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

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PROPOSITIONS

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1. In an artistic practice, the collection of information, the production and presentation of artworks, the delineation of new concepts can all be intertwined. So, artworks can be used to tell stories, and at the same time to investigate the conditions of existence and transmission of stories.
2. A document can be regarded as a narrative mode of an object. An object does not act as a document if not narratively, if not conveying, serving the reconstruction of, or proving a story. Therefore, documents can be studied as narrative artifacts.
3. There exist documents that refer to real events for which there is no official version, no certified truth. In order to study them, one has to rely on *variations* – on the contradicting, marginal, unofficial ways in which they have been transmitted.
4. A *variational mode* emerges when a document refers to an inaccessible truth and, yet, is still a document in terms of its relational, narrative function, without excluding other possible variations, and without proposing itself as the sole, official bearer of a single truth.
5. A *variational mode* can be useful to study narrative artifacts capable of acting *both* as artworks and as documents – like puppet shows, songs, illustrations, tales, etc.
6. In cases such as Giacomo Onofrio's puppet play *Il Vendicatore*, the plot embodied in the artwork (Pianetti's story) and the artwork itself (the puppet play) are inseparable, and therefore are to be studied as a single text – what might be called a *variational document*.
7. Both documents and artworks can be studied as 'intensities', as situational and relational 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 by a community in order to exist as such.
8. In a different way from history, anthropology or legal studies, *research in and through art* constitutes a powerful way to address the 'knot' of documents and artworks, by developing a theoretical and practical approach that is able to encompass the concepts of 'artwork' and 'document', and *use* them, *practice* them at the same time.
9. Re-enacting, rather than reading or interpreting documents, is a powerful method to identify and study their 'performative' dimension. In and through an artistic practice, documents can be 'revived', rather than simply used as sources of information. By animating them, blowing new life into them, one has the chance to see these narrative artifacts again *at work*, instead of studying them as dead, inert objects.
10. The idea of a *variational mode* is important to reflect upon today from a political perspective, since it sheds light on the use-based character of documents, always open to the potentiality of being revoked, debarred, reinvigorated, misused, abused or disused.
11. Italian politics often seems to follow the script of a puppet play with recurring 'stock characters', a play that appears to be able to be repeated many times.