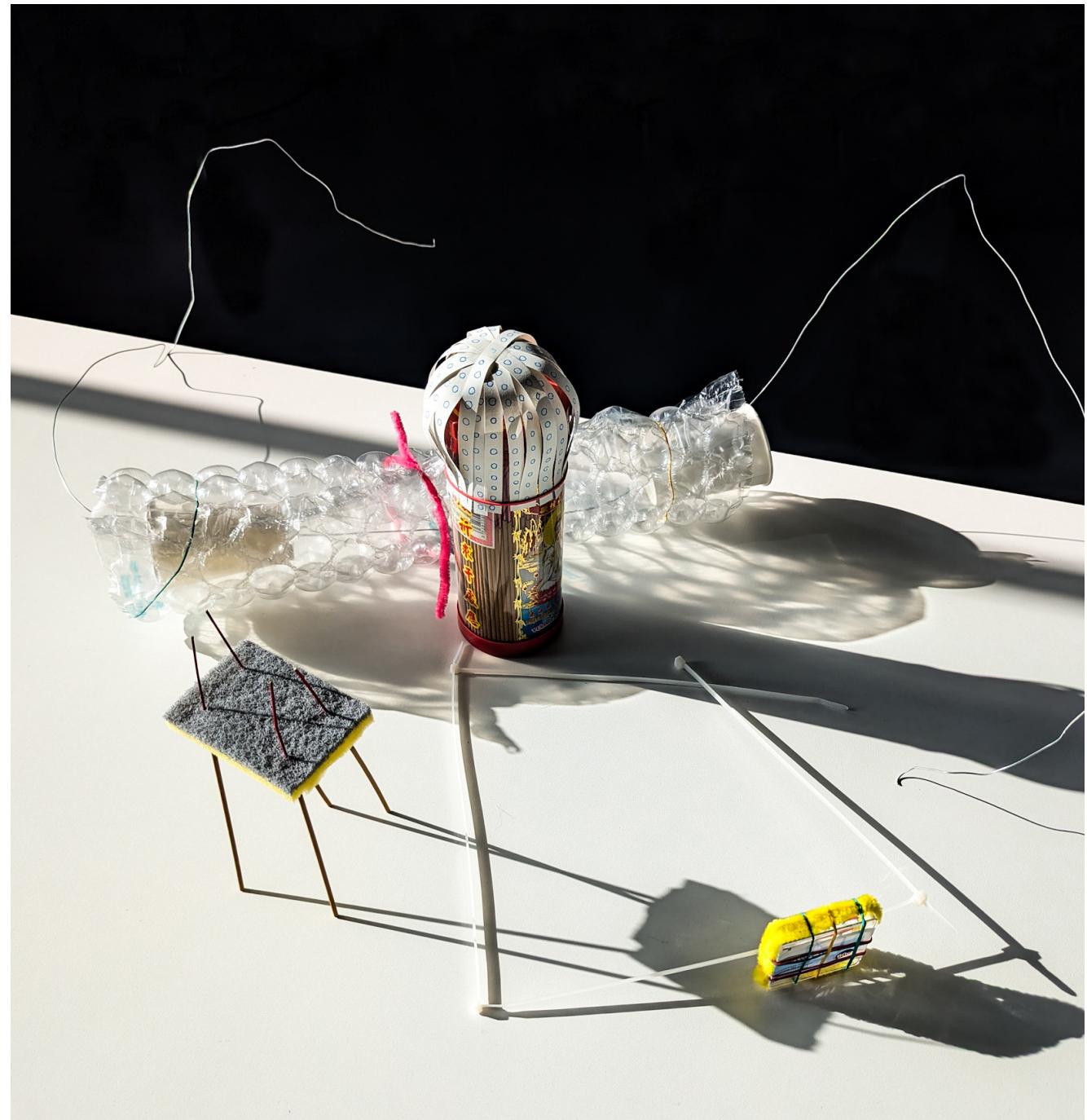
Shape Research



Paper Prototypes

First series of prototypes focused on generating ideas around capturing smoke and bringing the altar on the go. This would later influence the final outcome.

