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

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Introduction

Artworks and documents

1. Cycles

In my artistic practice I often work on long-term, research-based cycles of pieces. I usually begin by carrying out an investigation into an object of study – be it a social situation (e.g. a Tuareg community in Northern Italy), a historical event (e.g. a children’s theatre occupied and turned into a commune), a cultural artifact (e.g. a puppet play from the beginning of the XX Century). My investigation methods include collecting information in archives or libraries, as well as through interviews with people connected to the object of study.

Starting from the materials and the information I collect, I produce artworks that enact and engage with the object of study. Each of the cycles I have developed so far comprises different materializations and formalizations of the research, using multiple techniques, materials and narrative forms. For example, the cycle *Gondwana* (2015), about a Tuareg community in Northern Italy, comprises a video work, a museographic display of a series of objects and photographs, a tapestry, audio recordings of a series of musical improvisations and a publication. Each of the elements functions as a self-standing artwork, and they are not necessarily to be presented all together. Some of them have been presented on the occasion of art exhibitions; some during film screenings; some in the context of a performing art festival, some online, some through a radio program, etc. A ‘cycle’ in my artistic practice is an ensemble of different artworks related to a specific object of study.

In this dissertation, I will talk about three different cycles. Each of them focuses on a different figure. The first two are about Italian individuals (Simone Pianetti, Augusto Masetti), the third one concerns a traditional Colombian puppet character (*el espiritado*). Every ‘cycle’ is therefore intended both as a conceptual framework related to a case study, as well as a practical *ensemble* of artworks, objects and presentations thereof.

Each of the three cycles comprises multiple artworks, which narrate and present stories, information, questions and hypotheses around each character. The next chapters will consist of three intertwining layers:

1. a description of the artistic elements constituting the cycle, including reports on their making and on their modalities of presentation;
2. a historical framework about the characters, where I will present records, sources, documents and testimonies that I have encountered through archives and field research;

3. a series of theoretical reflections connecting the characters, their historical framework and my artworks.

The three layers will be interwoven, jointly developing the research discourse.

2. References

In the following chapters I will present examples from my artistic practice, ranging from exhibitions in gallery spaces to puppet shows in village squares, from films presented in movie theatres to workshops held in educational contexts. My work as an artist takes place in different fields and ‘disciplines’. Similarly, the scope of my artistic references – that is, the artists and artworks I was inspired by and looked at while working on my pieces – vary greatly.

I was hugely inspired by performers working in the field of puppetry, animation and *teatro di figura* today, especially by the experimental theatre company Pathosformel and solo puppeteer Marta Cuscunà, both from Italy. In works such as *La prima periferia*, *La più piccola distanza* and *T.E.R.R.Y.*, Pathosformel works with objects and animation in a contemporary, distinctive style, encompassing gesture, sound and space, without using words. In *La prima periferia*, for instance, three anthropomorphic, human-scale, skeleton-like puppets are animated by three performers. But the animation does not evoke a specific storyline. Rather, it can be described as a study on minimal, essential gestures: taking a hand to the head, slightly moving a foot, etc. The puppets emit only one sound: the creaking of the material of which they are made, a voice that seems to accompany the slow and measured actions of which they are involuntarily protagonists.



Pathosformel, *La prima periferia*

Marta Cuscunà, for example in *Sorry, boys. Dialogues on a secret pact for 12 severed heads*, explicitly connects her practice to the Italian puppetry tradition. As a one-woman show, she animates her puppets alone on stage, modulating her voice to give life to different characters. She works with puppets that have a clear continuity with classic *marionette* and *burattini* forms. What especially inspired me in Cuscunà's work is the fact that (in line with the Italian nomadic *cantastorie* tradition) she performs puppet adaptations of real stories, starting from sources like documents, written records, oral testimonies. For example, *Sorry, boys* is inspired by the 2008 controversy over the 'pregnancy pact' that 18 girls in a high school in Gloucester, Massachusetts had supposedly stipulated to get pregnant at the same time.



Marta Cuscunà, *Sorry, boys. Dialogues on a secret pact for 12 severed heads*

Apart from the context of performing arts, I have been interested in the way different practitioners have used puppets and animation in the ‘field’ of contemporary art, and I have been especially fascinated by specific pieces by artists Pierre Huyghe, Wael Shawky and Peter Friedl. Even within three very distinct artistic trajectories, the three share a common interest in the way animated objects may be used to tell stories.

In his super 16 mm film *This is not a time for dreaming* (2004), Pierre Huyghe documents a marionette show that tells the parallel stories of modernist architect Le Corbusier’s commission to design the Carpenter Center for Visual Arts at Harvard University, as well as Huyghe’s own commission to create an artwork to celebrate the building’s 40th anniversary. The puppets are recorded in intertwined timelines, mixing historical, contemporary and fantastic events. Le Corbusier and Huyghe are portrayed as puppet characters in the film, each describing the gestation of his own project. All the marionettes in the film have been manufactured by New Jersey-based company Puppet Heap, specialized in puppet fabrication. I have been very fascinated by Huyghe’s role as puppet master and narrator, as art critic Nicolas Bourriaud described him: “A researcher, traveller, narrator and organiser of events, Huyghe translates forms from one state to another – [...] an investigation of an institution into an opera for marionettes.”⁴

⁴ Bourriaud, Nicolas. “The reversibility of the real. Pierre Huyghe”, in *Tate Etc.* issue 7: Summer 2006, <https://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/articles/reversibility-real> (accessed 26 March 2018).



Pierre Huyghe, *This is not a time for dreaming*, 2004

Another artist embodying the figure of puppeteer and narrator in the contemporary art context is the Egyptian Wael Shawky. Grounded in extensive phases of research and investigation, his pieces question national, religious and artistic identity through film, performance and storytelling, mixing contemporary references with historical tradition, overlapping truth and fiction. Through marionettes, Shawky has staged epic recreations of the medieval clashes between Muslims and Christians in his film trilogy *Cabaret Crusades*, composed of *The Horror Show Files* (2010), *The Path to Cairo* (2012) and *The Secrets of Karbala* (2015). For the first film, Shawky used eighteenth century marionettes from the collection of Turin-based Maurizio Lupi marionette company. Custom-made ceramic marionettes were crafted for the second work, and glass marionettes from Murano for the third, blending human and animal traits, as well as referencing ancient African masks.



Wael Shawky, *Cabaret Crusades: The Secrets of Karbala*, 2015

Artist Peter Friedl has been collaborating with the legendary Milanese marionette company Compagnia Marionettistica Carlo Colla & Figli (with which I, too, had the chance to collaborate, on a work that will be the focus of chapter 3 of this dissertation) on the piece *The Dramatist (Black Hamlet, Crazy Henry, Giulia, Toussaint)* (2013), a sculptural ensemble of four 80-centimetre-tall marionettes, embodying four historical figures: John Chavafambira, a healer and diviner of the Manyika tribe (from what is now Zimbabwe); Antonio Gramsci's wife Julia Schucht, to whom the Italian Marxist addressed most of his famous prison letters; Toussaint Louverture, the leader of the Haitian Revolution executed by the French in 1803; and the legendary industrialist Henry Ford. Side by side, their feet touching the floor yet held up by strings, these figures indicate specific moments in cultural and political history. As puppets (moveable objects controlled by others), they are not monuments carved in stone but, rather, counter-monuments: they commemorate not what history has been, but its unexpressed potentialities.



