Relocated Pilgrimage: An Artistic Via Dolorosa in the Heart of Amsterdam

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Relocated Pilgrimage: An Artistic Via Dolorosa in the Heart of Amsterdam

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The route of the iconic Stations of the Cross is not only connected to physical locations of the Via Dolorosa in Jerusalem, but is also manifest in Catholic churches, processions, and passion plays, as well as heritage sites and shrines around the world. A twenty-first-century relocation of this pilgrimage is the international project Art Stations of the Cross. With the aim to offer artistic reflections on social injustice, each station is represented by an artwork especially located in a heritage site. Presented as a journey of contemplation, the 2019 edition took place in Amsterdam, The Netherlands. In this article, participant observation, questionnaires, and Art Stations documentation material are brought into conversation with pilgrimage theory. Three elements in particular are discussed: pilgrimage experience, its relation to mass-tourism, and materialisation of the pilgrimage narrative. Taking place in the heart of Amsterdam, an area overtaken by mass-tourism, the paper analyses how Art Stations established a double liminal context that simultaneously challenged and reinforced the route’s contemplative character. In addition, through the interplay of materiality and narrative, the Stations of the Cross tradition offered a prism on contemporary forms of suffering, and vice versa. This study contributes to the understanding of the multifaceted nature of contemporary pilgrimage taking shape in ongoing negotiations between visual art, religious heritage, and ritual.

Key Words: stations of the cross, visual art, religious heritage, liminality, mass-tourism, materiality, narrative

Introduction

Tied to the physical location of the Via Dolorosa in Jerusalem, the iconic pilgrimage of the Stations of the Cross is represented in a plethora of manifestations: in paintings or sculptures inside Catholic churches, in processions, passion plays, shrines, pilgrimage centres, Hollywood films, and music spectacles around the world. This multiplicity of the passion narrative can be seen as the results of continuous (re)negotiations, of both content and form (e.g. Ashley, 1999). The practice of negotiation is inherent to its very tradition, combining events referenced in Scripture and events added through apocryphal sources over time (Holwerda, 2019). Such continuous negotiations, and how people make the Passion narrative come to life in rituals, processions, and art are exemplary for the ‘social life of scripture’ (Bielo, 2009; 2018). The persistence and omnipresence of the narrative demonstrate how powerful this social life of scripture can be, a power resulting from ‘the creative work that people make scriptures do’ in relation or response to both institutional contexts and local particularities (Bielo & Wijnia, forthcoming 2021). Tourism in general, and pilgrimage in particular, are crucial features in the social life of scripture, rooted in the combination of ritual tradition and new creativity, resulting in the process Ronald Grimes has called ‘ritualization’ (2006). Within the context of the passion narrative, and its ritualised practice of the Stations of the Cross, a recently emerged ritual form is the international exhibition project Art Stations of the Cross. Relocated to a different city each year, the overall aim of Art Stations remains the same: to present a contemplative journey that invites reflection on contemporary issues of social injustice through the lens of the passion narrative.

Art Stations is exemplary of the dynamic nature embodied by the Stations of the Cross tradition, in turn an exemplar of the social life of scripture and its ritual creativity. The coalescence of religion, heritage, and travel is inherent to the Stations of the Cross tradition, which in Art Stations receives a contemporary artistic materialisation. The central question here, then, is how this artistic take on the Stations of the Cross potentially facilitates, enhances or challenges the notion of travel, movement, and journeying. With a focus on the 2019 edition that took place in Amsterdam, The Netherlands, this article analyses Art Stations through the lens of pilgrimage. It brings theoretical studies in conversation with fieldwork observations on three inductively distilled themes: experience, liminality, and materialisation of narrative. The three sections in
the body of this text each discuss one of these themes, their position in theoretical debates, and how the research on Art Stations sheds light on them. Additionally, each section presents another part of the art route: the organisational rationale of the project, its urban context in Amsterdam, and the meaning making process incited by the art route.