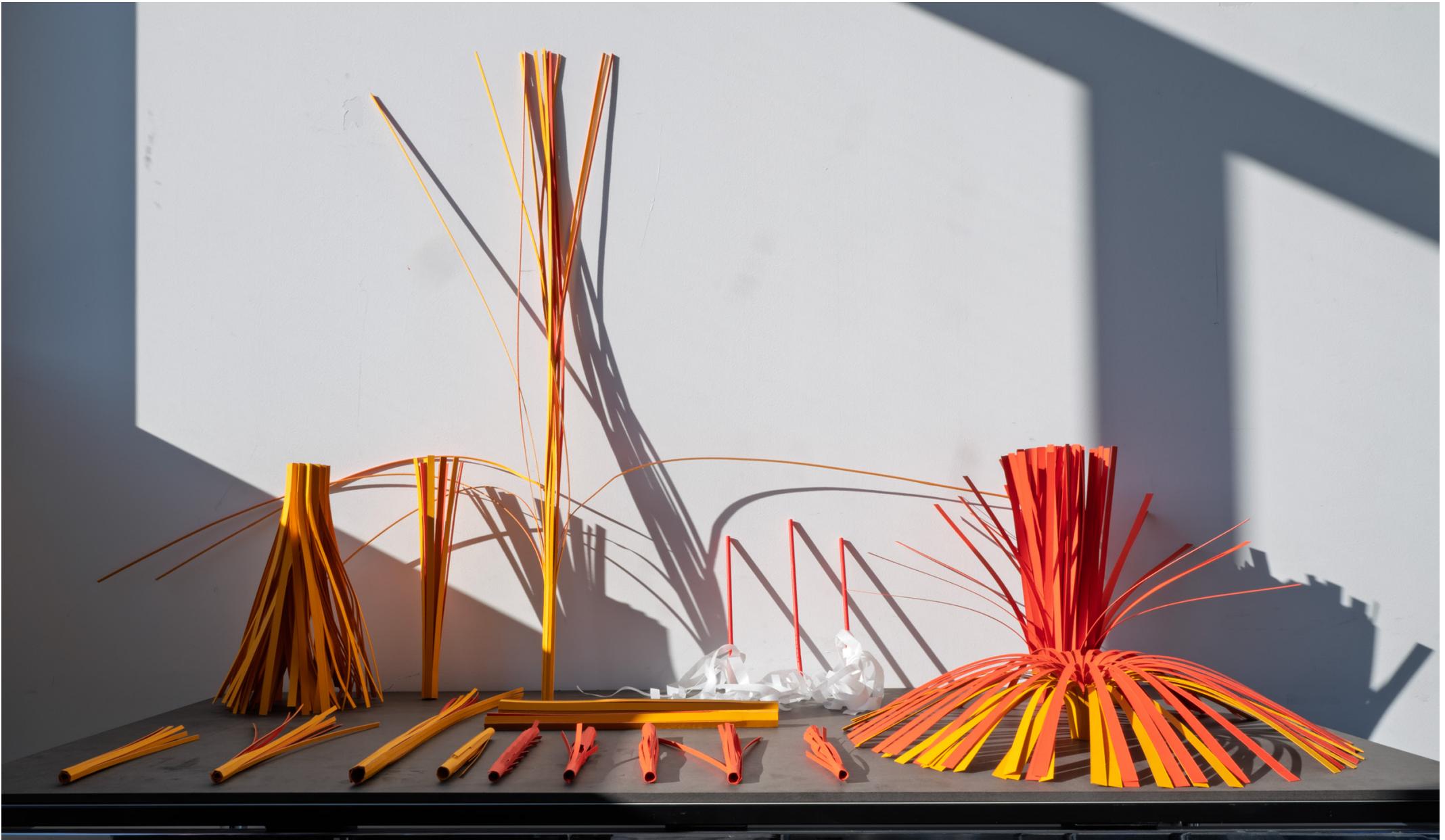
After finalizing the concept to replace any aspect of burning in the ancestor worship practice, the bulk of prototypes moved into how to represent incense including the smoke in paper form.



