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Devising Order

Socio-religious Models, Rituals, and the Performativity of Practice

Edited by
Bruno Boute
Thomas Småberg
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GIVING PUBLIC SPACE A FACE: THE AGENCY OF MONUMENTS AND PORTRAITS, THAILAND AND THE NETHERLANDS COMPARED

Irene Stengs*

Introduction

In modern society, ‘the public’ is increasingly associated with anonymity. The public realm is experienced as abstract and impersonal. The general perception is that individual, ordinary people do not matter here, nor have they any power or impact. Their lives are ruled by forces like the market, bureaucracy, or motorized traffic. In compensation for “the discontents brought about by the large structures of modern society,” the private sphere has gradually become the single locus of emotionally loaded, intimate, and personal relationships.¹ The gap between public and private is a widely, almost globally shared experience. From a theoretical perspective, however, the two spheres appear as the extremities of a bipolar continuum.² As a continuum, social reality produces ambiguous, heterogeneous experiences, and practices in which the perceived private becomes public and vice versa. In this essay, I will explore two cases of ritual in public places that may be interpreted as such hybrid moments.

Public places, in this context, form the physical dimension of the overall public sphere. Although very different in location and practices, both cases deal, as I will show, with the discontent produced by alienation. How ritual works in these cases requires, next to a focus on the actors, an additional focus on the agency of material objects. The latter will be my main topic.

Empirically, this essay concentrates on royal portraits in Thailand and on monuments in the Netherlands. My presentation of the Thai case is based on field research on the veneration for the monarchy, while the

* I want to thank Jeroen Beets, the members of the Religion, Media and Body seminar, and the editors of this volume for their critical comments on earlier versions of this contribution.


material for the Dutch case was collected as a part of my current research on the ‘monumentalisation’ of public space in the Netherlands. In Thailand, portraits of royal persons are omnipresent, of the present king in particular. For my argument, it is irrelevant whether these portraits are statues, paintings, billboards, or what other form they might have. Following W.J.T. Mitchell’s concept of a picture as the concrete, materialized manifestation of an image, any portrait is an image of the king. I interpret the ubiquitous presence of the king as a specific, ritualised articulation of a deep concern with Thai identity in a changing world. In the Netherlands, there is no such visual dominance of one particular face or figure. Yet, one overarching theme connects many of the newly-erected monuments in the country: undue, unexpected or violent death. Therefore, also these monuments are ritualised articulations of a specific and deep local concern. This concern shares the Thai preoccupation with uncontrollable, external powers in perceiving the respective casualties commemorated as victims of anonymous forces such as traffic, social disintegration, and government policies.

Irrespective of the obvious differences between the two cases, the erection of monuments and the placing of portraits are comparable in the respect of being commemorative practices. They are, to speak as Paul Connerton: “celebrations of recurrence,” commemorative events that share “a rhetoric of re-enactment.” Three performative modes—calendrical, verbal, and gestural repetition—constitute the fundamental elements of this rhetoric. Communities of remembrance, the large community of the nation as well as the smaller communities of sacrifice and loss, establish and reinforce their distinctive identity by repetitive re-enactment. Whereas Connerton concentrates on human presence and practices, my angle in this contribution is the own performativity of the material objects involved in the rituals. In other words, they establish an effect in the world.

1. Thailand: Presence of the King

In the eyes of the world, recent Thai politics are dominated by the colours yellow and red. ‘Yellow’ dominated the occupation of Suwannaphum

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4 Connerton, *Social Memory*, 65.
International Airport in November 2008; ‘Red’ was the colour of the violent protests in downtown Bangkok in May 2010. The red protesters demanded the resignation of the government that was regarded as the outcome of Thailand’s latest coup d’état, in which the then Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra (2001–06) was expelled from office. Since 2005, yellow has been the colour of the protest against Thaksin and his followers. The exact political positions in the conflict are beyond the scope of this essay. Basically, the crisis boils down to a bitter struggle over the access to political power and welfare. Both internal factors and the country’s incorporation into global structures produced a broad societal discontent.\(^5\) In the light of the political dimension of the royal portraiture under discussion the colour yellow is of special interest. Yellow is not just a random colour to single out a political movement: it is the colour of Thailand’s present monarch King Bhumibol Adulyadej (r. 1946-).\(^6\) Although ‘yellow’ may seem abstract to the outsider, for the Thai it is rather concrete. The analysis below of the presence of the king’s portraits will enter into the contents of this concreteness.