Peter Friedl, *The Dramatist (Black Hamlet, Crazy Henry, Giulia, Toussaint)*, 2013

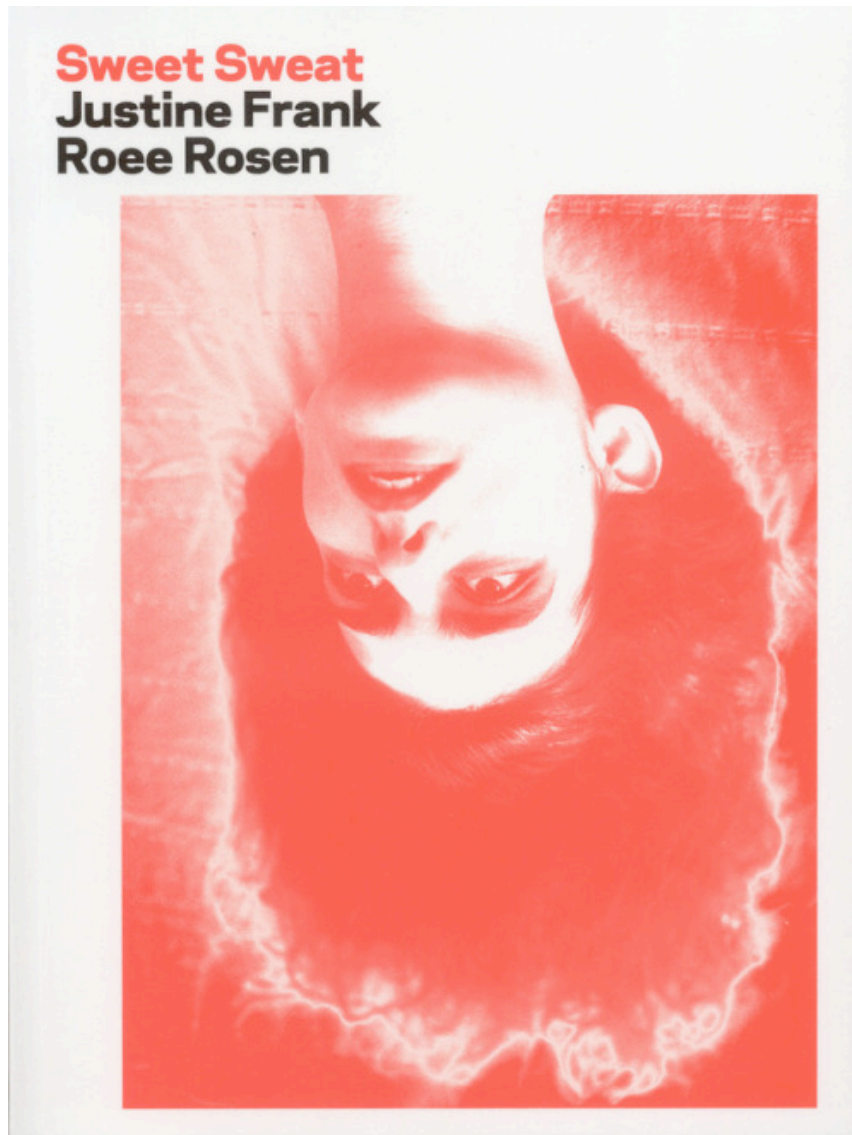
Peter Friedl has been a reference for me not only because of his use of puppets in his artistic work, but also because of his writings. Since his early times as a theatre critic, Friedl has been writing essays in parallel to (and in dialogue with) his work as a visual artist. A book has been published in 2010,⁵ collecting many of his texts tackling multiple disciplines. He wrote portraits of George Sand, Clarice Lispector, Theo van Doesburg, Alighiero Boetti and Jean-Luc Godard; he wrote on theatre and film history, as well as on colonial history and its traces in the present in Haiti, South Africa, Brazil, including Italy's half-forgotten colonial experience in Africa. Finally, I have been extremely interested in Friedl's written comments and reflections on his own projects, which I look at as a major reference of an artist writing about their own artworks.

Other notable examples of artists writing about and around topics connected to their artistic practice are Hito Steyerl (whose writings I will quote extensively), Roe Rosen and Raqs Media Collective. I will explain why their work as visual artists *and* writers has been a reference for my research.

Since the moment I had the chance to meet Israeli artist and filmmaker Roe Rosen, I have been fascinated by his role of narrator and protagonist of his films, publications and other storytelling projects in various media. He has published various books of writings connected to his works, among which *Live and Die as Eva Braun and Other Intimate Stories* (Sternberg Press, 2017), *The Blind Merchant (1989–1991)* (Sternberg Press, 2016), *Maxim Komar-Myshkin, Vladimir's Night* (Sternberg Press, 2014) and a novel written by fictional Jewish Belgian painter Justine Frank (*Sweet Sweat*, Sternberg Press, 2009). In all of his writings, there is a deep engagement and a constant experimentation in the relation between visual artistic forms (drawings, paintings, film) and different genres of writing (essays, reflections, fictional personas,

⁵ Friedl, Peter. *Secret Modernity: Selected Writings and Interviews 1981–2009*, ed. Anselm Franke (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2010).

comments on artworks), both under the sign of a constant drive to tell, to evoke and to question stories.

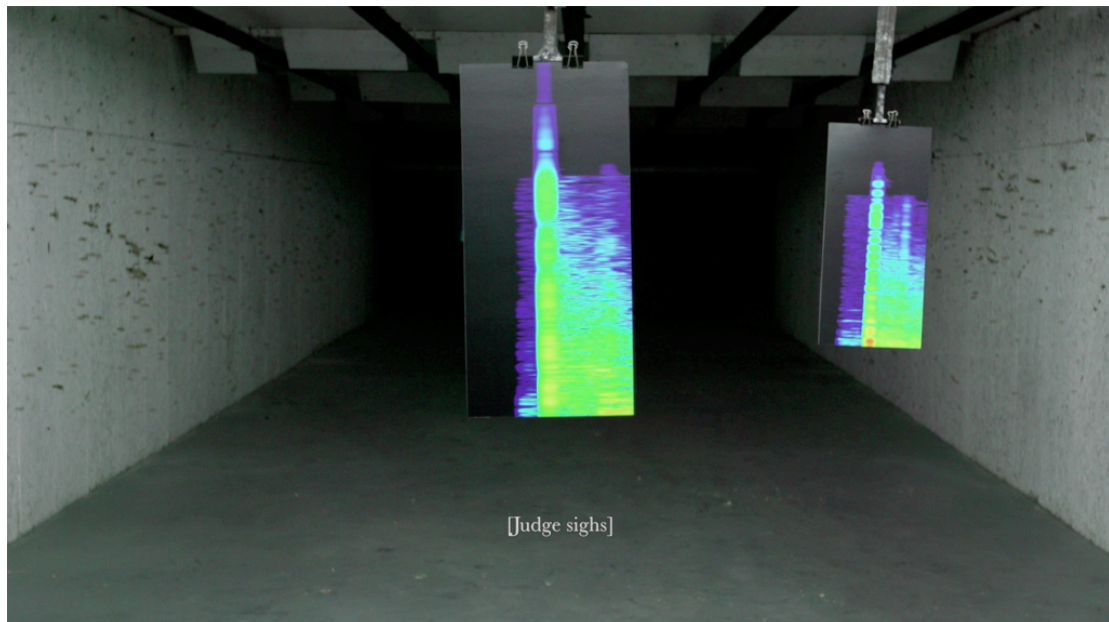


Roe Rosen, *Justine Frank, Sweet Sweat*, Sternberg Press, 2009 (front cover)