Paper Prototypes



Paper Prototypes

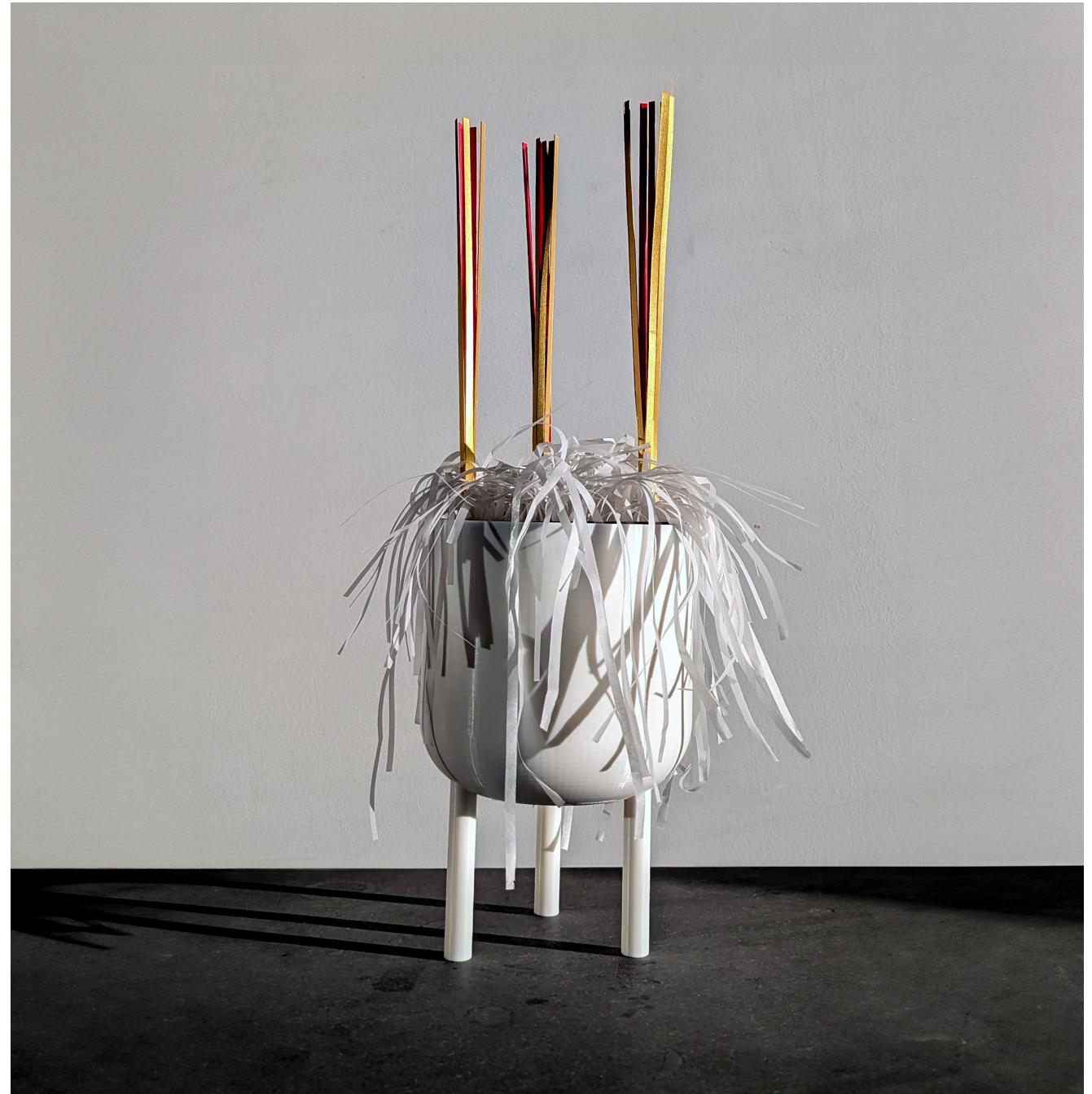


Paper Prototypes



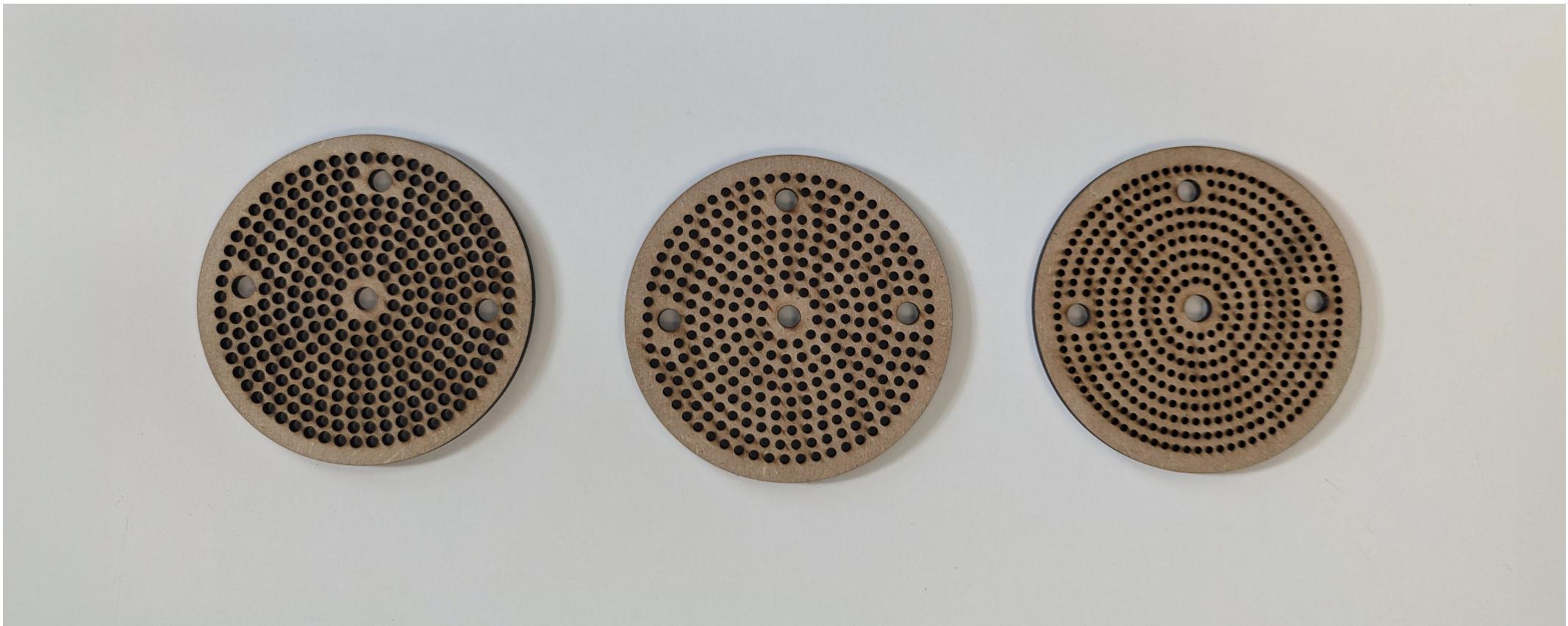
Paper Prototypes

Moving away from paper and working with plastic to create a secure vessel to create a better seal for the internal fan.



