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A Documentary-Material Approach for Performance

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Performance is material. From ballet to burlesque shows, stage plays to flash mobs, piano concerts to poetry readings, performance necessarily includes and involves the material world. It is because of and through materialism that a performance is enacted and performed, engaged and interacted with, analyzed and admired, studied and shared, preserved and remembered. Performance is, in other words, intimately intertwined with materialism.

Documentation—that is, documents and practices with them—is one important way in which many performances are materialized and constituted. Documents are not unimportant or disposable ‘things’ that simply serve to convey information; documents, and practices with them, help materialize and constitute, not just convey, information. When documents are considered indifferent to information and consequently disposable, then information becomes decontextualized. Bernd Frohmann criticizes this treatment of documents as of unimportant status and the concomitant privileging of information, stating that

to imagine the information conveyed by a member of the rapidly expanding universe of documents as abstract, noble, document content indifferent to the transformation of its vehicles and stripped of all material, institutional, and social supports is to imagine it as belonging to the same ontological category as the immaterial, intentional, and mental substance present to an individual mind in a state of understanding that document. (Frohmann, 2004, pp. 389–390)

Documents are not disposable things of secondary status to information. Documents play crucial roles in helping materialize and constitute information. But documents do not do this work on their own. David Levy states that documents “need our help as we need theirs. And at this stage in human societal development, the conduct of life would be unthinkable without them” (Levy, 2001, p. 38). Jane Bennett similarly argues that “humanity and nonhumanity have always performed an intricate dance with each other. There was never a time when human agency was anything other than an interfolding network of humanity and nonhumanity; today this mingling has become harder to ignore” (Bennett, 2010, p. 31). It is documents, and our practices with them, that help materialize and make informative their particular information.

While performances themselves are material productions and events, they are further materialized by and constituted through documentation. Documentation helps establish a material basis for performance that in turn materializes and constitutes the information presented, displayed or intended by the performance. Documentation is therefore a crucial component of performance because of its important roles in helping materialize it (or parts of it) into particular kinds of documents that are considered, treated, practiced and interacted with as information.

This article begins a discussion about the relationship between documentation, performance, and materiality. Adopting a broad approach to both documentation and performance, it argues that analyzing the importance of documentation for performance helps shed more light on performance's materialism and the many ways in which performance is experienced, interpreted, and used as different kinds of documentation. It presents the start of a documentary approach for analyzing performance by showing some ways in which documentation helps provide a material basis for performance beyond its enactment whilst simultaneously materializing and constituting it in and for other diverse contexts.

This article therefore argues that a documentary approach helps show the roles played by documents and practices with them in performance's materialization and constitution. This documentary approach in part responds to Ann-Sophie Lehmann's (2016) call for the need for greater material literacy to help better illuminate our material surroundings. She states that we need to have greater awareness, or literacy, of the materiality of our lives and world in order to more fully understand and appreciate how this materiality affects us and its implications for our lives. We need to know what our lives and world are made of by specifically examining the materiality of the objects, landscapes, and other things that we need and use and that make up our world.

By becoming more aware of our material surroundings and becoming more literate in understanding what the material components are and the affordances they allow, we can begin to better appreciate the ways in which our lives and world are created, maintained, experienced, interpreted, and understood. Lehmann argues that "to have material literacy means to be able to express oneself clearly about materials' qualities, histories, and affordances" (Lehmann, 2016, p. 14). She presents a framework of four components for developing material literacy. First, focusing on objects' materiality for observation and study. Second, establishing material dialogues. Third, contextualizing the materiality of the objects under study. Fourth, integrating materials, and their observation and study, in instruction and research.

Responding to Lehmann's call for greater material literacy, Marc Kosciejew (2017) extends the concept of material literacy by presenting a documentary-material literacy in which to further examine different aspects of the world, such as performance, from a documentation perspective. A documentary-material literacy similarly argues for the centrality of materiality and presents an adapted framework of four components for its application. It involves, first, focusing on a document's (in this case, a performance) materiality for observation and study; second, establishing documentary dialogues about and for it; third, contextualizing the materiality of the document under study; and fourth, integrating the document into instruction and research (Kosciejew, 2017, p. 98). A documentary-material literacy

illuminates how documentation helps materialize information, transforming it from something intangible into something tangible that, in turn, helps construct and shape diverse areas, aspects, and activities of life and the world.