After a description of the field and research methodology, this article first explores Art Stations through several core elements of pilgrimage experience. These elements reflect the dynamic and fluid nature of contemporary pilgrimage practices. In its very nature, Art Stations is a dynamic project. Although based on a traditional foundation, every edition builds a new route and provides new layers of meaning to the fourteen stations. Second, the route’s location in the historic heart of Amsterdam had large significance for how participants experienced the route. In the spring of 2019, inner-city Amsterdam was overtaken by mass-tourism, while the route promised contemplation. This geographical situatedness is analysed as a doubly liminal experience. Especially, the stations located in the red-light district simultaneously challenged and reinforced the route’s character of pilgrimage. Third, the fact that Art Stations is rooted in the narrative of the passion of Christ is significant. This narrative functions as prism on contemporary suffering: artworks visualised themes of human trafficking, colonial history, and the refugee crisis. However, the prism also worked the other way around: topical forms of social injustice made the passion narrative come to life, inciting a sense of urgency in the experience of this traditional narrative.

Fieldwork and Methodology

As a field of focus, Art Stations offered a route formed between fourteen (religious) heritage locations, each housing an artwork that represents one of the stations. Second, the route’s location in the historic heart of Amsterdam had large significance for how participants experienced the route. In the spring of 2019, inner-city Amsterdam was overtaken by mass-tourism, while the route promised contemplation. This geographical situatedness is analysed as a doubly liminal experience. Especially, the stations located in the red-light district simultaneously challenged and reinforced the route’s character of pilgrimage. Third, the fact that Art Stations is rooted in the narrative of the passion of Christ is significant. This narrative functions as prism on contemporary suffering: artworks visualised themes of human trafficking, colonial history, and the refugee crisis. However, the prism also worked the other way around: topical forms of social injustice made the passion narrative come to life, inciting a sense of urgency in the experience of this traditional narrative.

Fieldwork and Methodology

As a field of focus, Art Stations offered a route formed between fourteen (religious) heritage locations, each housing an artwork that represents one of the stations. Some artworks are produced specifically for this route, others are pre-existing and associatively tied to the theme of the station. The biggest curatorial challenge in the project is to match all sides of the triangle: station, artwork, and location. Between 2016 and 2019, Art Stations took place in urban, multicultural, and multi-religious contexts: London, Washington DC, New York, and Amsterdam. Departing from the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
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<th>Location</th>
<th>Artist</th>
<th>Artwork</th>
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<td>Hansa Versteeg</td>
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<td>6.</td>
<td>Veronica wipes the face of Jesus Jesus carries the cross</td>
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<td>Arent Weevers</td>
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<td>9.</td>
<td>Jesus falls for the third time</td>
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<td>11.</td>
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<td>Walloon Church</td>
<td>Erica Grimm, Tracie Stewart, Sheinagh Anderson</td>
<td>Sal Water Skin Boats</td>
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<td>12.</td>
<td>Jesus dies on the cross</td>
<td>Everyman Chapel, Oudezijds 100</td>
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<td>13.</td>
<td>Jesus is taken down from the cross</td>
<td>Museum Our Dear Lord in the Attic</td>
<td>Jan Tregot</td>
<td>The Last Days</td>
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<td>14.</td>
<td>Jesus is laid in the tomb</td>
<td>Oude Kerk</td>
<td>Giorgio Andreotta Calò</td>
<td>Anastasis</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
traditional Catholic foundations, *Art Stations* seeks to feature a combination of multi-religious and secular artworks, artists, and locations. Project co-founder Aaron Rosen described the exhibition:

much less as imposing a religious topography on the metropolis than drawing out and making more clearly visible the religious significance which the city already possesses (Plate, 2016: 257).

The Amsterdam edition was themed *Troubled Waters*, which the curators related to trade and harbour history; to its patron Saint Nicholas, the protector of sailors with three participating churches (previously of currently) in his dedication; to climate change; the refugee crisis, and; human trafficking. Water is regarded as the source of beauty as well as danger. The host locations were a mix of churches (both Catholic and Protestant), two sites run by living religious communities, and culturally-significant sites, such as a museum, a concert hall, and a monumental college building. Table 1 presents an overview of locations and artworks located at each station.[1]

The research method to gather and analyse data consisted of several elements. In addition to documentation material such as project plans and the exhibition catalogue, the majority of research data were gathered through fieldwork. During the preparations and production of *Art Stations* 2019, I functioned as a member of the organising committee. This enabled me to observe the curatorial considerations and practical preparations up close. My tasks within the committee included website management and organising guided tours with academic and societal partners. I was not involved in curatorial decision-making. Throughout the exhibition period, the research activities shifted focus to data gathering. This occurred in three different forms. I conducted participant observation during the opening night and four organised walking tours. Furthermore, I joined two plenary conversations with participants who had walked (part of) the route. And I distributed questionnaires, which resulted in 54 completed forms.[2] All the gathered data from participants were processed anonymously into this article.

