

Autumn Talk and Ocean Songs

Dramatic Assemblage – Methods and Relevance of Performative Historiography

Lena Haselmann, Janke Klok and Lilli Mittner

Cultural history is increasingly presented as multimodal, yet its interrelations are rarely researched multimodally. Using the example of the interdisciplinary project RESCAPE¹ on European cultural history, this chapter explores new forms of generating and mediating historiographic knowledge on the basis of an assemblage of historic sources related to the composer Agathe Backer Grøndahl and the painter Betzy Akersloot Berg. How can historical meaning be produced on the basis of historical sources? How can we bring insight into the research process to a broader audience? Based on our artistic practices and on new material feminist theories, this chapter presents a new approach to historiography, referred to here as dramatic assemblage, which is located at the intersection between literary theory, musicology, and art history.

1 RESCAPE was first established in 2017 and refers to the academic and artistic collaboration of Prof. Dr Janke Klok, Prof. Dr Lena Haselmann and Dr Lilli Mittner. The acronym stands for Research – Education – Sources – Creativity – Arts – Performances – Engagement. Previously, the research group RESCAPE has produced and theorized the following assemblages: “Camilla Collett and Agathe Backer Grøndahl talk in Berlin”, as part of a theme night with talks and concert contributions in the Nordic Embassies in Berlin (14th February 2017) and in Prof. Dr Stefanie von Schnurbein’s seminar “Creativity in Academic Work” on 3rd July 2017 at the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin; “Kunst som metode”, workshop with students from the Academy for Music at the University of Tromsø (15th October 2018), and “Da Betzy møtte Agathe. Performance og Workshop” at the Nordnorsk Kunstmuseum in Tromsø (16th June 2019). The further planned assemblages: “The Urban Abroad as a Space of Possibility. On the Development and Explanation of Dramatic Assemblage” (working title), seminar contribution, Norwegian National Library in Oslo, 16th September 2020, as well as a seminar at the Institute of Music at the Hochschule Osnabrück during the winter semester 2020/2021 were postponed due to COVID-19.

Truth, Fiction, and Reflection – Source Collage as Dramatic Assemblage

We define dramatic assemblage as an arts-based research method that embraces the following three dimensions: (1) combining ego-documents,² non-fictional texts, compositions, poems, stories and other art-related forms into a fictional dialogue between two or more historical personalities, (2) performing the fictional dialogue, and (3) reassembling the items with a mixed group of students, artists, researchers, and the community in a subsequent interdisciplinary workshop. The dramatic assemblage aims to get closer to the past experience of these historical subjects' reality and open up new spaces for knowledge through the encounter. In this chapter, we explore how our new method provides unknown possibilities for the reception, comprehension, and perception of history.

The following dramatic assemblage *Autumn Talk and Ocean Songs* is an imaginary encounter between the composer Agathe Backer Grøndahl (1847-1907) and the maritime painter Betzy Akersloot-Berg (1850-1922).³ Both artists were in Kristiania in the autumn of 1904. Akersloot-Berg, who had been living and painting on the Dutch island Vlieland since 1896, was in Kristiania visiting her parents. Backer Grøndahl was living on the island Ormøya south of the city, where she composed and taught. It is not known if the two women actually met. In the fictitious encounter that is staged here, though, we use this poetic freedom as a methodological tool.⁴ The poetic license applies only to the conversation, whereas all historical facts are taken from secondary literature and ego-documents, as well as from the artworks produced by Akersloot-Berg and Backer Grøndahl. The assemblage aggregates a body of knowledge about the artists, who shared a strong longing for nature and the sea, which became artistically inspiring motifs in their work.

While developing this montage, we were able to reconstruct when and where Betzy Akersloot-Berg visited Kristiania in 1904 and discover that the Norwegian painter Elisabeth Sinding (1846-1930) was her friend. Since Elisabeth Sinding was closely acquainted with Agathe Backer Grøndahl's colleague, the composer Chris-

2 Journals, letters, postcards, notes, autographs etc.

3 We would like to extend our gratitude to Charis Gullikson and Ingrid Skovgaard from the Nordnorsk Kunstmuseum for the possibility of allowing Backer Grøndahl and Akersloot-Berg to bump into each other there. In addition, we would like to thank Peter Schalk and Imgrid Rugenbrink from the Museum Tromp's Huys Vlieland for the collaboration and access to information and sources regarding Akersloot-Berg in the Museum Tromp's Huys Archives.

4 See Janke Klok and Lena Haselmann: "Camilla Collett und Agathe Backer Grøndahl unterhalten sich in Berlin – Ein Gespräch, das es nie gab. Dramatische Montage als akademische Praxis", in: Lena Haselmann, Janke Klok and Lilli Mittner (Eds.) "*Dat soll auch nicht jehen, dat soll fahren...*". *Norwegische Künstlerinnen in Berlin* (Berliner Beiträge zur Skandinavistik 25), Berlin 2019, pp. 91-123.

tian Sinding (1856-1941), it is not improbable that Elisabeth Sinding and Agathe Backer Grøndahl knew one another; Kristiania's circle of artists was small.

The dramatic assemblage was performed on 16th June 2019 at the Nordnorsk Kunstmuseum.⁵ The performance took place in an exhibition space, where the stage referenced a historic setting: a green turn-of-the-century sofa was framed by a piano and a small antique table with two chairs. Akerslout-Berg's paintings hung on the walls, forming the scenery's background. The protagonists and performers were the musicologist and mezzo-soprano Lena Haselmann (reading Backer Grøndahl's lines and singing), Friederike Bischoff (pianist), literary theorist Janke Klok (reading Akerslout-Berg's lines), and musicologist Lilli Mittner (narrator and stage manager).