It is no exaggeration to state that today the urban Thai public domain is completely dominated by the face of one individual: King Bhumibol Adulyadej or King Rama IX.\(^7\) Not only Ratchadamnoen Avenue, the Thai ‘Champs-Elysées’ which connects the Parliament building with the Royal Field adjacent to the Grand Palace—the heart of the kingdom’s socioreligious cosmos—but virtually all roads and buildings are decorated with billboards, banners, posters, or flags showing portraits of the king. Most portraits were placed as part of the celebrations of Thailand’s two most recent royal jubilees: the king’s 60th year on the throne in 2006, and his 80th birthday on December 5th, 2007. Both festive events were celebrated throughout the year, the first one evolving, so to speak, seamlessly into the next. Also, most semi-public spaces such as shops, temples, stations, offices, and restaurants now display portraits of the king, but in these locations more often in combination with portraits of the queen and/or with the present king’s grandfather, King Chulalongkorn (King Rama V). Even in most private houses the king’s image is present in the form of a

\(^5\) Cf. Tanabe and Keyes, *Cultural Crisis and Social Memory*.

\(^6\) King Bhumibol’s colour is yellow because he was born on a Monday. For the Thai people, each day of the week has its own colour, which is considered auspicious for people born on that day. In Thailand one’s *day* of birth—the day of the week one was born on—is attributed much more importance then one’s *date* of birth.

\(^7\) King Bhumibol Adulyadej is the ninth king of the Chakri dynasty, which was founded in 1782 by General Chakri, later King Rama I.
calendar, clock, and/or some stickers or banknotes, usually also in combination with one or more portraits of King Chulalongkorn.

The Thai king is the head of state in a constitutional monarchy. Juridically, there is not much difference from other constitutional monarchies. The Thai kingship is distinguished, however, by the general perception of the king as the reincarnation of the ‘righteous ruler’ and a Bodhisattva (Buddha-to-be), a perception that conflates with the Hindu cosmological concept of kingship as the king being the centre of the universe. Thai nationalist ideology is founded on the intrinsic linkages between nation, kingship, and religion: the virtuous Buddhist king is the compassionate and beneficial power that unites and sustains the nation. In this view, no principal distinction can be made between king and state. This politico-religious perception of kingship does not, however, explain sufficiently why exactly nowadays virtually all subjects and organizations feel the urge to continuously express their devotion to their king by decorating streets, public buildings and houses with portraits.

In the respect of internal power relations and the manner in which authority is exerted, the Thai nation state bears many similarities with ‘the postcolony.’ Although Thailand has never been colonised, the birth of Thailand as a modern nation state followed a period of what several scholars have described as a form of internal colonisation by the royal family. For my argument, I will take up Mbembe’s notion of the postcolony as “a particularly revealing (and rather dramatic) stage on which are played out the wider problems of subjection and its corollary, discipline.” Central in Mbembe’s analysis are Bakhtin’s elements of the ‘obscene’ and the ‘grotesque.’ But, where Bakhtin locates the obscene and the grotesque in the culture of ordinary people as a means of resistance against domination, Mbembe argues that they are essential in the creation and manifestation of state power as well. Through extravagant festivities and celebrations, ‘spectacles for the subjects,’ the state dramatises its significance, manifests its majesty, and materializes its presence. This performative modality of state power is not only grotesque, but also obscene. In the Thai situation the obscenity of the extravagance of power finds expression in a wide repertoire of gossip and apocryphal stories about members of the royal family.

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8 Tambiah, Culture, Thought and Social Action, 324–7.
9 Anderson, Imagined Communities; Kasian, Commodifying Marxism; Wyatt, “King Chulalongkorn the Great.”
10 Mbembe, “Provi, Thought and Social Action, 324–7.”
family and a continuous stream of jokes and ironic commentary about high-ranking officials (politicians, top-brass military, religious leaders). Discussing these representations of the reverse of the enlightened, democratic, Buddhist kingdom as enacted in the official celebrations would take us too far beyond the subject of this discussion, however. What is important here is that the veneration for the king legitimises and obscures the power of the state in its more personal and obscene manifestations. In the words of Mbembe, Thai kingship functions as a fetish. The signs, vocabulary and narratives are not meant to be symbols: they are officially invested with a surplus of meanings which are not negotiable and which one is officially forbidden to depart from or challenge.