The data gathering and analysis were informed by a literature review on pilgrimage in its broadest sense. The questionnaire contained two open questions about pilgrimage: how participants would describe this term and whether they felt it applicable to their experience of *Art Stations*. In the analysis of the data, the notion of pilgrimage also formed the departure point, to explore whether the organisational aim aligned with participant experience. To shed light on this question, prevalent topics were inductively distilled from the data: the performance of the route, the contrast between inside and outside the station locations, and the passion narrative as red thread. In what follows, these three topics are analysed through theoretical lenses of pilgrimage experience, liminality, and the materialisation of the narrative.

### Pilgrimage Experience

The first emerging topic in the data was that of pilgrimage experience. ‘Answering any student’s legitimate first question – what counts as a ‘pilgrimage’? – is no longer easy,’ George Greenia wrote in the opening paragraph of the article titled *What is Pilgrimage?* (2018:7). The reason why the answer to the question ‘what constitutes pilgrimage?’ is a challenge to answer is two-fold, as outlined by Bielo & Wijnia (forthcoming 2021). On the one hand, the academic field of pilgrimage studies has broadened over the last few decades. The theoretical understanding of what pilgrimage might entail has significantly expanded, not in the least by continuous encounters between pilgrimage and tourism studies. Initially, tourism and pilgrimage were placed in dichotomy (e.g. Smith, 1992). However, the walls of this dichotomy are slowly but steadily wearing down. Travel, whether of religious or secular nature, always has the potential to become a meaningful transformational journey. This was observed by Dean MacCannell, who stated that the motivations for undertaking a pilgrimage and a touristic tour are equally rooted in the quest for authentic experiences (1973:593). Anthropologists Victor and Edith Turner argued:

> Even when people bury themselves in anonymous crowds on beaches, they are seeking an almost sacred, often symbolic mode of communitas, generally unavailable to them in the structured life of the office, the shop floor, or the mine (1978:3-4).

While tourist practices may result in transformational experiences or fulfil sacred longings deep within us, it also works the other way around. Faith-based travel

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1. All artworks in the Amsterdam route can be viewed online at: [http://www.artstations.org/art/archive-2019/](http://www.artstations.org/art/archive-2019/)

2. The *Art Stations* organisation was not able to establish the total number of participants. One location that specifically opened for limited hours per week counted just under 4500 participants. Other locations also hosted regular visitors to their museum or church, which made it impossible to distinguish the *Art Stations* participants.
does not exist without elements of technology, leisure, or commerce along the way (Campbell, 2012; Qurashi, 2017; Karst, 2018).

On the other hand, practices of pilgrimage consist of continuous (re)negotiations and ritual creativity. Pilgrimage is desired and found in events like Star Trek conventions, Jim Morrison’s Paris grave, and Vietnam motorcycle rallies (Porter, 2004; Margry, 2008). Even more so, its expanded understanding no longer regards physical activity as prerequisite; it can be conducted exclusively in the online realm (Campbell, 2012) or on the pages of great literature, with Herman Melville’s Moby Dick analysed as:

a story of the soul’s pilgrimage towards redemption and Ishmael’s ‘damp, drizzly November’ in his soul as a metaphor for the holy longing (Gentile, 2009:403).

Resulting from these expansions in theory and practice, pilgrimage has gained broad and inclusive descriptions, like ‘touristic travel in search of authenticity or self-renewal’ (Badone & Roseman, 2004:2) or travel deemed ‘intentional,’ ‘purposeful,’ and ‘transformative’ (Greenia, 2018:7).

A strict definition of pilgrimage does not fit this range of expansions. Instead scholars have attempted to capture the multiplicity of pilgrimage by identifying characteristics. For example, Linda Davidson and David Gillitz formulated three premises of pilgrimage: the acknowledgement of larger forces than ourselves; the potential to engage in meaningful relationship with these forces; and the existence of special places where these forces can be encountered (2002, 1; xvii).

