How Does a Document ‘Act’?
Research-based Art as Docudramaturgy

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Essay – January 13, 2016

Within Open! Academy, *Open!* occassionally publishes research, essays and reports that came into being within educational contexts. This text by artist Yota Ioannidou is an individual writing project she produced as a PhD candidate at PhDArts Leiden University / KABK Den Haag that offers a doctorate in art and design.

The project *The Storyteller, The Knife and The ‘Machine’*, created for the Athens Biennale in 2013, serves here to introduce the research topic. It is a form of ‘research-based art,’ which denotes artworks whose research process – in situ, visits to archives, discursive conversations, research material, etc. – includes images, texts, interviews, documents, records and other forms of data, constituting dominant elements in the shaping and presentation of the artwork itself. The research process and material thereby become the artwork – either in the form of a performance, an event, an installation or a publication. [1]



The Storyteller, The Knife and The ‘Machine’, 2013, Kapnikarea Square / Agora 4th Athens Biennale, collection of the artist – Photo by Elpida Belali



The Storyteller, The Knife and The ‘Machine’, 2013, Kapnikarea Square / Agora 4th Athens Biennale, collection of the artist – Photo by Elpida Belali



The Storyteller, The Knife and The ‘Machine’, 2013, Machine Room / Agora 4th Athens Biennale, collection of the artist – Photo by Marianna Katsaouni



The Storyteller, The Knife and The 'Machine', 2013, Machine Room / Agora
4th Athens Biennale, collection of the artist – Photo by Elpida Belali

On the Critical Attitude

The critical attitude
Strikes many people as unfruitful
That is because they find the state
Impervious to their criticism
But what in this case is an unfruitful attitude
Is merely a feeble attitude. Give criticism arms
And states can be demolished by it.

Canalising a river
Grafting a fruit tree
Educating a person
Transforming a state
These are instances of fruitful criticism
And at the same time instances of art.

– Bertolt Brecht

The Storyteller, The Knife and The 'Machine'

In this essay I analyze existing notions of dramaturgy and the 'document' as compositional elements in the development and articulation of my subject docudramaturgy, which centres on what kind of dramaturgy is possibly incorporated within research-based artworks. The text serves as a 'scaffold' for the discursive definition of areas central to my research and art practice that involves in situ and archival research combined with performance. I focus primarily on dramaturgy with documents (docudramaturgy) in relation to my art practice; that is, I use the term 'dramaturgy' in relation to research-based art practices, rather than to theatre and performance. The essay is divided into: 1) a presentation of my artwork The Storyteller, The Knife and The 'Machine' (2013); 2) a treatment of dramaturgy and its historical development; 3) a questioning of whether documents 'act'; and 4) an exploration of the constitutive links between dramaturgy and documents, and the radicality of the concept of docudramaturgy within the field of research-based art.

The Storyteller, The Knife and The 'Machine' was a performance reenactment developed using historical documents. [2] It inspired me to explore the collected material (newspapers, photos and books) and its forms of dissemination further. Its starting point was a historical event: the riot against King Otto in Athens (1862) partly instigated by early Greek and Italian anarchists seeking to change the system of governance in order to guarantee the freedoms of the people and the establishment of a legitimate national assembly. The narrative within it introduces another course of events, the first case of individual terrorism in Greece, Dimitris Matsalis's knife assault committed on 3 November 1896 against two prominent citizens of Patras: a banker (who was killed) and a sultana merchant (who was seriously injured).

Parallel to the study of documents referring to these two events, I incorporated the early nineteenth-century theatrical play William; the porter [author's translation from Greek]. Matsalis had attended this class-based erotic drama by French playwright Théophile Marion Dumersan (1780–1849) a day before the violent actions. It is mentioned that he was yelling during the performance because he was against the content and the represented political message of the play that focused on the equalization of social positions of proletarians and aristocrats in a rather populist manner.

Following archival research at the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam and the Libertarian Archive in Patras, I brought together a group of participants to publicly discuss the collected documents. The research material consisted of leaflets, books and newspapers on Matsalis's case that were circulating in the nineteenth century. Our discussions highlighted the language used by official media in their representation and manipulation of the events at hand.

Extracts from the research material were incorporated into new publishing material used as props in the form of newspapers and picket signs. A performance took place in Kapnikarea Square in Athens, where the first historical event had happened (riot against King Otto).

Up until then, this was my most discursive and participatory work; it was the first time I conducted a performance as a sequence of open discussions, which also formed the script and narration of the final performance. Although I initially invited only a few participants, in the course of the open discussions they multiplied in number. The invited people had hybrid, intermediate roles, being both participants and audience. Furthermore, a part of the audience supported the open discussions and participated by transforming their own roles from audience into researchers and performers.