Another reference I have been very influenced by is the work by the Delhi-based Raqs Media Collective (Monica Narula, Jeebesh Bagchi, Shuddhabrata Sengupta), especially in the way they intertwine artworks and writings. Raqs have lead, for more than two decades, a multifaceted trajectory, editing books, curating exhibitions and producing artworks. They have been variously described as artists, media practitioners, curators, researchers, editors, and catalysts of cultural processes. Their writings, an integral and foundational part of their practice, have appeared in multiple publications all over the world, tackling issues related to contemporary art, historical enquiry, philosophical speculation, while bridging artistic practice, research and theory.

To conclude this short and necessarily incomplete excursus of my references and inspirations, I will mention two artists – Lawrence Abu Hamdan and Naeem Mohaiemen – whose artworks and writings question and interrogate the status of documents and evidence, often through an active engagement in law procedures and studies, as well as through anthropology.

Beirut-based Lawrence Abu Hamdan is not only an artist but also an audio investigator, whose practice deals with sound and its intersection with politics. Apart from his work being presented in art institutions, Abu Hamdan’s audio investigations have been used as evidence at tribunals and organisations such as Amnesty International. The techniques used in his audio-aesthetic practice have been used to conduct forensic audio analysis for several legal investigations. In his book *[inaudible] : A politics of listening in 4 acts* (Sternberg Press, 2016), he writes and reflects on “listening” as “an activity that can lead to the development of an organized protocol for engagement.”⁶ Lawrence Abu Hamdan’s film *Rubber Coated Steel* (2016) presents the fictitious trial of an actual murder case, focusing on an event in 2014, in which two unarmed teenagers were shot and killed by Israeli soldiers in the occupied West Bank. The case hinges upon an audio-ballistic analysis of the recorded gunshots, in order to determine whether the soldiers had used rubber bullets, as they asserted, or broken the law by firing live ammunition at the two teenagers.

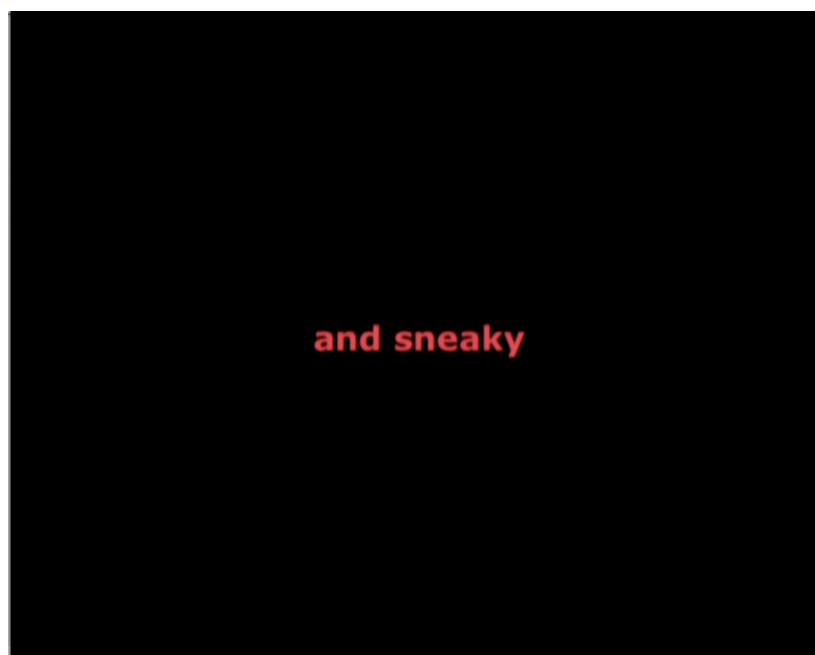


Lawrence Abu Hamdan, *Rubber Coated Steel* (still from video, 2016)

⁶ <http://www.sternberg-press.com/index.php?pageId=1702&l=en&bookId=595> (accessed 26 march 2019)

Naeem Mohaiemen, who works between Bangladesh and the US, is pursuing a doctoral degree in anthropology at Columbia University. He defines his artistic practice as “a search for objects. [...] Without the object there cannot be work on the wall, and one of the factors for doing anthropology is reeling back further to find the people, or social groups, that invented the myth of that object – the missing film canister, the trunk full of documents. It is [about] embracing the impossibility of a certain mythic object, and writing about that absence, about why people invent the story of the object – akin to inventing a god to structure your society – to give themselves the story they need.”⁷

In his 2012 video *United Red Army*, Mohaiemen includes pieces of documentary evidence to construct a narrative arc. He uses the original sound recordings from an airport control tower, reconstructing the hijacking of Japan Air Lines flight 472 at the hands of the Japanese Red Army in 1977, during which the hijackers forced the plane to fly to Dhaka, Bangladesh. In the film, the written transcript of the tense and watchful radio conversation between hijacker and hostage negotiator are presented on a dark background.



Naeem Mohaiemen, *United Red Army* (still from video, 2012)

I will now elaborate on how I intend to study the relations between artworks and documents in my own artistic practice.

⁷ Wilson-Goldie, Kaelen. “The Stories They Need”, in *Frieze* n. 166, October 2014, <https://frieze.com/article/stories-they-need> (accessed 26 march 2019).