Figure 1. King Bhumibol Adulyadej’s portrait on Ratchadamnoen Avenue, one of many, in honour of the king’s 80th birthday in 2007 (photo by Irene Stengs, 12/01/2008).

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11 Hamilton, “Rumours, Foul Calumnies and the Safety of the State.”
12 Mbembe, “Provisional Notes on the Postcolony,” 4. In Thailand, the expression of any doubt or deviant ideas about the monarchy is outlawed by the strictest lèse majesté legislation to be found in the world.
The current, exalted veneration for King Bhumibol must be understood in its combination with the repression and self-censorship induced by Thailand’s strict lèse majesté legislation. Within the politico-religious realm, royal commemorations form a distinct, legitimizing cultural repertoire.

The celebration of three royal jubilees in the 1980s gave the veneration for the Thai king a ‘canonic sequence.’ Since then, the Thai people have constantly been reminded of the kingly virtues and merit bestowed upon them. Each new commemorative occasion, whether related to the king’s personal lifecycle or dynastical one, provides another opportunity to stress the import of the beneficent king for the nation and its inhabitants. The year 1982 commemorated the bicentennial of Bangkok as the Thai capital and two hundred years of rule by the Chakri dynasty. Broadcasts, publications, and festivities highlighted the achievements of the Chakri rulers. In 1987, the auspicious moment of the king’s ‘completion of the fifth twelve-year lifecycle’ (his sixtieth birthday) was celebrated. The year 1988 was marked by the celebration of the king’s ‘breaking of the record of the longest reign ever of a Thai/Siamese monarch’ (mahamongkhon phrarratchaphithi mangkhalaphisek). Since the record to be broken had been set by King Chulalongkorn, who had been on the throne for forty-two years and twenty-three days, the royal qualities of these two kings were extensively compared. In these comparisons they appear as truly equal: every single virtue that is part of the image of King Chulalongkorn has its complement in King Bhumibol’s. Emphasized are their open-mindedness, their eagerness to implement technological innovations, their qualities in steering the kingdom in times of change, their religious virtues, their compassion for ordinary people, and their willingness to sacrifice themselves for the good of the people and the nation. Recounting the narrative time and time again lends the kings mythical qualities, which together constitute the ideal, modern Buddhist king.

With ‘The Record of the Longest Reign’ celebrations the royal cult truly gained momentum. Since then, Thailand has celebrated an almost

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14 Connerton, Social Memory, 41. For a more elaborate account of the royal jubilees, see Stengs, Worshipping the Great Moderniser, 242–7.
15 Twelve is regarded as an auspicious number, and so are its multiples.
16 Siam was formally renamed Thailand in 1939. The name of the country was changed back to Siam in 1945, and renamed Thailand again in 1948, which name has remained ever since.
uninterrupted sequence of royal commemorations. For King Chulalongkorn, most of these events took place in the 1990s, when his popularity had reached its zenith. Apart from King Chulalongkorn’s initiatives and achievements being continuously in the media limelight (in newspapers, magazines, booklets, television programmes, and videos) the cult was above all visible through the mass production of the king’s portrait. Portraits of King Chulalongkorn were for sale in portrait shops, markets, bookstores, department stores, fancy fairs, temple shops, and amulet markets. These portraits not only took the shape of reproduced photographs, paintings, or statuettes to decorate houses or altars. Clocks, necklaces, coffee pots, key rings, stickers, embroidery patterns, and even jigsaws could bear the image of the king. In addition, semi-governmental organisations such as banks and the army issued regularly ‘King Chulalongkorn images,’ for instance a new series of King Chulalongkorn commemorative coins or statuettes, either to be sold for charity purposes or to be distributed for free at special events.

Figure 2. Well-wishing billboard for King Bhumibol Adulyadej at a mountain road in Chiang Mai province (photo by Irene Stengs, 20/01/2010).