These premises maintain their relevance in the context of Art Stations, particularly in relation to the special places for encounters. By creating a temporary layer upon existing geography, the art route aims to facilitate such places, each edition anew. However, these premises do not necessarily grasp what it means for people to engage in pilgrimage. Therefore, Greenia built on these premises and identified seven aspects of pilgrimage experience. Experience constitutes a common shared element, regardless of whether practices are regarded as religious or secular. In Art Stations, the combination of religious and secular elements is so multifaceted and intricate, that it may be best characterised as postsecular (Molendijk, 2015; Wijnia, 2018). Greenia’s seven experiential aspects offer a fruitful way to shed light on such intricate intertwinements, manifest in the intentions of Art Stations organisers, motivations of curators, and experiences by participants.

### Seven Aspects

Greenia’s first aspect of pilgrimage is the value of transcending both self and community: Art Stations does this by tapping into traditional foundations. The Stations of the Cross tradition and the passion narrative are its departure points. The route took place during Lent, in Amsterdam from March 6-April 26, 2019. Ties were created with church communities, offering artistic insights into celebrating liturgical events throughout this period. Multiple church communities organised walking tours and conversation groups during the event in Amsterdam. The sense of transcendence which Art Stations incited was not only between participants, their individual experiences of faith and their communities, but was also of a trans-historical nature.

This trans-historical nature relates to the second aspect, engines of memory. Numerous participants described how they felt a strong sense of connection: to Christian tradition in general and to Jesus as a person who suffered in particular, but also to historical events. For example: Yona Verwer’s artwork at Station 3 referenced the Holocaust and was located in the Reinwardt Academy. During the Second World War, this building housed a school. All its Jewish pupils and teachers were deported to concentration camps. Seeing this artwork, as part of a larger stations route, established a sense of connection between contemporary participants and people who had lived generations before them.

In addition to this kind of deep-rooted experience of time, the third aspect timelessness imagined points to pilgrimage’s ‘ability to resist time’ (Greenia, 2018:11). While walking the route, participants deliberately placed themselves out of the routine and clockwork time of everyday life. Their entire focus was on walking this route and the creation of new memories, by means of their engagement to the history and rituals they encountered along the way. Art Stations contained a strong focus on contemporary events and issues, which, as part of the route, also facilitated a character of time-out time. This equally becomes time set apart as it is connected to Biblical and historical events.

All these aspects lead to the fourth aspect - effacement of self: a rejection of individualism in favour of becoming a pilgrim on the path. Art Stations very much encourages connections between participating individuals and the topics and people portrayed in the artworks. Participating in the route ideally made one think of their place in a large whole, that being one’s
city, family, country, church community, continent, or any other type of collective. As such, the Art Stations participant is also asked to relate to those who are not on the trail. As co-founder Rosen described it:

*I think it’s a powerful idea to imagine that everyone we see walking anonymously alongside us might be a pilgrim, whether following these Stations of the Cross, or undertaking their own completely different journey* (Plate, 2016:256).

The relationality between those in the know and those who are not connects to the fifth aspect, performance without pretence: Walking the route provides participants with a different status from everyone else around them. They alone recognise the station locations as part of a larger whole, giving the participants a sense of inside knowledge, creating a bond between those in the know, as opposed to those without a clue. On the route, everyone is equally participating. Inequality emerges when it comes to understanding the art and its relation to the represented stations. Some do not care for these connections, others do not feel whole without understanding why a particular artwork is placed in a particular location. Some highly value the curatorial knowledge and see that as a frame of reference to become part of. Others prioritise their own experiences and associations and see the curator’s intentions as bonus.

The sixth aspect, body centeredness, focuses on both the physical effort it takes to walk the route and the impact this effort may have on the mental experience of the stations. While in theory the route offers a chronological order, in practice it was a challenge for the curators to establish this order and for the participants to follow (see Figure 1). Most participants visited a selection of stations, not necessarily in the right order, but depending on the locations in one’s vicinity and on opening hours per location.[3] Amsterdam saw the first edition where the app Alight was not part of the route. The app, featuring an audio contribution per station was meant to allow people to keep some continuity over the journey, and maintain a sense of contemplation between locations (Plate, 2016:256).

3. For the curators, initially the aim was to create a chronological route in terms of geographical order of the participating locations. However, location practicalities and the puzzle of which artwork would fit where, meant this aim was abandoned after a while. Although mentioned by some, most participants did not experience this as problematic. Some even visited one or two stations at a time and felt sufficiently engaged by these.
However, as will be argued below, in Amsterdam the urban environment fulfilled this sense of continuity for participants when journeying from one station to the next. Navigating busy and bustling streets strongly impacted participants’ physical and mental experiences of the route, which is not unlike experiences in Jerusalem itself (Feldman, 2016).

