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ASCERTAINING THE FUTURE MEMORY OF OUR TIME DUTCH INSTITUTIONS COLLECTING RELICS OF NATIONAL TRAGEDY



Irene Stengs

In the Netherlands, as in many places elsewhere in the world, the site of a violent public death usually becomes a rapidly expanding memorial. Such a memorial, generally consisting of flowers, letters, drawings, photographs, candles and cuddly toys brought by individual citizens, is the locus where the public emotions ensuing the violence are visualized and take material shape. In the slipstream of this relatively recent form of commemorative culture (see Walter 2008), it has become common practice to collect and preserve part of the commemorative material produced at these sites. The higher the societal impact of the lethal incident, the stronger the urge to preserve the materials and to include them in the collections of museums, governmental archives or academic institutions.¹ Such institutional collecting makes commemorative material a particular form of heritage that needs to be kept for exhibition and research, at present or in the future.

The trend towards preserving commemorative material should be understood against the background of the only alternative: disposal. The act of disposing of such materials appears to be increasingly experienced as problematic. It may be felt as insensitive, offensive or even immoral. Preservation, on the contrary, comes across as compassionate, caring and conscious historical responsibility. One might think that the latter qualities make preservation and collecting appear unambiguously justifiable. This, however, is not always the case. In this contribution, I demonstrate how such collecting is permeated with ambiguities and contradictions.

Contradiction is most poignant, however, in another category of materials that come into view as a potential testimony of what happened. We may think here of material that directly relates to the perpetrators: in particular, lethal weapons. The question of whether to preserve or to destroy such items is a recurring issue.

With this chapter, I seek a better understanding of the growing urge to preserve materials pertaining to violent death in the public domain. In scholarly work on commemorative culture and memorial sites (Santino 2006; Sturken 2007; Doss 2010; Margry and Sánchez-Carretero 2011), this topic has received relative limited analytic attention so far. Addressing the complex relationship between commemorative culture and processes of heritage formation, I introduce two concepts that may be helpful in articulating some of the problems inherent in the preservation of such materials: sacred waste and anticipatory heritage.² With the notion of sacred waste, I aim at spotlighting the ambiguous properties of the material involved and the consequences of such ambiguity for its treatment (Stengs 2011, 2014).³ The notion of anticipatory heritage relates to the ways that societies seek to construct the future memory of their time.⁴ Drawing on work from the fields of anthropology and the study of religion foregrounding the significance of materiality in the production and preservation of meaning (Van Beek 1996; Miller 2009; Morgan 2010; Bynum 2011; Houtman and Meyer 2012), I take the material itself as my point of departure. How to understand the charging of such materials with meaning and emotional power? What values are involved?

Contested Preservation

I start my argument by disentangling the relationships between violent death, collective commemorative rituals and the values invested in the objects involved, using Birgit Meyer's concept of 'sensational form' (2006). With this concept, Meyer seeks to contribute to the study of religion by addressing the question of how people sense, and make sense of, experiences that they understand as transcendental. Sensational forms – which carry both meanings of the word sensation: 'feeling *and* the inducement of a particular kind of excitement' – invoke and organize access to the transcendental (2006: 8). Collective rituals as well as material religious objects (books, buildings, images) may be regarded as authorized sensational forms: what they share is a capacity to address religious practitioners and involve them in particular practices of worship to enable them 'to experience the presence and power of the transcendental' (2006: 8). To conceptualize transcendental or religious experiences as 'human encounters with phenomena or events that appear as beyond comprehension', Meyer uses the notion of a sublime that induces a 'sense of beauty or terror' (2006: 9). I understand the (sudden) confrontation with violent death as such an encounter with an event 'beyond comprehension'. In the violence,

the sublime manifests itself in its capacity of mere terror, inducing 'fear of death' and 'fear of pain' (Burke 2001 [1757]).

Analogous to the sensational forms evoking, mediating and organizing religious experiences, collective commemorative rituals following upon instances of violent death in the public domain (silent marches, wakes, memorials) evoke, mediate and organize grief, anger, sadness and retaliation. Such rituals may be understood as practices to ward off the sublime terror society was so suddenly confronted with; in other words, as present-day forms of incantation. Their material residues, in all their variety, appear in this perspective as physical barriers against such evil and the fears that come with it. The predominance of flowers and candles may be understood as parts of the traditional ritual repertoire related to death, mourning and commemoration, irrespective of any symbolic meaning attributed to the objects.⁵ The writings, drawings and items referring to the circumstances of the tragedies and the individuals involved form, in their turn, material recountings of the event, narrating the violent fate of the victims. The cuddly toys, references to childhood innocence and morality, are the principal commodities within a Western 'comfort culture' that originated in the US in the early 1980s, when adults started to give teddy bears to AIDS patients (Sturken 2007: 8, 131). Since then, the teddy-bear-cum-cuddly-toy has evolved into the world's main material carrier of expressions of sympathy and grief, in contexts of tragedy and loss of almost any kind.⁶ As we will see, each of these categories of materials enforces its own, specific, treatment.

My empirical focus is on the Netherlands, where amidst a long list of 'violent public deaths', three events stand out because of the nationwide outrage they evoked: the assassination of politician Pim Fortuyn (Hilversum, 6 May 2002); the assassination of movie director and publicist Theo van Gogh (Amsterdam, 2 November 2004); and the killing of seven people, and serious injury of ten others: all members of an audience watching the Queen's Day Parade (Apeldoorn, 30 April 2009). The latter incident is generally remembered as the 'Queen's Day Tragedy' (*Koninginnedagdrama*).

