

**Signs
of
*Life***

photography by
Jeroen Hansen



Noord-Brabant, The Netherlands



Gran Canaria, Spain



Noord-Brabant, The Netherlands



Flevoland, The Netherlands



Lanzarote, Spain



Lanzarote, Spain



Lanzarote, Spain



Gran Canaria, Spain



Noord-Holland, The Netherlands



Gelderland, The Netherlands



Malopolska, Poland



Ibiza, Spain



Gran Canaria, Spain



Overijssel, The Netherlands



Noord-Brabant, The Netherlands



Flevoland, The Netherlands





Trapani, Sicily, Italy



Taranto, Italy



Lombardia, Italy



Utrecht, The Netherlands

It's like there was
a point in the road
that said
'this is the end
of the line'

To
here

Roadside memorials: continuing bonds between the living and their departed loved ones

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The book that lies in front of you contains a wide variety of pictures by Jeroen Hansen of memorials located throughout Europe. Each picture shows a very unique and often handcrafted memorial place, some of which are situated in beautiful isolated rural landscapes and others in hectic urban areas. Behind every memorial is a story that is not always known to passersby. However, it is self-evident that they all mark a place where someone's loved one has died, and where that deceased person is being remembered. With the placement of these memorials, a new landscape of mourning has emerged in Western societies. Death that once was a taboo and regarded as something to be kept private, has proliferated in the public sphere of today's society. Moreover, this book itself is a way in which death becomes more visible. Perhaps, as the title 'Signs of life' suggests, the pictures don't portray death itself, but tell the stories about lived lives, and reveal how bereaved people find ways to continue the bonds with their deceased loved ones in their ongoing lives.

Research on roadside memorials

As part of my doctoral study on 'Final Place: geographies of death and remembrance in The Netherlands', I conducted research on the meanings that bereaved people attach to roadside memorials in collaboration with Peter Groote. I was interested in why roadside memorials were established, by whom, for whom, their design and what kind of role they played in the grieving process. My research involved collecting data on more than 400 roadside memorials in The Netherlands and interviewing the establishers of 24 roadside memorials. I will use some quotations from the interviews to relate some of the stories behind the memorials.

Why established?

From the interviews I learned that the primary reason for establishing a roadside memorial is to honour and commemorate a loved one who died. According to a mother, who lost her 17-year-old son, "You're occupied with leaving traces of his existence; that people keep talking and thinking about him." Marking the site of tragedy is also essential, but it can be seen as a part of keeping the memory of the victim alive. Another reason for establishment is to warn the public. In the interviews, however, this emerged as a secondary rationale only. Only two respondents stated this as their main motive, while many others mentioned this as an afterthought.

For whom?

Our study has revealed that in absolute numbers the majority of the roadside memorials are established for young men, since they represent the biggest group that die in traffic accidents. We have taken those numbers into account and calculated whether the age and gender of the victim affects the establishment of a roadside memorial. We found indeed that age played an important role: the younger the victim, the more likely a memorial is established. Yet, the gender of the victim did not play a role. The roadside memorials emphasises the unacceptable deaths of victims who died too young and who met such a violent death away from home. In modern societies that apparently have been successful in controlling death, there seems to be an increasing need for memorializing those cases where death occurs suddenly, unexpectedly and violently without warning and the opportunity for closure.

Two types of memorials

In this book, two types of memorials can be distinguished: spontaneous and permanent roadside memorials. These differ substantially in their composition, construction and in terms of who established them. Almost all start as a spontaneous memorial of a temporary nature. It is created at the time of the accident and constructed with items that are available at the time, such as flowers, candles, teddy bears, personal notes and mementos. Most spontaneous memorials are part of an existing structure such as a tree, pole or crash barrier, emphasizing spur-of-the-moment construction since these existing structures are usually located near the site of the accident. People have often not applied for official permission to set it up. Friends and classmates, who are the main establishers of this type of memorial, seem to have a pressing and urgent need to memorialise the accident event and the loss of a member of their social group.

