the non-standard

a weekly paper for experimentation in the materialisms of the present

September 28, 2025 · Vol. 1, No. 8

LAB RATS

by ***Penelope Papailias***
and
George Mantzios

Πείρα[γ]μα (peira[g]ma): non translatable greek wordplay that combines the words teasing and experiment. From **Weathering Together Workshop**: **A Site-Responsive Ecodramaturgy**, part of P(elion) S(ummer)L(ab) 6: **Anthropo-scenes: Restaging Climate Dramas for Environmental Justice (2025).** Photo Credit: Penny Paspali

a 10-point Primer for Experimental Humanities Laboratories

**1 **

The lab *is not* a 'field school' for extracting academic ore;

We hole up to provincialize Europe, center minor histories, & embrace multilingual surfeit.

**2 **

Our cosmopolitics is site-responsive rather than site-specific:

Local in allegiance, *worldly in resonance*.

**3 **

We arrive as guests, so we begin by listening:

To the *polyphony* of the *mountain's sounds* and *people's stories*.

The *rhythm of our approach*: *pause*, not recess; *encounter*, not retreat.

**4 **

We operate as a para-site—next to, with, occasionally against official institutions and traditional pedagogies:

a fleeting encampment *stealing time* for thinking in common.

**5 **

The lab is a refuge where study happens without permission or surveillance;

a safe space to *repair relations* and *minister to bodies* depleted by The Rat Race.

**6 **

The cohort prototypes situations, models parameters of assembly, invites strangers to play, perform, relate.

**7 **

New roles emerge:

***anthropologist as curator*,**
***performer*,**
***producer*;**
***artist as theorist*;**
***theorist as stagehand*.**

**8 **

The experiment is *not a project*; *nor is it an argument*,

but *it is an urgent prompt for collective improvisation*, *situated documentation*, *impromptu exhibition*.

**9 **

Our experiments convene publics.

The risk of failure is inherent and thrilling, another form of opening.

**10 **

***Democracy & Dissent*; *Liminal Lives & Para-Sites*; *Data & Power*; *After/Lives*; *Ec/o/ontologies*; *Anthropo-scenes*—**

these are the ratlines of our continued study, repair, and *return*.

Penelope Papailias is Associate Professor of Social Anthropology at the University of Thessaly, where she is Director of the Master's Program in Mobility Studies and the Pelion Summer Lab for Cultural Theory and Experimental Humanities. She is author of Genres of Recollection: Archival Poetics and Modern Greece *(Palgrave, 2005), coauthor of Digital Ethnography (Kallipos, 2015) and coeditor of* Greek Colonialities *(Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung, 2023,). Her publications have appeared in* Public Anthropologist, American Anthropologist, Memory Studies *and* Media, Culture & Society. *She is a founding member of the initiative* dëcolonιze hellάş *and was on the steering committee of the Experimental Humanities Collaborative Network ,2020-2024.*

George Mantzios is Assistant Professor of Sociocultural Anthropology at Mount Royal University, Associate Director of the Pelion Summer Lab for Cultural Theory and Experimental Humanities, and was formerly Mary Seeger O'Boyle Postdoctoral Research Fellow at Princeton University's Seeger Center for Hellenic Studies. His publications have appeared in Anthropology Quarterly, Focaal, *the Journal of Global and Historical Anthropology, and the* International Journal of Cultural Studies.

EXPERIMENTAL, *NOT 'PUBLIC,'* HUMANITIES

by ***Jacob Henry Leveton***

Universities are shuttering Humanities programs.

They do so in the name of "solvency" and "professional outcomes"—betting on "Science," dismissing the Arts as "a poor return on investment."[1]

It's precisely this predicament that calls for the Experimental Humanities.

A practice of risk, relation, and experiment, where collective thought is governed neither by austerity nor metrics, but by co-creation and the testing of futures in common.

An Experimental Humanities turn is demanded—and it must break with the "Public Humanities," that tendentious Faustian bargain forged by the austerity academy, a late-capitalist formation readymade for our late-fascist present. A dark double of Duchamp's *Fountain*.

Scarcity as spectacle; a charnel house of cuts as "outreach;" metrics-driven "best practices;" "civics" education on the cheap.

Public Humanities are an Ideological State Apparatus.[2]

If the Public Humanities are Academe's pernicious compromise—shifted investment, packaged analytics, staged civics—the Experimental Humanities are their refusal.

Like the sciences, they test hypotheses; like social movements, they turn speculation into praxis. They revise together, measure impact by shifts in cultural ground, and keep failure as possibility alive.

1. Public, Palatable, Fascist

By contrast, today's "Public Humanities" inherit fascist staging and liberal consensus.

The Public Humanities are not new.

Their genealogy runs through the twentieth century's darkest chapters.

Under Hitler, the humanities were not silenced. They were staged.

Joseph Goebbels, failed novelist turned Minister of Propaganda, didn't fear the humanities.