Irrespective of the differences in (political and individual) motivations and circumstances that underlie the three events, they all evoked a sense of crisis among the Dutch population. On one hand, the societal impact found expression in the ensuing collective commemorations, and in the collection and preservation of many of the materials generated in these rituals. Tracing how Dutch society has dealt with this material enables me to provide empirical substantiation of my understanding of commemorative material as sacred and waste at the same time. Usually only a part of it will be kept, while the other part will be disposed of and consequently acquires the status of waste. But which part to preserve, and which part to dispose of? What arguments or criteria for selection are mobilized?⁷ On the other hand, the impact of the above events reverberated in the

heated public debate that evolved in 2010 regarding the question of whether the lethal objects used in the three assaults should be preserved as 'historical objects of the future' or – in accordance with standard juridical procedure – destroyed.

Central for my argument here is that the advocates of preservation mobilized 'history' by framing the (future) historical value of these sensational objects as similar to the present-day historical value attached to certain controversial objects preserved from the seventeenth century Dutch Republic, the so-called 'relics of Dutch national history' (*vaderlandse relieken*). 'Relics of Dutch national history' form a specific subcategory of 'secular relics': objects that are considered to have belonged to or have been in touch with persons, or have originated in events that are retrospectively – or, in the cases in this study, anticipatorily – regarded as 'historical'. Such objects are stored or displayed in secular places as museums or research institutions (see Bodenstein 2011). It is my objective to bring out why materiality is essential for the persuasive power of such secular relics in evoking the past. Thus my interest is not the question of whether specific historical objects have the potential to transfer factual knowledge of the past, a general assumption criticized by Ludmilla Jordanova (1989). Instead, it lies in exploring the potential of objects to induce in people a sense of past events and experiences by transferring narratives and emotions (see also Van de Port and Meyer, this volume). For it is that potential that demands that contemporary lethal objects be preserved in order to exercise their power, in the future, to evoke the then past.

Safeguarding Tragedy

On 30 April 2009 at 11.50 AM, in the Dutch provincial town of Apeldoorn, a black Suzuki Swift sped straight through an audience watching the annual Queen's Day Parade. Aiming for the Queen and the royal family, the driver killed seven people in the audience instead. The car crashed against the Queen Wilhelmina Monument (*de Naald*, 'the Needle') in the centre of the crossing where the royal family was scheduled to pass in an open bus, and left the driver fatally wounded. The tragedy took place before the eyes of millions of people watching the Parade by live television broadcast. In the following days, a continuous stream of commemorative objects flooded the crossing and its vicinity, the memorial space of the National Canadian Liberation Memorial in particular.⁸ The abundance of fresh flowers (for instance, lilac, jasmine, tulips, roses, lilies of the valley, quite a few apparently handpicked from private gardens), gave the memorial an extraordinary aesthetic in terms of colour and fragrance, overwhelming the presence of such objects as letters, ribbons, candles and cuddly toys.

In the week after the tragedy, the director of Restauratie Atelier Sterken BV, a workshop specializing in the restoration and conservation of paper, leather and vellum,⁹ contacted the Apeldoorn city authorities to offer free

assistance with the preservation of the commemorative material, an offer that was gratefully accepted.¹⁰ Two days after the formal commemoration ceremony (8 May), Atelier Sterken gathered all materials, except for the flowers, plants and candles. After a treatment of three months, entailing freezing, drying, cleaning, flattening and gamma radiation (for disinfection), the conservation process was completed. The city authorities had decided that the materials would become part of the collection of CODA (*Cultuur Onder Dak Apeldoorn*), Apeldoorn's main cultural centre, consisting of a museum, library and archive.

Atelier Sterken had provided similar assistance before; after the so-called 'Enschede Firework Disaster' (23 May 2000), when an exploding firework warehouse destroyed an entire neighbourhood, leaving 23 people dead, and approximately 950 wounded; and in 2004, when film director Theo van Gogh was killed by an Islamist fanatic. Atelier Sterken's dedication started when the Enschede City Archives approached Jan Sterken (the workshop's founder) to preserve some of the artefacts collected by the Archives in the neighbourhood where the firework warehouse had exploded. Sterken and his employees decided to offer their assistance *pro bono*. In 2010, some of the preserved materials were used in an exhibition commemorating the tenth anniversary of the disaster.

With regard to what may be described as the 'Theo van Gogh materials', Atelier Sterken preserved the commemorative material selected from the memorial sites – in consultation with Van Gogh's relatives – by the Rijksmuseum (the 'National Museum') and the Amsterdam Museum,¹¹ as well as the threatening letter that the assassin had pinned with a knife to the body of Van Gogh (Figure 9.1).¹² This letter went to the Public Prosecutor, where it is still kept. Most of the paper commemorative material, predominantly drawings and letters, became part of the collection of the Amsterdam City Archives. There it was categorized¹³ and digitalized, and still forms a permanent virtual exhibition displayed on the Archives' website.¹⁴ In addition, the Amsterdam Museum¹⁵ and the Rijksmuseum have several objects and letters in their collections (but not in their permanent exhibitions), which are partly accessible on the museums' websites. A telling example of such an object in the Rijksmuseum collection is a film container, with a cigarette butt attached to it – Van Gogh was an ostentatious smoker – labelled 'Film Fortuin' (not Fortuyn!) and the text 'This was your last film, on Pim Fortuin. This time, you were the victim', written on it (Figures 9.2 and 9.3).¹⁶

The collection and preservation of the Pim Fortuyn commemorative material followed different trajectories. From the commemorations celebrating the tenth anniversary of Fortuyn's death (in 2012), it became apparent that a selection of the material had been kept by the foundation Stichting Vrienden van Pim Fortuyn (Friends of Pim Fortuyn), a foundation established in the memory of Fortuyn. For the occasion, the foundation created a 'commemoration memorial' next to the statue of Fortuyn in



Figure 9.1 Workers of the Amsterdam Sanitation Department selecting items to be preserved as part of the clearing of the Theo van Gogh memorial site, one week after the murder (10 November 2004). Photo by the author.