With time, the memorial may disappear through decay or removal, or be replaced or expanded by a more permanent one. For example a tree that is decorated soon after the accident, can still remain part of a more permanent memorial. The permanent type of memorial will survive longer. Many of this type of memorials are legal and permitted by the authorities for a number of years. Permanent memorials are frequently built by the parents of the victim.

The permanent memorials contained more information about the deceased. Whereas spontaneous memorials clearly convey to an outsider that it is a place where someone has been killed in an accident, permanent memorials clearly identify who has been killed. The deceased's biography is communicated by the name,

the date of birth and death, a short text and affixed photographs. Parents seem to memorialise the deceased in a more enduring way and regard their deceased loved one as having departed (i.e. being not-present) as opposed to being deceased (i.e. ceasing to exist). It is believed that the presence of the deceased can be felt.

At the memorial, the bereaved may communicate with their departed loved one. An interviewed mother talks with her deceased daughter at the roadside memorial: "Sometimes, I communicate with her at that place. It depends a little on whether there are people around. Otherwise I do not talk aloud to her." Some bereaved do flash their car lights or honk their horn when they pass the memorial as a way of greeting the deceased. One mother who lost her 22-year-old son referred to a shared meal: "We had a barbeque over there [at the memorial]. Yes, that was something he still wanted." This explains why the establishment of the memorials has a strong geographical background. Literally, it is only 'in place' at the site of the accident and 'out of place' anywhere else. Another mother said about the memorial that was established in honour of her son: "This is the place where he died, where he was for the last time. This is his place."

Design

In contrast to spontaneous memorials, permanent memorials are diverse. Of the memorials that we studied, 23 percent are characterized by a cross, 27 percent by a commemorative tile, 19 percent by a tree, 13 percent are in the form of a rock, 15 percent resemble a pole, and 24 percent are of another shape. This variety in the design of Dutch roadside memorials would appear to differ from roadside memorials in other countries, such as Mexico, the USA,

Not
a day
goes by

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An invisible door
to the other side





Lecce, Italy



Bourgogne, France



Lecce, Italy



Brindisi, Italy



Zuid-Holland, The Netherlands



Friesland, The Netherlands



Utrecht, The Netherlands



Vizcaya, Spain



Utrecht, The Netherlands



Gelderland, The Netherlands



Bari, Italy



About the Photographer

Photographer Jeroen Hansen (44) combines his passion for photography with his job as a consultant at a large insurance firm. A strong interest in society is one of the driving forces in his life. For many years he has chosen subjects in his work that are controversial or have taboos attached to them.

Roadside memorials have fascinated him for a long time. Is it appropriate to stop and stand in front of a memorial that doesn't belong to you? What happened here? How did the family deal with their grief? These were some of the questions occupying Jeroen's thoughts and this is what spurred him on to photograph the memorials the way he did.

Jeroen is a self-taught photographer. His style is influenced by Dutch photographers such as Jan Banning, Koos Breukel and Mike Roelofs. *Signs of Life* is his second book of photographs. His previous book of photographs (*Alleen heel anders*) explored breast cancer.

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Photography Jeroen Hansen

www.jeroenhansen.nl

Text Jeroen Hansen,
Mirjam Klaassens, Hans Vos

Translation Raj Pabla

Design Irene van Nes

www.ireneontwerp.nl

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Photographing these roadside memorials took place over a period of four years and represents a special period in my life. I spoke to many people while I was taking these photographs, both at the memorial sites themselves as well as in the homes of a number of families. Families who had lost one or more of their loved ones in an accident. They played an important role for me in this photography project. I would particularly like to thank the Aarts family, the Van der Meer family, and the Kreemers family for their willingness to share their moving and extraordinary stories with me. At the time this gave me encouragement to complete this project.

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