3. Intensities

As it will be made clear throughout the chapters, in this dissertation ‘documents’ will be studied as objects of a very special kind. More precisely, they will *not* be studied as objects, but as a specific *mode of existence* of objects. In a classic definition by librarian and historian Suzanne Briet, a document is defined as “any concrete or symbolic indexical sign, preserved or recorded towards the ends of representing, of reconstituting, or of proving a physical or intellectual phenomenon”.⁸ In other words, documents may be considered objects (“concrete or symbolic”), which can be identified, read and interpreted (“sign”) in order to uphold a certain account (“reconstituting or proving”) about reality (“a physical or intellectual phenomenon”). So, for instance, a contract may be used as a document in order to uphold a narrative regarding the selling of certain goods; a set of digital data may be used as a document in order to uphold a narrative regarding an individual’s web browsing history; a fingerprint may be used as a document in order to uphold a narrative regarding the presence of an individual in a specific location, and so on. In this dissertation, documents will be conceived as interactions between objects and narratives.⁹

I will argue that documents come into existence when specific objects are invested with a narrative current that *runs through* them. Therefore, documents will not be considered *entities*, but *intensities*. From 2005 to 2009, when I was a student at IUAV University in Venice, I had the chance to follow several seminars by Giorgio Agamben, a philosopher whose ideas will recur throughout the dissertation. I remember that he would often use the term ‘intensity’ – a key-concept in his thinking – in a sense that I will try to clarify by referring to a recent interview he gave:

I divide the field of experience into two main categories: substances on one hand, and *intensity* on the other hand. As for substances, it is possible to establish their boundaries, to define their themes and subject, to trace their cartography; *intensity*, on the other hand, doesn’t have a unique place. [...] It goes without saying that *intensities* are more interesting than essences. [...] Philosophy isn’t a substance, but an *intensity* that can suddenly animate any field: art, religion, economics, poetry, passion, love, even boredom. It resembles something like the wind, the clouds, or a storm: like these, it suddenly shakes, transforms and even destroys the place where it takes place, but just as unpredictably, it passes and disappears. [...] I have always thought that philosophy and poetry aren’t two separate substances, but two *intensities* that animate the same field of language.¹⁰

Viewing documents as *intensities* entails that they are not to be studied as ‘things’, but as ‘modes of existence’ of things. The question, then, will not be, “*What* is it?”, but

⁸ Briet, Suzanne. *Qu'est-ce que la documentation?* (Paris: Éditions documentaires, industrielles et techniques, 1951), 2.

⁹ This dissertation will study documents as an intrinsically human way of using objects. It will not aim at addressing “objects-in-themselves”, and therefore it will not enter the theoretical fields explored by contemporary discourses such as speculative realism or object-oriented ontology.

¹⁰ Giorgio Agamben interviewed by Antonio Gnoli. “Credo nel legame tra filosofia e poesia. Ho sempre amato la verità e la parola”, in the Italian newspaper *La Repubblica*, Milano: 15 May 2016. My emphasis, my translation.

rather, “*How does it act? How is it used?*” In other words, no *ontology* of documents will be proposed here: documents will be studied through the concept of ‘use’.

The same is true, according to Agamben, for objects and human practices that acquire the status of art. He emphasizes that art (but also politics) does not indicate specific objects or practices, but rather a certain ‘use’ of them, a ‘mode’, an ‘intensity’ that runs through them. “Politics and art are not tasks nor simply “works”: rather, they name the dimension in which works – linguistic and bodily, material and immaterial, biological and social – are deactivated and *contemplated* as such.”¹¹

Both in the artwork and in the document, the object is suspended from its everyday use in order to be contemplated, involved in an *other* use. If the status of the artwork and that of the document really share such a mode of existence, it will then be possible to study the two concepts through an approach that encompasses both. Envisioning such an approach is one of the aims of this dissertation.

Another crucial aspect in the delineation of the concept of ‘document’ that will be proposed, is its structurally *relational* and *situational* character. A document always implies a relation: it cannot be used by one person only. It usually implies a community that is willing to use an object as a document. As we will see throughout the chapters, the relational character of documents is akin to theatricality in multiple ways. Borrowing philosopher Samuel Weber’s words about theatre, a document “can never be construed as self-contained or self-regulating”.¹²

If a document exists in the interaction between an object and a narrative, it will not make sense to study documents by separating these two elements. A document exists only as a *situational* concept. Even this characteristic of documents may be related to theatricality. Weber uses the term “situational”, “with the proviso that “situation” here includes not merely the actions represented on stage but their presentation as well. [...] Meaning is not separable from the way in which it is staged”.¹³

4. Narrative, mode

To express more precisely how the term “narrative” is used in the text, I will refer to two theories by leading narratologists. Gérard Genette conceived a structure defining the three different concepts encompassed in the word “narrative”:

1. “the narrative statement, the oral or written discourse that undertakes to tell of an event or a series of events”, that is, “the signifier, statement, discourse or

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 351.

¹² Weber, Samuel. *Theatricality as Medium* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), 43.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 26

- narrative text itself”, for which he proposes to use the word “*narrative*” [‘*récit*’];
2. “the succession of events, real or fictitious, that are the subjects of [the narrative’s] discourse”, that is, “the signified or narrative content”, for which he proposes to use the word “*story*” [‘*histoire*’];
 3. “the event that consists of someone recounting something: the act of narrating taken in itself”, that is, “the producing narrative action and, by extension, the whole of the real or fictional situation in which that action takes place”, for which he proposes to use the word “*narrating*” [‘*narration*’].

Genette conceives these three different functions as interlocking parts of a single triangular structure: each of them lives “by the relationship to” the others.¹⁴

Another model is proposed in the seminal 1985 study by Mieke Bal, *Narratology*, defined by herself as a “theory of narratives, narrative texts, images, spectacles, events; cultural artifacts that ‘tell a story’”.¹⁵ Bal defines a text as “a finite, structured whole composed of language signs”, and a “narrative text” as a text in which “an agent relates (‘tells’) a story in a particular medium, such as language, imagery, sound, buildings, or a combination thereof”.¹⁶ To clarify that a text is a cultural object not only existing in a literary textual form, Bal specifies: “since ‘text’ refers to narratives in any medium, I will use this word with an emphasis on the structuredness, not the linguistic nature of it; to keep this in mind I will use it interchangeably with ‘artifact’”.¹⁷ It is precisely in this sense that I will often use the expression “narrative artifacts”. Both the documents that I will study and the artworks that I will present in this dissertation, will be defined as such.

Within a narrative text (or artifact), one may identify what Bal calls the ‘story’ and the ‘fabula’ (not dissimilar to Genette’s notions of ‘*récit*’ and ‘*histoire*’). It is a “three-layer distinction”, and each of the layers may be analysed separately. However, the fact that they are “inseparable” is clearly stated by Bal as an introductory precaution to the discipline of narratology, when she states that a distinction is “a reasonable basis for a further study of narrative texts”, but that such distinction “does not mean that these layers ‘exist’ independently of one another. The only material which we have for our investigation is the text before us”¹⁸.

Following Bal’s approach, this dissertation starts from the premise that, for every narrative artifact (a photograph, a pamphlet, a contract, a puppet show, a street

¹⁴ Genette, Gérard. *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), 25-29.

