GIVING PUBLIC SPACE A FACE: THE AGENCY OF MONUMENTS AND PORTRAITS, THAILAND AND THE NETHERLANDS COMPARED

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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

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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.