The whole process resembled more the 'performing' of research than the 'staging' of an event. Through this I realized the importance of incorporating dramaturgy and documents

in research-based art, as the collective modus operandi aims toward a greater understanding of the produced discourse.

What Kind of Dramaturgy?

A common definition of dramaturgy – as that found in the Merriam Webster Dictionary – is: 'the art or technique of dramatic composition and theatrical representation.' Danae Theodoridou, a contemporary performance maker and researcher, gives the following definition:

> 'Drama' thus deriving from the Greek verb (dro=to act), denotes the action or rather the summation of actions that are taking place on stage within the frame of a work, whereas drama-turgy is understood as the process that works toward the construction of such drama, such stage action, as the etymology of the term implies (drama+ergon=work), defining dramaturgy as 'actions at work.' [3]

Dramaturgy as 'action' facilitates our perception of the multiple ways in which it might contribute to other fields besides theatre and performance, and specifically to research-based art. In the art context dramaturgy (of documents, data, historical evidence, photos, texts, etc.) can be an approach to both the presentation and conducting of research. Employed to select content, relate research documents to each other, create discursive formats, and distribute research-based art in the form of a performance or an event, dramaturgy as method distinguishes itself from others in that it aims directly at performance or the creation of an event and engaging the audience. [4]

Dramaturgy directs itself toward the 'live' event. It also proposes collective qualities through its form of research and presentation that imply collaboration with participants and audience. The relation to the public is crucial, not in the sense of an audience but of the 'emancipated spectator' [5] as developed by theorist Jacques Rancière, wherein through particular approaches within theatre and performance spectators might become active participants.

Playwright, director and Professor in Modern Drama at the University of York Mary Luckhurst offers a historical account of dramaturgy, focusing on English and German dramaturges, in her book *Dramaturgy: A Revolution in Theatre* (2006). Making reference to German playwright, poet and literary critic Gotthold Lessing (1721–1781) – the first (officially) appointed dramaturge in Hamburg and worldwide (though for just two years) – Luckhurst relates dramaturgy to teaching or didactics [6]:

> Definitions of dramaturgy as a collection of writings that theorise drama, and as the activity of the dramaturg in the staging of a play, common today, are conceptually linked to another word, , didascalia (Gotthold Lessing's working title for the *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*). The Oxford English Dictionary, citing the Latin didascalicus and the Greek , didaskalikos, records didascalic as 'Of the nature of a teacher or of instruction; didactic; pertaining to a teacher,' mentioning , didaskalos, 'teacher,' and , didaskein, 'to teach.' [7]

According to Luckhurst, Lessing's approach represents a radical pedagogical and aesthetic innovation in eighteenth-century German theatre. An interesting expression of Lessing's concept of dramaturgy is the working title of his famous periodical *Hamburgische Dramaturgie* as *Hamburgische Didaskalien* [Hamburg Didascalia] inspired by Aristotelian didascalia, a kind of catalogue in which notes mentioned plays and, analytically, how and where they were played as well as how the plays had been perceived. [8] In the end, Lessing did not use the term *didascalien* because it might have presented his criticism as hegemonic and not open to debate.

Until Lessing's appointment as a dramaturge (1767), dramaturgy didn't encompass much more than managerial tasks, translations and selecting plays. Lessing incorporated research, writing, critique and an approach on educating actors, while also addressing the audience. The educational quality of dramaturgy that he unveiled went far beyond entertainment. As Luckhurst states, Lessing's ideas would not only reform German theatre but the whole cultural landscape. Furthermore, Luckhurst emphasizes the criticality of Lessing's practice as it introduced a reflective voice to theatre making and the concept of theatre as a subject into public debate, [9] aiming to educate actors and the public to become 'informed critics.' [10] For him theory and practice were crucial to making theatre.

