Monuments and Affordance

Multisensory Bodily Engagements with the Landscape of Memory in South Africa

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In the parks and squares, where statues glorifying
the pioneers of the discredited regime had presented
an insolent challenge to the populace, scaffolding
and hardboard sheeting covered the graven images
that would be in line with today's impulses.
Birds, not given to political correctness,
hovered above, ready for the unveiling
when they would deposit their hoary loads
(Langa 2000: 35).

The “#RhodesMustFall” campaign initiated by students at the University of Cape Town (UCT) in March 2015 sparked a wave of statue defacements across South Africa and gave fresh impetus to the national debate about colonial and apartheid era monuments and, indeed, the continued presence of all cultural symbols associated with historical narratives of oppression in the current democratic order (Pather 2015; Mkhwanazi 2015; Mthethwa 2015; van Vollenhoven 2015). After rushed debate, the Rhodes statue was indeed removed on 9 April 2015, but the predicted “statue revolution” (Heritage Portal 2015) hardly took place. Despite a few more incidents of defacement in subsequent months (*e.g.* Dano 2016), very few commemorative markers have since been removed or relocated; most defaced statues were quickly cleaned up or repaired. The “Rhodes Must Fall” campaign and its aftermath drew excessive attention from the media, government authorities, and members of the public. Comparatively little attention is paid to the pervasiveness of neglect and the ubiquitous evidence of defacement or abuse of statues and commemorative markers across the country, which has affected both old monuments and new statues installed under the aegis of the post-apartheid government.

This study will neither empirically engage with these incidents of “vandalism,” nor with the diverse arguments characterizing the current debate about monuments, as this has been done elsewhere (Marschall forthcoming). Rather, it aims at making a primarily theoretical contribution that advocates a shift from semiotic and discursive approaches to monuments focussing on issues of representation and signification, notably at the societal level, to psychoanalytical approaches that foreground the individual and his/her multisensory physical engagement with monuments. Gibson’s theory of affordance will be drawn upon, along with evidence from media reports and personal observation, to examine how people in South Africa, and beyond, interact with monuments and especially statues—not as cultural symbols laden with meaning, but as material objects in space that afford opportunities for physical interaction—in affirmative, utilitarian and/or destructive ways. It is argued that such bodily engagements and the traces they sometimes leave on the commemorative marker can feed back into the process of signification and potentially produce new affordance effects. The present contribution ultimately aims to provide a new perspective on the meaning of monuments and acts of “vandalism.”

FIG. 1. — REMOVAL OF THE RHODES STATUE BY MARION WALGATE (SCULPTOR),
UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN, 9 APRIL 2015

Photo: Michael Hammond/UCT, April 2015, University of Cape Town.

The Space

This paper was partly inspired by the critical comment an anonymous peer reviewer made about a manuscript I had submitted on monument “vandalism” in South Africa which read: “What kind of hypocrisy does not see a colonial monument set up on prime African land as ‘not vandalism,’ but condemns as ‘vandalism’ acts that reject and deface this monument?” Indeed, colonial monuments are not only symbols commemorating leaders of white “civilisation” in Africa, but along with buildings and other infrastructure, they are physical markers in space, set up on a so-called empty land. Their presence “produces space” by encoding it with signification, describing its use and expressing spatial practices. “To speak of ‘producing space’ sounds bizarre,” writes Lefebvre (1991: 15), “so great is the sway still held by the idea that empty space is prior to whatever ends up filling it.”

This reminds us to step back from the contested monument for a moment, mentally roll back time and reflect on what was there before. For many opponents, the root cause of resistance to colonial monuments hence lies not in who or what they represent, but in the spatial injustice symbolized by their imposition. Like a triumphal exclamation mark, the erection of the public monument symbolically—and sometimes literally—concludes the fight over the land. This manifested itself in most obvious and immediate ways at the very beginning of European engagement with the southern tip of Africa. In 1497, when the Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama and his party landed on the South African coast in the area of what is now called Mossel Bay, he erected a monumental memorial cross (*padrone, padirão*), the first monument in the Western sense of the word installed on South African soil. Soon after, conflict broke out with the indigenous population of Khoekhoen herders. Da Gama’s men are reported to have discharged a cannon and the Khoekhoen knocked down the monument in a gesture of defiance—the first act of “monument vandalism” in South African history (Marschall 2010: 19; Welsh 2000).