It is crucial to note here that the text as well as its performance are rooted in academic research, in contrast to a text intended for stage performance. We are not concerned with whether Peer Gynt appears in a green, yellow, or red light, but we are interested in the experience and identification with history through theatrical, semi-staged moments. Compared to a dramatic text which aims at creating complex characters, our single-dialogue parts are comparatively long, resembling serial monologues that are packed with a considerable amount of historical knowledge. Thus, this text form is closer to an academic lecture than a play. Since the dramatic assemblage processes texts as well as other types of art, it can be seen as an expanded lecture, a lecture that considers hearing, seeing, and tasting as prerequisites for working together on and with the material, enabling the audience to understand the method. Music plays a significant role in this assemblage. The published lyrics and sheet music are perceived as historical sources that create a certain mood and atmosphere. Moreover, the dramatic assemblage demonstrates how dialogue between Agathe Backer Grøndahl and Betzy Akerslout-Berg is interwoven with the lyrics of the songs and with the paintings. The dialogue's performance was an extension of the historiographical approach developed by the research group RESCAPE. Whereas the first dramatic assemblage, held in Berlin (a traditional place of Norwegian-German cultural exchange) was still restricted to a dramatic dialogue, the Nordnorsk Kunstmuseum in Tromsø became our experimental lab for integrating music and paintings.

In the next section of this chapter, we present excerpts from a dramatic assemblage in text form. The sources (in italics) have been translated into English; the originals, except for the lyrics, can be found in the footnotes. This printed format, however, does not allow us to fully present the assemblage, since it also included music and paintings. Some exemplary paintings are depicted here in black

5 "Da Betzy møtte Agathe". Performance og Workshop ["When Betzy met Agathe". Performance and Workshop], 16th June 2019, Nordnorsk Kunstmuseum.

and white.⁶ The performed music is indicated by the song texts, which are placed above the text of the speakers. Generally, the presentation is oriented towards the form of drama, with one exception: we chose not to provide stage directions, since the intention of a dramatic assemblage is mainly to exploit the impact of the texts and other materials on the readers and listeners, whereas stage directions would influence the readers' interpretation. Performers refrained from trying to embody the historical persons, in order to maintain a certain distance.

In the context of this chapter and its academic audience we position ourselves as researchers by using footnotes to offer explanations. In a performance for the general public, these explanations would not be necessary. This already shows the new knowledge this multimodal text form provides. In a dramatic assemblage the respective dialogue sections are thus oriented towards content-related information more than towards a fluent dramatic dialogue. The reason for this construction of the fictitious conversation is the scholarly motivated necessity of combining knowledge garnered from different historical sources. In the assemblage knowledge is more condensed than it would be in either a staged or a real-life conversation. At the same time, though, less factual knowledge is transported than a traditional academic paper or a documentary biography would allow. Focusing on the identification with the material, the assemblage enables readers to understand possible correlations. Hence, opening up new avenues of thought, the assemblage offers unfamiliar perspectives on the sources. The boundaries between generating and conveying knowledge are thus no longer clearly drawn: the mediation (workshops, CD production, performances of dramatic assemblages) enables us to tap into new areas of knowledge and to gain innovative perspectives on history.

6 Further materials can be found on the internet site RESCAPE, <http://site.uit.no/rescape/recent-projects> (last accessed on January 3, 2021).

Autumn Talk and Ocean Song – Excerpts from a Dramatic Assemblage

M u s i c:

*Amber*⁷

Along the playful sea they walked,
the waves dancing so lightly. The swaying surface lay foaming;
they wandered slowly, foot by foot, lingering and kneeling down; searching for
amber.

She received, what he took from the sea. Beautifully polished, in the form of a heart,
gleaming as clearly as the brightest candle.

She carried it on her chest, kissing it often.

She gave him hers in return,
it though, was a heart that beat.

He sailed out on the stormy sea; she never met him again.

She continued to carry his heart there, carried it with her, sorrowful and happy, she
didn't know how to tell them apart;
but his was only made of amber.

N a r r a t o r: An autumn evening in Kristiania in 1904. The city lies enticingly at the foot of the idyllic fjord. The autumn sun colours the maple trees in Solli Park golden red. The painter Betzy Rezora Akersloot-Berg (1850-1922) has just returned from a short walk in the park, where she had been looking at Auguste Rodin's (1840-1917) statue *The Man with the Key*, installed there in 1902. In an apartment at Frognerveien 4/2, she is now reading the card her husband, the Consul Gooswinus Gerardus Akersloot (1843-1929), has written to her from Gothenburg. "*Greetings from Gothenburg. I will not be arriving before tomorrow morning at 11. Akersloot.*"⁸

There is a knock at the door and the composer Agathe Backer Grøndahl (1847-1907), whom Betzy Akersloot-Berg has invited for coffee and cake, enters. They greet one another.

7 "Rav" [Amber], song by Agathe Backer Grøndahl from: *Sange ved havet* [Songs by the Sea] op. 17, no. 1. The song is performed by mezzo-soprano and piano. All the lyrics in this paper have been translated from the original Norwegian into English by Stefanie von Schnurbein and Rett Rossi.

8 Postcard: "Hilse fra Göteborg. Jig kommer ikke i morgen för kl. 11 formiddag. Akersloot." Gooswinus addressed the card to "B. Akersloot-Berg, Christiania, Frognerveien 4-2" on 09.28.1904. Archives Museum Tromp's Huys Vlieland. English translation by Rett Rossi based on the German translation by Lena Haselmann.

B e t z y:⁹ I am so pleased we could meet today, dear Agathe. Only recently did I have the opportunity to hear your *Songs by the Sea*.¹⁰ I was astounded to learn from my cherished friend Elisabeth Sinding how difficult it was for you to find a publisher for them. You of course know that Elisabeth painted *Village Street*, when she was visiting us on Vlieland.¹¹ It's hanging here in our dining room now. When your *Songs by the Sea* were published, she sent me a copy. In your scoring, I recognize my longing for the sea and a parallel to my attempt to convey the movements of the waves, the colours and forms of the clouds, the power of nature – that is what is implicit in my work as an artist. “*Never have I doubted, even for a moment, what I should paint, it was the ocean – my one great aspiration*”.¹² I believe this passion for the ocean began during my time as a nurse in West-Finmark, the land of the Sami. That was actually the first step into an independent life as a working woman. When I began in 1870 it had only been four years since unmarried women were allowed to pursue vocational activities. On my visits to the sick I often went alone on skis over the highlands and saw the ocean in the distance. The light, the skies, the landscape, and the waves of the sea, they fascinated me, and I continue to bear these images in me.

