PUBLIC PRACTICES OF COMMEMORATIVE MOURNING:
RITUALIZED SPACE, POLITICIZED SPACE,
MEDIATED SPACE.
THREE CASES FROM THE NETHERLANDS

IRENE STENGS

This article will focus on the constitution of space through public practices of commemorative mourning. In order to include different angles of view, I will discuss three formats of public mourning. Case 1 follows a roadside memorial in the city of Amsterdam during its five years (2002-present) of existence; Case 2 concerns the commemorative practices performed after the death of the Dutch singer André Hazes (2004); Case 3 discusses part of the commemorative practices that followed upon the violent death of the Dutch moviemaker Theo van Gogh (2005). Although the persons commemorated the causes of their deaths, and the scale and contents of the subsequent mourning rituals differed widely, a comparative perspective will provide a better view on the relationship between ritual and space. First, I will argue that ritual (or, maybe better, ritualized) space is essentially politicized space. Second, I will address the constitutive power of media and mediation in constructing ritual(ized) space. Third, I will contemplate on the working of ritual on place and space and elaborate on the difference between ritual space and ritualized space. Fourth, I will show that ritualized space cannot be understood as confined to a concrete, geographically demarcated place.¹

Case 1. The Dappermarkt roadside memorial

Spring 2002. I join two men standing in contemplation at a bunch of flowers tied to a post on a corner of the Dappermarkt, an Amsterdam street market. Here, a few months earlier, a four-year-old boy on his bike was run over by a garbage truck, in the pedestrian area. Driving in the reverse, the driver had overlooked the toddler. A line of metal posts demarcates the pedestrian area. Somebody has tied a bunch of flowers to the post closest to the spot where the accident happened, together with a photograph and the boy’s name. The men share their dissatisfaction about the ‘fact’ that the garbage truck driver who had killed the boy was most probably just continuing his job in another area of the city.

For me, this was the first time that I took consciously notice of such a memorial: it raised my professional awareness of the very existence of the phenomenon called ‘roadside memorials’. Until so far I had not questioned their ‘self-evident presences’. Maybe its location, in my own neighbourhood, triggered my interest, and not much later I started a research on, what I loosely call, ‘new public rituals in the Netherlands’. The location allowed me to follow the memorial over the years.

This brief introduction already illustrates the immediate impact of roadside memorials: the memorial made the men and me interrupt our initial ‘doings’ to stand for a while and to engage in a conversation. In other words, the memorial, basic as it was, had transformed this place, a small part of public space, into something inviting or compelling other ways of doing than in ordinary public space. This contribution seeks to understand this transformation by exploring the performative qualities of roadside memorials, rather than the personal motivations of the people who erected the memorial. This implies a focus on the interplay of roadside memorials with their environment and audience. As will become apparent later, this interplay is not limited to the direct, physical environment of the respective memorial and the people who happen to pass there, but also happens in a wider sphere defined by other, related monuments and people’s perceptions of them.

In the first months the Dappermarkt memorial consisted of a regularly refreshed bunch of flowers and the picture of the boy. But about half a year later it was given a more solid shape. Now, a rectangular slab of black granite, about one square meter in size, marked the place of
In the Netherlands, the existence of roadside memorials is a recent development. This is demonstrated, for instance, by the fact that the Dutch word for roadside memorial, *bermmonument*, made its first appearance in the Dutch press in 2002 (*NRC Handelsblad* 29-12-2002) (see Stengs: ‘Roadside Mourning’ (2004)).

For an urban roadside memorial such a three-dimensional shape is exceptional, at least in the Netherlands. As a consequence of the limitations that the environment imposes, the more permanent ‘road traffic victim’ memorials that exist in urban areas show little variation: they consist of plaques or tiles in the pavement or a wall, as three-dimensional marks are usually considered unacceptable in the often narrow streets. The posts made the memorial three-dimensional, and reinforced its message that this was a sacred place to the extent that it was impossible to step on the stone otherwise than by mischief. A marble teddy bear inlay mentioned the name of the boy and the dates of his birth and death. Basically, the slab did not differ from a contemporary child’s gravestone, albeit at level with the pedestrian area.