¹⁵ Bal, Mieke. *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), second edition, 3.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 5. Another characteristic of a narrative text described in the introduction goes as follows: “That with which the narrative text is concerned, the ‘contents’ it conveys to its readers, is a series of connected events caused or experienced by actors presented in a specific manner”. *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

storytelling performance, etc.), the story it conveys and the artifact it conveys it through, can be divided only as “a theoretical supposition”, where “for text analysis [...] that which is in effect *inseparable* should temporarily be disjointed. [...] A narrative text is a story that is ‘told’ in a medium; that is, it is converted into signs”:¹⁹ “form and meaning cannot be disentangled.”²⁰

In this dissertation, every document will be studied as a ‘narrative artifact’ and, at the same time, as an ‘intensity’, as the interaction of an object invested with a narrative current that runs through it. The three chapters will focus on case studies in which the ‘story’ (the content) is not separable from the ‘text’ (the form through which the story was transmitted). In other words, the focus is on cases in which what the document *documents* is not detachable from the actual object through which such document exists. Therefore, it will be possible to distinguish, but not to separate:

- the objects and the narrative currents that run through them;
- the events and their modalities of transmission;
- story and text
- fact from artifact
- content from form.

Stories will be studied as structurally inseparable from the narrative artifacts that transmit them – that is, from their forms of transmission. Mieke Bal writes, “narrative must be considered as a discursive *mode* which affects semiotic objects in variable degrees”²¹. The concept of *mode* will be another central element in this study. Insofar as documents may be considered as a narrative *mode* of objects, they exist only in the act of *documenting*, of *being used* as documents. In his book *The Use of Bodies*, Agamben surveys the idea of a ‘modal ontology’, in an attempt to reframe ontology through the perspective of ‘mode’. But what is a ‘mode’? Via an examination of texts by Spanish Jesuit theologian and philosopher Francisco Suárez (1548—1617), Agamben defines it as

an affection of the thing, «which determines its ultimate state and its reason for existing, without, however, adding to it a new essence but only by modifying it». [...] it is a question of defining a paradoxical state of being, insofar as it is totally deprived of an essence of its own and yet is really distinct from that to which it adheres as a mode, namely, by modifying it. [...] «modal being cannot subsist by itself nor be separated from that of which it is a mode».²²

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 6-8.

²⁰ Bal, Mieke. *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 26.

²¹ Bal, Mieke. *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), second edition, 14. My emphasis.

²² Agamben, Giorgio. *The Use of Bodies: Homo Sacer IV, 2*, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 155. Agamben quotes Francisco Suárez, in *Francisci Suárez e Societate Jesu Opera omnia*, vol. 25 (Paris: Ludovicum Vivès, 1861), 256, 263.

Later on in the book, Agamben observes that “We are accustomed to think in a *substantial* way, while mode has a constitutively *adverbial* nature, it expresses not “what” but “how” being is.”²³

It is in this sense that a document can be conceived as a *mode* of an object: a narrative current invests an object, “modifying” it without adding any “new essence”. A photograph remains *essentially* the same if it stays hidden inside a drawer, or if it is used as a piece of evidence in a trial: only its *mode* of existence changes. A document is an object *used* in a certain way, and *use* will be another recurring concept in this study.

A document (but a similar argument could be put forward with regards to an artwork) is “not something substantial or a preestablished end but coincides entirely with the use”²⁴ that one makes of it. It “is not a substance nor the objectifiable result of an operation: it is the operation itself, the relation itself” between of an object and a narrative: it is “that relationship and not one of its terms”²⁵.

5. Law, power

The concept of legal evidence will be addressed as a specific category of documents. Evidence is a mode of existence of an object when it is invested by law. A legal institution considers an object as a piece of evidence insofar as it allows its use to truthfully demonstrate a narrative. This view entails a purely *situational* nature of law, which is asserted, for example, by Jacques Derrida:

Laws are not just in as much as they are laws. One does not obey them because they are just but because they have authority. The word *credit* carries all the weight of the proposition and justifies the allusion to the mystical character of authority. The authority of laws rests only on the credit that is granted them. One believes in it; that is their only foundation.²⁶

If law – and its enforcement – is the basis for the official validation of documents, and if law is purely based on the credit that is granted it by a society, then the mode of existence of a document is, as well, purely based on such credit. That is, its mode is purely *performative*, not ontological. There is no document *as such*, there are only objects *used* as documents, credited as such, certified by law (which itself is founded on credit).

²³ *Ibid.*, 164.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 54.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 101.

²⁶ Derrida, Jacques. “Force of Law. The Mystical Foundation of Authority”, in *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice* (New York: Psychology Press, 1992), 240.

In 1710, Neapolitan philosopher Giambattista Vico formulated his well-known principle, *Verum esse ipsum factum*, translatable as “truth itself is fact” or “the truth itself is made”.²⁷ Filmmaker and writer Hito Steyerl, commenting on Vico’s motto, writes, “A fact is something which is made. In our times, this seems like an obvious statement.” Steyerl, following a Foucauldian line of thinking, points out how, in contemporary societies, power controls the manifestation of truth, and how “documentary” forms present information and narratives as “true”. If “truth is something which is produced and constructed”, then “[d]ocumentary truth is considered as a product combining power and knowledge”.²⁸

However, the documents relating to the three case studies presented here, are of a very peculiar nature: there is no official version, no certified truth for the real events they refer to. They deal with acts of solitary, inarticulate and “pre-political”²⁹ resistance, often transmitted through outmoded³⁰ narrative formats. In order to investigate such stories, one has to rely on the mysterious, unofficial, marginal and latent ways in which they have been transmitted. This is why I will try to define an alternative mode of existence of documents: a *variational mode*.

Such a mode refers to documents existing only as non-authorized, non-institutional narrative artifacts, not certified as ‘true’ by any institution of power. These documents cannot act as bearers of truth, of an official version; rather, the narratives they convey are necessarily *variations* of an inaccessible truth. Despite their inherent variability and unofficiality, these artifacts did not withdraw from their documentary vocation: they still stubbornly carry the traces of a real event, a real life, a real gesture. Among them are the puppet shows, the pamphlets, the songs, the flyers and the rumours through which the stories of Simone Pianetti, Augusto Masetti and *el espiritado* have been transmitted. I will present these three characters, as well as the narrative artifacts through which they have been transmitted, as working examples towards a *variational mode* of documents.

But how did such artifacts escape power and its institutional mechanisms of certification and truth-production, while somehow preserving their documentary function? How can such artifacts be *used* as documents, and how should they be studied? What does it mean to use something as a document when it does not exist in

²⁷ His wording was “*Verum et factum reciprocantur seu convertuntur*” (“The true and the made are convertible into each other”). Vico, Giambattista. *De Antiquissima Italorum Sapientia ex Linguae Originibus Eruenda Libris Tres* (“On the Most Ancient Wisdom of the Italians Unearthed from the Origins of the Latin Language”, first edition 1710) trans. L.M. Palmer (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1988).

²⁸ Steyerl, Hito. “Truth Unmade. Productivism and Factography”, in *transversal*, Vienna: Eipcp, March 2009, <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0910/steyerl/en> (accessed 29 March 2019).

²⁹ According to Hobsbawm, “*pre-political* people [...] have not yet found, or only begun to find, a specific language in which to express their aspirations about the world. Though their movements are thus in many respects blind and groping, by the standards of modern ones, they are neither unimportant nor marginal.” Hobsbawm, Eric. *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19th and 20th centuries* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1959), 2-3.