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- 9 The complexity of naming historical women poses a fundamental methodological challenge. For further considerations about this see Lena Haselmann, Janke Klok and Lilli Mittner: “Aufmerksamkeit für Berlin als Ort norwegisch-deutschen Kulturaustausches”, in: Lena Haselmann, Janke Klok and Lilli Mittner (Eds.): “*Dat soll auch nicht jehen, dat soll fahren...*”. *Norwegische Künstlerinnen in Berlin* (Berliner Beiträge zur Skandinavistik 25), Berlin 2019, pp. 11-12. In the performance text presented here, we have chosen to use first names, in order to reduce the distance to the temporally distanced people. In the framing text and reflections, we have used maiden and married names. Also, during the conceptual phase for the exhibition “Like Betzy” (15th June 2019 - 16th February 2020) at the Nordnorsk Kunstmuseum the question of names was discussed. The team decided to only use first names in the exhibition texts for all artists, regardless of gender.
- 10 Backer Grøndahl's *Sange ved havet* [Songs by the Sea] was composed in 1884 and published in 1887.
- 11 Elisabeth Sinding: *Dorpsstraat* [Village Street], 1898. Elisabeth Sinding (1846-1930) attended the J.F. Eckersberg School of Painting in Christiania (beginning in 1865), studied with Christen Brun in Dresden (1869-1870), as well as with Otto Seitz and Heinrich Zügel in Munich (1871-1873). Small animals were frequent motifs in her work after the 1870s, which can also be seen in her paintings from Vlieland (see Anne Wichstrøm, “Elisabeth Sinding”, in: *Norsk kunstnerleksikon*, 20.02.2017. Online: *Store norske leksikon*, http://nkl.sn.no/Elisabeth_Sinding (accessed on September 10, 2019). Her brother Otto Sinding (1842-1909) taught Akersloot-Berg in Munich; her other brother Christian Sinding (1851-1941) was a composer.
- 12 “Aldrig et öieblik har jeg tvivlet på, hvad jeg skulde male, det var havet, som var min eneste store higen”. Letter from Akersloot-Berg to C.W. Schnitler, 16.03.1907 from Belle-Ile, France. Archives Museum Tromp's Huys Vlieland.

A g a t h e: I can well understand this affinity for Norwegian nature, dear Betzy. Abroad I always long for our small country. When I travelled to Berlin as a 17 year-old to study music, I was terribly homesick. Now almost 50 years later, I can still feel my yearning for the Norwegian mountains, sky, and sea! I rediscovered these emotions in the Danish poet Holger Drachman's early work *Songs by the Sea*.¹³ Even though some say they are overly dramatic,¹⁴ for me they held so many ocean sounds that my head overflowed with melodies. I simply had to put them to music. In the poem "Amber" I heard "*the uninterrupted movements of waves beneath the soulful words*".¹⁵ And the song "A Fresh Morning" I composed after a delightful morning walk along the shore.

M u s i c:

*A Fresh Morning*¹⁶

The wind is so docile,
the boat, it is ready,
the world is so pleasurable
if you just know to take it properly;
if only you do not put glasses on,
especially not the dark grey ones,
but rather see with the eyes of the sun,
then the sea smiles sky blue,
and you can barely grasp,
that the dunes can be so bare.

Sail carefree ahead, good boat,
to the sea,
even though the nose gets wet,
it will get dry again.
The wave arches its body
and with its shoulders
lifts up the sun that lay buried.

13 Holger Drachman (1846-1908) wrote his collection of poems *Sange ved havet* [Songs by the Sea] in 1877.

14 See Cecilie Dahm: *Agathe Backer Grøndahl: komponisten og pianisten* [Agathe Backer Grøndahl: Composer and Pianist], Oslo 1998, p. 137.

15 "bølgenes uavbrudte bevægelse under den gåtfulle teksten", Dahm, *Agathe Backer Grøndahl*, p. 138.

16 "Frisk morgen" [A Fresh Morning], song by Agathe Backer Grøndahl from: *Sange ved havet* [Songs by the Sea], op. 17, no. 6. The song is performed by mezzo-soprano and piano.

We set the mast in the loop,
 running the sail up to the top,
 and thus sail – good morning – out to the sea!

B e t z y: Just think, Agathe, you had already composed the songs in 1884! That was precisely the time I was in northern Norway, this time no longer as a nurse but as a painter. Becoming an artist almost seemed a divine mission. Ultimately, being an artist became my *raison d'être*. I quickly understood, nonetheless, that my knowledge of painting was insufficient, and I studied painting in Kristiania. I debuted at the first autumn exhibition here in Kristiania¹⁷ in 1882 and travelled afterwards to Stamsund in Lofoten. I did not want to paint my northern Norwegian landscape from memory. I had to return there, out into the fresh air and work with the natural light. That was the time when painting outdoors or “plein-air painting” – as they call it now – emerged.

A g a t h e: You don't say! My sister Harriet was preoccupied with capturing the natural light, just like you – albeit with her interior paintings. She called it “open air painting indoors”.¹⁸

B e t z y: A wonderful expression! Nevertheless, it always drew me outside! After my training in Kristiania at the Royal Academy of Drawing,¹⁹ I travelled to Munich in 1881 and “*had an atelier [there] for three winters and Otto Sinding evaluated our work. Every summer I was in Norway, to study my cliffs on the coast and my ocean. My study trips to Norway lasted from the earliest of spring up to late autumn, as long as it was bearable to stay outside despite the wind and weather.*”²⁰ I was unable to study at the art academy

17 The Norwegian “Høstutstilling” [autumn exhibition] or “national art exhibition” is an annual art exhibition in Oslo. The first autumn exhibition was conceptualized in 1882 at the Christiania Art Society as a radical protest against the established bourgeois dominance. The autumn exhibition, which is now organized by the state, continues to take place to this day.

18 Marit Lange: “Harriet Backers Berliner, Düsseldorfer und Münchener Inspiration – Kunststudien im 19. Jahrhundert”, in: Lena Haselmann, Janke Klok, and Lilli Mittner (Eds.), “*Dat soll auch nicht jehen, dat soll fahren...*”. *Norwegische Künstlerinnen in Berlin* (Berliner Beiträge zur Skandinavistik 25), Berlin 2019, pp. 47-70, here p. 65.

19 The Royal Academy of Drawing and Art Christiania was established in 1818. In 1869 it was renamed The Royal Academy of Drawing and in 1911 it became the Norwegian Academy of Craft and Art Industry.