18 Portraits of King Chulalongkorn are still for sale everywhere. His image is now less prominent than that of King Bhumibol.
In the 21st century, however, the celebration of King Chulalongkorn has given way to that of King Bhumibol. With each anniversary and jubilee, the veneration for Thailand’s present monarch has reached new heights. Apart from the annual celebrations of the king’s birthday (December 5), the kingdom has celebrated a series of special jubilees, most importantly King Bhumibol’s fiftieth year on the throne (1996), His Majesty’s auspicious completion of his sixth twelve-year lifecycle in 1999, and the occasions of His Majesty living as long as King Rama I (the longest-living Thai monarch until May 23, 2000), and subsequently becoming the longest-living Thai king ever on May 24, 2000.\footnote{On May 23, 2000 King Bhumibol reached the age of 72 years, five months, and nineteen days, or 26,469 days. King Rama I died on May 23, 1809, 26,469 days old. A government committee organised a special ceremony (\textit{sama mongkhon}, in which the king asked King Rama I for permission to live longer) on May 23, a temple connected to King Rama I (Wat Suwandaram in Ayuttaya) began renovations, and a book comparing the two kings’ lives was to be published. On May 24, the day King Bhumibol actually broke King Rama I’s record, the ‘Royal Long Life Ceremony’ was celebrated (see \textit{The Bangkok Post}, May 23, 2000 and \textit{The Nation}, May 24, 2000).} The festivities of 2006 and 2007 mentioned earlier have been the most recent and the most excessive episodes in this commemorative sequence.

Following Connerton’s line of thought on the relation between myth and ritual, we may understand the royal commemorations as performances of mythical ‘fundamental constants.’\footnote{Connerton, \textit{Social Memory}, 43.} Each royal commemoration claims anew the eternal dependence of the existence of the Thai nation on the benevolent presence of a Buddhist king. Connerton’s insights help in understanding why not just any ‘ritual,’ but a specifically commemorative ritual—with its “explicit backward-looking and calendrical character”—can claim such continuity.\footnote{Ibid., 45.}

I will now return to the main objective of this contribution: understanding (commemorative) ritual in the context of modern societal discontent and the significance of material objects therein. A specific feature of the Thai royal commemorations is their emphasis on portraiture; in each celebration the public domain is (re)decorated with the royal image. To the Thai beholder, royal commemorations and the appearance of portraits are inextricably intertwined phenomena. Through the ritual, the presence of the royal image has become a ‘self-evident’ presence that fills virtually every corner of the public domain with ‘Thainess.’ This self-evidence, however, does not imply that the king’s portraits have become something
neutral or unnoticed. Thainess being presented as springing from the pure
goodness of the king, this presence conceals the social division at the basis
of much discontent. This concealment adds to the portraits' potency to
make the discomforted citizen feel at home in his/her own society.

In the course of 2006 and 2007, the presence of the king in the Thai
street scene took a new and more abstract form: yellow. In particular,
the yellow polo shirt with the royal emblem became the hallmark of love
for and dedication to the king.\textsuperscript{22} With the sixtieth anniversary of
the king's ascension to the throne in June 2006, the yellow polo shirt evolved
almost into a national uniform. It became the proper dress code not just
for bureaucrats and employees of (semi-)governmental institutions, for
schoolchildren and everybody with a more representative occupation, but
basically for anybody to wear yellow on Mondays. In this way, decorating
streets, buildings, and homes with royalty was extended to the human
body. More critical voices spoke ironically of the 'yellow fever.' 'Yellow'
became a big industry, not only in the form of polo shirt production (com-
plete with accusations of price gouging, artificial shortages, and illegal
reproductions), but also in the forms of flags, posters, ribbons, calendars,
and numerous more mundane objects and articles. Many objects were not
merely yellow but in addition bore the king's effigy or the text 'we love the
king' (\textit{raw rak nailuang}), often also rendered as 'we [red heart] the king'
(\textit{raw [red heart] nailuang}). The variation of more down-to-earth 'royal
objects' was striking: clocks, fans, pencils, money boxes, kitchen aprons,
umbrellas; mention it, and virtually anything could be made into a token
of adulation. Together with the dress code, the omnipresence of the fetish
stretched even into people's most intimate or private spaces.\textsuperscript{23}

In an environment so dominated by one particular sign, however, the
sign may lose part of its performative power: the yellow may turn grey.
The encouragement from the man whose yellow collection of calendars,
clocks, and portraits I wanted to photograph was revealing: I should not
forget to take a picture of his house pig. The theoretical point that a sign
is only a sign by standing out amidst the otherness of its environment
could not be illustrated better. Another aspect of this sea of yellow is that
against such a background the absence of yellow may stand out as the
non-yellow, and cannot but be interpreted as a sign. Such non-yellow will

\textsuperscript{22} Also the military involved in the coup had yellow ribbons tied around their weapons,
implying 'this is all for the sake of the king.'