In addition, a new message was attached to the ‘original’ memorial post, comprising a photograph and a text, addressing the public:

Miguel
Born 25-12-1997
killed 27-2-2002

Dear people

On this spot, a child lost its life.
Here, school friends, acquaintances and family
place regularly toys, stuffed animals, and flowers
in commemoration of this child.

Please do not take these away!

My impression of the place as a grave – as a sacralised space – was clearly not shared by every passer-by. Watching the spot, I saw some people take care to avoid stepping on the stone, while others apparently did not bother or possibly had not noticed the stone at all.

Somewhere between Miguel’s day of birth (25 December), Christmas Day 2003 and Valentine Day 2004, the stone had been demarcated with four typically Amsterdam street posts (the so-called *Amsteldammetjes*) and a frame of fresh tiles in a lighter shade of grey than the surrounding pavement. The posts made the memorial three-dimensional, and reinforced its message that this was a sacred place to the extent that it was impossible to step on the stone otherwise than by

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3 For an urban roadside memorial such a three-dimensional shape is exceptional, at least in the Netherlands. As a consequence of the limitations that the environment imposes, the more permanent ‘road traffic victim’ memorials that exist in urban areas show little variation: they consist of plaques or tiles in the pavement or a wall, as three-dimensional marks are usually considered unacceptable in the often narrow streets. In a Dutch city it is virtually impossible to erect a memorial without permission of the city authorities (in contrast with the countryside or non-urbanized areas). Urban memorials, therefore may also testify of the initiators’ will power and persuasiveness, or, occasionally, of their social status as well (see Stengs: ‘Roadside Mourning’ (2004)).
Figure 1. The Dappermarkt memorial during Christmas time, 2003
Figure 2. The Dappermarkt memorial during Christmas time, 2003
purpose. This increasing demarcation of the spot well illustrates Durkheim’s definition of the sacred: that what is isolated from the profane by its distinct heterogeneity. I will follow this matter-of-fact understanding of sacredness.

From the first day of the memorial’s existence, this part of the space originally destined by city-authorities and planners as pavement had been transformed into a memorial space. But the place’s new quality had eventually become undeniable through its shape as a three-dimensional object in the midst of the pavement. The memorial exerted a spatial impact on all passers-by, who, willingly or not, had to adapt their paths, thereby forcing its presence upon their awareness. Michel de Certeau’s insights on the distinction between strategies and tactics may be helpful to understand such working of roadside memorials, be they two- or three-dimensional. Strategies, according to De Certeau, are products of the institutional powers in society, a calculation of acts and forces to steer the processes in their outer environment, distinct from their well-delineated selves. Pedestrian areas, street designs and city planning are part of the domain of such powers. Tactics, on the other hand, belong to ‘the weak’, the ordinary people for whom the outer world is not theirs: ‘(A) tactic insinuates itself into the other’s place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance’. A roadside memorial can be regarded as a tactic, resisting or questioning the self-evident nature of the space defined as a pedestrian area, but questionable itself as well. In De Certeau’s perception people shape their understanding of their environment through their everyday practices of walking or dwelling. Understanding one’s environment happens through narratives of ‘pedestrian speech acts’. By creating ‘spatial stories’ people appropriate places, making them ‘a place of their own’, but – is my addition – in a way invisible for others.

Figure 3. The Dappermarkt memorial with Valentine decorations, February 2004
Figure 4. The Dappermarkt memorial with Valentine decorations, February 2004

Figure 5. The Dappermarkt memorial, March 2004
A roadside memorial forms a twofold infringe upon the ways public space is defined and perceived. As an ‘illegal’ practice it infringes upon the exclusive rights of the authorities to destine and design public space. As ‘a narrative become visible’ it infringes upon the hidden narratives of passers-by connected to this specific place. In De Certeau’s terms a roadside memorial is a spatial practice narrating the violent death of a person, narrating a story that ‘haunts’ a specific space.9 Such a narrative has the potential to insert itself into the personal narratives through which individual city-dwellers inhabit their places. We should note, however, that a roadside memorial can only alter the dominant perception of a specific space to a limited extent (cf. De Certeau). Lefebvre’s distinction between conceived space (espace conçu) and lived space (espace vécu) may be helpful here.10 Conceived space is space as it appears to policy makers in terms of destinations and regulations. In our case, the Dappermarkt memorial remains ‘space destined as pedestrian area’ for them. Lived space is space as experienced and shaped by people in their day-to-day lives. For our topic of discussion, this implies that the people who actually stand, walk, speak or conduct their rituals on that place can experience the demarcated site as sacred.