20 “I München havde jeg tre vintre atelier (...) og Otto Sinding (...) kom og tilså vores arbejder. (...) hver sommer var jeg i Norge for ved kysten at studere mine klipper og mitt hav. Mine studiereiser til Norge varede fra den tidligste vår til så længe ud på høsten, som det var mig mulig at holde ud for veir og vind.” Letter from Akersloot-Berg to C.W. Schnitler, 16.03.1907 from Belle-Île, France. Archives Museum Tromp's Huys Vlieland.

in Munich, since women were not admitted at the time.²¹ “For a brief time I studied in Vienna and here I saw a painting from the famous maritime painter Mesdag,²² and this painting’s daring treatment [of colours] captivated me.”²³ And suddenly I knew that what I wanted to be, it had a name: I wanted to be a maritime painter!

M u s i c:

*Late at Night*²⁴

Now, that everyone is sleeping
and it has become calm around the fishermen’s cottage,
the wind has shifted
towards the foreign coast;
Now that the rolling waves
have calmed
until it is light again,

now I want to lighten
my full chest on the ocean’s shore.

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- 21 Had Akersloot-Berg been there a year earlier, she might have been able to participate in an experiment that the Munich Academy conducted in 1880. The Dutch painter Wally Moes (1856-1918) wrote that in this year, the doors were briefly opened for female students. The following year, the experiment was ended. Female students were considered a disruptive element in the art milieu. It then took until 1919 for the academy to once again permit women to study. See Cora Hollema: *De Noors-Nederlandse Zeeschilderes Betzy Akersloot-Berg (1850-1922)* [...], Doctoraalscriptie (Master’s Thesis in Sociology), Amsterdam 1979, [Archives Museum Tromp’s Huys Vlieland], pp. 22-23.
- 22 Hendrik Willem Mesdag (1831-1915) was born in Groningen. His father, a banker and amateur painter, encouraged him to study art. In 1856, Mesdag married the painter Sina (Sientje) van Houten (1834-1909). After receiving an inheritance from his father, Mesdag gave up his banking profession at the age of 35 to pursue a career as a painter. He studied under Willem Roelofs (1822-1897) in Brussels and then moved to The Hague in 1868. In 1880 he received a commission from a Belgian enterprise to paint a panorama of the small town Scheveningen at the North Sea near The Hague. Due to the collaboration with his wife Sina and his students in 1881 he managed to complete an enormous painting – 14x120 metres. It is assumed that Betzy Akersloot-Berg participated in the restoration of the painting in 1888. See Marian Douma and Maartje de Haan: *Olieverf, penselen en zeewater de schildersvrienden Betzy Akersloot-Berg, Hendrik Willem Mesdag en Sientje Mesdag-van Houten*, Zwolle 2010, p. 20.
- 23 “[...] var jeg en kort tid i Wien for at studere og her fik jeg se et billede af den berømte marinemaleren Mesdag, og dette billedes djærve behandling især - fangede mig.” Letter from Akersloot-Berg to C.W. Schnitler, 16.03.1907 from Belle-Île, France. Museum Tromp’s Huys Archives.
- 24 “Sildig” [Late at Night], song by Agathe Backer Grøndahl from: *Sange ved havet* [Songs by the Sea], op. 17, no. 7. The song is performed by mezzo-soprano and piano.

Oh beloved, you who sleep far away
 silent on the pillow,
 not suspecting, which waves
 slumber on this coast,
 you reach across in your dreams –
 want to lean against my chest, –
 you do not know, that the peace is gone –
 so painful – until it is light again.

B e t z y: Yes, Agathe, it was ten years before I knew who I was; that is to say a maritime painter, a “painter of seascapes”.²⁵ The preferred genres of my colleagues – portraits, nudes, still life, interiors, everyday pictures – were out of the question for me.²⁶ Watercolours, which so many do, were also not for me. Oil paints are required to capture the ocean and sky on canvas. I thank the good lord for the invention of the paint tube, which has made open-air painting possible.²⁷ It was never easy for my critics that I deviated from the usual paths taken by female artists. In 1890, a critic wrote about my painting *At Gjesvær*²⁸ in the *Rotterdamsch Nieuwsblad*, that I created it with “*stubbornness and real masculinity*”.²⁹ He seemed to intend that as a compliment.

In order to study, I had to go abroad, but I could only paint the ocean under the open sky in Norway. Thus, travelling became my – naturally costly – everyday life. I wrote many letters requesting financial support and applying for scholarships. Over time, I came to know the formulations by heart: “*Betzy Berg, signatory of the application, sincerely requests the support of (—), in order to be able to continue her training as a maritime painter*” or “*to be able to undertake a study trip to the Norwegian coast*”.³⁰ In

25 Britt Bell calls her a “Zeeschilderes” [seascape artist] in: Britt Bell: “Betzy Akersloot-Berg. Liv og virke som kvinne og kunstner”, in: Anne Wichstrøm and Michael Hammer (Eds.): *Betzy Akersloot-Berg, 1850-1922. Minneutstilling 7.-29. september 1996, Aur Prestegård*, Aurskog 1996, pp. 19-24, here p. 21.

26 See also: Mieke Gerritsen-Kloppenborg and Henriëtte Coppes: *De kunst van het beschutte bestaan: vijf schilderessen aan het begin van deze eeuw [...]*, Heerlen 1991, p. 8, and Anne Wichstrøm: “Betzy Akersloot-Berg. En av pionerene”, in: Anne Wichstrøm and Michael Hammer (Eds.): *Betzy Akersloot-Berg, 1850-1922. Minneutstilling 7.-29. september 1996, Aur Prestegård*, Aurskog 1996, pp. 13-18, here p. 15.

27 The paint tube was invented in 1842 by the portrait painter John Goffe Rand (1801-1873).

28 Gjesvær is a village in Norway.

29 “Er is stoutheid en durven, schier mannelijkheid, in de opvatting van dit groote zeestuk”. Kunstnieuws. De Kunstclub, in: *Rotterdamsch Nieuwsblad*, Rotterdam, 21.01.1890, p. 1. Cited in Bell, “Betzy Akersloot-Berg”, p. 34.

30 “Betzy Berg, undertegnedes andragen i ärbödighed om at måtte erholde understøttelse (...) for videre at uddanne sig som marinemalerinde” and “om at måtte erholde understøttelse

order to study in Paris, I applied for a scholarship “to be able to visit a drawing school that was specially equipped for women”.³¹

Figure 1: Betzy Akersloot-Berg: *Bij Gjesvær [At Gjesvær]*, undated, circa 1890. © Betzy Akersloot-Berg. Please contact Museum Tromp's Huys Vlieland to obtain permission to use the artwork.