Rotterdam, composed largely of original 2002 commemorative objects, such as flags, cuddly toys, posters, candles and T-shirts with slogans (Figure 9.4). Most of the Fortuyn commemorative material, however, is kept at the Meertens Institute, where I work. This institute of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences is dedicated to the research and documentation of ‘diversity in language and culture in the Netherlands’.¹⁷ Initially, Fortuyn’s brothers and sister were not eager to hand over the material to any of the interested parties.¹⁸ When, in the year after the murder, societal interest in ‘Fortuyn’ quickly faded, the disappointed family decided to bury the materials with Fortuyn in the monumental grave at his summer residence in Italy. Meertens Institute researcher Peter Jan Margry managed to convince the family that preservation at the Meertens Institute would be a more appropriate destination with the arguments that



Figure 9.3 The film container in a truck on its way to preservation (10 November 2004). Photo by the author.

The quotes seem to emphasize an authenticity, which, they imply, is missing in the other collections.

As is the case with almost all such commemorative collections, the Fortuyn collection at the Meertens Institute is a selection from the material that was available. For instance, a container with cuddly toys, originally regarded by the family ‘as an ideal gift for third-world children’ (Margry 2011: 332), was not preserved, for two reasons. First, according to Margry, these ‘unmarked stuffed animals ... would not produce enough additional relevant information for research’, and second, ‘the costs for disinfection, preservation, and storage would have exceeded the budget’ (Margry 2011: 335). It is worth taking a closer look at the dealings with cuddly toys, as these help to flesh out some of the complexities inherent in dealing with commemorative material in general.

After Fortuyn’s funeral, the memorial sites were cleared and the materials (except for the flowers, I presume) went to the family. These amounted



Figure 9.4 The 2012 Pim Fortuyn ‘Commemoration Memorial’ consisting of original 2002 commemorative objects. Photograph by the author.

to large quantities, as the container with cuddly toys exemplifies. The family’s intention to donate the cuddly toys to ‘third-world children’ highlights the difficulty of disposing of such material as just garbage. Charged with an emotional or moral value, such material demands special treatment. Such a situation becomes the more relevant when large quantities are involved. For instance, the quantities of memorial material that ‘inundated’ the streets of New York, the Pentagon and the Flight 93 crash site in Pennsylvania confronted collectors of these ‘ephemera of loss’, in this case the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History in particular, with the question of how much of the material could be collected (Gardner 2011: 289–90). For the remaining material, however, no proper destination existed.

A charity destination may offer a way out to the moral dilemma imposed on the caretakers. The eventual dealings with the flowers left after the death of Princess Diana are illustrative here: the fresh flowers were selected to be sent to homes for the elderly, while the remaining 10,000 to 15,000 tons of flower material was composted for use in royal parks (Greenhalgh 1999: 42, 48). The flowers collected at the Columbine High School memorial were treated in a similar vein: ‘Rotten flowers became compost for the Denver area park; fresh flowers became potpourri for victims’ families’ (Doss 2010: 72). In the Netherlands, the Dutch Ministry of Internal Affairs was confronted with a similar dilemma in the aftermath of the

MH17 Malaysia Airlines plane crash. This atrocity left all 298 people on board, including 193 Dutch citizens, dead in the Ukraine on 17 July 2014. In January 2015, the Ministry commissioned the mayor of Hilversum, the town where most of the commemorations had been taking place and where also MH17 commemorative material from other locations had been stored, to develop a ‘National Cuddly Toy Protocol’ (*nationaal knuffelprotocol*) for dealing with such cuddly toys, both in the present case and in future. Although no official protocol has been established to date, the dealings with the MH17 cuddly toys, which numbered almost a thousand, might serve as an example for future cases. For the 2015 MH17 commemoration, the cuddly toys were used for a wall (*knuffelmuur*), a construction that may be captured best as a ‘wall of compassion’ (Figure 9.5). Thereafter, the foundation Vliegkamp MH17 (Plane Crash MH17) cleaned the toys, and approached a charity, the foundation Geef een Knuffel (Give a Cuddle). The latter foundation collects money for children with cystic fibrosis, and distributes cuddly toys among sick children in hospitals and related destinations, such as Ronald McDonald houses. The foundation ascertains that the children will never hear or find out about the origins of their new cuddly toy. In this way, the objects, cleared from their emotional value, could start a ‘new life’.