He understood their power when he summed up the Nazi "National Press Law" under the auspices that:

"It is the absolute right of the State to supervise the formation of public opinion."[3]

Under fascism's state of exception, humanities—art history, folklore, philosophy, and philology, especially—fold into state spectacle, (re)produce imagined community, and press consensus.

The Public Humanities propagate this logic like Hemlock.

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1 See Todd Wolfson and Mia McIver, "Organizing for a Just and Democratic Academic Future," *Academe: The Quarterly Magazine of the American Association of University Professors*, Spring 2025, https://www.aaup.org/academe/issues/spring-2025/organizing-just-and-democratic-future

2 See Louis Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, trans. G.M. Goshgarian (Verso, 2014).

3 "Foreign News: Consecrated Press," *TIME*, October 13, 1933, https://time.com/archive/6751737/foreign-news-consecrated-press/

They promise access while setting the terms for what a polite public and controlled discourse is.

They vitiate critique in favor of deliverables.

2. Overhead Humanities

Within the contemporary research university, the apparatus is subtler but the trace is unmistakable. "Impact" and "best practice" replace analysis; budgets dictate form.

Humanities centers now function to capture overhead—the indirect costs skimmed from grants—diverting funds upward into the general budget as tuition declines.[4] These funds rarely support the project itself. Instead, they underwrite the expansion of research administration salaries, justified under headings like "staff support" and "utilities." What goes unspoken is that this maneuver shores up the university's finances in the face of declining enrollments.

The effect is recursive: inquiry bends toward the kinds of grants most likely to sustain the cycle; overhead feeds the apparatus that demands still more.

The sciences have long been structured this way, but the humanities have not been immune.

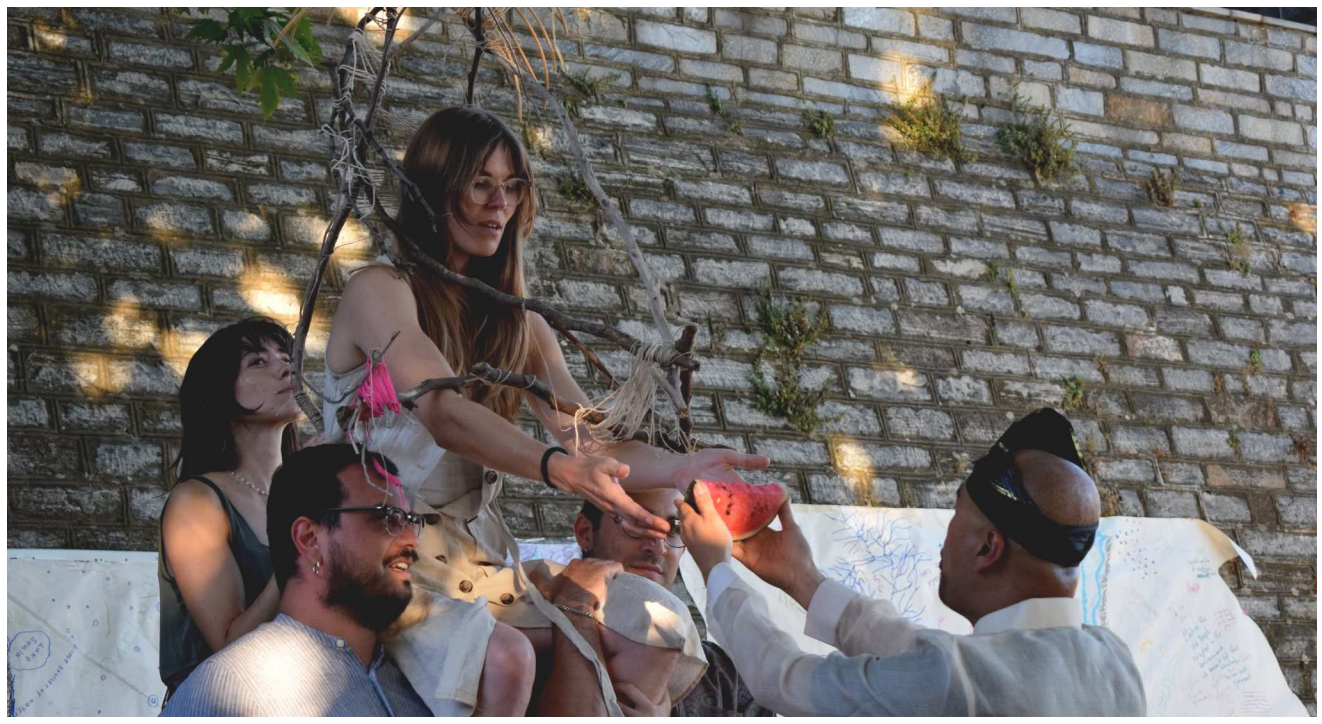
Faculty sometimes adopt the language of administration with the "Public Humanities" to stay in step with "leadership," securing resources in an era of scarcity—even when the fit is uneasy, and the ethics suspect.