A g a t h e: I would describe my training as a chain of lucky circumstances. When I was a child our home was filled with music. When I was four or five years old, I already received instruction from my grandmother. Later we moved from my birthplace in Holmestrand to Kristiania, so that I could receive appropriate training in piano and composition, at least that is what I was always told. Thereafter I wanted to study in Berlin, which was not easy for my parents. I was still quite young, and my mother, in particular, would have preferred to keep me close. However, the decision was finally made, and I departed for Germany with the financial support of my “uncle” Ellef Thurmann.³² The years in Berlin were full of fantastic musical and artistic experiences. I still remember clearly the events of a

(...) for med hjælp heraf at kunne foretage et studieophold ved Norges kyst”. Letters from Betzy Berg to the Royal Academy of Art and Craft Industry Kristiania, 1884 and 1886. Archives Museum Tromp's Huys Vlieland.

- 31 “frekventere en av de dersteds for kvinder indrettede tegneskoler.” In: Wichstrøm, Betzy, p. 14.
 32 Lena Haselmann: *Agathe Backer Grøndahl – von Norwegen nach Berlin. Professionelle Musikausbildung im 19. Jahrhundert* (Internationale Hochschulschriften 641), Münster and New York 2018, p. 123.

typical day: "Arise from bed at 7am, eat at 8, Tuesday and Friday practice until 1pm, the other days I was with Kullack every morning, Monday and Thursday I play on my own, Tuesday and Friday afternoon, I help teach, Saturday morning I receive instruction in theory and methodology, which consists of lectures for future teachers [...]. There I sit with a student at a mute little piano and have her do finger exercises, while from two other rooms, pretty pieces by Chopin and Schumann are played in different keys, which one might despair of, while I unceasingly count one, two, one, two, until I am quite thirsty; but then it is also a blessing to go to a confectioner on Leipzig Street and to indulge myself in a truly sizeable cream puff."³³

Narrator: Culinary Intermezzo: Cream puffs are served and can be eaten by the audience while the conversation continues.

Betty: What an impressive description of your day-to-day life as an artist, Agathe! And I truly understand that teaching music is quite different from expressing yourself by playing or composing music. I, too, remember my training, in Munich and Paris, as well as later with Mesdag in The Hague. Those years were intense and strenuous. For me the work is the "highlight of life",³⁴ even though it has not always been easy. I often had to struggle with my motifs. For example, when the Norwegian barge *Perle* crashed not far from Vlieland in 1897, one of the drowned castaways was washed up on the shore and I absolutely wanted to paint it. Nevertheless, the mayor forbade it. I solved that problem by asking one of the island residents to lie down in the same way with upholstered fabric.³⁵ I also remember one time, when I gave sewing classes for young girls on Vlieland, which I did regularly in order to tell them about my faith, suddenly a storm began.³⁶ I could not stay inside any longer. I had to run to the sand dunes, to paint them.

33 "Op Kl. 7, spiser 8, spiller til 1 Tirsdag og Fredag, de andre Dage er jeg hver Formiddag hos Kullack [sic], Mandag og Torsdag spiller jeg selv, Tirsdag og Fredag er jeg Hilfslærerinde, Onsdag og Lørdag Formiddag har jeg Theori og Methodiktide, som bestaar i Forelæsninger for dem som vil blive Lærerinder. [...] Der sidder jeg med en Elev ved et stumt lidet Claver, og lader hende spille Fingerøvelser, mens det fra to andre Værelser spilles i forskellige Tonearter smukke Stykker af Chopin og Schumann, det er til at blive fortvivlet over, imedens teller jeg ein [sic], zwei, ein zwei uophørlig til jeg bliver ganske tørst; men da er det ogsaa en Velsignelse at gaa ind til en Conditor i Leipzigerstraße og faa sig en rigtig stor Windbeutel med Krème." Agathe Backer Grøndahl to Inger Kathrine Smith Petersen, Autumn 1865. Cited according to National Library Oslo, Letter Collection, Brevs. 879; see Haselmann, *Agathe Backer Grøndahl*, p. 142.

34 Bell writes: "Arbeid er livets lyspunkt", in: Bell, "Betzy Akersloot-Berg. Liv og virke som kvinne og kunstner", p. 21.

35 Betzy Akersloot-Berg: *Drenkeling* [The Drowned], 1897.

36 Religion played an important role for Betzy Akersloot-Berg. She had a strong Christian believe and was a member of the lay community Vergadering van gelovigen [Assemblies of

I thus dismissed the girls 15 minutes before we were due to end. One of them helped me carry my painter's box outside. I had asked a carpenter to build it for me. Thus, I could paint more or less protected from wind and rain. I saw that due to the tides the beach had become quite narrow. I placed my easel and then I only had eyes for the stormy sea. It was not always easy to stand upright when I painted under difficult conditions. When I was on the Lofoten Islands in the summer of 1892 I went out on the Arctic Ocean with a whaler. The boat began to rock so strongly that I could no longer paint, but someone helped tie me to the mast.³⁷ During my travels along the Norwegian coast I sought out lighthouses. Once I asked a lighthouse keeper to rope me down in a box, in order to study the waves from up close.³⁸ He was quite astonished, since no one had ever asked him to do that before.

A g a t h e: Unfathomable! There is also a splendid anecdote from my travels: unaccompanied middle-class women travelling in Southern Europe were very unusual. *"None of us understood the dangers we were exposing ourselves to. [I] had in fact bought a 'Totenschläger' [death club]. [I] kept it hidden in my bag, my hand on the lithe stick, and I was sure to strike in case of an attack. In this way we experienced Naples; after all we had to see Vesuvius, Pompeii, and Capri's blue grotto. [...] We were never truly afraid. [I] had my death club after all, though there were moments in which we suspected there was danger! And then Rome: What an experience! [...]"*³⁹ It is exciting how alluring but also foreign life abroad is.

B e t z y: Yes, after I had seen Mesdag's painting in Vienna I travelled to The Hague. Artistically those were important years for me. I painted the returning fishermen

brethren]. During her years on the isle Vlieland she taught girls about her believe during sewing classes.

