

Description for the general public

Laboratory as a mode of knowing. From archaeology to a project

Laboratory is associated mainly with the natural sciences and experiments. While imagining it, we can see a group of scientists wearing white lab coats, samples and test tubes, advanced equipment. In our research project we consider whether a humanist can have her laboratory. Has she ever had one? Is it possible to experiment in the humanities? If so, how would this look like? Is teamwork in the humanities feasible? What is the role of infrastructure in the humanistic research? Does the humanities lab serve as a mere imitation of the scientific laboratory? Are there any risks (and if so, what kind) resulting from adaptation of the concept of the laboratory to the humanities?

These questions gain in importance due to the observed “laboratorization” of the world, including the humanities. The word “laboratory” increasingly appears as the label of new initiatives in the humanities, as well as in the books’ and journals’ titles. It is worth studying whether the “laboratorization” of humanities is a superficial and fleeting trend or a symptom of deeper and more lasting changes of its condition. In the face of changes occurring both in the world and in the ways of its exploration, such as: expansion of technology (digitization), climate change, hybrid wars, refugee crisis, terrorism, progress of neuroscience, and problematization of relations between natural science and the humanities, a reconfiguration of humanities and crystallization of their new forms (e.g. so called “new humanities”, posthumanities, digital humanities) is taking place.

A crucial part of our project is the archaeology of the humanities laboratory. Its prefigurations can be found in the alchemy lab as well as the cabinet of curiosities. In the twentieth century many famous humanists, such as Jerzy Grotowski, Claude Lévi-Strauss and Aby Warburg, resorted to the notion of laboratory when describing their own scholarly or artistic work. We will inquire into their workshops in order to grasp the model of established laboratorial procedure. The project will also include studies on the experiments involving the poor and homeless in the home for social help designed by English philosopher, Jeremy Bentham, known for his concept of Panopticon. The other, alongside the archaeological one, part of the project is the design of the contemporary form of the humanities laboratory, creation of its theoretical framework. In order to achieve this, we will analyze topics and ideas developed lately in the field of posthumanities and critical infrastructure studies and we will further examine the concept of “co-thinking”. Moreover, carrying out interviews and observation in the contemporary laboratories in the areas of the humanities and art (Belgian SARMA, Finnish Moving Laboratory) is planned. One of the tasks will be also to create the Laboratory Atlas – a visual essay addressing the issue of the humanities laboratories.