³⁰ I will refer to some of the narrative artifacts related in the next chapters as ‘outmoded’, ‘out-dated’ or ‘marginal’. These adjectives refer to specific codes, once widely shared by given communities but that nowadays scarcely used, or used in a different, less wide-ranging manner.

a stable format (as a photograph, a contract, a fingerprint), but only in a format that is, intrinsically, subject to variations (a puppet show, a *cantastorie* performance, a song)? These are questions this dissertation aims to address.

One of my goals is to propose examples of a way out of the connection between power and the “documentary”, as figured by Steyerl:

[I]n certain situations the rupture of the documentary image from the bonds of knowledge and power happens. And this event is even capable of paradoxically and temporarily liberating the documentary image from its ties to power, usefulness, pedagogy and knowledge. This truth is not produced. It cannot be calculated, manufactured or anticipated. It becomes a *factum verum*, a true fact precisely by being unmade, so to speak, by happening, being contingent and uncountable. At this point a new reading of Vico’s slogan emerges. *Factum verum* not only means that facts are produced. Simultaneously it also means: a fact can be true, precisely because it cannot fully be contained by the power relations of its production. (Of course this doesn’t apply to all so-called “facts”). It means that some documentary articulations cannot be wholly controlled by dominant discourses.³¹

6. An archaeological approach

In the last years, when I described my interest in non-certified documents and in events for which there is no official truth, I was often asked if my attitude did not imply a certain relativism or, even, historical negationism. I have also often been asked what was my position towards neologisms such as “fake news”, “alternative facts” or “post-truth”. Furthermore, since my three case studies all refer to the first half of the 20th century, I was often asked, “Why, in the middle of such a vertiginous transformation in media, communication and information technology, are you talking about half-forgotten events and out-dated narrative forms?”

Philosopher Maurizio Ferraris would probably reply that the possibility to produce a previously unimaginable amount of documents is precisely at the core of such a transformation. According to his theory, today’s economy is no longer based on agricultural, industrial or financial capital, but on a new form of capital: the *documedial capital*, which concerns the data that the human population continuously produce online.³² Today, State institutions and transnational corporations ‘read’ and use these data (mainly through machines and algorithms).

³¹ Steyerl, Hito. “Truth Unmade. Productivism and Factography”, in *transversal*, Vienna: Eipep, March 2009, <http://eipep.net/transversal/0910/steyerl/en> (accessed 29 March 2019).

³² Ferraris, Maurizio. “Web è comunismo realizzato, ma resta lo sfruttamento: ecco l’era documediale”, in *Agenda Digitale*, 22 June 2018, <https://www.agendadigitale.eu/cultura-digitale/ferraris-web-e-comunismo-realizzato-ma-resta-lo-sfruttamento-ecco-lera-documediale/> (accessed 29 March 2019).

In the light of the contemporary, exponentially growing significance of documents (and of what Ferraris calls “documentality”)³³, this dissertation claims that it is more crucial than ever not to take documents for granted, but to study their modalities of production, transmission and validation, to explore their paradoxes and critical aspects and to question the origins of their mode of existence. I will present three case studies that provide examples of liminal situations of the concept of ‘document’. It is my belief that an ‘archaeological’³⁴ approach to documents is necessary to address the complexity of a concept at the centre of an epochal worldwide transformation – possibly more than an approach too narrowly situated in strictly contemporary social and technological ambits.

I believe that exploring cases of *variational documents* in the past may help reach a deeper and more nuanced understanding of what lies behind expressions like “fake news”, “alternative facts” and “post-truth”. Yes, I am presenting reports on characters from the past, but not to invite the reader to view them as historical half-forgotten curiosities; I present them today because I believe that their political potential has not yet fully come to fruition. I believe that their acts, the stories they generated and the artifacts through which they have been transmitted have something to tell us about the world we live in *now*. I gather them, as ghosts (or guests), in the spirit of Benjamin’s idea of a “constellation in which one’s own epoch comes into contact with an earlier one”.³⁵

7. Art, use

The proximity between artworks and documents that I will describe in this dissertation stems from two premises:

1. If art may open up an alternative space for documents to act, then research in and through art may be a very effective manner to study *variational documents*, since it is can encompass narrative artifacts as complex organisms, without separating content from form, story from text.
2. Both documents and artworks may be studied as ‘intensities’, as *modes* of existence of objects rather than objects ‘in themselves’. Their definition is not ontological, but performative: they need to be *used, animated* in a specific way in order to exist as such.

³³ See, for example, Ferraris, Maurizio. *Documentality. Why it is necessary to leave traces*, trans. Richard Davies (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), *passim*.

³⁴ By “archaeological”, I refer to Agamben’s use of the term: “The *archē* toward which archaeology regresses is not to be understood in any way as a given locatable in a chronology [...]; instead, it is an operative force within history [...] the *archē* is not a given or a substance, but a field of bipolar historical currents stretched between anthropogenesis and history, between the moment of arising and becoming, between an *archi*-past and the present.” Agamben, Giorgio. *The Signature of All Things: On Method*, trans. Luca D’Isanto and Kevin Attell (New York: Zone Books 2009), 110.

³⁵ Benjamin, Walter. “On the Concept of History”, in *Gesammelten Schriften* I:2, trans. Dennis Redmond (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1974).

Therefore, the notions of ‘use’ and ‘animation’ may be effective not only in order to study the notions of ‘document’ and ‘artwork’ separately, but also in order to explore a *variational mode* of existence encompassing both. In this perspective, through the concept of *variational mode* I will describe specific narrative artifacts that act *both* as artworks and as documents – puppet shows, songs, illustrations, tales, etc.

The method I intend to follow does not separate (even if it distinguishes) the theoretical and the artistic components. The study of narrative artifacts will be developed through the practical use of their very same formats within my artistic practice. For example, the investigation into Simone Pianetti and into the narrative artifact of the puppet show *Il Vendicatore* (recounted in Chapter 1) was developed using and re-enacting the very same artifact in my artistic work. The research project on Pianetti includes:

- a *re-enactment* of a puppet show (*Il vendicatore*, performed by Giacomo Onofrio and originally written by his namesake grandfather), right in the same location where the event that inspired it took place;
- a video documentary comprising archival footage of a film recording of that same puppet show in the 60s;
- a publication of flyers inspired by Pianetti’s story
- a series of interventions on the puppet show script.

In short: the narrative artifact of the puppet show *Il vendicatore* will be studied through its *use* in my artistic practice.

Agamben defines the concept of “use” as

a zone of indetermination between subject and object (the agent is in some way also object and place of action) and between active and passive (the agent receives an affection from his own action).³⁶

In this sense, the artistic practice is not separated from the object of study, and the research situates itself in the middle, between a narrative artifact that it aims to study, and an artistic practice that *uses* the very same narrative artifact. The artifact, the object of study, will always be allowed to “speak back”³⁷.