37 Henk P. Medema: "Woest en grommend springt het water. Een rusteloos verlangen dreef Betzy Berg, dochter van de romantiek van plek naar plek", in: *Reformatiorisch Dagblad*, 27.10.1995. Akersloot-Berg was not the first painter to be tied to a mast: when he was 70 years old, the English painter William Turner (1775-1851), like Odysseus before him, had himself tied to the mast, in order to be closer to the waves (see David van Reybrouck: *Odes*, Amsterdam 2018, pp. 208-209). This episode thus indicates Betzy's knowledge of the painting practices of other maritime painters.

38 Bell, "Betzy Akersloot-Berg. Liv og virke som kvinne og kunstner", p. 22.

39 "Ingen av os forstod farene vi utsatte oss for. Riktignok hadde min søster kjøpt en totenschläger, gjemt i lommen holdt hun haanden om den smidige stok, og var viss paa, at hun vilde slå til, om jeg blev angrepet. [...] Neapel, for vi maatte jo se Vesuv, Pompei og Capris blaa grotte. [...] Egentlig rædde var vi aldrig. Agathe hadde jo sin totenschläger, men der kom dog øieblikker, hvor vi fik en anelse om, at der fandtes farer." This quote is from Harriet Backer, but we allow her sister Agathe to say it here. Lange, *Harriet Backer*, pp. 276-277.

on the shores of Scheveningen. I became a member of the Pulchri Art Society,⁴⁰ where I painted and exhibited. There I also met the Dutch Queen Wilhelmina, who was also a member of the society. She had her own 'back door', so that she could come and go without being seen.⁴¹ Sientje Mesdag, who was also a member, painted a portrait of me. When my husband Gooswinus and I bought our house on – of course – Vlieland in 1896, I hung it up there, where it still is today.⁴² I love being on Vlieland. I find the island resembles a ship with the ocean all around me.⁴³ What fascinates me are all the colours and forms the water could take. That is what I try to capture again and again.

M u s i c:

*As I Sailed Past your House*⁴⁴

As I sailed past your house,
I could not grasp,
that it was you, who lay hidden inside,
you the most precious of my treasures.

When the sun has left the mourning earth,
her flames swallowed by the ocean's waves,
you lie motionless, my precious treasure,
hidden in the stone-walled chamber.

You wait.
High on the wild seas,

40 Pulchri Studio (1847): Pulchri means “by practicing the fine arts”.

41 Thera Coppens: “Schilderes Koningin Wilhelmina en Haar Kunstvrienden”, in: *Artikelen van Thera Coppens*, <https://www.theracoppens.nl/artikelen/197-schilderes-koningin-wilhelmina-en-haar-kunstvrienden.html> (accessed on October 23, 2020), originally in: *Vorsten*, October 2002.

42 Akersloot-Berg was proud to give the oldest house on Vlieland, which she and her husband had bought in 1896, the name Tromp's Huys. It is assumed that she did so in memory of Cornelis Tromp (1629-1691), who was important in both Norwegian and Dutch maritime history. Bell, *Betzy Akersloot-Berg*, p. 49.

43 Betzy Akersloot-Berg in a letter to Betzy Voorhoeve, 25.05.1919: “Julie denken misschien, dat wij ons vervelen hier op ons groote fregat – zee aan alle kanten – werkelijk niet – ik bemin de zee [...]” [“You probably think that we are bored on our big frigate – the ocean on all sides – no, truly not, I love the ocean.”], in: Archives Museum Tromp's Huys Vlieland.

44 “Og da jeg seiled dit Hus forbi” [As I Sailed Past your House], Song by Agathe Backer Grøn-dahl from: *Sange ved havet* [Songs by the Sea], op. 17, no. 3. The song is performed by mezzo-soprano and piano.

your Viking struggles with the barge.
 He has not yet learned to die,
 has to sail his path without you.

Figure 2: Betzy Akersloot-Berg, *Noordzeestrand [North Sea Shore]*, undated, circa 1900. © Betzy Akersloot-Berg. Please contact Museum Tromp's Huys Vlieland to obtain permission to use the artwork.



B e t z y: Art for me is a gift from God. It is my destiny. *“For me personally, there is no style, only the ocean and the Norwegian cliffs are my area of expertise.”*⁴⁵ At the same time, my paintings are also my earnings. I have to sell most of them in order to be able to live from my art. That was often emotionally difficult for me. I later copied my favourite paintings. However, again and again, my money fell short and I had to sell them again. Usually, private buyers purchased my work. In addition, I tried to generate new sources of revenue. For example, I have an agreement with the *Folkeblad* in Northern Norway, declaring that they are permitted to use my paintings to illustrate their articles. They also regularly buy a couple of my paintings that they offer as prizes in a lottery. How is that for you, Agathe? Can you live from your art?

A g a t h e: After the loss of concert revenues, not the least because my hearing is so poor, it has become difficult since we moved here to the island. *“There are not as many students as there once were, as a natural consequence of us living out here and I expect that bit by bit they will completely stop coming, just as so many things did. And then,*

45 Bell, “Betzy Akersloot-Berg”, p. 22.

I haven't the slightest idea what will happen [...] There are so many unpaid debts that, if my husband was to see them, he would barely be able to sleep due to worrying about our existence, so I hide them and try to pay them one by one... He is actually angry with me because I have not earned anything in a long time. Marriage hardens even the most sensitive nature. Everything would be much easier and require less money, if we lived in the city, where work is better compensated, to live out here, one has to shoulder quite a bit.”⁴⁶ Above all, I am happy about the pieces I have been able to compose and hope that my music will be performed for many years to come, even when I can no longer give concerts myself. I enjoy simply looking out at the fjord, which presents me with a new face every day. Once in a while, I leaf through concert announcements and reviews. Art, music, nature, sky, ocean, and the amicable people who surround us, these are what make life worth living. I hope you have many years ahead as a practicing painter, dear Betzy, and that many more distant sounds will fly to me.

M u s i c:

*Distant Sounds*⁴⁷

I want to carry you
 on my songs,
 like the waves
 carry the fisherman's dinghy;
 gently cradled,
 back and forth,
 and the beat whistles from the rudder post.