In the twentieth century, the 'Epic Theatre' of German theatre director, poet and playwright Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956) once more completely reformed the notion of dramaturgy. Brecht designed a new model, which he analyzed extensively in *Der Messingkauf*, at once play and theoretical argument. Written irregularly between 1939 and 1955, the text positions the dramaturge as performer, instead of the figure traditionally 'hidden' and 'off stage.' There are five characters: the *Philosopher*, the *Actor*, the *Actress*, the *Dramaturg* and the *Lighting Technician*. Luckhurst writes that 'The Dramaturg puts himself at the Philsopher's disposal, and promises to apply his knowledge and abilities to the reconstruction of the theatre into the thaetre [*sic*] of the Philosopher. He hopes the theatre will get a new lease of life.' [11] By placing the dramaturge at the philosopher's disposal, Brecht clarifies the dramaturge's action as theoretically important. Writer, performance curator and Professor of Performance and Visual Culture at the University of Roehampton, London Adrian Heathfield arrives at a similar conclusion stating: '...a dramaturge is not an originary source or a final repository of meaning for a work, but rather an agent in a process of communal meaning making.' [12] This definition suggests an extended role for the dramaturge by demonstrating their function in a collective sphere regarding dramaturgy as a process. The multifunctional and critical character of the 'ideal' dramaturge, as Brecht defines this role, acting between the philosopher and the actor, with an off stage as well as on stage status, offers a path very like the radical criticality in contemporary art practice, engaged with politics and bridging theory and practice (as Lessing also tried to achieve).

Both Lessing and Brecht take an educational, pedagogical and cognitive approach to dramaturgy, questioning how it might act as a vehicle for social, political and cultural change. Their concepts are vital to understanding how to combine theory and artistic practice. For me the dramaturgical tools illuminated therein offer the possibility for critical engagement by and with the audience. They enable the audience to develop a reflective voice (as Lessing proposed) and respond to the artwork and the social-political phenomena under consideration.

Is it possible to identify dramaturgy in other fields of arts, sciences and social spheres beyond theatre? [13] To find out, I interviewed Konstantina Georgelou, a performing arts theorist, dramaturge and researcher. Georgelou regards dramaturgy as an expanded practice. For a better understanding of dramaturgy, according to Georgelou we must understand dramaturgical choices. These relate to: whom you are working with and how (hierarchically or collaboratively), the institutional parameters (e.g., established institutes or not) and how you address your audience in the construction of the event or performance. These choices produce the particular aesthetic formats and the ethical and political implications that occur through them.

The inclination to see dramaturgy beyond the realm of the stage or performance was intensively explored by Erving Goffman (1922–1982), the first sociologist to develop a dramaturgical analysis of everyday human interactions. In his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1956), he juxtaposes these interactions with roles, props and the stage, looking at the whole social sphere and its attitudes as a theatre. Goffman claims that his dramaturgical approach adds a fifth perspective to the technical, political, structural and

cultural perspectives on the subject of human interaction. He applied the dramaturgical perspective to describe and analyze techniques of impression management. Impression management entails the way in which people present themselves or act in a specific environment, e.g., at their job, at a dinner, walking down the street. Furthermore, a dramaturgical perspective can be traced in the shaping of the interrelationships among performance teams in the establishment as a company or an institution.[14] An example is how employees and employers interact and how each self acts in the group.

Goffman uses dramaturgical analysis to explore the thin line between the performer and audience – a crucial relation that applies to artworks, too. Pointing to the shift between roles that occur according to social context, the moment you act as performer, you also act as audience of the person in front of you. I mention Goffman's dramaturgical approach as inspiration for what I call a 'dramaturgy of documents.'

Lessing and Brecht offer radical dramaturgical prospects connected with processes inside and outside the theatre, aimed toward cultural, political and social awareness – either with respect to the embodiment of philosophy and theory within art or the reforming of dramaturge, actor and audience roles. Goffman's theory on the other hand acts as a concrete example, outside the art field, of how to incorporate dramaturgical thinking to interpret social phenomena.

If and How a Document 'Acts'

Does a document 'act,' and if so, how? To answer this question, I first refer to Italian philosopher and scholar Maurizio Ferraris's theory of 'documentality,' which involves the explanation of the types of inscriptions carried within documents. Second, to delve into how the document works in terms of speech acts, I introduce archivist Geoffrey Yeo, who links the notion of the document to Speech Act theory. I also take into consideration a different concept of 'Documentality' introduced by artist Hito Steyerl in her text 'Documentarism as Politics of Truth' (2003) which coincides with my understanding of how documents act. Inspired by Foucault's concept of governmentality, Steyerl writes 'I call this interface between governmentality and documentary truth production "documentality."' [15] As Ferraris explains in his essay 'New Realism, Documentality and the Emergence of Normativity': 'The prospect of documentality begins with the theory that – from its ancient to its modern supporters – conceives of the mind as a tabula rasa on which to lay inscriptions. In fact, as we have seen, there is a powerful action of inscriptions in social reality: social behaviors are determined by laws, rituals and norms; social structures and education form our intentions.' [16] In the case of documentality, according to Ferrari, the object-document is an inscribed act. It is a constitutive element in the creation of social spheres. This means that a social object is the result of a social act – a 'contact of affairs' [17] – recorded on paper, a photo, tape, computer file and, even in the minds of people involved in the act. [18] With the term 'records,' Yeo identifies evidence, artifacts and documents as sources of information and as representations of past events.