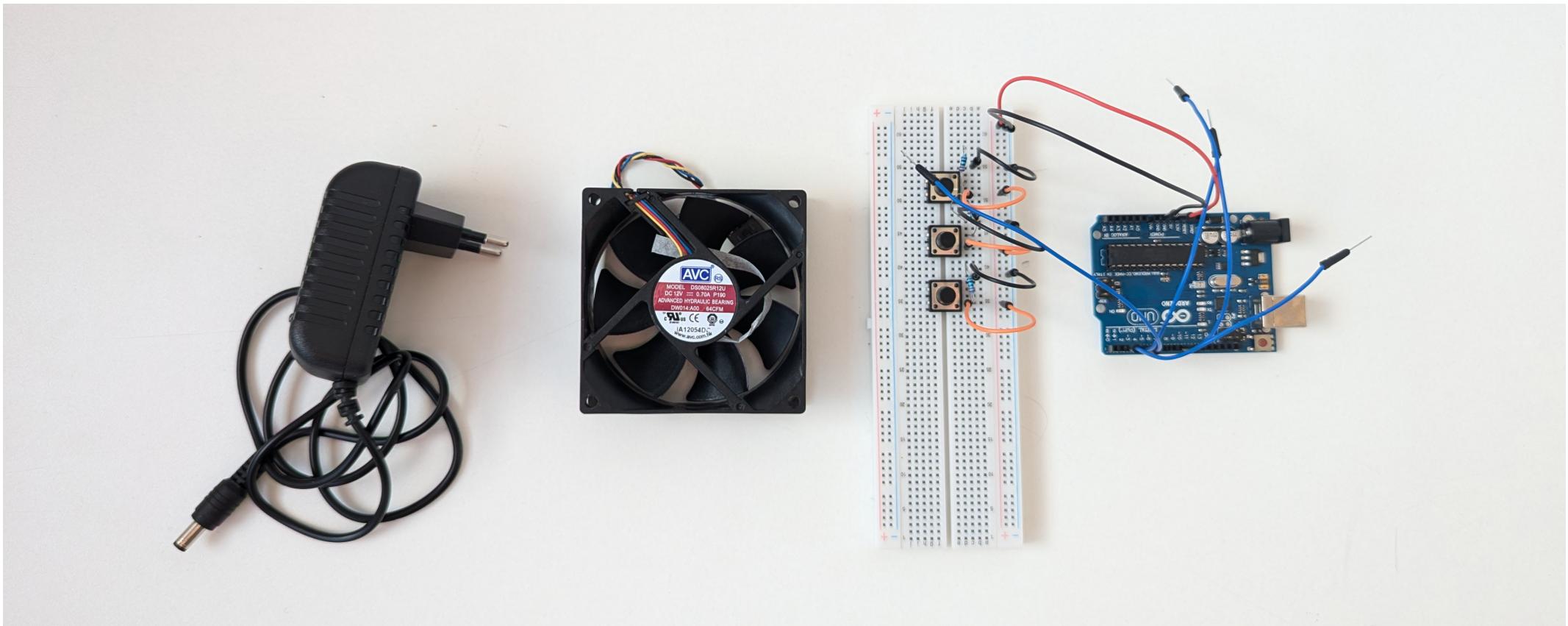
User Tests

Going into user tests, I knew I would need to explain the project and how it works since rituals have to be learned, especially when there are specific steps. The most useful feedback was the placement of the holes for the incense. I originally did not have them equidistant because I wanted to frame the «smoke». Users noted that with equidistant the «smoke» will still be framed and add better stability for the legs.