Frohmann similarly stresses materiality's importance when approaching and analyzing something as documentation. He presents the concept of the documentality of things to help determine or show when something is or can be a kind of documentation. This concept "refers to a thing's affective power or agency, exercised in its arrangements with other things, to generate traces, marks, signs, inscriptions" (Frohmann, 2014, p. 1) and so on. He argues that this concept can be more useful in approaching something as a document because it replaces a restrictive binary approach (is something a document or not) with a more flexible continuum of documentation (how much of a document is this something). The documentality of things is therefore "a continuum from weak to strong documentality" that "forces the question, 'how much of a document is it?' rather than 'is it a document?'" (Frohmann, 2014, p. 1). A documentary-material literacy complements the documentality of things concept by emphasizing and analyzing a thing's materiality. By stressing performance's materiality, for example, its kind or level of documentality can be established and thus can be approached from a documentation perspective both as itself, as an assemblage of diverse material things and arrangements, and also its resulting and subsequent documentation that is created or generated from it.

Performance's materiality, in fact, is illuminated by the many resulting documents that become anchored and connected to it. Once the event has occurred, or possibly as it occurs, documentation is involved and multiplied in ever more kinds to constitute the performance in and for other diverse contexts. Suzanne Briet observes how many things become attached to documents, stating that even the smallest event "immediately becomes weighted down under a 'vestment of documents'" (Briet, 1951/2006, p. 10). Although Briet does not explicitly discuss documentation's constitutive effects, her classic example of the antelope illuminates the roles played by documentation in the materialization and constitution of the things and events to which it is attached.

It is worth quoting in full Briet's description of the antelope's documentation to help more fully illuminate how a thing or event—even a living being—becomes further materialized and constituted by and through documentation. She describes how

the least event... becomes weighted down under a 'vestment of documents'. Let us admire the documentary fertility of a simple ordinary fact: for example, an antelope of a new kind has been encountered in Africa by an explorer who has succeeded in capturing an individual that is then brought back to Europe for our Botanical Garden... A press release makes the event known by newspaper, by radio, and by newsreels. The discovery becomes

the topic of an announcement at the Academy of Sciences. A professor of the Museum discusses it in his courses. The living animal is placed in a cage and catalogued...Once it is dead, it will be stuffed and preserved (in the Museum). It is loaned to an Exposition. It is played on a soundtrack at the cinema. Its voice is recorded on a disk. The first monograph serves to establish part of a treatise with plates, then a special encyclopedia (zoological), then a general encyclopedia. The works are catalogued in a library, after having been announced at publication... The documents are recopied (drawings, watercolors, paintings, statues, photos, films, microfilms), then selected, analyzed, described, translated (documentary productions). The documents that relate to this event are the object of a scientific classifying (fauna) and of an ideologic... classifying (classification). Their ultimate conservation and utilization are determined by some general techniques and by methods that apply to all documents—methods that are studied in national associations and at international Congresses. (Briet, 2006, pp. 10–11)

The antelope, on its own, is a living, breathing animal; it is not a document. The antelope becomes a document once it is captured and confined in a laboratory-type setting, in this case the zoo, to be displayed, viewed, studied, and analyzed like a document. There is also a complex assemblage of infrastructures and resources surrounding the animal that further transforms it into different kinds of documentation for different purposes and various audiences in diverse contexts.

Briet further notes that the antelope can be considered the progenitor of all of its resulting and subsequent documentation. It is after all turned into diverse kinds of documents including biological-medical reviews, scientific reports, journal articles, news stories, photographs, videos, drawings, conference papers, and so on. Moreover, like the antelope in the zoo, each additional or new kind of document requires complex assemblages of many material things to help further materialize and constitute the antelope in and for other diverse contexts. Indeed, the more the antelope is documented, and the more these resulting and subsequent documents are themselves subsequently documented in the same or different ways, the more the antelope is documentarily multiplied. Or, put differently, this multiplying documentation materializes, multiplies, extends, and constitutes the antelope for, across, and within a plethora of contexts.