Additionally, Yeo draws attention to an aspect of records or documents as representations of acts by employing the Speech Act theory of John L. Austin and John Searle. Speech Act theory focuses on utterances having performative action in terms of language and communication (e.g., what kind of reality a saying produces instead of what this saying describes).

Yeo explains that 'representations can be seen as "things that stand for something else."' [19] Consequently, the constitutive link between Speech Act theory and documents is representation; Yeo states: 'Records testify to the power of the performative; they are implicated in actions and events and in the deontology that underpins much of human society.' [20] As records affirmed the power of the performative, the analysis of what a document represents may suggest what powers underly a document.

The following story illustrates how a document acts, and how we can read the performative into a document. It is a story I heard many times from relatives and isn't unique in Greece. After the Second World War, many Greek archives and the buildings that hosted them were destroyed by fires. The documents were mostly certifications of births and deaths. Lela is a very old lady now, around eighty. When she needed a civil identity card in 1975, she was asked to provide a birth certificate. Unfortunately, the document had been destroyed. Police then asked her to bring two witnesses to testify to her birth date. A single woman and unemployed, Lela had the great idea to fake her age by claiming that she was fifteen years younger. Through this small lie, she would have access to job opportunities and of course a chance to find a husband. A woman forty years of age was perceived as quite old in Greek society. The identity card was released, the birth date was set as 1950 instead of the actual 1935. As a result, Lela found a job in a state company (but not a husband). Her success, however, came with a price. Instead of being retired by sixty, she only got her pension at seventy-five. She worked fifteen years longer than she would have otherwise. This story presents a case of how a document acts but also reveals an intervention within a document.

Exploring Links between Dramaturgy and Documents within Research-based Art

The concept of docudramaturgy, which is central to my art practice, presupposes constitutive links between dramaturgy and documents. How do documents act and how do dramaturgical choices occur by the artist and participants within a research-based art project? Considering documents as devices to exercise power,[21] it is important to address who registers documents and in which social, institutional and political context each document is produced. In *The Storyteller, The Knife and The 'Machine'*, the persistent interpretation of the documents (newspapers and essays from the nineteenth century) does not aim at a reconstruction of the narrated history. It rather proposes a 'horizontal' examination of those historical documents through collective reading, to stimulate a critical reading of the current sociopolitical reality and to reflect on how this reality is constructed and represented. In this particular case, an important dramaturgical choice was to work with participants – be they experts or not. Following a process of collective research, which suggested a collective interpretation of the selected documents with the invited guests and the audience, my intention was to transform the audience role to that of researchers and performers.

Documents may be falsified in order to *subvert* or *intervene* in power structures or provoke reactions. An example from *The Storyteller, The Knife and The 'Machine'* is an extract from a book employed as a reference in public discussions on reports of the riots against King Otto. Recorded in the book is a crowd shouting, 'Down with the King! Long live the policeman.' In Kapnikarea Square, writing the script for the final performance shaped through an assemblage of the original documents, it was impossible to include the phrase, 'Long live the policeman.' During the current 'Greek Crisis' there has been a violent eviction of political and cultural squats in Greece by the police. Furthermore many participants from squats had been arrested alongside many citizens in peaceful – and not so peaceful – demonstrations. For that reason, a small change in the original paragraph from the book had to be made, 'Down with the King! Down with the police!' Accuracy of the original document would have ruined the whole concept of the project because the performance re-enactment was a kind of demonstration combined with public talks in Kapnikarea Square – a busy square near the Greek parliament and surrounded by police.

Dramaturgical choices can be traced through the process of falsification mentioned above, that is, deciding which part of the document has to be changed and what will replace it. For example, in the old dramaturgical modus operandi, the dramaturge chose an old play and changed the necessary parts of the text in order to communicate it properly to the audience. In a similar way, in the case of my project, the documents' content had to change

in order to voice what is crucial to state now with respect to the current Greek political reality.