Electronics

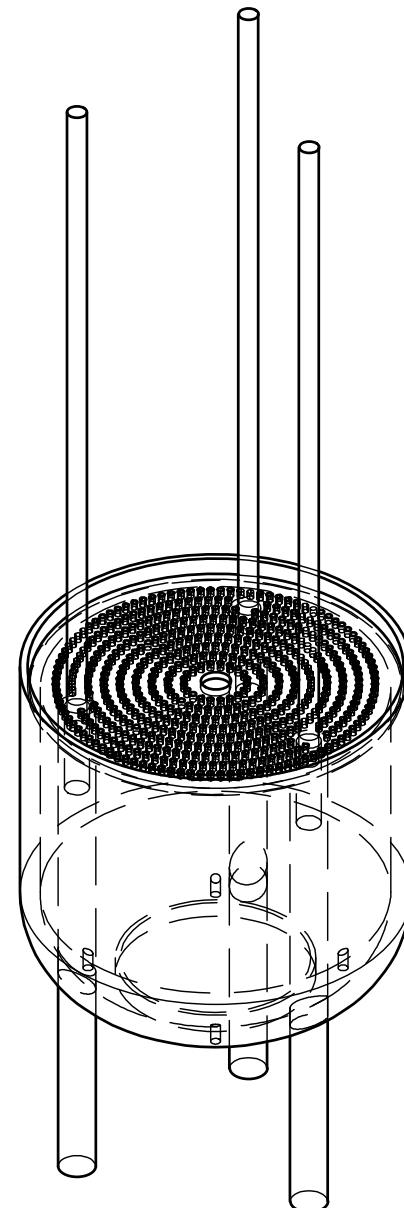
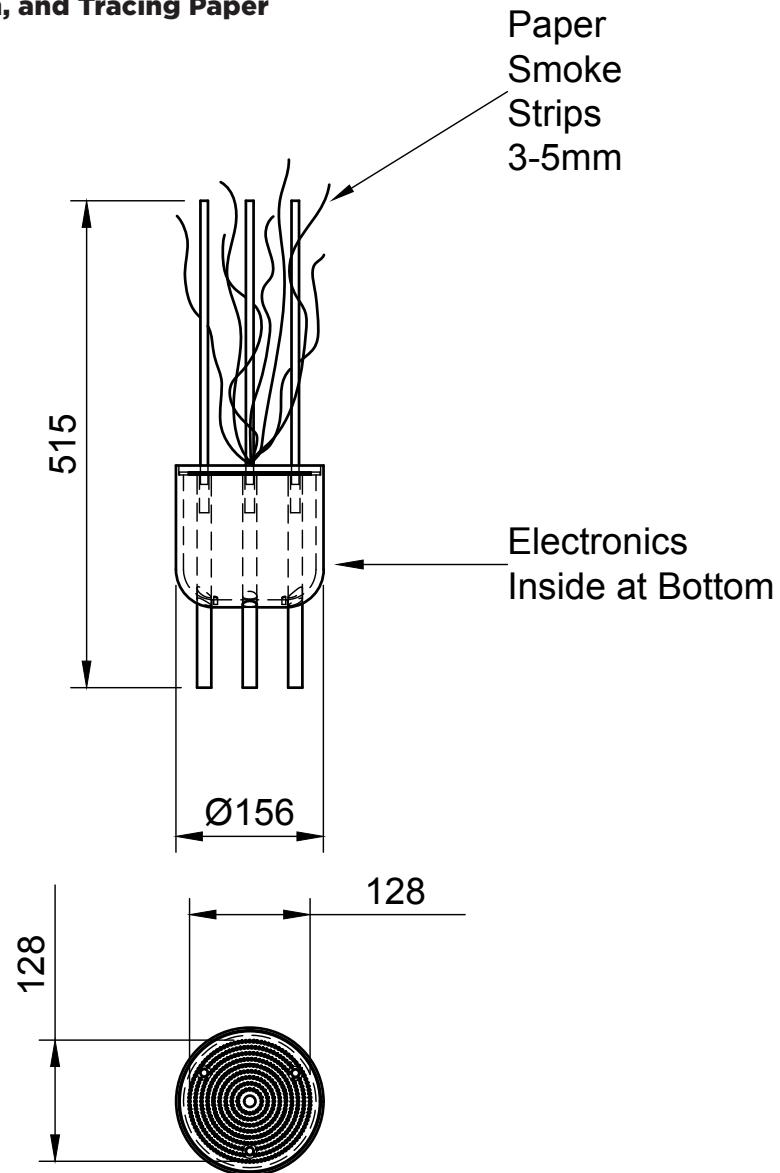
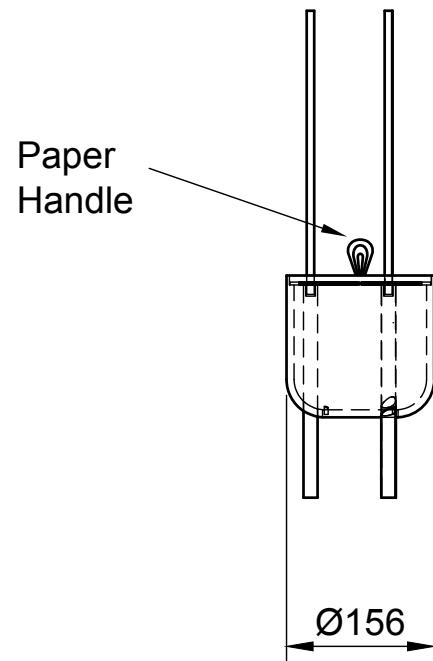
The main electrical component is a 12V fan. To prototype I used three push buttons to signal when to start the fan. What's missing is connection to a network component for the vessel to receive the messages from a device.



Plan Drawings

Materials: Pear Wood, MDF, Duotone Paper 150 gsm, and Tracing Paper

Scale: 1:05 in mm



Summary

The final prototype is constructed out of wood and MDF coupled with paper for the more organic and fluid parts of this object. There is still much work to be done such as integrating the electronics and refining how the fan operates inside the vessel.



Summary