The performance, like the antelope, becomes a progenitor document of all of its multiplying documentation. Further, like the antelope, each document coming, resulting, springing from the performance, in addition to all of their subsequent iterations and multiplications, require their own complex assemblages of material things—from resources to infrastructures—to help materialize and constitute it in and for diverse contexts. Different performances, moreover, would also involve or require different kinds of documentation, different kinds of

audiences, different kinds of practices, for different kinds of settings. While a photograph and video of the same performance, for example, both help materialize and constitute it, they are nevertheless different kinds of documentation involving different kinds of assemblages of practices, infrastructures, and audiences for different purposes in different contexts.

This multiplying documentation, in fact, helps show the multitude of different kinds of documentation required and used in different contexts. The more that the antelope is documented, for instance, the more it becomes a part of and entrenched in discursive systems as something that is informative of or factual about antelopes or other related phenomena. Ronald Day discusses how “for Briet, ‘facts’ are rich in meaning through their appearance in multiple forms and series of documents. This is what Briet means when she speaks of the ‘documentary fertility’ of a ‘simple, originary fact,’ such as the newly discovered antelope” (Day, 2008, pp. 156–157). Similarly, the more the performance is documented, the more it is consequently witnessed, experienced, interpreted, remembered, disseminated, shown, and constituted in various times and places by different audiences for diverse purposes, such as enjoying, analyzing, cataloguing, archiving, studying, copying, showing, and so on. The more it is documented, in other words, the more it becomes a part of and entrenched in diverse discursive systems as something that is informative or factual about that performance or other related phenomena.

But with the resulting and subsequent documentation, what is the relationship between the progenitor and its resulting and subsequent documents? Frohmann asks “how is the fate of the primary document (the antelope) related to its secondary documents...More generally put, how are connections between documents and their referents established, maintained, weakened, and severed?” (Frohmann 2014). He argues that “documents are spawned from objects, events [like performances], concepts—from ‘things’ in the widest sense; the documents are traces of the things that are the documents’ objects or referents” (Frohmann 2014, 6). The referent, in this case the performance, is no more (it is completed, finished, over), but its material traces (documents) remain, and in fact are multiplied into additional and new kinds of documents. When the performance is over, its documentation endures and often continues to multiply; or like the antelope, once the animal is dead, its documentation endures.

The referents, moreover, tend to draw attention away from the progenitor. Frohmann explains that while the progenitor becomes weighted down by its vestment of documents, this vestment, in turn, requires “more tending, more attention, than its origin; indeed, it is the flow of secondary documents that inaugurate—because there are so many of them—so much of this stuff—that documentation becomes the signature cultural technique of our time” (Frohmann, 2014, pp. 6–7). The resulting and subsequent documentation, in other words,

(eventually, sometimes even immediately) becomes a central focus because of its material permanence and its continual multiplication and use in diverse contexts.

It is also important to note that there are performances that are created and staged not only for their live enactment but also, sometimes specifically, for reasons of posterity. Philip Auslander argues that performance artists, actors, designers, directors, producers, and organizers are often interested in preserving their work and are consequently “fully conscious of the need to stage it for the camera as much as for an immediately present audience, if not more so” (Auslander, 2006, p. 3). The performance, in other words, is often deliberately documented or specifically meant to be documented. These performances are performed to be experienced at the particular time and place of their live enactment whilst also documented for material permanence. They are performed to be both shown and to be documented. Further, many performances need documentation to be preserved, shown, and experienced in other contexts beyond their live enactment.

Documentation indeed plays important roles in the materialization and constitution of performance. This article aimed to start a conversation about documentation, performance, and materialism by arguing, and beginning to show how, a documentary-material approach, or literacy, can help one analyze performance as a kind of documentation. This approach can also help illuminate the importance of documentation for performance beyond its enactment. When there is a focus on the documentation of performance in terms of observation, study, and analysis—that is, when performance is approached from a documentation perspective, when its documentary-material aspects are contextualized, and when it is integrated into dialogues and research about both documentation and performance—then additional and new light is shed on its materiality.

A materialist (re)orientation with a concentration on documentation can help provide more helpful directions for approaching our material world. Such documentary approaches and literacies begin to respond to Lehmann’s (2016) call for material literacy, by presenting opportunities for more kinds of material-documentary literacies, to help enrich and expand our conceptions and understandings of documentation itself in addition to performance and other materials and materialisms.

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