Most of the narrative artifacts that will be studied in the next pages can be properly considered *artistic* forms (i.e. puppet theatre, *cantastorie*, flyers, etc.). Therefore, a study on these forms will also necessarily be a study on their position within specific communities and historical, socio-political contexts, as well as on the social and

³⁶ Agamben, Giorgio. *The Use of Bodies: Homo Sacer IV*, 2, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 28.

³⁷ “The rule I have adhered to, that I hold my students to, and that has been the most productive constraint I have experienced in my own practice, is to never just theorize but always to allow the object ‘to speak back’. Making sweeping statements about objects, or citing them as examples, renders them dumb.” Mieke Bal, *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002, p. 45.

“documentary” significance of such artistic practices. That is why the study of narrative artifacts *as* artistic practices will be constantly in dialogue with a reflection on my own artistic practice, on my use of such narrative artifacts and on the socio-political positioning of my own artistic practice.

I have often been asked which ‘fields’ I relate to in my artistic practice. My artworks are usually presented in contexts related to ‘contemporary’ practices: art museums and galleries, film festivals, performing arts events. So, one way to answer this question would be: my practice relates to contemporary art, cinema and performing arts. However, I feel that such an answer is somewhat incomplete. The works described in the following chapters have also been presented in contexts less related to ‘contemporary’ art culture (and I am mindful of the slipperiness of such definition), such as: public squares, local history circles, regional magazines dedicated to folk traditions, Colombian and Italian public radio, community centres... This choice was not motivated by an interest in “bringing contemporary arts to a wider audience”. It was rather motivated by an interest in engaging with the distribution channels proper to the very same formats that I was using (i.e. puppet shows, *cantastorie*, local legends, anarchist pamphlets, etc.). When I was working with Giacomo Onofrio, a traditional puppeteer, I knew that I could not just ‘displace’ his work in a more ‘contemporary’ setting, like a museum or an experimental theatre festival: I knew that engaging with *his* audience was part and parcel of our collaboration.

8. In and through

This dissertation will use concepts and reflections coming from multiple disciplinary fields, such as history, anthropology, philosophy, legal theory, literary studies and theatre studies. As Mieke Bal pointed out, “concepts are not fixed. They travel – between disciplines, between individual scholars, between historical periods, and between geographically dispersed academic communities. Between disciplines, their meaning, reach, and operational value differ. These processes of differing need to be assessed before, during, and after each ‘trip’”.³⁸ I will try to constantly follow this methodological warning, while embarking on this “inter-disciplinary”³⁹ research journey.

³⁸ Bal, Mieke. *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 24.

³⁹ According to Bal, the itinerary of “a concept travelling from one discipline to another and back again [...] is to be termed *inter-disciplinary* [...] To call it ‘transdisciplinary’ would be to presuppose its immutable rigidity, a travelling without changing; to call it ‘multidisciplinary’ would be to subject the fields of the two disciplines to a common analytic tool. Neither option is viable. Instead, a negotiation, a transformation, a reassessment is needed at each stage.” Bal, Mieke. *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 39.

However, as a research in and through art, I believe that this study can legitimately claim an independent and distinct approach from the disciplines it refers to. To clarify what this approach consists of, I will quote a definition by Henk Borgdorff:

Does artistic research have a methodological framework of its own? My position is yes and no. Yes, because one specific characteristic of artistic research is that artworks and art practices form an integral part of the research process – the research takes place in and through art practice. No, because a researcher can additionally make use of a variety of methods, techniques, and perspectives, whether drawn from the humanities, the social sciences or the natural sciences (methodological pluralism).⁴⁰

My ‘cycles’ on Pianetti, Masetti and *el espiritado* consist of artworks *as well as* documents collected in field research, conversations, archives and libraries. They consist of hand-to-hand encounters with the *form* through such documents were collected and transmitted. My artistic practice uses these documents to (re)evoked, (re)activate, (re)transmit and (re)perform them, and this cannot be based solely on a historiographical or anthropologic approach, which would be both insufficient and incoherent. In my practice, the hand-to-hand encounter with documents – studied as narrative artifacts – occur *in and through* art, that is, in and through the *use* of those very same artifacts.

Documents cannot be presented ‘as they are’, with a false and naive claim of neutrality. My research in and through art aims to question such unattainable claim to neutrality, taking into account that any narrative regarding a real event is inseparable from the artifacts (the *form*) it is transmitted through. That is why research in and through art is suited to engage with narrative artifacts: because it can do so *in and through* such forms, *using* them.

The way I use an old puppet show (Case 1), anarchist pamphlets (Case 2), or oral testimonies (Case 3), is aimed at studying stories as inseparable from the artifacts they are transmitted through, objects as inseparable from the narratives that activate them. My artistic practice acts as a hand-to-hand encounter with documents; in order to study and use them in my artworks, I cannot simply borrow instruments from anthropology and historiography. Their study and use need to take place, from the beginning, in and through art.

⁴⁰ Borgdorff, Henk. *The Conflict of the Faculties. Perspectives on Artistic Research and Academia* (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2012), 41.

9. Animation

I will often refer to the concepts of ‘animation’ and ‘use’, which will prove useful to reflect on the mode of existence of artworks and documents. In the case of both artworks and documents, in fact, an object is used, animated, performed in a specific way. In order to envisage the proximity between the concepts of ‘use’ and ‘animation’, I will refer to one of the *Bemerkungen* (“remarks”) in Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*:

432. Jedes Zeichen scheint *allein* tot. *Was* gibt ihm Leben? – Im Gebrauch *lebt* es. Hat es da den lebenden Atem in sich? – Oder ist der *Gebrauch* sein Atem?

432. Every sign *by itself* seems dead. *What* gives it life? – In use it *lives*. Is it there that it has living breath within it? – Or is the *use* its breath?⁴¹

In this fragment, Wittgenstein interrogates the idea of animation in language, by juxtaposing two terms: *Leben* (“life”) and *Atem* (“breath”). If a sign, taken in itself, does not appear as a living entity, then what is it that brings it to life? Is its “living breath” something inner, inherent to the sign itself, or is it something external, blown into it through *use*? James Loxley and Mark Robson read the fragments in this way:

Wittgenstein seems to be asking what it is that gives life to that which appears to live. But having posed the question in this way, Wittgenstein continues in a manner that raises the suspicion that life rests outside the thing itself, in what he calls *use* (*Gebrauch*). There is no sense of life as essence or property, only as effect. At the level of the sign, then, the appearance of life is an appearance of *being animated*.⁴²

In a similar way I will refer to the notion of animation in relation to documents. A document is neither an object nor an ‘essence’, a ‘propriety’ of an object; rather it is a *use*. An object is animated, given life through a certain use we make of it. A document is a certain use of an object: a mode of its *existence* (as opposed to essence).⁴³ In exactly the same way one can regard art: as a use we make of certain objects – as a way to animate them. This dissertation will attempt to propose examples of a *variational* use of objects, animated as documents *and* artworks.

Furthermore, the notion of animation will inhere in the three case studies in a parallel sense:

⁴¹ Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte, ed. P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 135.

⁴² Loxley, James and Robson, Mark. *Shakespeare, Jonson, and the Claims of the Performative* (London: Routledge, 2013), 79.