If fascism staged culture outright, late liberalism buries it in budgets. The "Public Humanities" now emerge in this administered space: austerity translated into spectacle, "outreach" in place of inquiry, metrics in place of critique.[5]

Left unchecked, the situation under late fascism will hasten a university *Gleichschaltung*—the "bringing into alignment" of institutions first named in Nazi Germany. Then, culture and education were made to sing in unison with power. *Gleichschaltung* names not only a past danger but a present trajectory—threatening to make the university an instrument of governance rather than a site of critique.[5]

In the US, the drift is already visible as austerity and authoritarian reflex hollow out the academy. In the UK, a Reform government would tighten the screws; in France, National Rally would do the same.

It is into this trajectory that the "Public Humanities" fold themselves, mistaking accommodation for access, compromise for critique. This is why they are beyond being salvaged.



From **Weathering Together Workshop**: **A Site-Responsive Ecodramaturgy**, part of **P**(elion)**S**(ummer)**L**(ab) for Cultural Theory and Experimental Humanities **6**: **Anthropo-scenes: Restaging Climate Dramas for Environmental Justice (2025).** Photo Credit: Penny Paspali

Born of austerity, sustained by overhead, hopelessly complicit with power, they are not a bridge to any "public" anxious to be pandered to, ambiguously named and loosely tethered to the humanities—

The Public Humanities, as an enterprise—and it is inescapably that—are an apparatus of capture.

3. Experimental Humanities Against Capture

What begins in refusal must move toward invention.

Not the polishing of compromise, nor the rebranding of capture, but the opening of method.

Experimental Humanities emerge where inquiry is made in common—where risk is shared, relation is cultivated, and prototypes of thought are tested as futures in the making.

They stand alongside the sciences, extending STEM into STE(A)M—not as a convenient "value add," but as an insistence that the arts have always carried experimental weight.

As late as the eighteenth century, the sciences were indissociable from poetics: Joseph Wright's *Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump* (1768)—and Valentine Green's mezzotint engraving after it—were media experiments that circulated not only as art but as instruments of inquiry.

Valentine Green, after Joseph Wright, *A Philosopher Shewing an Experiment on the Air Pump*, 1769. Mezzotint with traces of engraving in black on ivory wove laid paper, Department of Prints and Drawings, Art Institute of Chicago

Indeed ***αἴσθησις*** made pneumatic chemistry

▲

aesthetically-perceptible.[6]

Wright translated science into image, staging its drama for the eye. Joseph Priestley, working with the same air pump in the experiments that led to his discovery of oxygen, drew the lesson more starkly:

> "And the English hierarchy (if there by anything unsound in its constitution) has equal reason to tremble even at an air pump."[7]

What the air pump dramatized for Priestley—and what Wright and Green amplified—was not material discovery but speculative possibility.

There was no bird, only the lungs glass simulating its absence. The air pump was already a prototype situation: a mediating device that spoke out, tested limits, improvised futures.

Such experiments did not end in the eighteenth century. They continue wherever publics are constituted through speculative means, provisional devices, and shared risk.

Building a Sound and Video Installation for PSL 3, Makrinítsa, Greece, August 2019. This work held space for members of the Syrian diaspora to experiment by layering storytelling into sound and image, turning a brick archway of the St. Nikolas Orthodox Church into memory's resonant threshold.

In 2019, at the Pelion Summer Lab, I helped build a sound-and-video installation in Makrinítsa with members of the Syrian diaspora.

Stories were recorded and remixed into layered sonic compositions, projected into a brick archway of the St. Nikolas Orthodox Church.

The arch became a resonant threshold, memory made audible, relation staged in common.

This is the Experimental Humanities's Wager: publics are not given but constituted, together, in risk and in relation.

That prototypes, whether sonic, visual, or conceptual, open possibilities precisely by being fragile, provisional, and shared.

From fictive birds to resonant thresholds, from air pumps to archways, the Experimental Humanities affirm speculation as method. They insist that knowledge is not administered but made in common, not measured by metrics but by movement in the world. They sustain failure as possibility, and breath as horizon.

Nothing less is adequate to our time

Jacob Henry Leveton teaches Art History, Visual Culture, and Critical Theory at Loyola University Chicago and edits the non-standard.

4 Megan Zahneis, "A Historic Decline in US Births Signals More Enrollment Troubles," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 7, 2021, https://www.chronicle.com/article/a-historic-decline-in-u-s-births-signals-more-enrollment-troubles

5 David Joselit and Pamela Lee, "Six Propositions after Trump's Second Victory," *October* 191 (Winter 2025): 3–4; John Bellamy Foster, "Editor's Note," *Monthly Review*, vol. 68, no. 8 (January 2017), https://monthlyreview.org/articles/mr-068-08-2017-01_0/

6 See Jacob Henry Leveton, "The Politics of Breath" in *The Empty Gallery*, ed. Chloé Pelletier, Art Institute of Chicago, 2020, https://www.artic.edu/articles/875/the-politics-of-breath

7 Joseph Priestley, *Experiments and Observations on Different Kinds of Air* (J. Johnson, 1790), xiv.