

Experimental Humanities: A Collaborative Manifesto

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“For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives”

— W.H. Auden

“It is self-evident that nothing concerning art is self-evident anymore, not its inner life, not its relation to the world, not even its right to exist”, so declared one of the last doyens of philosophical modernism, Theodor Adorno, over fifty years ago. Yet, while the academic appreciation of art since then has seemingly been beset by an anxiety disorder – be it prognosticating about its status after Auschwitz, uncovering its culpability in various forms of oppression, or reflecting on the ongoing “crisis” in the humanities – compelling new forms of art have, in fact, flourished over the last five decades, with many of contemporary culture’s most prominent figures hailing from marginalised communities and/or the Global South. Simultaneously, along with inculcating new forms of expression, digital media have enabled hitherto unprecedented access to high and low culture alike.

In short, we find ourselves at a crossroads. On the one hand, we are confronted with the necessity of working through what Terry Eagleton has called the “vivid guilt” of Western culture’s past. On the other, in both academic study and activism, harnessing art’s emancipatory potential is of crucial importance. Not least by problematising antiquated, essentialising notions of racial, sexual and gender identity, it is perhaps primarily through literature, music, art and theatre that we speak back to power by affirming the beauty, fragility and singularity of human experience in an increasingly inhumane, technocratic society. Ultimately, experimental humanities seeks to develop incisive inductive methodologies that ensure the development of truly critical perspectives, while fostering radical critical activism that deploy art’s liberatory potential to their full advantage.

Workshop 1

In the first of our three workshops, we will focus on art’s “inner life”, “relation to the world”, and “right to exist”. Additional questions that may be considered include:

1. To what extent can sexual practises, such as S&M, also be considered aesthetic ones?
2. How can we develop a nuanced, critical account of practices like tattooing, which have generally been outside of academic discussion?
3. Do decolonised curricula throw the baby out with the bathwater?
4. Was Dostoyevsky’s Prince Myshkin correct to assert that “beauty will save the world”?
5. What is the role of the humanities in the Anthropocene?

Workshop 2

On the basis of these initial discussions (and some notable manifestos from the past), in the second workshop, we will produce a collaborative manifesto for Experimental Humanities. This will be used as a vision statement for the CEU's participation in the Experimental Humanities Collaborative Network (EHCN), and shape the courses and events developed under its aegis.

Workshop 3

The final workshop will be concerned with more practical issues, including:

1. What opportunities for artistic practice and/or the study of the humanities can be enabled at CEU?
2. How can we ensure that courses/practices are sufficiently inclusive and academically rigorous?
3. What opportunities are there for engaging in Vienna's cultural life?
4. What space/support is there for student-led projects/productions?

Prior Reading

While no reading is necessary for these workshops, it is advisable to come to the first one prepared to discuss your favourite artworks. For the second, examples of manifestos will be uploaded beforehand, but you have no obligation to read them in advance. For the final session, you need only come armed with ideas, hopes and demands.

Dates and Times

May 8 1330-1510 (A420)

May 15 1330-1510 (A211)

May 24 1330-1510 (A211)

For those joining us online, here is the Zoom link:

<https://ceu-edu.zoom.us/j/3339270353?pwd=alBJalQvSEdrNzlhYW5nbjY5YjJhQT09>

Meeting ID: 333 927 0353

Passcode: 704893

Please see the event on the CEU website here <https://events.ceu.edu/2023-05-08/workshop-series-collaborative-manifesto-experimental-humanities-ceu>