\textsuperscript{23} Cf. Mbembe, “Provisional Notes on the Postcolony.”
then be interpreted as deliberate, instead of being merely accidental. A person, house, or shop, without any ‘yellow’ becomes by implication a person that does not love the king, or a place where the king is not loved. The exuberance, and this counts for portraits as well as yellow, gives rise to a specific agency, which makes them organise. as it were, their own further proliferation. Once a certain ‘critical mass’ of signs has been exceeded, more and more people will feel compelled to follow suit. Acknowledging this proliferational potency of the material takes understanding how the grotesque actually becomes grotesque, beyond an interpretation from the points of view of repression and merely symbolic representation.

2. The Netherlands: Presences of the Private

Over the last twenty years, the number of monuments, memorials, and statues in the Dutch public domain has seen a significant increase.
More and more individuals, organizations, and pressure groups initiate monuments and statuary. The current importance attributed to public memorials and commemorations is not specifically ‘Dutch.’ Andreas Huyssen, speaking about Germany and the West in general, observes that “the notion of the monument as memorial or commemorative public event has witnessed a triumphal return.” Erica Doss, writing about the United States, even speaks of “memorial mania” to address the abundant proliferation. The Netherlands, therefore, provides a case study of a new commemorative culture in (at least) the West, centred on individual and collective emotions.

Private initiatives have other preferences for the kinds of events or people that deserve to be commemorated, preferences that may even be contrary to choices made by authorities and the elite. As a first observation, the new monuments that result from these preferences may be interpreted as a reflection of a broader shift in power over the public domain. In my interpretation, roughly four categories of privately initiated monuments may be distinguished, in the Netherlands. I want to emphasize that all of these practices of commemoration have their predecessors. Their ‘newness’ thus lies in their numbers, their initiators, and the ways they are initiated. Moreover, we should not think of these categories as clearly demarcated grassroots initiatives: private initiatives in the public domain still require a certain degree of authority involvement. Differentiating them into categories, however, eases a perspective on the various political dimensions involved, since each category articulates a different societal issue.

First, we may note the recent tendency to erect monuments in commemoration of recently deceased local or national figures, generally in the form of lifelike statues. Examples of such statues are: the three statues erected in commemoration of Pim Fortuyn, a politician murdered in 2002; the statue of Sylvia Millecam, a well-liked actress who died of breast cancer in 2001; the statue of André Hazes, a popular singer who died in 2004. A second tendency is the public commemoration of individual victims of fatal traffic accidents (roadside memorials), work-related accidents, or street violence with small, initially temporary, memorials. Such ephemeral memorials may occasionally evolve into permanent ones. Specific

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25 Cf. Doss, *Memorial Mania*.
monuments in commemoration of all victims who have lost their lives in one single disastrous event form a third category. These ‘collective’ monuments serve as a memento to both the victims and the event. For the Dutch case we may think for instance of the monuments commemorating the victims of the Bijlmermeer airplane crash (1992), the Enschede firework disaster (2000), and the Volendam New Year’s Eve fire disaster (2001). The fourth, and probably most recent, development is the erection of monuments in commemoration of specific categories of victims. This type of ‘collective’ monuments differs from the latter in three significant aspects. ‘Categorical collective monuments’ are, first of all, dedicated to people who lost their lives through a particular cause (traffic, disease, work), irrespective of when or where this happened. Such monuments are therefore open to the inclusion of future casualties. In addition, they are often dedicated to a specific group of victims within a wider category of people who died through that particular cause. In the Netherlands basically all ‘categorical collective monuments’ have been erected in the 21st century, a notable exception being World War II monuments for specific categories of war victims.

As an illustration of a trajectory towards the erection of a collective monument, I present the case of the monument for young road traffic victims. This monument, unveiled on April 10, 2005, is located in Nuenen, a provincial town in the Dutch province of Noord-Brabant. Before entering into the case, however, I want to insert a brief remark on a specific methodological issue. Since my topic of interest lies mainly in the political dimensions of public statements of mourning and commemoration, I have chosen not to include those sides of loss and mourning that remain confined to the private lives of the bereaved. Once made, public

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26 Cf. the contributions to Nugteren et al., Disaster Ritual.