In later periods, the violence inherent in this process became more abstract, veiled, and deferred. Lefebvre argues that the coercion implicit in the state’s regulation of urban space and the everyday is often disguised, but as the state “rationally” organizes society and its everyday spaces, imposing plans and programmes onto public and private spheres, opposition is provoked (Lefebvre 1991: 23). While the defacement of monuments is generally called “vandalism,” carrying connotations of violence, barbarism and irrationality, the violence embedded in their erstwhile establishment is silenced.

Interestingly, different understandings of “empty space” remain an important cause of contestation even in the present democratic era. As state authorities and

enthusiastic organizations pursue the installation of commemorative artifacts deemed important symbols of “our heritage,” they eagerly look for suitable spots within the urban fabric or even nature reserves, as in the case of the new National Heritage Monument recently erected in Groenkloof Nature Reserve outside Pretoria.¹ Little consideration is given to how residents, communities or the general public used these spaces before they were “filled” and how the presence of the new monument affects their freedom of movement and behaviour, their opportunities for meeting, relaxing or simply knowing that a small pocket of nature remains preserved, because the purported public good of the monument, its educational values and moral uplift, are assumed to outweigh such mundane concerns. The Olive Schreiner Memorial in Kalk Bay, near Cape Town, erected as part of the Sunday Times Heritage Project in 2007, is a case in point. The community’s rejection of this commemorative artefact was neither grounded in ideological contestation over its content and meaning, nor its physical shape and style, but very explicitly about the space it occupied. The monument was set up in a small park in this coastal town narrowly wedged between the sea and the mountain, hence encroaching on one of the few recreational green spaces where people can go to relax, run, walk their dogs and watch their children play (Marschall 2011).

Restoring the Empty Space

Advocates of a radical iconoclasm essentially want symbolically to re-create the empty space, restore the prime African land, erase all traces of domination foisted on them by force. The defacement or destruction of monuments and cultural symbols often occurs in haste, fuelled by ideological or religious fervour, anger and resentment; it can be an emotionally powerful release of pent-up frustration, buoyed by peer adulation (Goldstein 1996). Carefully targeted acts of iconoclasm and “vandalism” can take on a dynamic of their own and inspire a spontaneous wave of largely wanton destruction, in which initial intentions may get lost, especially in the current age of social media and instant global dissemination of information, where reverberations can be caused in far-away places.

The term vandalism was first used in the context of the French Revolution with reference to the destruction of symbols of the *Ancien Régime*. Robespierre had argued that the destruction of the monarchy must be followed up with

1. See “South Africa pays Tribute to Historic Heroes,” for video, photos, news from SA News.gov, 16 September 2015, <<http://www.southafrica.info/about/history/heritage-monument-160915.htm#.WDfa7CzYzMg>>.

the radical clearance of any signs of despotism from the spaces of the new republic. By 1792, concerns emerged that the destruction was taking on excessive proportions and that many unique monuments, art objects and cultural artefacts belonging to the nation's patrimony were being damaged, looted or destroyed indiscriminately. Legal regulations were devised to protect the "national cultural heritage" (Bresnahan 2014), illustrating how heritage is not merely "found" or identified, but discursively constructed.

The Meaning of Monuments

There is a remarkable disjuncture between the fervour, self-importance and hyperbolic claims of those who initiate, promote or defend monuments and the reality of how members of the general public engage with them in their everyday lives. This is certainly not unique to South Africa, but seems to be a general characteristic of monuments the world over. It was famously captured by the Austrian writer Robert Musil (1936) who observed that monuments are part of the general streetscape, like trees; one would immediately notice if they were missing, but nobody ever looks at them and people often don't know who they represent. Monuments try so hard to be noticed, yet virtually repel our gaze. In South Africa, a nation-wide research project conducted by the South African Heritage Resources Agency (SAHRA) for the Department of Arts & Culture confirmed that most passers-by do not know who or what the statues and monuments in their midst represent or what they are meant to symbolize (Marx 2003). Current legislation provides for the removal of individual monuments on a case-by-case basis, after careful consideration of their significance and consultation of relevant stakeholders (NHRA 1999), but this approach has resulted in few changes to the national landscape of memory. As noted earlier, most opponents of old monuments are not interested in considering the merits of each case, engaging with specific meanings and possibilities of (re)interpretation.