The final aspect is open-endedness, referring to the ‘incompleteness’ of walking the route. ‘No pilgrim seems to wrap up his or her journey satisfied that they exhausted the experience’ (Greenia, 2018:12). Several participants observed how the pilgrimage effect was postponed for them. While walking the route they did not have ample time and headspace to process the multitude of impressions, this only occurred in the days and weeks after their participation. Through the type of art and the associative mode of curating, Art Stations touches upon large socio-political issues, which are not easily solved. As such, Art Stations does not provide straightforward answers, but rather it encourages people to reflect on how they relate to the addressed issues. This aligns with studies of how pilgrims continue to process their experiences months and even years after the physical ritual is finished (Frey, 2004; Kaell, 2014:160-195).

**Double Liminality**

The second theme that came to the fore in the data was that of liminality, a topic that strongly relates to context. The 2019 Art Stations route was located throughout the historic heart of Amsterdam. Five of the stations could be found in the area of the red-light district, others were spread out along the city’s historic canals. All these areas are part of the heart of Amsterdam, which is overtaken by mass-tourism. While exemplary of the flourishing and globalising economic developments of the last decades, in many major European cities mass-tourism is simultaneously regarded as ‘the downside to success’ (Slot & Michon, 2016:261-263). This dual take on tourism is also reflected in its relationship to pilgrimage. Whereas for a long time, the two have been theoretically positioned as opposites, more recently their interrelationship is studied in more fluid and integrated manners, resulting in descriptions like ‘intersecting journey’ (Badone & Roseman, 2004:2), ‘spiritual tourism’ (Norman, 2009), and ‘crossroad’ (Stausberg, 2011). As Paul Post and Louis van Tongeren observed:

> What we are dealing with is a flowing dynamic whole of shifting appropriations and experiences. Practices and places offering room for these dynamics are in great demand and quite successful (2014:13).

These approaches recognise the pluralised – and popular – realities of travel, globalisation, and religion. By means of drawing from historical or religious traditions, people consciously negotiate modes of travel, creating an experience that suits them (Bielo & Wijnia, forthcoming 2021). Given the placement of the stations in Amsterdam and the atmosphere of the streets that participants journeyed through, it is relevant to explore how participants negotiated their own intersecting journeys. This exploration is conducted with a notion that characterises both pilgrimage and mass-tourism and as such can be placed at the heart of their intersection: the notion of liminality.

Victor Turner famously described liminal entities as neither here or there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial (1969:95).

The notion became a core concept in ritual studies and in its extended fields like performance and pilgrimage studies. Originally attributed to the core phase of rites of passage by Arnold van Gennep (2010), and further developed by Turner, the strict sequential logic to liminality has become a topic of scrutiny (cf. Thomassen, 2016). As such, the notion of the in-between does not necessarily begin and end with the departure and return dates of a pilgrimage, but gains a more fluid character. Yet, even in such a dynamic and perhaps fragmented manifestation, liminality remains of relevance for practices associated with transformational travel. The traveller or pilgrim consciously incites a liminal state of being, away from the routines, expectations, and socially inscribed status of everyday life. Those taking part in the temporary route of Art Stations were engaging in a liminal activity, primarily connected by means of their participation, by means of interaction with the theme of the route, the artworks, and the journey between the locations. And also, later on, after returning home, by engaging with these aspects and their memories, impressions, and interpretations.

In Amsterdam, Art Stations functioned as a liminal zone within the urban context of mass-tourism. However, engaging in tourist activities is not a continuous or routine state of being either. The
resentful. Jesus’ own way of the cross passed through a similar scene, and people were no doubt offering to sell him postcards too. God can be found in the midst of this hubbub, not only in the cloisters (Richards, 1985:195-196).

The Amsterdam streets busy with tourists on their Spring and Easter breaks constitute in fact a highly regulated space. Like with the previous editions in other major cities:

The experience of these stations is more geared towards individuals and small groups. Organizing pilgrimages became nearly impossible due to municipal regulations for group visits (Plate, 2016:256). Small-scale guided tours were organised, both by the Art Stations organisation and by (church) communities themselves. Taking part in a tour, participants noted, allowed them to exchange impressions and experiences when walking from one station to the next, which they experienced as valuable.