The two different perceptions of space reflect differences in power. The memorial’s informal status of perpetrating upon prevailing regulations, its unorganized ‘coming into being’ distinguishes it from places that are specifically destined for ritual, like graveyards, churches, and official monuments. In order to acknowledge this specific type of space, I therefore prefer to speak of roadside memorials as ritualized space rather than ritual space. ‘Ritualized’ does more justice to the dynamic nature of this particular transformation of place into space and its impermanence.

In its eventual solid, material form, the Dappermarkt memorial was no longer ephemeral, but not a truly static, permanent object either. In the first place, its appearance changed in the course of time, following the annual calendar. The passing of time found ritual expression at the memorial in the form of specific decorations to suit national holidays or national events (like international football competitions), significant days on the deceased or his relatives’ private calendar, or, for instance the advent of spring. That the memorial was only a semi-permanent

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structure, became eventually clear in spring 2005, when the Dapperstraat, the street where the Dappermarkt is located, was completely redesigned and re-paved. When the new pavement was ready, the memorial appeared to have been entirely removed. I interpreted this as a sign that the city authorities had only tolerated such an extensive memorial in the midst of a pedestrian area because the already upcoming renovation would imply a ‘natural end’ to the memorial. My assumption would prove wrong, however. After two years of absence, the memorial was restored, albeit on a slightly different location this time, and without the four posts. A portrait of Miguel was now part of the stone as an inlay. Decorative plants, flowers and lights still come and disappear. The renewed placing had probably happened around Miguel’s day of birth (25 December) in 2006. Since then, a new private party has entered the contest about the meaning and function of this part of public space: a market stand selling Turkish pizzas and other snacks has set up its chairs and tables immediately next to the memorial.

Figure 6. The Dappermarkt memorial, April 2007
Figure 7. The Dappermarkt memorial, July 2007
I now have come to the point to ask what message or messages roadside memorials actually convey. Like all ritual, roadside memorials do not convey one-dimensional or homogeneous messages or meanings. There is not just one single reading of the Dappermarkt memorial. For instance, it inspired the two men introduced above to render a narrative of anger towards and blame on the side of the garbage truck driver. But I encountered also a narrative of shame and guilt on the side of the mother. In this narrative the boy had died because she needed to buy some marihuana in the ‘coffee shop’\textsuperscript{11} at the corner. Since nobody below the age of eighteen is allowed to enter a coffee shop, she had to leave her child outside. It was around 6 PM, and dusk was falling. The market had closed already, the stands were broken down, and sweepers and garbage collectors were tidying the street. The garbage truck driver had not seen the boy while manoeuvring his truck. With some people, this narrative evokes sympathy and understanding for the memorial’s existence. For others, it is reason to reject it.

One narrative strand, however, is shared by all roadside memorials: all such memorials testify of the violent and unexpected deaths of the respective victims commemorated. Irrespective any other narrative related to a memorial, and irrespective these make people sympathize or disapprove, this message cannot be denied. This gives roadside memorials a more immediate political dimension, which, as I will argue below, is inevitably evoked the very moment a memorial is established.

In the Dutch public debate the question is often asked why the bereaved – if they are in need for a place to commemorate – do not turn to graves, society’s traditional location for mourning and contemplation. One might thus wonder what memorials do offer that graves do not, a question that seems the more relevant since many memorials appear to be moulded after the example of a grave. What differentiates graves from memorials, apart from the absence of a body in case of the latter? Similar to graves or grave-monuments roadside memorials can be understood as a form of mediation between the world of the dead and the world of the living. Both prolong, so to say, the social presence of the deceased.\textsuperscript{12} But do memorials and graves mediate the same indeed? I suggest that the difference in location – the public domain opposed to the relatively sheltered environment of the graveyard – is significant. In

\textsuperscript{11} ‘Coffee shop’ is the Dutch euphemism for a location where soft drugs are sold.

