

A SUMMARY OF THE WORLD

Esther Kokmeijer (1977)

"Those of use who have never seen the equator are a good deal excited. I think I would rather see it than any other thing in the world... Closing in on the equator this noon. A sailor explained to a young girl that the ship's speed is poor because we are climbing up the bulge towards the centre of the globe; but that when we should once get over, at the equator, and start down-hill, we should fly."

Mark Twain (1835 / 1910) 'Following the equator: A Journey Around the World' (1897)

The equator itself is invisible, but is nevertheless there. You cannot see the equator but you can see where it is. But why should the one thing you want to see 'more than any other thing in the world' be something you cannot actually see at all? Why be so eager to reach a place which, visually speaking, need not necessarily be any more interesting than any other place? The equator is an imaginary line which runs precisely between the North and the South Poles. And that is precisely what makes the equator so interesting. There is nothing random about it. It is a specific place that appeals to one's imagination.

The desire to shed more light on the world led to the idea of travelling to the exact centre of all the continents. The geographical centre is a factual and calculable spot. It is the navel, the core, the very heart of a continent. To me, it is the most important part of a continent. Each continent has an exact centre. This makes comparison possible. All the centres together form my summary of the world.

For this project geographer Professor Jean-Georges Affholder of the IGN (Institut Géographique National) in Paris determined the geographical centre of each continent by calculating the centre of gravity. I succeeded in physically visiting all these geographical centres. I entered the coordinates of each geographical centre into a GPS. Via satellites I was able to locate them precisely, to the metre, and was also able to accurately record the route we took.

Once I had received the coordinates, just like Mark Twain who wanted nothing more than to see the equator, I wanted nothing more than to see the geographical centre of each continent. And seeing has nothing to do with the visual value of the place you see, but the emotional value it holds. It is about physically being in a place which appeals to the imagination for what it is.

My desire to explore dates back to my earliest childhood. I used to take my mother's hand and ask 'where are we going?' A change of environment was desirable to me even then. At that time, my home village of Brantgum with its eighty houses, in the north of the province of Friesland, was adventurous enough. At the age of twenty-one, I went on my first long journey which lasted a year. I was bitten by the travel bug and 'travel' was no longer a superficial term; it had become a new way of life. In thought I have never since stopped travelling. I have experienced the peace and space that the movement of travel entails. Names of places and countries I know from books, films and newspapers only really take on a meaning if I've been there myself.

Travelling is departing, staying and returning. It is about the movement. It is a series of events, meetings and experiences. And because they often differ from the experiences of everyday life, the impressions left are more intense. Travel is instinctive, it isn't good, it isn't bad, it's what you make of it yourself. It is personal. My wanderlust is especially fed by curiosity and the romantic desire to see and experience 'everything'.

For me, the purpose of this journey was not only to arrive at each geographical centre. Not the final destination alone, the journey itself was the destination; a traveller should develop as the journey develops. The journey itself makes the chosen destination important. The route we took travelling to and from the geographical centres was therefore over land and sea wherever possible. Only the continental waters were crossed from coast to coast by aeroplane. The feeling of being able to bridge vast distances fills me with a great sense of freedom. The feeling of crossing vast distances is like waking from a coma. Or, as James Hamilton-Paterson wrote "If you wanted to formulate the First Rule of travel, it could perhaps be that the means of travelling determines the destination reached."

Every geographical centre has a story of its own. By making this journey, I wanted to make the geographical centre of each continent important. I marked every geographical centre. They are temporary markings; they are perishable and will be incorporated into nature within a few days or weeks. I do not want to interfere with the nature of that place, do not want to claim that place, just to name it. To give it a name and soul.