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## **The variational mode: three cases about documents, artworks and animation**

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## Preamble

What really matters about the past is what we cannot remember. The rest, what memory conserves or retrieves, is mere sediment. A part of time passed has really become part, like a digested nutrient, of the living organism; it continues to be *past* but it is the only true living past and it lives in the brain and the blood, ignored by memory.<sup>1</sup>

Furio Jesi

This dissertation is about a series of documents; it is about how I have used them in my artistic practice, and it is about the stories these documents convey. It starts from the postulation that a document is a narrative mode of an object; an object, in other words, would not function as a document if not narratively, if not conveying, serving the reconstruction of, proving a story. All of my artistic practice deals with documents, with using and exploring their narrative potential, inside and outside legal procedures and governmental discourses.

I will bring forward a parallel view of artworks and documents. As I will argue, both artworks and documents may be studied as situational and relational modes of existence of objects, insofar as both are based on the use a community makes of them. Therefore, not only documents will be studied as narrative artifacts. The following chapters will also deal with artworks that act as narrative artifacts. Artworks can tell stories. This seems obvious if we talk about films, puppet shows or radio-documentaries. But I will explain, starting from my practice, how even exhibitions may be conceived, in their entirety, as narrative artifacts.<sup>2</sup>

Of course, this is not a universal statement. I am far from arguing that every artwork is a narrative artifact – not all art may be described as narrative. However, my artworks included in this dissertation will be presented and studied in relation to their narrative potential.

Furthermore, I will attempt to demonstrate how the concept of ‘document’ is intrinsically connected to power and truth. A document, in order to act as such, always needs a certain validation, which usually is provided by an institution of power (a court, for instance). Such an institution certifies the truthfulness of the object, the narrative that invests it, and of the link between the two.

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<sup>1</sup> Jesi, Furio. *Spartakus. The Symbolism of Revolt*, ed. Andrea Cavalletti, trans. Alberto Toscano (London: Seagull Books, 2014), 119.

<sup>2</sup> For a study of exhibitions as objects of cultural analysis, see Bal, Mieke. *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), especially chapter 4, “Framing”, where Bal states: “The method I used in the exhibition was to deploy narrativity” (166).

My approach will be that of a ‘research in and through art’,<sup>3</sup> which I believe can be extremely effective in proposing methods and possibilities for another use, another mode of existence of documents. If a document is a narrative mode of an object, then an artwork might function as an alternative mode of existence of the same object, as another way to animate it, potentially less related to power and authority. Art is capable of opening up a space for such an alternative mode, accommodating the narrative potential that documents express, while remaining outside legal procedures of officialization and validation.

My main research hypotheses, which I will try to test in this dissertation, are:

- *It is possible to conceive a mode of documents not based on official validation by institutions of power;*
- *Such a mode could be identified and studied in and through an art practice.*

In the following introduction, I will try to situate my artistic practice and my research project, by indicating a series of artists and artworks I was inspired by, from different fields, as well as by introducing certain concepts that will recur extensively in the dissertation, such as ‘intensity’, ‘mode’, ‘use’, ‘animation’ and ‘narrative’.

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<sup>3</sup> “The exceptional thing about research in and through art is that practical action (the making) and theoretical reflection (the thinking) go hand in hand. The one cannot exist without the other, in the same way action and thought are inextricably linked in artistic practice. This stands in contradistinction to ‘research *into* art’, such as art history and cultural studies.” Wesseling, Janneke. “Introduction”, in *See It Again, Say It Again: The Artist as Researcher*, ed. Janneke Wesseling (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2011), 2.