27 There are early exceptions, though. One example is *D‘r Joep*, the Dutch national mineworkers’ monument, erected in 1957 in Kerkrade. The initiative to honour all mineworkers with a monument was taken by the son of a deceased miner. This early monument fits into 21st-century developments by a renewed attention which led for instance to the production of replicas in 2002, of which 2000 pieces were sold immediately.

28 Examples of specific categories of WWII victims are: Auschwitz deaths; homosexuals; Gypsies; the *Indisch* Dutch. Most memorials for such groups were erected in the (late) eighties and the nineties (see Van Vree, *In de schaduw van Auschwitz*). Although I cannot go into details here, the increasing ‘monumentalisation of public space’ is also related to the erections of new WWII monuments: the four categories of monuments distinguished above all have their specific WWII elaborations. New forms of monumentalising WWII as a way of casting personal trauma into cultural memory may be said to have paved the path for others or other groups to ‘publicize’ their traumas (cf. Withuis and Van Vree, *Erkennen*). See also the recent research of Van Ginkel on WWII commemorative culture.
statements take their own course and have consequences of their own. My presentation of the Nuenen monument is therefore based exclusively on information that the bereaved and other people concerned have disseminated through different media, most notably their websites.29

2.1. The Young Road Traffic Victims Monument

Ted Alfrink (16) died on the evening of November 28, 2002. Earlier that day, a speeding car had hit him when he crossed a main road on his way home from school. The next morning a group of 500 schoolmates and friends walked in a silent march from school to the spot where Ted had been hit. Marked with flowers, poems, and short texts, the place became a memorial site. To enable the group to contemplate Ted’s death, and the car carrying Ted’s body from the hospital to pass, the police had closed down the road for half an hour. Also in the weeks to follow people kept on visiting the scene of the catastrophe, and added new flowers, texts, candles, and lanterns. Ted’s father, reflecting on the ‘coming into existence’ of the memorial, wrote:

Then, we first learned to know the significance of a memorial. It indicates that this site carries a special meaning. Here, a person has been snatched from life. This can never become an ordinary place anymore, hence the sign. As a remembrance, as a warning.30

Figure 4. The Ted Alfrink memorial in the first weeks after Ted’s death (http://www.ted-alfrink.net).

29 The major sources for this case study are http://www.monument-nuenen.net.
30 Quotations translated from the Vereniging Verkeers Slachtoffers (VVS 8(1):6).
Heavy rains spoiled the memorial, the flowers decomposed, and towards the end of December it was clear that something should be done. Ted’s family decided to replace these ephemeral tokens of commemoration with a more permanent memorial, which at the time, though, was intended to be temporary as well. On February 23, 2003 the new memorial was unveiled: a one-meter high, transparent acrylic memorial with a portrait of Ted and a poem, surrounded by lanterns. The municipal authorities gave their full support to the establishment of the memorial and gave permission to sustain the memorial for at least three years. In his address at the unveiling, Ted’s father mentioned several reasons that had motivated the family to erect the memorial. First, they had come to realise that they feared that their child would be forgotten, that after a couple of years one may be the only one to keep on laying flowers on his grave on his birthday. (...) A memorial keeps the memory alive.

Secondly, the creation of the initial memorial by schoolmates and friends from other schools during the silent march should be understood as a meaningful act. The memorial had been erected because people always need a place where they can find comfort and where they can commemorate the deceased. In that light, clearing away the entire memorial seemed too harsh:

Then, all of a sudden, there is nothing left. Replacing it would be better.

Thirdly, many people had told them that the memorial’s presence made them drive more carefully and slow down their speed and because so many children have to cross this place daily, each warning is important. (...) We hope that Ted will guard all these children.

Ted’s father also explained why they thought of Ted’s memorial as temporal: the family’s major aim was to erect a ‘timeless monument’ dedicated to all young traffic victims in the region. For that purpose the Young Road Traffic Victims Monument Foundation was established. It was the Foundation’s objective to have the monument completed by the end of 2004.