\textsuperscript{12} E. Hallam & J. Hockey: Death, Memory & Material Culture (Oxford 2001).
the case of a grave, the extended social presence of the deceased remains limited to the personal perception shared by family and friends. But a roadside memorial, a material testimony accentuating the cause of death, not only prolongs the deceased’s social presence, but adds to his social identity the aspect of being a road traffic victim. A similar argument holds for other victims who are commemorated in the public domain (see I. STENGES: ‘Ephemeral Memorials against ‘Senseless Violence’: Materialisations of Public Outcry’, in *Etnofoor* 16,2 (2003) 26-40; IDEM: ‘Commemorating Victims of ‘Senseless Violence’: Negotiating Ethnic Inclusion and Exclusion’, in P.J. MAR- GRY & H. ROODENBURG (eds.): *Between Otherness and Authenticity. Reframing Dutch Culture* (Aldershot 2007) 159-179 on the identity of victims of ‘senseless violence’).

Herewith, intentionally or not, the relatives place the victim in the political context of protest against ‘the ongoing traffic disaster’. The ritualized space of the roadside memorial is therefore inherently also a politicized space. And perhaps even more important for our understanding, this space is not limited to the immediate environment of the actual spot where a specific memorial is located, but stretches to – and from – all those many roadside memorials and other traffic-related places of commemoration: it is social as well as spatial space.

Case 2. Commemorating André Hazes

This section will focus on the power of ritual performance, and the significance of the media in the ritualisation of death, at least of the death of celebrities. Dutch celebrity and singer André Hazes (generally known and addressed as ‘André’, a custom I will follow) died on September 23, 2004. André belonged to a specific category of popular ballad singers, the so-called *levenslied* singers. The Dutch music genre *Levenslied* (literally ‘song of life’) is maybe best described as a genre based on sentimental, corny or torch songs. Its main characteristics are the content and idiom of the lyrics (love, hardship, loneliness) in combination with a specific opera- or operetta-like vocal technique. Not only the musical dimension, but also the singer’s background form an essential ingredient

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15 A growing number of monuments are being erected in commemoration of one specific category of victims, such as all traffic victims, or all youths or casualties within a certain municipality. This happens in both the Netherlands and elsewhere (see STENGES: ‘Individual and Collective Memorials’ (2005)).
of the *levenslied* performance. In the case of André, the combination of his ‘authentic’ Amsterdam working class background with a certain sentimentality designated him as a *levenslied* performer. In the 1970s Tim Griek, André’s most important producer, added elements from another genre, pop music, to André’s *levenslied* songs, creating the new subgenre *levenspop* (‘life pop’). The genre is sometimes described as *polder blues*, a description that resonates with André’s own desire to be seen as a blues singer and composer.

The *levenslied* genre is not appreciated by the Dutch populace as a whole. Like its performers, it belongs to a particular social layer of society. The genre is to a large extent the music of white, autochthonous, lower-income, lower-educated Dutch, most aficionado’s being working class or, for a lesser part, middle class. As such, it has never been taken seriously in the higher echelons of society. For decades the genre was hardly broadcast on radio and television. Although this has changed – some *levenslied* performers (like for instance Frans Bauer) have become so incredibly popular that they cannot be ignored anymore – the dichotomy between *levenslied* aficionados and those who frown upon the genre largely parallels a social one. André’s *levenspop*, however, made its way into the mainstream media.

André’s death (September 23, 2004) was celebrated in a sequence of extraordinary commemorative ceremonies. Colleague singers and befriended celebrities organized a free concert dedicated to André in the Amsterdam football stadium ArenA, four days after his death. The event, titled ‘Thank you André’ (*André Bedankt*), was attended by 50,000 André Hazes fans. The arrival in the stadium of the hearse and the funeral cars heralded the beginning of the event, and the central role reserved for André’s body and his mourning family. The coffin with André’s body was placed at the centre point, to remain there during the entire performance. The Dutch public broadcasting organisation TROS televised the whole event live, drawing an audience of five million Dutch and one million Flanders.