Returning to the Fortuyn cuddly toys, the family never managed to donate these to third-world children, because of the ‘spiraling costs of cleaning’ (Margry 2011: 332). Herewith, another ‘trash’ dimension of



Figure 9.5 The ‘Wall of Compassion’ (2015) constructed from the cuddly toys left at various sites in commemoration of the MH17 victims in 2014. ANP, photo: Michael Kooren, Pool.

commemorative material is highlighted: when not taken care of properly, it will soon disintegrate or decay to assume a gestalt that in other cases would imply removal as waste. Affected by humidity and dirt, the cuddly toys had, in some sense, become waste: unless thoroughly cleaned, they were no longer suitable for donation. Yet, in their status of 'sacred' objects, the toys resisted disposal. Together with all the other Fortuyn materials for which the family could not find a proper destination, the toys awaited a special – ritual – treatment: collective burial in Fortuyn's grave in Italy. This ritual disposal never happened either, however: when the other Fortuyn materials had gained a new status as 'national cultural heritage', the toys' waste value overruled their sacredness. The family only could take the final step towards desacralization by disposal; however, only after this had been made ethically acceptable by the declaration that the cuddly toys were scientifically redundant. The 'life history' (see Appadurai 1986; Kopytoff 1986) of these cuddly toys provides an empirical illustration of the consequences that may follow from the tug of war between the waste and sacred values of such materials. Being inherently unstable, sacred waste tends to move – to paraphrase Appadurai (1986: 13) – 'in and out' of its state as either sacred or trash, according to time and circumstances.

Future Relics of Dutch National History

The second part of this contribution focuses on the arguments mobilized for or against preservation or destruction of the lethal objects used in the assaults. Opposed, in the debates on this matter, are the objects' attributed historical value – again, a scientific argument – and their negative, emotional value, which I discuss below. As it is my intention to shed light on the growing urge to preserve, I first ask the question: what elements constitute the scientific argument? From there, I will proceed to the forces requesting destruction in order to better understand, in the words of Dutch anthropologist Gosewijn van Beek (1996: 15), why certain issues '*must* be settled "materially"'. The objects concerned are: the wreck of the car that was driven at the Queen and the royal family during the 2009 Queen's Day celebrations; the pistol that killed Pim Fortuyn; and the knife that the assassin left in the chest of Theo van Gogh. The case of Theo van Gogh involves other controversial materials as well: a pistol, a machete, another knife and the threatening letter already mentioned. Yet, more than any other object, the knife in the chest has become the iconic image of that murder.

The destination of the three objects became an issue after a short news item by RTL4, one of the Dutch commercial channels, stating that the CODA Museum was planning to organize an exhibition including the wrecked car.¹⁹ Both the director of the CODA Museum (Carin Reijnders) and the director of the Dutch Police Museum in Apeldoorn (Taco Pauka) where the wreck was stored denied that they were planning an exhibition, but were firm on the historical relevance of the object. To them 'the

wrecked car (was) an important object in telling history'.²⁰ To explain their desire to preserve the object, the directors compared the wreck with other controversial objects kept in museums. Pauka, in an interview with the national public broadcaster NOS: 'Some years ago, we obtained the knives used in the killing of Theo van Gogh.'²¹ To further demonstrate the museum's integrity in dealing with such sensitive material he added that the preservation of these weapons does not entail exhibition in the near future at all: 'At present, placing it in a showcase and showing it to all people is something I even wouldn't dream of. We keep this in silence, and in peace and quiet, until a generation will arise that is able to decide on the thing with some more distance than we, who are emotionally involved with the object.'²² With this comparison, Pauka firstly places the wreck in the same category of objects as the Theo van Gogh murder weapons, herewith including these objects in the debate. Secondly, he emphasizes that emotional distance is a precondition for any decision taken on a possible status of such objects as true museum objects. And thirdly, his argument demonstrates a responsibility as a professional collector by expressing his commitment to future generations' awareness of history.

Reijnders' comparison similarly revolved around the significance of emotional distancing. Yet, she chose to compare the wreck with a controversial object four centuries older exhibited in the Rijksmuseum: the sword that was used in the beheading of Dutch statesman and supreme government attorney Johan van Oldenbarnevelt in 1619. Reijnders: 'Now, it is far too heavily charged, far too delicate. And this delicacy rules our perception. At present, in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, one may see the sword with which Van Oldenbarnevelt was beheaded. Well, today, we look at it with a pretty objective gaze, as a piece from our national history.'²³ With this statement, Reijnders placed the wreck in a very specific category of controversial objects, generally referred to as 'relics of Dutch national history' (*vaderlandse relieken*). From Reijnder's perspective, the wreck appears as a future relic of Dutch national history.

Coincidentally or not, the pistol that was used to kill Pim Fortuyn hit the headlines one week later. In its function of 'Museum of Dutch National History', the Rijksmuseum was in the process of obtaining the object. Moreover, Wim Pijbes, the director of the Rijksmuseum, explicitly envisaged the pistol as a future relic of Dutch national history. Again, a comparison was made with the Johan van Oldenbarnevelt sword. In the public discussion that followed, the (destroyed) pistol used in the killing of the 'founding father of the nation', Prince William of Orange (1584) was also mentioned. Furthermore, the Rijksmuseum also emphasized the importance of the preservation of the pistol for future generations, acknowledging the contemporary emotions still clinging to it. Thus, within one week, lethal objects from the three national tragedies appeared in a debate focusing on the question of their importance for the history of the future. The pro-preservation stance, most strongly voiced by historians and

professionals working in the world of museums and heritage, was based on a scientific argument: the objects have become part of the nation's history, and are therefore to be considered as future relics of Dutch national history.