The Foundation managed to collect 40,000 Euros within a year and a half. The remaining 30,000 Euros needed came mainly as donations in kind. Apart from relatives and friends of the bereaved family, local

organisations, authorities, enterprises, media, and schools offered their support. A recommending committee was established consisting of members from various domains of formal politics (the mayor, the royal commissioner of the province, a Member of Parliament), the medical world, the chairman of the Dutch Federation of Road Traffic Victims, and a Dutch football international from the region.
The monument was eventually placed along the provincial road where Ted had died, although at a different location: a busy roundabout where the local youth meets to bike to school together. Instead of the original intention to erect a monument in dedication to the young road traffic victims in the region, the monument was dedicated to all young traffic victims and their loved ones in the Netherlands, since no monument for young traffic victims then existed.\(^3\) The Foundation’s website emphasises the unique genesis of the monument, with local youth participating in every step of its coming-to-be, from concept and design to the unveiling. Consequently, the monument, entitled ‘Future comfort tears’ is not only dedicated to young people, but also truly belongs to them. The monument consists of a low granite wall with three bronze life-size figures, depicting future comfort tears. One of the inscribed texts reads:

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\(^3\) See http://www.monument-nuenen.net/FAQ Monument voor Jonge Verkeersslachtoffers (last accessed March 5, 2009).
'Future Comfort Tears' is a gift to all young people, their family, and friends, who are victims of road accidents, to show that we stand by them in their sorrow.\(^{33}\)

2.2. Mediating Presence through Monuments

The initiatives taken after Ted Alfrink's death reflect, in a nutshell, the prevalent political and public debates on the (non)acceptability of traffic-related violent deaths, injuries, and mourning as it presently takes place in the Netherlands. ‘Future Comfort Tears’ reflects, as any monument for a specific category of victims does, a ‘struggle for recognition’ of certain people’s specific losses and pain. Such effort is part of wider changes in modern politics, including shifting politics of control over the public domain and an increasing ‘publication’ of private issues. In such processes, mass media and digital communication play a predominant role, not only in facilitating ‘monumentalisation,’ but also by creating a notable uniformity of related commemorative ritual, like silent marches and wakes. We may ask why people perceive the erection of a monument as a substantial recognition of their cause. Focusing on the agency or performativity of the ‘new’ monuments (i.e. monuments, statues, memorials) may help to answer this question.

Monuments alter people’s doings in public places. They may force people to adapt their paths. They may also incite people to pause, to discuss, lay flowers, spray graffiti, or to damage them. They “play,” to speak as Foote, “an active role in their interpretation.”\(^{34}\) A monument’s presence, however, is not limited to its direct physical environment. Monuments are also mediatised constructs with mediatised presences and consequently exist also in social space. We therefore should not limit our perspective and analysis to individual monuments (and/or to the motivation of the people who erected these particular monuments), but instead also focus on the mediatised interconnection between monuments. The significance of one particular roadside memorial, for example, reaches beyond ‘what it does’ in its physical environment. Its ‘space’ “stretches to (…) all those many roadside memorials and other traffic-related places of commemoration.”\(^{35}\) If a specific memorial has indeed been in the media is not relevant here.

\(^{33}\) English translation quoted from the Foundation’s website http://www.monument-nuinen.net/home (last accessed March 9, 2009).

\(^{34}\) Foote, *Shadowed Ground*, 5.

\(^{35}\) Stengs, “Public Practices of Commemorative Mourning.”
What matters is the regular media appearance of roadside memorials, whether as concrete memorials or as a topic. The interconnection makes these places together articulate an increasing societal concern with ‘traffic death,’ the increase in memorials being the material manifestation of an increasing concern. Consent and cooperation on the part of the authorities is one factor in the sensation of societal recognition. The import of this consent, however, is based on the potency of the material to permanently communicate the initiators’ concern.

The erection of statues or collective monuments requires, unlike that of smaller individual memorials, the formation of a community that supports the initiative financially, socially, and legally. In such ‘memory’ communities people feel connected—albeit ephemerally—through shared experiences, whether through one event or through consecutive events. These are affective communities, collectivities based on emotion and feeling (instead of location, birth, social status etc.). The eventual unveiling of their monument is generally the first moment that such a community becomes material: the physical monument has an organising power.

