Chapter 6

Present absence

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137. Vredesmonument (Peace Monument), Vereeniging

12. J. G. Strijdom-Bolgybeeld (J. G. Strijdom's Bust), Krugersdorp

- 16. Jameson-Gedenkteken (Jameson Memorial), Roodepoort
- 18. Ossewatrekmonument (Ox-Wagon Trek Monument), Paardekraal School, Krugersdorp
- 19. Magersfontein-Monument (Magersfontein Monument), Orange Free State
- 8. Churchill-Gedenkteken (Churchill Memorial), Natal
- 27. Republiekmonument (Republic Monument), Nooitgedacht School

9. President Paul Kruger Standbeeld (President Paul Kruger Statue), Pretoria

14. Verpleegster Henrietta Stockdale-Beeld (Nurse Henrietta Stockdale Statue), Kimberley

32. Plaasskool-Monument (Farm School Monument), Panfontein School, Vereeniging

- 6. Republiekmonument (Republic Monument), Drie Riviere Primary School, Vereeniging
- 5. Ossewatrekmonument (Ox-Wagon Trek Monument), Cottesloe, Johannesburg
- 19. Republiekmonument (Republic Monument), Jan de Klerk High School, Krugersdorp
- 29. 1838-Gedenkteken (1838 Memorial), Nooitgedacht

81. Bloedriviermonument (Blood River Monument)

- 25. Langenhoven-Beeld (Langenhoven Statue), Langenhoven High School, Pretoria
- 21. Die Saaier-Beeld (The Sower Statue), Lichtenburg
- 37. Piet Retief-Monument (Piet Retief Monument), Port Elizabeth

- 30. Piet Retief-Monument (Piet Retief Monument), Dingaanstat
- 49. Ossewatrekmonument (Ox-Wagon Trek Monument), Queenstown
- 16. Voortrekker-Monument (Pioneers Monument), Graaff-Reinet

95. Paardekraalmonument (Paardekraal Monument), Krugersdorp

55. Voortrekkerleier Karel Landman-Monument (Pioneer Leader Karel Landman Monument), Alexandria, Cape Province

32. Ossewatrekmonument (Ox-Wagon Trek Monument), Nelspruit

25. Voortrekkerweg (Pioneers Road), Krugersdorp

The work on this visual essay began during an artist residency in Johannesburg in 2016. Hoping to learn about other commemoration practices than the ones I was familiar with from my home country Israel and my place of residence in Western Europe, I embarked southwards, crossed the equator for the first time in my life, and moon landed in South Africa.

The calls and demands of the #RhodesMustFall movement were still echoing in Johannesburg's campuses, and I found myself searching for photographs of monuments in old books at the libraries of the same universities. The original images used here were all scanned from two publications in Afrikaans, edited and published by J.J. Tonder: *Fotobeeld van 300 monumente, standbeelde en gedenktekens langs die pad van Suid-Afrika* (Pictures of 300 monuments, statues and memorials along the path of South Africa) from 1975, and *Veertien Gedenktekens van Suid-Afrika* (Fourteen Memorials of South Africa) from 1961.

The selection contains photographs that depict "human figures" alongside the "sculptural subject", and thus brings into focus the relationship between man and (absent) object. The sequence begins with the only image I found, in which Black persons are present. It documents the mounting of the Peace Monument by sculptor Coert Steynberg in Vereeniging in 1961. From here onwards the series of retouched and tinted photographs exhibits an imagined narrative: The erection of the monument is followed by a festive inauguration, and later by ceremonies and yearly gatherings as well as school visits. Now the monument is established as a place and may occasionally be emancipated from its original memorial function and transformed into a stage for non-related public events. From a stage it easily shifts into a mere background. But the personal relation to the (absent) object and the memory it comes to eternalise (or silence) persists, and we witness different forms of identification with the two. Here a closer look reveals: the body is initially very close, even touching and imitating, but slowly distances itself. The gaze transforms from sympathy to awe and turns eventually to an inner inquiry.

Not much from my initial motivation to grasp something about the local landscape and culture came about during my three months stay in South Africa. Nonetheless, what I have possibly learned here was actually to feel that I may not grasp. The right to relevance, which has accompanied me hitherto in all my (more or less righteous) undertakings, was cropped off my self-assured way of being; and I have never guessed that this resultant void could possibly involve liberating qualities, next to its terrifying hollowness.

5. Meulsteen (Millstone), Elandsfontein