André’s cremation, the day after the concert, was a private event. The disposal of his ashes, however, was not. Here, I think, lays an important key for understanding and interpreting the extraordinary

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commemorative mourning events that André’s death evoked. I will therefore make a short digression to summarize some remarks on cremation that I have made elsewhere. My understanding is based on the assumption that the ‘disposal’ of a body is always a ritualized practice.

Cremating a body changes it from a larger singularity into a multiplicity of small parts. Each bit of those ashes has the potential to represent the whole it was once part of, i.e. the ‘person’. This multiplication allows for multiple disposals, or in other words to conduct multiple rituals with one body, separate in space and time. One might also speak of ‘serial disposal’. This observation holds true for anybody’s body, and multiple disposals are becoming increasingly popular. When it comes to the ashes of celebrities, whose identities as celebrities are media constructions, the multiplicity of the ashes matches in a particular way with the multiplicity that characterizes the media representations of a celebrity’s body. Each subsequent disposal generating its own media attention, the possibility of multiple rituals to dispose of a celebrity’s body prolongs the celebrity’s medialised presence. In other words, serial disposal fits the way in which media seek to serialize the attention given to the more important celebrities.

To paraphrase Hockey and Kellaher: Where have André’s ashes gone? It had been André’s specific wish that his ashes should be rocketed into the North Sea. And so it happened, at least for the greater part of his ashes.

André’s Disposal, Episode 1

Divided over ten rockets, the major part of André’s ashes was rocketed into the North Sea from Hook of Holland, in a brief ceremony on the beach. The firing of the rockets was conducted by Rachel Hazes, André’s third wife and his wife at the time of his death, and their two children Roxy and Dré Jr. The ceremony took place on the first anniversary of André’s death, and formed the closing performance of the commemorative concert held that evening in the Rotterdam Ahoy Hall (no free admission, this time). After the last performers had finished their song, the scene switched from the musician’s platform to the large screens in the concert hall, on which the audience could follow the rocking of

18 J. HOCKEY & L. KELLAHER: Where Have All the Ashes Gone (s.l. 2002).
André’s ashes near Hook of Holland. The whole event – the concert and the ceremony on the beach – was integrally broadcast on television.

*André’s Disposal, Episode 2*

One other rocket with ashes was rocketed into the North Sea from Noordwijk aan Zee, 50 kilometres north from Hook of Holland. This beach ceremony was conducted by André’s first wife, her daughter fathered by André and the son and relatives from André’s second marriage.19

*André’s Disposal, Episode 3*

One portion of André’s ashes was put in an envelop and illegally flown to Florida, where it was buried in the garden of the House of Blues, ‘a favourite place of André’.20

*André’s Disposal, Episode 4*

On the day of his first birthday after his death (June 30), Rachel, Roxy and Dré Jr. had a tattoo placed on their wrists with ashes of André mixed into the ink ‘as a symbol of their eternal interconnectedness’.21

*André’s Disposal, Episode 5*

Also some friends of André had themselves tattooed with André’s ashes. Fearing to be suspected of homosexuality when carrying a man’s name on their arms, they had the tattooist write André’s name in Chinese characters.

*André’s Disposal, Episode 6*

Finally, Rachel divided a part of the ashes over three small urns, so that she, Roxy and Dré Jr. could all have their own personal urn.

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19 The rocketing at Noordwijk aan Zee had taken place in secrecy, but was publicized the next day in the newspapers.
20 *De Telegraaf* 13 August 2005.
21 *De Telegraaf* 13 August 2005.
All the André Hazes commemorative celebrations (except for the actual cremation, as said) were staged performances and widely mediated events. They were all embedded in a sequence of happenings initiated and orchestrated by André’s widow, Rachel Hazes, except for the smaller rocketing ceremony on the beach of Noordwijk aan Zee. Earlier on the day of the commemorative concert and the rocketing, Rachel had a statue unveiled at the Amsterdam Alber Cuyp Street Market. The organization of the concert, the making of the statue, and the placing of the tattoos, the narration about the envelop and of the three urns, were all made public in a real-life soap of six weekly episodes, ‘Typically André’ (Typisch André) as a preamble for the ‘André commemoration day’. ‘Typically André’ was also about Rachel’s writing of André’s biography, titled ‘On behalf of André’ (Namens André). The first copy was presented by Rachel to the Amsterdam mayor Job Cohen during the unveiling ceremony of the statue, to which the mayor was invited to give a speech.