⁴³ Mieke Bal states something similar in relation to the act of looking, when she writes that “It is meaningful to activate the look only in the use of objects. Unread, a novel remains a mute object; unread, an image remains an equally mute object.” Bal, Mieke. *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 49-50.

- Case 1 will focus on Simone Pianetti (1858-?), an Italian mass murderer who escaped and disappeared, and who then became a puppet character, *animated* as a stock character. I will report on my artistic work on one of the first puppet adaptations of his story.
- Case 2 will focus on Augusto Masetti (1888-1966), an Italian soldier who shot at his superior officer and declared not to remember having done it, as if in a state of ecstatic possession, as if *animated* by an external entity. Mainly using publications and workshops, I have produced a series of artworks related to legal, medical and anarchist records on his case.
- Case 3 will follow the appearance of a puppet character in Colombia, *el espiritado*, and its supposed connections to the Masetti case. I will describe a series of artistic works I produced, starting from a puppet script about the self-destruction of a village, which will be read as a commentary on puppetry, anarchism and *animation*.

The connections between art and animation have been extensively studied by curator Anselm Franke. His exhibition project *Animism* (2012) aimed to provide “a different context for reflecting on an old topic in the theory of art, one that has considerable reverberations in the present: the question of animation”. Franke’s definition of animation is somewhat similar to Agamben’s concept of ‘mode’: “What if the soul is not a substance, not a “thing,” but a function (not unlike the “zero” in mathematics)? What if “soul” (*anima* in Latin) is another name for the very medium that makes reciprocal exchange possible, for what happens in the very in-between, the event of communication?”

As I did before with regards to documents, Franke highlights the *relational* character of animation: “the *fact of animation* and the *event of communication* are one and the same. There is no being-in-communication that is not also a form of animation [...] Animation is always a form of entanglement with an environment and with *otherness*”⁴⁴. For Franke, a form of animation is required for an object to be regarded as ‘art’, and he asks if it is “in art – and in art alone – that modern civilization has reserved a place where animism is allowed to survive [...] do [museums] not yield their own paradoxical forms of animation? Museums make objects to be looked at by subjects – and this is already a “relational diagram” in which one side talks *about* the other”⁴⁵.

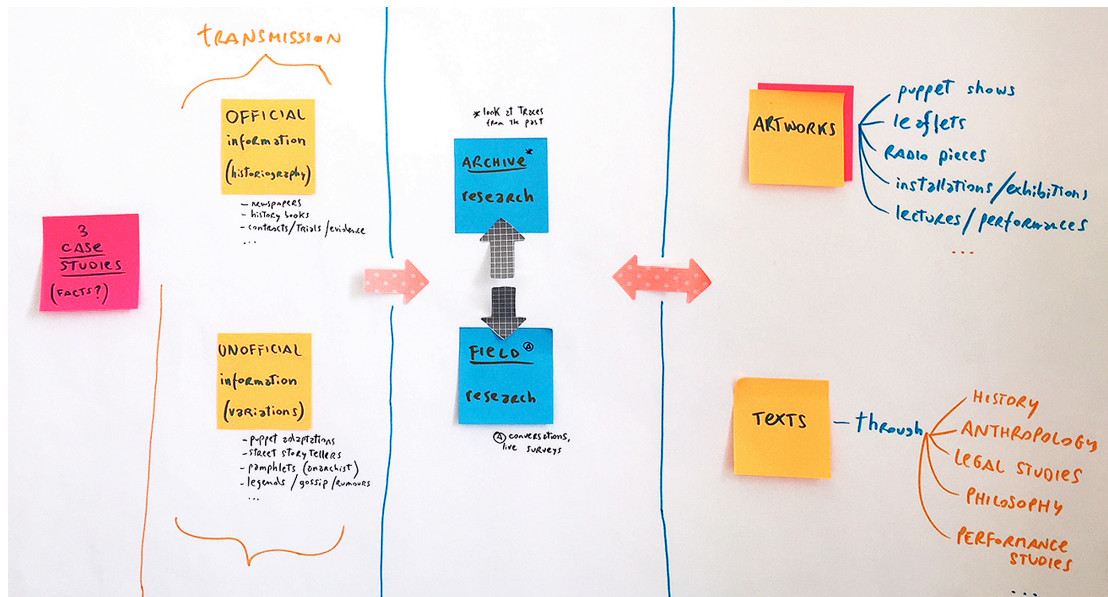
To summarize: my artistic work is about *animating* documents, *using* them and questioning their *mode* of existence. ‘Mode’, ‘use’ and ‘animation’ are the key methodological concepts that I have evoked in this introduction. If, as argued by Agamben, art can be intended as a contemplation of objects in a state of suspension, ‘research in and through art’ has the potentiality to overcome distinctions between

⁴⁴ Franke, Anselm. “Animism: Notes on an Exhibition”, in *e-flux journal*, n. 36, July 2012. <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/36/61258/animism-notes-on-an-exhibition/>

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

practice and study, as well as between story and text, fact and artifact. Unlike historiography or anthropology, such a discipline does not have its subjects of study on the outside, separated from it. Rather, through the *use* of its objects of study, it occupies “a zone of indetermination between subject and object”⁴⁶.

10. Map



When I was almost finished writing this dissertation, I was asked to draw a map of it. The diagram above is what I came up with. On the left are the three case studies in their actuality, considered as real events in the moment of their occurrence. In the second column are the forms through which those events have been transmitted (up until my encounter with them), be it through ‘official’, institutional channels (newspapers, contracts, evidence, trials, historiography, etc.) or unofficial, *variational* channels (puppet shows, street storytellers, anarchist pamphlets, legends, gossip, etc.).

At the centre are the two manners through which I engaged with the abovementioned materials: archive research (traces, records) and field research (live conversations). The last section at the right comprises what I have produced during my engagement with the materials: artworks (in the formats of puppet shows, booklets, radio pieces, installations, lectures, performances, films, etc.) and texts (like this dissertation).

At the end of the dissertation I included a glossary, an overview of different concepts used throughout the text, composed as a collection of excerpts by theorists and artists

⁴⁶ Agamben, Giorgio. *The Use of Bodies: Homo Sacer IV, 2*, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 28.

I refer to. Such inter-disciplinary, fragmentary, heterogeneous and at times contradictory list of concepts was conceived both as an imaginary gathering of authors and as a theoretical toolbox for the reader.

Lastly, I would like to stress the deep importance of collaboration with regards to the practice related in the following pages. In the last years, during the research phases, during the production of the artworks and during my writing, I engaged in collaboration and dialogue with several persons, including anthropologist and artist Andrea Morbio, puppeteers Giacomo Onofrio and Franco Citterio, artist Herlyng Ferla, set designer and inventor Paola Villani, writer and educator Carolina Valencia Caicedo and philosopher Andrea Cavalletti (an interview with whom is included here as an appendix). My encounter with them has deeply shaped my thinking and my practice, and the works presented in this dissertation have been greatly influenced by these different forms of dialogue and collaboration.