The calendrical character of commemorative ritual requires a discussion of the aspect of time. When a monument has been erected, (annual) ritual practices at the monument may make its related community take shape and again. At ‘Future Comfort Tears’ a commemorative ritual takes place on World Day of Remembrance for Road Traffic Victims (the third Sunday of November). The Dutch public domain is basically a continuum shaped by anonymous forces, marked every here and there by personal or collective ‘publications’ such as monuments or advertising. The same counts for what could be called, Dutch ‘public time,’ the neutral sequence of hours and calendar days every now and then broken into by publicly claimed and marked days. Or, in Connerton’s more abstract wording, time as a repetition of quantitative and equivalent units is broken into by creating recurrent qualitative and identical parts. More and more political, commercial, or governmental organisations, or groups from whatever background, discover public ‘time’ as something that can be claimed for their cause by marking a specific calendrical unit as ‘Day,

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36 There is, however, no relationship with a possible increase in traffic deaths. On the contrary, since the 1970s—when the number of traffic deaths was at its highest point (> 3000)—the traffic death toll has only been decreasing. The earliest roadside memorials in the Netherlands, to my knowledge, date back to 1994.

37 Maffesoli, The Time of the Tribes; Doss, Memorial Mania, 15.

38 Connerton, Social Memory, 66.
Monuments can hardly do without such a dedicated day because otherwise there would be no self-evident recurring moment for repetitive ritual. The qualitative aspect of time involved here makes all these moments identical, which allows the participants to ‘find themselves as it were in the same time,’ and to feel connected with earlier commemorative events and the events commemorated.

The community connected in suffering brought about by traffic death shows that affectual communities are not necessarily confined to national spaces. The social movement united in a growing concern with road safety has led to the establishment of many local, national, and transnational civil organisations and protest campaigns around the globe. In 1991, the European Federation of Road Traffic Victims (FEVR) was established. The World Day of Remembrance for Road Traffic Victims, originally an initiative of the British FEVR affiliate organisation Road Peace in 1993, has been adopted as an official World Day since 1995 and is observed in both religious and secular settings. The pope, for instance, prays for the victims on the day. World Health Day 2004, as another example, was dedicated to road safety as a public health issue. The United Nations initiated a Road Safety Week in April 2004.

The recent development of (traffic) victims’ organisations and networks, categorical monuments, and related commemorations should be placed in a broader sociopolitical perspective. In my view, the development suits the rise of one-issue organisations and parties (in the Netherlands, for instance, for animal rights, motoring and parking, the elderly, security, patients’ associations for specific diseases, etc.). The new Dutch monuments may be seen as articulations of the tendency to organise political activities and commitment on the basis of specific personal involvement rather than on the basis of general ideology. Monuments, because of their own agency, are a successful technology of ‘publication’ in this context of contemporary politics. When successful, a combined claim on a place in the public domain and public time will ascertain an interest group of recurring public attention.

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39 I am referring here to secular days, the oldest example probably being International Labour Day (May 1) (initiated in 1889 at the Marxist conference in Paris); recent examples are Secretary Day (third Thursday in April) or Make a Difference Day, which actually consists of two days (March 20 and 21), ‘the weekend’s national day of helping others.’
40 Connerton, Social Memory, 66.
41 The FEVR comprises 29 affiliate organisations from fifteen different countries.
42 On the differences between classical political parties and single-issue parties see, for example, Mudde, “The Single-Issue Party Thesis.”
3. Conclusions

The Thai case showed how commemorative ritual establishes the myth of modern Buddhist kingship as a massive, perpetual, and indisputable royal presence in the public domain. In the process, the material substrate of the cult has been shown to possess a compelling force of its own. The casual uniform of the yellow polo shirts has made the individual body a carrier of the royalist-nationalist ideology. Together with the abundance of the royal image, the yellow fills the public domain with Thainess. While the royal presence counterbalances alienation, it depoliticises the alienation experienced at the same time. The Dutch case showed how private commemorative ritual and memorials in the public domain make individual sorrows political: the alienation experienced is channelled into a political force. Again, the materiality, i.e., the increasing number of monuments, was shown to evoke its own further proliferation. The commemoration process produces a public remembrance of the deceased as a casualty, a hybrid identity that is private as well as public. In both cases, commemorative ritual, rather than keeping memory alive, creates memory. Its specific performative potential to do so explains why states as well as individuals resort to commemorative practices. Permanence, permanence in time through calendrical repetition, and permanence in space by the materiality produced, is the foundation this potential is built on.