And the fisher boy,
 who lies at the helm,
 daydreaming about her,
 he knows,

46 Letter to her son Nils, 27.01.1902 “Eleverne [er] ikke er saa mange som ellers som naturlig Følge af at vi bo herude, [og jeg] imødeser at det lidt efter lidt forsvinder det ogsaa, ligesom meget Andet, og da ved jeg sanledig ikke hvordan det skal gaa [...] I det hele ligger her saa mange ubetalte Regninger, at hvis min mann saa dem vilde han ikke faa sove for Nærings-sorger, saa jeg gjemmer dem og ser at faa betalt dem efterhaanden. Riktignok faar jeg mine Skjænd fordi han ingen Penger faar af mig i længre Tid, men Ægteskabet hæder selv den mest sensible Natur [...] Alt vilde jo være langt lettere og vore Udgifter mindre hvis vi boede i Byen hvor ogsaa Arbeide vilde lønne sig bedre, men det gjelder jo bare at slide sig ud for at bo herude, ved Du.” Agathe Backer Grøndahl to Nils Backer-Grøndahl [sic], in: Dahm, *Agathe Backer Grøndahl*, p. 248.

47 “Fjerne toner” [Distant Sounds], Song by Agathe Backer Grøndahl from: *Sange ved havet* [Songs by the Sea], op. 17, no. 4. The song is performed by mezzo-soprano and piano.

he listens to the song
and thinks that the boat
is not broad enough
for all his thoughts.

N a r r a t o r: Betzy Akersloot-Berg continued her artwork until she died in 1922. Thanks to the postcards that she regularly exchanged with her husband, and which she collected in an album, it is possible to retrace her travels. Agathe Backer Grøn-dahl, who was three years older, withdrew from concert life in 1904. Her ability to hear had permanently deteriorated over many years until she was almost deaf. She died in 1907.

***** [End of Dramatic Assemblage] *****

Dramatic Assemblage as an Academic Practice

The dramatic assemblage is an academic practice, which, similar to Beatrix Borchard's "gap-writing", uses a collage of sources as a research method in biography.⁴⁸ Here numerous stories about coincidental encounters, sources, and inter-connections play a role that is not to be underestimated. Paying attention to these coincidences makes our thinking dynamic and is able to create new turns and perspectives in cultural, literary, and music-historical research. No pre-established catalogue of questions can replace this way of gaining knowledge. It is the boxes and bundles under the bed, the suitcases and drawers, the rejected duplicates and private collections that provide us with information about the cultural activities of men and women. Not only should this material be brought to life for today's readers and listeners, but it should also show how, to use Toril Moi's terms, "language and attention" are necessary to reflect reality.⁴⁹ An important starting point is knowing that ego-documents, concert programmes, and announcements etc. can be read in that sense as artistic works (such as paintings, poems, compositions etc.), and hence it is necessary "[...] to continually question and reinterpret the results of the analysis."⁵⁰ In "traditional" heroic historiography the focus lies

48 Beatrix Borchard: "Mit Schere und Klebstoff. Montage als wissenschaftliches Verfahren in der Biographik", in: Corinna Herr and Monika Woitas (Eds.): *Musik mit Methode. Neue kulturwissenschaftliche Perspektiven*, Köln 2006, pp. 47-62.

49 Toril Moi: *Språk og oppmerksomhet*, Oslo 2013, p. 15.

50 Original: "die Ergebnisse der Auswertung immer wieder zu hinterfragen und neu zu deuten", Beatrix Borchard: "Lücken schreiben. Oder: Montage als biographisches Verfahren", in: Hans Erich Bödeker (ed.): *Biographie schreiben*, Göttingen 2003, pp. 211-241, here pp. 230-231. Translation by the authors.

on heroes who should serve as “role models”.⁵¹ This, however, generates a one-sided picture of a person’s life. With a dramatic assemblage a multidimensional depiction of a person’s life can be conveyed with the aid of numerous narrative voices. In the case of Backer Grøndahl, the image of a humble pianist and industrious composer was passed on and reproduced in a male-dominated music culture. In Akersloot-Berg’s case, the dominant image was that of an unconventional artistic genius.

The dramatic assemblage is an attempt to depict various aspects of these individuals, as well as the difficult, at times less glamorous but also surprising, everyday life of our “heroines and heroes”, including their challenges and experiences of work. One of the fundamental characteristics of a dramatic assemblage – to show rather than to explain – is motivated by the idea of allowing readers to get as close to the historical actors as possible. There is an emotional connotation inherent to source genres such as correspondences, journals, as well as ego-documents, since the spectator becomes part of the figure’s life.⁵² Initiating a process of identification with historical figures opens up the possibility of stepping into the everyday life of the past through fiction.⁵³

In the following section, we would like to examine the three developmental stages of the dramatic assemblage more closely: stage 1 – collecting and assembling sources, stage 2 – performing, and stage 3 – reception and identification. We will not be considering the individual media (images, music, and text); rather we will explain the significance of the assemblage through their interplay. Based on the idea that music is thought in motion,⁵⁴ we understand music as a mode of transferring knowledge. Our understanding of the concept includes the duration of the performance, as well as the lyrics and the music as an aesthetic experience. In our case, music is thus another carrier of meaning in addition to paintings and literature. Meaning arises in the intersection of all those elements.⁵⁵

51 Original: “klassischen” and “Vor-Bilder”, *ibid.*, pp. 216, 217. Translation by the authors.

52 See Marius Wulfsberg: “Innledning”, in: Mette Witting Refslund and Marius Wulfsberg (Eds.): *Camilla Collett. Brev til Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson*, Oslo 2015, pp. 4-21, here p. 12. In his analysis of the letters from the Norwegian author Camilla Collett (1813-1895) to her colleague Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson (1832-1910), Wulfsberg emphasizes that the letter genre is frequently connected to *closeness*.

53 The latter is evident, for example, in the affective reactions of listeners to a previous dramatic assemblage in the form of a surprising potential of identification, see Klok and Haselmann, “Camilla Collett and Agathe Backer Grøndahl”, p. 110-113.

54 See Marianne Steffen-Witteck, Dorothea Weise and Dierk Zaiser (Eds.): *Rhythmik – Musik und Bewegung: Transdisziplinäre Perspektiven* (Musik und Klangkultur 29), Bielefeld 2019, pp. 11-24.

55 See Janina Wildfeuer (Ed.): *Building Bridges for Multimodal Research: International Perspectives on Theories and Practices of Multimodal Analysis* (Sprache – Medien – Innovationen 7), Frankfurt a.M 2015.