Figure 8. The unveiling ceremony of André Hazes’ statue, September 23rd, 2005. Left of the statue mayor Job Cohen with Rachel’s book, right Rachel and children.
Although the celebrations, like all commemorative ceremonies, consisted of ‘re-enactments of other rituals that are prototypical’, their unusual combinations, and larger-than-life scale, beg for a focus that supersedes the individual celebrations and spaces. In the commemoration of André, the Amsterdam ArenA and the Rotterdam Ahoy Hall are important and concrete places: here the concerts alias commemoration ceremonies took place. We may interpret sport stadiums and concert halls as modern counterparts of traditional ritual spaces, such as churches, mosques, graveyards. The latter, however, are spaces specifically destined and designed for the purpose, and often consecrated or initiated in some way. Stadiums and multifunctional halls differ in that respect. Comparable to the ritualized space that may occupy part of a pedestrian area, they can never become unambiguous ritual space. Moreover, a limited focus on these spaces would not do fully justice to ‘the commemoration of André Hazes’ as a total event. The commemoration was fragmented, or serialized, in space and time: a variety of commemorative practices were performed by different people at different times and on different locations, connected through a well-planned series of media productions. To conclude my argument on ritualized space I will further explore how media and mediation contribute to the construction of that space, spatially and socially.

Case 3. The Cremation Ceremony for Theo van Gogh

The cremation service for Theo van Gogh took place in the late afternoon of November 9th, 2004. One week earlier, on November 2nd, Van Gogh, a provocative movie director and publicist, had been murdered in Amsterdam, by a Dutch-Moroccan Muslim fanatic. The assassination had happened in the context of Van Gogh’s habit of commenting bluntly on just anything, including Muslims, and of his production Submission, a movie highlighting the relation between the abuse of Muslim women and the Qur’an. The killing evoked a variety of ritual responses, which I will briefly sum up here. On the evening of Van Gogh’s death approximately 25,000 people participated in a ‘noise wake’ held on the Dam Square in Amsterdam, a live-teledvised political

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event of an extra-ordinary order. Many had brought frying pans, pan lids, whistles, musical instruments, ghetto blasters, etcetera in answer to the call to bring anything that could produce noise as a token of protest. The idea of a 'noise wake' had arisen in the context of the ‘usual Dutch’ ritual response to violent death: a silent march.\footnote{Reputedly, Van Gogh had detested silent marches, hence a noisy event seemed more appropriate to commemorate his death.} On the spot where Van Gogh had died (in the Linnaeusstraat) a large ephemeral memorial took shape. The immediate vicinity of Van Gogh’s house became another memorial site, also with many flowers, notes and objects. Both sites lasted for a week. On Wednesday 10\textsuperscript{th}, the morning

![Image: The noise wake at the Dam Square, alternating views of the speakers and the crowd on a big screen, November 2\textsuperscript{nd}, 2004](image.png)

Figure 9. The noise wake at the Dam Square, alternating views of the speakers and the crowd on a big screen, November 2\textsuperscript{nd}, 2004

\footnote{Cf. P. Post et. al.: \textit{Disaster Ritual. Explorations of an Emerging Ritual Repertoire} (Leuven 2003); I. Stengs ‘Commemorating Victims of Senseless Violence’ (Aldershot 2007).}
Figure 10. The noise wake at the Dam Square, November 2nd, 2004
The disposal of such temporal memorial sites is a related topic that deserves attention in its own rights. It would take too far to go into details here. In the case of the Van Gogh memorials, the objects constituting the memorials were, in consultation with the bereaved, transferred to be kept in the Amsterdam City Archives. 600 of the restored and preserved notes and pictures are on permanent display on the Archives’ website: stadsarchief.amsterdam.nl → Presentaties → Amsterdamse Schatten → Dood → Rouwbetrooiingen Theo van Gogh (last visited March 25, 2008).