Historical Sensations

To better appreciate the persuasive power of the argument that an object may be a 'relic of Dutch national history' it is necessary to explore this category of objects in more detail. Why do these objects have the potency to inspire the preservation of present-day objects as potential future relics? The notion of 'relics of Dutch national history' conveys that in the Netherlands a specific category of historical objects is perceived as 'relics', a categorization that sets these objects apart from any other object related to Dutch national history. What objects does this category entail? Relics are usually body parts or pieces (including hair or nails) of sacred men and women, or items that have belonged to them; objects thus of individuals with a special relation to God or with the divine and therefore are religiously charged. The nineteenth century anthropologist James Frazer understood this charging as the working of 'contagious magic': objects touched by the saint are objects touched by the divine. In the Western European context, relics are generally understood as Catholic objects, in particular. Yet, the Dutch vaderlandse relieken are definitely not Catholic but rather are 'secular'. The concept of the vaderlandse reliek specifically relates to objects from seventeenth-century Holland, a period generally known as 'the Dutch Republic' (1588–1794, formally the Republic of the United Netherlands). The earlier sixteenth century Calvinist-protestant iconoclasm had been directed against the veneration of saints and, by implication, against that of relics. Paradoxically, it has been the formally Reformist Republic that produced the most significant relics of Dutch national history or 'secular relics' as they are conceived of today.

One issue that dominated politics in the seventeenth century Republic was the struggle for political control between Republicans and Orangeists. The latter, largely the old nobility, were the protagonists of a cardinal political role for the Orange family. Although Holland was a Republic, the locus of power – the so-called 'Stadholder' (*Stadhouder*, the chief magistrate of the United Provinces of the Netherlands) – was an inherited position, occupied by a family of princely descent, the House of Orange-Nassau.²⁴ In their ambition to establish a truly republican administration, the Republicans, based in wealthy merchant circles, particularly in Amsterdam, opposed the dynastical power of the Stadholders. It goes beyond the topic of this contribution to outline the political turmoil and alternating power constellations of the seventeenth century in detail. Yet, to understand why objects related to some of the main political players of the period could survive as relics, it is important to understand that the political antagonism between Republicans and Orangeists continued to

dominate political debate until Napoleonic times. Following the ‘social life’ (Appadurai 1986) of particular objects related to statesmen, vicars and scholars who had resisted the primacy of the Stadtholders, historian Wim Vroom shows how these objects played a role in this ongoing dispute (1997: 12–14).²⁵ They appeared as objects of veneration in Republican-inspired drawings, poems, stories and songs, while simultaneously being the target of derision and ridicule in lampoons and pamphlets from the Orangeist side. Most valued in this ‘secular relic cult’ were objects related to the heroes of the so-called Loevestein party (named after Loevestein Castle, the state prison): Johan van Oldenbarnevelt, Hugo de Groot (internationally known as Grotius) and the brothers Jan and Cornelis de Witt, in particular. Except for Hugo de Groot, all died violent deaths. For the purpose of this contribution – understanding why present-day lethal objects may appear as future relics – I will briefly present the events and circumstances that generated today’s most important ‘relics of Dutch national history’, including the relics related to the death of William of Orange, as these relics were specifically mentioned in the 2010 debate. As we will see, issues concerning the objects’ perceived authenticity continue to play a role in present-day controversies.

Events and Circumstances I

In 1584, protestant Stadtholder Prince William of Orange was murdered in the Prince’s Court in Delft by a fervent Catholic in Spanish service, named Balthasar Gerards. The perpetrator was sentenced for high treason, and executed in public. First, as the law required, the traitor’s weapon was publicly destroyed on the scaffold. The bullet holes left by William’s murderer in an inner wall of the Court, now a museum, have reputedly been treasured ever since. A forensic reconstruction of the murder, conducted in 2012, authenticated the bullet holes as original. That year, the Prince’s Court obtained an authentic sixteenth-century *radslotpistool* for its new exhibition ‘Cold Case: Willem van Oranje’.

Events and Circumstances II

After a severe confrontation with Stadtholder Prince Maurits (a son of William of Orange), Johan van Oldenbarnevelt was accused of high treason and beheaded on 13 May 1619. The execution generated many relics, of which only a few have been preserved. After the execution, ‘supporters’ kept pieces of Van Oldenbarnevelt’s velvet mantle soaked with blood. A witness described how, after the beheading, bystanders soaked their handkerchiefs in the blood; some scraped blood-soaked sand and pieces of wood from the scaffold in order to sell the pieces to other bystanders. Some buyers, on the contrary, wanted the blood of Van Oldenbarnevelt out of revenge: ‘mixed with wine, they drank the blood’ (Vroom 1997: 14–15, trans. I.S.). The

objects that survived as relics of Dutch national history are a seventeenth century execution sword and the walking stick (*het stockske*) with which the aged Oldenbarnevelt had reputedly climbed the scaffold. In fact, there are three *stockskes*, all claimed to be the authentic one. With regard to the unclear provenance of the sword, Vroom makes the comparison with the rediscovery of a medieval miraculous statue: ‘wrongfully neglected, it is discovered by accident, and then begins its triumphal march’ (1997: 33, trans. I.S.). From the moment of its ‘reappearing’ (around 1743), the object has been successfully promoted as the sword used in Van Oldenbarnevelt’s execution. The sword and one of the sticks are permanently exhibited in the Rijksmuseum.