Stage 1: Collecting and Assembling Sources

During the collection stage, working with poems, songs, journal entries, as well as music and paintings allows interdisciplinary work beyond the traditional disciplines. The turning and flipping of different types of sources, together with the manifold modes of materiality and form, reveal how history is constructed, and at the same time produce a closeness to the material. Holding the actual materials which we are working with in our hands (the postcards, the letters, the journals, the first editions, the portrait photos) is a fundamental prerequisite for the results of our collective thought process, and ultimately for the form of this chapter. In comparison to traditional heroic historiography, in which the superlative, originality, scope, and complexity control the narrative, here the narrative categories are in no way preconceived. They evolve from the material.

Focusing on the cultural actions and the everyday lives of the creators, instead of on the history of their works, makes coincidental stories and interconnections visible. Furthermore, the assemblage technique makes it possible to create layers of history, and to not have to decide on one all-encompassing story – to allow it to exist in its fragmentation. This permits a different form of attention from that of the traditional scholarly sequencing of sources, which is then often “homogenized” and thus flattened. In order to thwart this process, the different types of sources are collected and evaluated. Regardless of whether it may be a string quartet or a song, a dedication or an autobiography, a note in a journal or a painting – every type of source holds potential meaning, which provides information about the cultural activities of people. Cultural memory is thus also tied to materiality.⁵⁶

Stage 2: The Multimodal Performance of the Dramatic Assemblage

The performance of a dramatic assemblage makes it possible to breathe new life into the material for contemporary audiences, thus renewing the significance of 19th century lyrics. Since the lyrics comprehensibly draw on different sources, the performance creates the space for spectators to evoke their own individual interpretations. In this way, they themselves participate in the process, giving meaning to the text, or, in the words of Borchard, they “generate history”.⁵⁷ With the performance the audience is introduced to the actual principles of historical work: that just like artworks, ego-documents and other publications (such as concert pro-

56 Susanne Rode-Breyman and Sven Limbeck (Eds.): *Verklingend und ewig. Tausend Jahre Musik-gedächtnis 800-1800*, Wolfenbüttel 2011.

57 Borchard, “Lücken schreiben”, p. 241.

grammes and announcements) can be read in different ways, and that it is necessary “[...] to always question and reinterpret the results of the analysis”.⁵⁸

Figure 3: Performing the dramatic assemblage at the Nordnorsk Kunstmuseum in June 2019. Janke Klok reading the text for Betzy Akersloot-Berg, Lena Haselmann the text for Agathe Backer Grøndahl and Lilli Mittner reading the narrator. © RESCAPE. CC BY-NC-ND 4.0



Attention changes when one reads a text by a person instead of about them. Personal experiences, often found in ego-documents, move us more intensely, making the story, whether it is fictional or true, more authentic, and bringing us closer to the historical protagonists, as if they were sitting here now, next to us in the room. This increased attention in turn allows participants to find new perspectives in and about the material: we would have missed the feeling of enjoying the cream puffs and the feeling of freedom felt by the young Agathe Backer Grøndahl in Berlin had we not learned this from the letter to her cousin and relived it by tasting real cream puffs in the Nordnorsk Kunstmuseum.

Stage 3: Workshop – Reception and Interaction

In the subsequent workshop the audience was divided into five groups with each group receiving identical materials: original quotes from the ego-documents, paintings by Akersloot-Berg in postcard format, and sheet music from Backer

⁵⁸ Ibid., pp. 230–231.

Grøndahl's compositions, which they had listened to earlier. The participants were invited – like the researchers – to be creative and to assemble a collage.

Figure 4: Sample collage created during the workshop at the Nordnorsk Kunstmuseum 2019. © RESCAPE. CC BY-NC-ND 4.0



The artists and researchers of the above-described dramatic assemblage were present and observed the process, however, they did not direct it. There is no right or wrong in this creative process. In this way, each participant can slip into the role of an “artist-researcher” and take part in the co-creation. Observing this pro-

cess delivers interesting insights into the reception of a dramatic assemblage. The “holding-in-the-hand” of miniature copies of paintings, the easel, the bundles with the “unknown” contents – all of this is part of the assemblage experience and of working with the sources; it is a way of researching that we want to convey. Conversations about the origins and meanings of sources erupt between the participants. Possibilities for organizing the material were discussed, tested, and discarded again. One group, for example, focused strongly on the sequence of the text fragments, while another group cut up the pictures and sheet music. Using different colours, they drew connections between the newly produced fragments. The audience brought a variety of new possibilities into the workshop. We could observe that the participants were highly engaged. In conversations sparked by the concrete materials, new questions arose and were discussed. The participants expressed repeatedly: “It is as if we grew close to both women.” Within the frame of an expanded concept of knowledge which defines empathy as embodied knowledge,⁵⁹ this means that cultural historical understanding takes place on a level that is beyond the rational. The workshop confirmed our assumption that music opens new paths for the participants to produce relations between the presented source fragments and their own realities.

Summary and Outlook

As a method the dramatic assemblage turns traditional narrative patterns upside down: it is no longer the individual authority who, based on expertise, passes on “facts” to the audience. Instead, it is the dialogue between the reconstructed people, who are the focus of the assemblage, which allows and demands the empathy and interpretation of the audience. One of the key insights gained from working with this method is that the boundaries between researchers and creative actors have to be redrawn. The dramatic assemblage proves itself as an academic practice: it creates practical and theoretical spaces to think, inspiring new scholarly questions, re-examining history, literary texts, and ego-documents. The dramatic assemblage is thus a suitable experimental arrangement for developing scholarly curiosity, and for generating and appropriating historical knowledge. By integrating the performative element, it also holds tremendous potential as an educational practice. The call to re-arrange given materials, which were previously presented in their entirety, has extensive didactic and pedagogic implications. The interactive-performative part of the method aims to ensure that teaching is part of research, just as research is part of teaching. The script of the performance can thus be un-

59 Nivedita Gangopadhyay: “Introduction: Embodiment and Empathy, Current Debates in Social Cognition”, in: *Topoi* 33 (2014), no. 1, pp. 117-27, here p. 117.

derstood as a form of mediation, in which using two or more voices as well as including images and music, contributes to different kinds of actualization.

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