Entering the sites where the stations were located offered participants literally a break from the bustling streets. For many this interchange of urban life and solitude was a significant aspect to their experience. Some found it a disturbance to the contemplative experiences they had inside the station locations.

The majority of those strolling on the streets of the red-light district do so as part of a city trip. As such, I would propose to regard mass-tourism in itself a liminal entity as well. Both the routing and the geographical context in which the exhibition was located offer sites and experiences of time out of time. Albeit of different nature, the liminal characters of Art Stations and the historic heart of Amsterdam met and merged throughout the period the routing was on. As such, for those participating in the route, it had the potential of resulting in a doubly liminal experience. It strongly resonates with descriptions of Holy Land pilgrimage. As scholar and tour guide Jackie Feldman tells a group when visiting a station of the cross, surrounded by a market:

Look, many of you expect to find a peaceful, devotional path. But more than the sound of prayer, what you’ll be hearing outside is the sound of business. Now, imagine what it was like in Jesus’ day. People doing their last-minute shopping for Passover (Feldman, 2016: Chapter 3.4).

Similarly, a 1985 tour guide notes:

The traditional route passes through lanes which are noisy and at times thick with visitors intent on shopping, sightseeing and refreshment. This ought not to make pilgrims...
Anjet van Linge's sculpture *Compassion* (2018) was placed behind a water flow, an imaginary river Jordan, feeding into the baptismal font (Figure 3). The contrast between the interior and exterior of the station location was stark. It drew attention to those residing in the margins of societal structures, not only through the materialisation in the artwork, but also through their occasional presence in the chapel and on the route between stations.

Overall, the location of *Art Stations* challenged the perception of a contemplative journey as a journey performed in solace. However, its placement simultaneously reinforced the route's reflective character by physically and mentally surrounding participants with the lived realities of themes in the art. As such, the route demanded its own type of ritual, the artworks evoked a contemplative mode (as a step away from the outside world), while the topics they addressed (embodied by this outside world) infringed engagement in a very direct and personal manner. Rather than devaluing the route's contemplative nature, for many participants this double liminal context incited a state of reflection, either on the spot or in the weeks that followed.

Others mentioned it as very relevant, as it mirrored the dynamic nature of life itself. The exchange of quietude and reflection inside and noise and activity outside offered an, albeit chaotic, sense of continuity for participants. As one participant described, it was

> good to be aware of the often god-less environment.

For those experiencing this, ‘life’ as it happens on the street was not fundamentally different from what they were asked to reflect upon inside the station locations.

Staged against the backdrop of the monumental canals and the red-light district, the themes addressed in the art route also manifested themselves in the lived reality. Forced prostitution and human trafficking had a painted and virtual-reality presence in the artwork of Station 3 (Figure 2), while in fact journeying from one station to the next in the red-light district provided a real-reality experience on these topics. Another meaningful example was Station 12, located in the Chapel of Saint George or *Allemanskapel* (Everyman’s chapel) at the Oudezijds Achterburgwal. Located directly next to the brightly neon-lit façade of *Casa Rosso*, this chapel is open day and night for those in need of mental or physical solace. During *Art Stations*,

Figure 3: Anjet van Linge, *Compassion* (2018), located in the Everyman’s Chapel, Amsterdam.

![Photo: Martin Waalboer.](image)
Materialising the Narrative

The third, and final, topic that surfaced from the data is the relationship between the materiality of the artworks and the passion narrative. This narrative is the departure point for each edition of *Art Stations*. Central to this narrative is the suffering of Christ in his last hours of life on earth, from his conviction to his entombment. In Amsterdam, it was decided to add a fifteenth station to the traditional fourteen, namely that of resurrection. Through the metaphor of water, various aspects of contemporary forms of suffering and social injustice featured in the artworks. The narrative of the passion functioned as instrument in associatively curating artworks, locations, and stations. In the curatorial negotiations, the material presence and artistic intentions played a major role. Eventually, with the aim of creating a route that ‘lays bare the underbelly of our world so that we can begin to relate to our world in new ways’ (Hengelaar-Rookmaker & Ouweneel-Tóth, 2019:2). In the route’s physical manifestation, this aim was to be established through the interplay of narrative and materiality, which will be analysed next.