For Friday 5th, neighbourhood organisations had organised a march from the neighbourhood mosque to the memorial site, to protest against violence and to demonstrate their collective commitment to a civic society consisting of people from a broad variety of ethnicities and religions. On Tuesday 9th, the Cooperating Dutch-Moroccan Organizations in after the cremation, the sanitation department removed the entire memorial ‘on request of the Van Gogh family’. 24

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Figure 12. The Van Gogh memorial site in the Linnaeusstraat; November 5th, 2004
Amsterdam had organised a bicycle tour, ‘Cycling for Solidarity’, from the western area of Amsterdam to the eastern area of the city (a symbolic route: Mohammed B., the assassinator, was from Amsterdam West; Theo van Gogh lived in East). The tour ended in the Oosterpark, a public park bordering on the Linneausstraat, with a closing gathering ‘Murdered because of the Word. We Don’t Accept Extremism’, there, the rapper duo Lange Frans & Baas B performed and Amsterdam mayor Job Cohen gave a speech. The cremation ceremony that evening concluded this series of commemorative activities. The eventual cremation ceremony may provide a useful empirical contribution to the purpose of

25 In Dutch ‘de Samenwerkende Nederlands-Marokkaanse Organisaties Amsterdam’.
26 In Dutch ‘Fietsen voor Verbondenheid’.
27 In Dutch ‘Vermoord om het Woord. Extremisme pikken wij niet’.
this article: trying to unravel the interconnectedness between ritual, space and media.

Van Gogh was cremated at the Nieuwe Oosterbegraafplaats, a cemetery in the eastern part of Amsterdam, not far from the house where Van Gogh had lived, nor far from the place where he was killed. For the occasion, the cemetery was closed for the general public. The farewell ceremony was held in the cemetery’s auditorium. Admission to this space was restricted to family and intimates of the deceased. A large tent had been set up next to the auditorium for public figures, politicians and government representatives, journalists and other people who had not been part of Van Gogh’s inner circles but who had been invited since his death was a public occasion. In the tent, the service was followed on a screen.

Another kind of space had been created on the street in front of the cemetery entrance. Here, people who had not been personally invited gathered to follow the ceremony on a large screen: neighbourhood or Amsterdam people, journalists, activists, researchers, and everybody else who felt the urge to be there, maybe 500 people in total. In addition, in the private spaces of their homes also the general Dutch public was able to follow the ceremony, which was broadcast live on national television.

How to understand the relationship between the different spaces in which people participated in the ceremony, or at least followed it? The auditorium may be rightfully called a ritual space, no doubt about that, and the bereaved gathered in the room made the ceremony by their joint presences and acts. As in all ritual, mere presence is already a form of participation. But what about the tent? As invitees, the people there may be considered part of the ceremony as well, and at least the tent was in the precincts of the cemetery. As a demarcated space, with the specific destination to shelter the presence of the invitees, the tent was a sacred space in the Durkheimian sense. A special role in this constellation was played by the screen. Only the screen turned these people’s presence into participation.

The same arguments hold for the street and the people watching the screen erected there. With their presence they had accepted the explicit invitation to the general public to attend the ceremony on that location. The place had been fenced off from the street, creating a special place in otherwise ordinary public space. In combination with the mediated attendance of the ceremony, the situation made it another temporary
sacred space. Also here, the screen – the mediation – ‘did it’. Without it, the gathering would have been not much more than a group of interested people without access to the actual ritual.

We may wonder to what extent the same line of reasoning counts for the 1.9 million people who watched the cremation ceremony in their living rooms on their home television screens. To what extent may they be regarded as another group of remote participants? And if so, may we say that the ritual space of the cemetery auditorium reached to include their rooms, making these ritualised spaces for the time being, too? I do not see any reason why the screens in the tent and on the street did, and the screens in the living-rooms did not. The conclusion we may draw is that television, as a live mass medium, demonstrates that ritualised space is a social construct rather than a localised spatiality.

Figure 14. Van Gogh’s cremation ceremony, followed on the screen near the cemetery entrance; November 9th