Events and Circumstances III

Another event that still appeals to the national imagination is the escape from Loevestein Castle by Hugo de Groot, a well-known lawyer and an ally of Johan van Oldenbarnevelt. Hugo de Groot was also arrested on charges of high treason. In 1619, De Groot was sentenced to lifelong imprisonment in Loevestein Castle. In 1621, he managed to escape in a book chest. The chest has become one of *the* relics of Dutch national history. Other important De Groot relics are as the modest bricklayers’ jacket that De Groot had reputedly worn in order to cross the Dutch border unrecognized on his way to Antwerp, and his Loevestein wine glass. Like the walking stick, there are several chests, some of them rediscovered one to two centuries after the escape. This is proof, Vroom concludes, of the meaning that people attached to these objects and that, in that sense, all of them can be regarded as true ‘relics’ (1997: 38). The Rijksmuseum exhibits one of the book chests, along with the story of De Groot’s escape, concluding the text with the line: ‘the chest on display here was long thought to be the one from this famous story’.

Events and Circumstances IV

The lynching of the brothers Jan and Cornelis de Witt on 20 August 1672 is considered one of the most gruesome political killings in Dutch history. Both Jan and Cornelis had been important statesmen, but because of a combination of circumstances their fate turned, and both were arrested for high treason in 1672. On 20 August of that year, the brothers were publicly lynched and literally torn to pieces in The Hague.

The relics generated by the murder were of a particular kind, namely pieces of their bodies: ears, nose, hair, skin, blood, genitals, tongues and toes. An eyewitness – a supporter of the brothers – describes with abhorrence how he saw the mob ‘cutting the brothers fingers from the hands, the noses from the faces, the lips from the mouths, the ears from the heads, the tongues out the mouths, and the toes from the feet, to sell these to

interested bystanders' (Vroom 1997: 15, trans. I.S.). Again, these 'objects' were desired by enemies as trophies as well as by supporters as relics. The eyewitness himself bought a piece of the index finger of Jan de Witt, and wrote a widely distributed poem in which he praised this particular body part for having been raised in an oath against the Stadtholder (Vroom 1997: 15–17). Today, the tongue of Jan de Witt and a toe of Cornelis de Witt are on display in the The Hague Historical Museum.

The objects now known as *vaderlandse relieken* were charged with the political sentiments and emotions of their time, which explains why they survived to become relics. Now, four hundred years later, these emotions are gone with the people who felt them. In the larger narrative of the origin of the Dutch nation state they have become material evidences of the truth of that history – irrespective of how differently this history has been told over the course of time. Important in obtaining the status of relic is their 'history of preservation'. As Vroom has shown, many of the objects have been family heirlooms of relatives. Most objects disappeared from the public view and interest; only a few eventually surfaced in curiosity cabinets or, in the mid nineteenth century, in exhibitions of national antiquities, to be incorporated eventually into the collections of the emerging national museums. There, according to Vroom, the objects are not always properly valued: a preoccupation with scientifically established authenticity – with the question whether these objects really are what the narrations claim them to be (see Van de Port and Meyer's introduction) – obscures questions about their historical meaning. More than written documents, he argues, the objects bring the past literally within reach (1997: 38). Vroom's plea for taking the meaning of these objects seriously locates the sense of authenticity that people may experience from interaction with them in the realm of the sensorial (cf. Van de Port and Meyer), to which we may add, with Jordanova (1989), the realm of the imagination. For a better understanding of the capacity of such objects to induce people to engage in sensorial, emotional, imaginative and intellectual relations with the past, the final section of this contribution addresses the material presence of the objects: their sheer materiality as fundamental for their aesthetic appeal and persuasiveness.

Emotional Distancing and the Past of the Future

Vroom's argument has been made for the wreck, the knife and the pistol as well as for the commemorative objects brought to the places of mischief: all these may eventually bring the past of the future within reach. Declaring such objects relics of Dutch national history in the making constitutes an attempt to write these murders into history. In that sense, the museums and institutions mentioned are involved in the creation of the heritage of the future or, as I call it, anticipatory heritage.²⁶ In contrast to 'heritage looking back', when the historical value of certain objects is decided

upon retrospectively, museums and institutions may now also collect in anticipation of the possible historical value of certain objects or materials for the future. When it comes to the preservation of materials pertaining to violent death in the public domain, the significance of emotional distancing (see also Blanes, this volume) may work either way, as I will show in the remainder of this contribution.

Like the Republican relics in their time, the wreck, the knife and the pistol are objects charged with emotion: they differ from objects from the past in that their past is still within reach. It is precisely the absence of distance in time and affective involvement that gave rise to the controversy at stake. The RTL4 news on the preservation of the wreck evoked negative responses, based on emotional and normative arguments. The aversion evoked by the idea of preservation/display was most strongly voiced by the bereaved, but also resonated with views on the topic among ‘the general public’ as evidenced in public letters, web forums, etc. Relatives of Queen’s Day Tragedy victims who had learned about the preservation plans through the media used expressions such as ‘macabre’ or ‘ultimate insanity’. The mayor of Apeldoorn immediately expressed strong disapproval of the idea of future exhibition, as did the parents of the perpetrator/driver of the car. The CODA Museum and the Police Museum tried in vain to contextualize their work. Reijnders:

It is really unfortunate that this is announced as if we were preparing an exhibition with that murder weapon. Now, this car receives lots of attention, but at the same time many cuddly toys, poems and letters that were left at that spot are being preserved as well, to allow that story to be told as well and as broadly as possible to future generations.²⁷

The parents of the perpetrator appealed to the court to ask for the wreck’s destruction and won the case. They justified their request with the argument that it was emotionally unbearable for them to live with the idea that the object with which their son had killed seven people would be on display somewhere, sometime.