Narratives play an important role in motivations for undertaking pilgrimage (Hesp, 2010; Van der Beek, 2018). The passion is exemplary for the type of stories that Suzanne van der Beek calls ‘anonymous narratives,’ characterised as follows:

*The relation between these narratives and their original creators is so loose that they could almost be considered to come from an anonymous source (Van der Beek, 2018:40).*

The Stations of the Cross are a ritualised and institutionalised form of the passion narrative, based on how this is recounted in the various gospels of the New Testament and several apocryphal sources. Yet, arguably there is not one definitive source of origin and the narrative has transformed over time. This can be seen in the development of the stations, expanding in number and changing in content over time in response to new insights or convictions (Holwerda, 2019). Despite their changing nature over time, such shared anonymous narratives facilitate shared narrative communities. Such communities, when it comes to the passion, move beyond the boundaries of church and take shape in broader cultural dimensions. The Netherlands has a very lively and abundant passion

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*Figure 4: Hansa Versteeg, Madonna del Mare Nostrum (2017), located in the Mary Chapel of the St. Nicholas Basilica, Amsterdam.*

Photo: Hansa Versteeg, 16 March 2019.
Güler Ates was commissioned to create Station 6, an installation in which she combined quotations from refugee narratives collected through interviews, printed on wall and floor-covering paper, with photographs of her signature veiled figure taken inside the Church of Our Dear Lady. It resulted in an immersive room, hosted in a side-room of this church, which is also used by the Syrian-Orthodox congregation (Figure 5).

Participants spoke of these artworks in various ways: terms of hopelessness, because solutions are seemingly beyond their control; in relation to a life choice like volunteer work with refugees; and in relation to faith, experiencing Art Stations as a demonstration of Christianity’s relevance in today’s secular world. The installation was even described as a sacred space, in which one participant felt uncomfortable being present with too many others.

Throughout the route, the passion narrative materialised in the curated artworks. Some were made especially for the route, others were pre-existing artworks that were associatively selected. The art provided contemporary perspectives on the suffering of Christ, via themes of human trafficking, colonial history, suicide, and the climate crisis. Particularly, the theme of the refugee crisis resonated for many. At Station 1 Hansa Versteeg’s hyper-realistic painting Madonna del Mare Nostrum (2017) was placed in St. Nicholas Basilica’s Mary chapel to the left of the choir (Figure 4), where the church’s own first Station of the Cross is located as well. Versteeg’s painting depicts a fiercely looking woman holding a child, both wrapped in a shiny silver thermos blanket. This ‘Lady of the Mediterranean Sea’ displays a sense of dignity, confronting the viewer with the inhumane circumstance to which many refugees around the world are condemned.

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In perceiving the artistic translations of suffering, Greenia’s aspect of the effacement of self surfaces. In line with co-founder Rosen’s wish that Art Stations pilgrims position themselves in relation to those surrounding them on the journey, one participant stated that Art Stations

places the elements from the passion where they belong: between all people and not solely in the church. ... One also forms a community with all
those unfamiliar people on the streets, a feeling of love that excludes no one and without judgement.

Overall, participant response to the topical interpretations of Christ’s suffering reflect a form of social criticism. This is a fundamental aspect of pilgrimage as observed by Van der Beek. Contrary to popularised narratives, pilgrimage does not lead one to find who one truly is. Rather, it leads one to reflect on who one truly wishes to be (Van der Beek, 2018:232-233). Art Stations participant responses show that it also concerns who one wants or wishes others to be.

How artworks are able to achieve such experiences, might be understood via a parallel to orthodox icon paintings. Birgit Meyer described their working as an interface between matter and meaning: [the artworks] are not simply carriers of meaning, but make it present objectively (via matter), sensuously (by appealing to the senses) and intellectually (by making sense) (2016:234).

While the parallel to icons allows for an understanding on which levels the participants experienced the artworks, there is also an important difference. As Hans Belting explains:

In the context of religion, pictures have a special ontological status which distinguishes them from other pictures. Their evidence is tied to the belief of their devotees (2016: 235).

Yet, in Art Stations this special ontological status is not a given. While the shared passion narrative functions as a strong foundation, the artworks are, via curatorial decisions, newly introduced. By positioning these artworks as Stations of the Cross, the curators and the material presences of the art combined request the participants to provide the artworks with a special ontological status, of meaning or even presence.