On the one hand, exploring the question of if and how a document *acts*, within my art practice, allows me to regard documents as dramaturgical devices, which means that I incorporate and contemplate documents within my artwork as 'live' entities for the creation of the performance or the event. On the other, dramaturgical concepts like the ones developed by Lessing and Brecht (i.e., 'informed critics,' educational but not didactic in approach), serve as paradigms to employ dramaturgy within research-based art. Specifically, as I mentioned above, the Brechtian approach which places the ideal dramaturge acting between the philosopher and the actor, with an off stage as well as on stage status. These concepts suggest a way, one that coincides with my intention, to transform the role of the audience into that of researchers and performers. Docudramaturgy incorporates documents by associating, translating and questioning their representational status. It offers the possibility to engage the audience through a process of collective research and interpretation of documents. Excepting a wider analysis and enlargement of the research subject, a collective approach suggests a dialectic mode of meaning production. Within the wider scope of creating political and social awareness through art, docudramaturgy allows for forms of independent research that render spectatorship active, which in turn proposes a process of the spectator's understanding of their own position.

Yota Ioannidou (Athens) graduated with a BA from the Athens School of Fine Arts and a MFA from the Dutch Art Institute (Arnhem). In her projects Ioannidou creates and revises archives, following a process of research (visits in archives and in situ research), collection (texts, images, data, maps, films), recordings of interviews or discussions. The formulation of the research material combines performance as storytelling and formation of reading and performing groups on the research subject. Ioannidou's projects investigate issues related to social struggles and act to question and cross-examine phenomena triggered and maintained by various hierarchical structures for political, cultural or social reasons. Recent projects include *Good Morning Mr. Mesmer*, 2015–present, Kunsthalle Exnergasse, Vienna; *The Storyteller, The Knife and The 'Machine'*, 2013, 4th Athens Biennale; *Voice_Over*, 2012; *Aula Intergalactica* (with Teresa Maria Diaz Nerio), 2011, *Word of Mouth* curated by Kernel for the 3rd Athens Biennale; and *On the hill one happens to be sitting on – A tribute to failure*, 2011–2013, various locations.

Footnotes

1. An example is the project of the artist Martha Rosler *'If you lived here...'* (1989), presented in DIA Art foundation in New York. This project consisted of three group exhibitions with invited artists and activists, a series of events, panels and discussions around the subject of homelessness and housing in America. It was an extended look into the issue of homelessness through various artworks, discussions and documentary approaches. In my view, it was a project that demonstrated a unification of research, social activism and art.
2. A performance re-enactment is an art form that enables the revival of a past event or even a past artwork by creating it anew.
3. Danae Theodoridou, 'Short (Research) Stories: Drama and Dramaturgy in Experimental Theatre and Dance Practices,' PhD dissertation, Department of Drama, Theatre and Performance, University of Roehampton, 2013, 83.
4. From my perspective what distinguishes an event from a performance, is the temporality of the event, the possibility to include within an event different performances, other artistic articulations, discussions, panels and non-artistic formats.
5. Jacques Rancière, 'The Emancipated Spectator,' *Artforum*, March 2007, 271.
6. Mary Luckhurst, *Dramaturgy: A Revolution in Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 6.
7. Ibid., 24.
8. Ibid, 29.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid., 113.
12. Adrian Heathfield, 'Dramaturgy without a Dramaturge,' in *Rethinking Dramaturgy: Errancy and Transformation* , ed. Manuel Bellisco and María José Cifuentes (Murcia: Centro Párraga & CENDEAC, 2010), 107.
13. For the full interview see appendix available here: yotaioannidou.net
14. Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Social Sciences Research Centre, 1956), 154.
15. Hito Steyerl, 'Documentarism as Politics of Truth,' May 2003, European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies, eipcp.net.
16. Maurizio Ferraris, 'New Realism, Documentality and the Emergence of Normativity,' in *Metaphysics and Ontology Without Myths*, ed. Fabio, Bacchini, Stefano Caputo and Massimo Dell'Utri (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), 119.
17. Geoffrey Yeo, *Speech Act Theory and Concepts of the Record* , lecture, School of Library, Archival, and Information Studies, Vancouver, 2010, www.youtube.com.
18. As Maurizio Ferraris states in his essay 'New Realism, Documentality and the Emergence of Normativity': 'The constitutive law of social objects is Object = Inscribed Act. That is to say that a social object is the result of a social act (such as to involve at least two people, or a delegated machine and a person) that is characterized by being recorded, on a piece of paper, on a computer file, or even only in the minds of the people involved in the act. Social objects are divided into documents in a strong sense, as inscriptions of acts, and documents in a weak sense, as recordings of facts.'
19. Geoffrey Yeo, 'Representing the Act: Records and Speech Act Theory,' *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 31, no. 2 (October 2010): 109.
20. Ibid., 110.
21. See appendix available here: www.yotaioannidou.net.

Tags

Aesthetics, Art Discourse, Research

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