The news on the Rijksmuseum collection plans for ‘the Pim Fortuyn pistol’ was accompanied by the message that the pistol would only become part of the collection if the Fortuyn family would give their consent. The latter came almost instantly. Marten Fortuyn, Pim Fortuyn’s brother: ‘This confirms that my brother has written history; or, at least, that his murderer has. If I were the museum, however, I would take out its spring’.²⁸ As with all crime-related objects, the pistol had so far been preserved as evidence by the Public Prosecution Service. According to protocol, the Service will destroy such objects when the evidence is no longer needed. In case an institution is interested in obtaining such an object (always as a loan) a request with justification may be sent to the public prosecutor, who will decide on the object’s future. For the pistol, the Theo van Gogh weapons and the wreck, such requests have, indeed, been made. The public prosecutor approved the

Rijksmuseum's request for the pistol, the Dutch Police Museum's request for the Theo van Gogh weapons, and was probably also intending to approve a request for the wreck, which came both from the CODA Museum and the Police Museum. According to the curator of the Police Museum, a wooden case had already been prepared to store the wreck. It was the intention to give the wreck a place far away in the museum's basement and out of sight of anybody, even of the employees of the museum itself.

The latter is not to be understood as a mere description of how the wreck would have been treated. As an embodiment of pain and death, the wreck *needed* to be hidden from sight in the most remote corner of the museum basement. Yet, for others, such concealment would be not enough. Like the sixteenth century execution of Balthazar Gerards' pistol – its ritual destruction on the scaffold – it was felt that the wreck should be destroyed. Following Van Beek (1996: 15–16), I understand the destruction of the wreck not as merely symbolic but as the consequence of its material capacity to engage people with its violent past. The wreck's materiality, one might say, thus works both in its favour and against it: as the concrete embodiment of the narrative of the violence of which it has been part, it renders this past sensible, (re)evoking emotions of anger and grief associated with the attack. This capacity is the primary reason why various parties insisted on preserving the wreck. Yet, as a material object, it may be destroyed (see Van Beek 1996: 15). Consequently, the wreck's capacity to 'bring the past within reach' enabled other parties to mobilize this destructibility. The destinations of the other potential relics to date demonstrate that the outcome of the anti-thetical forces associated with the objects' materiality remains uncertain. The 'Fortuyn pistol' became part of the Rijksmuseum collection. Although not on display, it is kept in storage. The 'Theo van Gogh weapons' (most probably) still are in the depot of the Police Museum. However, since the general negative response to the museum's interest in preserving the wreck still resonates, the museum denies any 'involvement' with the objects.²⁹

The necessity of such denial demonstrates the contentious and dangerous potency inherent in anything '*sacre*' (see Chidester 2014: 239–40). The assaults charged the lethal objects with a negative moral and emotional value, whereas the commemorative rituals charged the commemorative materials with a positive moral and emotional value. It is helpful to bring these apparently antagonistic categories of objects or materials within the same analytical framework of heritage formation and processes of sacralization (Meyer and De Witte 2013). Whether positively or negatively charged, the values attached to these objects/materials account for their special, set apart – and hence sacred – status, and their consequent framing as (future) heritage. The potential effects of such framing may be powerful as, in the words of Meyer and De Witte, 'even ordinary objects may be elevated to the level of the extraordinary and achieve a new sublime or sacred quality' (2013: 276). In the case of the sensationally charged objects and materials under study here, this framing proved to have powerful effects indeed: framing

as heritage brought to the fore tensions and contestations over control and ownership, and highlighted the antithetical forces inherent in the materiality of the objects/materials. Important features of anything sacred are ambivalence and a tendency to escape control (Chidester 2014: 240). The ambiguity explains the two directions framing as heritage may take. For the objects/materials charged with positive emotions such as empathy and grief, disposal and destruction would appear as a denial of what people are standing for (or against). Precisely because distancing is yet impossible, the objects/materials need to be preserved. Yet, their mere quantity and/or ephemerality oppose such control. As the car wreck, the Fortuyn pistol and the Theo van Gogh weapons are all charged with negative emotions, the historical and other scientific arguments for preservation may be interpreted as attempts to untie the objects from the emotions involved. Framing the objects as possible future relics of national history implied the creation of distance, which was unbearable for many involved. At the same time, however, the curators and other institutional collectors involved assumed that these are exactly the kind of objects that in due time will generate those emotions that will connect people with the nation's myths and narratives. There is something paradoxical in the way the creators of future heritage deliberately seek distancing while intending a future use of this possibly most sensational form of heritage. As I have argued, relics of national history, as a specific kind of heritage, work precisely because these objects *are* sensational: they facilitate experiences of the past through the senses.

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Notes

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1. More recent examples include materials collected at the memorial sites related to terrorist attacks in Nice, Paris, Brussels and Manchester.