Such attribution of presence is a broader cultural phenomenon. When it comes to physical locations in relation to novels and films, people tend to search for – and relish in – physical and material references in which they can recognise their imagination (Reijnders, 2011). Perhaps the same can be said for the relationship between art and faith; based on the response to Art Stations, the connections created between the anonymous narrative of the passion and the artistically materialised stations, through topical forms of suffering, resonated very strongly for participants. Yet this resonance occurred in a very open-ended manner, echoing Greenia’s final aspect of pilgrimage. Despite the effect of this invitation – leading participants to project their own interpretations – these interpretations were by no means of unanimous nature, resulting in a variety of experiences per artwork. Not one of the stations elicited a unanimous interpretation in the participant response. Ultimately, the passion narrative offered a prism on contemporary forms of suffering, it offered rationale for the curators to bring together their selection of artworks. However, the prism also worked the other way around; topical, and thus for participants recognisable, forms of social injustice made the passion narrative come to life and relevant as many called it, inciting a sense of urgency in the experience of this traditional narrative, and of faith in general.

Discussion

In this research, pilgrimage offered the theoretical lens through with Art Stations is studied. Based on participant response, it seems that the art route has offered many a form of a transformational and intentional journey. The discerned themes of experience, liminality, and materialisation of narrative surfaced in the gathered data, which are in turn strongly interrelated as well. While experience functions as a broad, overarching theme, the notions of liminality and materialisation of narrative can be regarded as sub-themes.

In this article’s title, Art Stations is designated as relocated pilgrimage. This notion of relocation occurs on multiple levels. First, it embodies the fact that, while originally tied to a physical location, the Stations of the Cross concept has been moved to another place. It is a core element of the Stations of the Cross tradition, as it has seen – and still sees – a plethora of manifestations around the world. The annually different artistic materialisations in Art Stations is a relatively recent development in this long-standing tradition. The project’s location in a busy urban context offered a key insight into its liminal nature, as this placement facilitated an interaction between various liminal dimensions.

The second level of relocation is achieved by means of the method of curating, embodying a sense of being out of place or without a foundation. Contemporary artworks are associatively placed in the context of the passion narrative. Each artwork then functions, albeit temporarily, as Station of the Cross, which participants are invited to relate to and, to a certain extent, believe. Even if people did not agree on the thematic associations or did not appreciate the individual
artworks, the invitation was gladly accepted given the engaged participant response.

Finally, the overall context of the relocated pilgrimage was received in an appreciating manner. A reason for this may be found in the curatorial and theological framing of the stations. Contrasting the heavy subject matter addressed in the majority of the stations, the undertone was always one of hope – not least reflected in the addition of the fifteenth station of resurrection. Despite the seeming hopelessness of world affairs, the route incited participants – coinciding with the notion of intentional travel – to conclude with a feeling of hope.

Concluding Observations

A project like Art Stations consists of three main dimensions: rationale, means, and practice. The rationale is offered by the Stations of the Cross tradition and, broadly speaking, by the narrative of the passion of Christ. In the context of Art Stations, this narrative is translated into topical forms of social injustice and suffering. In turn, Art Stations in Amsterdam seamlessly functioned within the broader passion culture in The Netherlands. This rationale gained a presence by means of art and religious heritage. The connection between the selected works of art, their host locations, and the station themes was crucial. Many participants not only recognised the artworks as important in their experiences of the route, but also the locations. Entering museums, churches, and other heritage sites for the purpose of this route, many described as taking a look behind the scenes of everyday urban life. This relates to the element of practice: actively contemplating the art, having conversations with others, and walking between one station and the next. This navigating the route through the busy streets formed a fundamental part of the pilgrimage experience.

Ultimately, this exploration of the themes of pilgrimage experience, liminality, and materialisation of narrative in the context of Art Stations served two aims. First, to contribute to the continuously expanding theoretical understanding of pilgrimage. Art Stations demonstrates a mix of religious historical roots, established pathways, and traditional rituals with contemporary, fluid, and fragmented notions of the sacred. Through the mobilisation of art and religious heritage, a novel form of pilgrimage emerges, each edition anew. Second, this research aimed to contribute to the much-studied interrelationship between pilgrimage and (mass) tourism. Instead of positioning the contemplative journey offered by Art Stations solely in dichotomy with the touristification of the inner city of Amsterdam, this article explored how the temporary pilgrimage route and this bustling urban context meet and merge, into a form of co-existence. These analyses are to encourage further research into sites where visual art, religious heritage, and ritual potentially intertwine as novel forms of pilgrimage.

Bibliography


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