2. Phyllis Passariello (1994) uses the notion of sacred waste in an article on the ritual (re)use of the human body and its parts, remains and excrements, the placenta in particular. Hence, Passariello basically deals with the sacrality and the sacralization of human waste departing from the question 'is anything that once was part of a human *ever* considered *pure waste* by humans' (1994: 110). I view sacred waste as a much broader and more encompassing concept (Stengs 2014).
3. Commemorative material is but one instance of 'accidentally produced' (Chidester 2014) objects or substances 'that cannot be disposed of as just garbage (or rubble), but neither can be kept or left alone' (Stengs 2014: 235).
4. In Ruy Blanes' contribution on scaffolding in Luanda (this volume), constructing future memory happens literarily.
5. See Hallam and Hockey (2001) on floral symbolism and death.
6. See Linenthal (2001) and Sturken (2007) on the ubiquity of teddy bears in US commemorative culture since the Oklahoma Bombing (19 April 1995). Sturken makes a convincing argument for the 'Americanness' of the phenomenon, but contrary to her assertion that it 'is impossible to imagine, by comparison, a group of European officials standing at a memorial while holding teddy bears' (2007: 131), I think, judging from the omnipresence of cuddly toys in European commemorative culture, that such imaginings are now very possible.
7. These dilemmas are widely recognized: see for instance the *The New York Times* 'What to do with the Tributes after the Shooting Stops' (<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/07/us/dallas-police-shooting-tributes.html>, accessed 30 August 2017).
8. Although, of course, the Needle is central here, the city authorities almost immediately decided to channel all tributes to the vicinity of the Liberation Memorial. This memorial, 'The Man with Two Heads', commemorates the liberation of the Netherlands by Canadian armed forces in 1945. An identical memorial commemorates the liberation in Ottawa. The Needle was erected in 1901 on the occasion of Queen Wilhelmina's marriage, and also as a tribute to the queen's parents (King William III and Queen Emma).
9. Atelier Sterken's two sister companies, Documenten Wacht (Documents Watch) and Museum Wacht (Museum Watch), are specialized in the protection, maintenance, transportation and restoration of collections and archives of museums, banks, government institutions and libraries. Both companies partly work through an insurance-like membership system.
10. Interview with the director of Atelier Sterken (Jeroen Jochem) on 23 August 2012.
11. At the time, the Amsterdam History Museum.
12. The letter was addressed to a Somali-born Dutch politician (Ayaan Hirsi Ali), a former Muslim and outspoken critic of Islam, who had worked with Van Gogh on a short movie (*Submission*, 2004) about the suppression and abuse of women by Islam. In the letter, the assassin calls for a holy war, also threatening various other 'heretics'.
13. See <https://archieff.amsterdam/inventarissen/inventaris/30051.nl.html> (accessed 30 August 2017).
14. See https://archieff.amsterdam/stukken/dood/theo_van_gogh/ (accessed 30 August 2017).
15. See <http://am.adlibhosting.com/Details/collect/54637> (accessed 30 August 17).
16. The film container is catalogued as object NG-2004-72-2, see www.rijksmuseum.nl (accessed 21 June 16). Judging from the dates of acquisition, the Rijksmuseum started to collect commemorative objects only after the murder of Theo van Gogh. Next to several Theo van Gogh commemorative objects (the film case, several written statements), the museum placed a 'Pim Fortuyn flag' in December 2004. Other objects are all of a later date.

17. See <http://www.meertens.knaw.nl/cms/en/component/content/article/160-uncategorised/138759-collectie-pim-fortuyn> (accessed 30 August 2017).
18. The National Archives and the International Institute of Social History (IISG) were also interested.
19. <http://www.rtlnieuws.nl/nieuws/binnenland/auto-karst-t-wordt-tentoongesteld> (accessed 30 August 2017).
20. <http://nos.nl/artikel/185406-burgemeester-auto-karst-tates-niet-tentoonstellen.html> (accessed 30 August 2017).
21. <http://nos.nl/audio/185428-suzuki-swift-bewaren-voor-volgende-generaties.html> (accessed 12 November 2014, no longer available. Trans. I.S.).
22. <http://nos.nl/audio/185428-suzuki-swift-bewaren-voor-volgende-generaties.html> (accessed 12 November 14, no longer available. Trans. IS).
23. NOS Journaal, 16 September 2010, <http://nos.nl/artikel/185406-burgemeester-auto-karst-t-niet-tentoonstellen.html> (accessed 30 August 2017. Trans. I.S.).
24. The title is derived from the idea that the person involved ‘holds’ the vacant seat (*stad* = place) of the king. The Netherlands had abjured Spanish king Philip II, but not monarchy as such.
25. Other groups of secular relics distinguished by Vroom are objects related to the first period of the rebellion against the Spanish troops, objects related to the House of Oranje-Nassau, and objects related to the military, mostly the maritime heroes, Piet Heijn, Michiel de Ruyter and father and son Tromp (Vroom 1997: 12).
26. My inspiration for this notion is derived from the Dutch art historian Frans Grijzenhout, who calls a project of Dutch ethnologists to preserve 52,000 ‘letters to the future’ by ordinary Dutch people ‘a tendency towards anticipating “heritagization” of the present’ (Grijzenhout 2007: 16–17). But, as Derrida and Prenowitz (1995) state, any archive refers to the future and not to the past.
27. <http://nos.nl/artikel/185406-burgemeester-auto-karst-tates-niet-tentoonstellen.html> (accessed 30 September 2017. Trans. I.S.).
28. <http://nos.nl/artikel/187077-rijksmuseum-wil-vuurwapen-volkert-van-der-g.html> (accessed 30 September 2017. Trans. I.S.).
29. When trying to trace the whereabouts of the weapons, I met a profound silence regarding the question of whether these objects (particularly the most iconic among them – the knife that was found in the chest of Van Gogh) were actually in the collection of the Police Museum. In January 2014, insiders told me that since the debacle with the car wreck the museum had been unable to add any new object to its collection; previously, objects had come as donations from the public or the Public Prosecutor. Furthermore, the museum is very concerned about any possible negative news.

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