It is important to note here that the general apathy equally applies to post-apartheid monuments and statues. Although usually launched with great fanfare, equipped with unequivocal explanatory panels and designed in an easily accessible style to facilitate broad comprehension, the author has encountered numerous examples testifying to the lack of knowledge about the significance of these commemorative markers, especially amongst youths. When such monuments are found with traces of vandalism and neglect, these are easily interpreted as a show of disrespect for the heroes of the liberation struggle or as a sign of protest about ANC appropriation of liberation history and other issues of contestation.

Notwithstanding that this interpretation might be entirely true, this paper intends to consider a different perspective. Semiotic and discursive approaches to public memory focus on processes of signification, how “messages” are encoded in monuments and decoded or “read” by members of the public, often in unpredictable ways, and how meanings are framed and constructed through socio-political discourses. While much has indeed been written about how post-apartheid monuments in South Africa (and elsewhere) represent the past and forge discourses of national identity, some scholars have criticized this approach. D. Hook (2005), drawing on H. Lefebvre (1991) suggests that monuments are not simply the outcome of signifying practices and cannot be reduced to a “text” and that more attention must be paid to the materiality and physicality of the monument as an object in space. Semiotic and discursive approaches also assume that individuals mentally engage with commemorative markers, cognitively identify and make sense of their signifying features, think about them and form an opinion about their meaning and significance. This may not always be the case.

Mimetic Quality of Statues

Recalling the series of statue defacements that followed the “#RhodesMustFall” campaign, but also considering older precedents (*e.g.* Hlatshwayo & Sama Yende 2005; Nthite 2006), it seems that ideologically motivated vandalism is targeted far more frequently at statues than any other kind of monuments and symbols. This suggests that beyond meaning and symbolic “message,” some types of commemorative markers are more prone to defacement than others. It is the mimetic quality of the realistically rendered bronze effigy, the idealized frozen likeness and figuratively embodied presence of the “enemy” that makes statues infinitely more provocative for detractors. The more monumental, imposing, concealed the statue, the more alluring, inviting, beckoning it becomes as a target, suggests M. Taussig (1999: 20), virtually crying out “to be toppled, besmirched, desecrated.”

Metaphysical and psychoanalytical approaches have been suggested as alternatives to social constructionism to explain the psychology underpinning statue vandalism and defacement. A statue resembles the medium of mimetic magic, argues M. Taussig (1999: 4), like sticking a needle in the heart of a figurine so as to kill the person thereby represented. Since the commemorated person is already dead, the treatment becomes a form of posthumous punishment of the despised, and an attempt at figuratively killing the legacy of their deeds and ideologies. D. Hook (2005) draws on Freud’s

notion of the uncanny, the disturbing eerie double, to explain the efficacy of monuments. Realistically rendered statues with minute attention to detail, like dolls and figurines, are instruments of the uncanny, as their life-likeness causes fleeting doubt about their ontological status, their inanimate character. Acts of iconoclasm and defacement “trade off exactly such a mechanism of presence. To deface a statue in condescending or obscene ways is effective. Because, it is—in exactly an imaginary sort of way—to see a pigeon shit on the head of Cecil John Rhodes, or Paul Kruger, rather than on a bit of polished marble” (Hook 2005: 699). More than any other type of monument, the life-like appearance of statues encourages conduct that mimics confrontational human interaction, such as spitting or throwing stones at it, mutilating, toppling, and trampling on it. Paint splashes usually bear the hallmarks of hasty indiscriminate action, but sometimes protestors take good care to target their desecrating intervention at “where it hurts most” (*e.g.* the crotch in the case of the Botha statue in Durban, see Ngubane 2015) or use materials that evoke particular disgust, as in the besmirching of the Rhodes statue at UCT with human excrement.

The imitation effect created by the media constitutes another psychological factor underpinning statue defacement. Iconoclasm has long been known to be contagious, spread by the media, which are magically attracted to vandalized monuments and toppled statues (Kolrud & Prusac 2014). Photojournalism, in particular, thrives on the iconic image—its evocative power, richly layered iconography, symbolic resonance and emotionality—implying that regime change virtually requires that statues must fall. This is epitomized by the famous toppling of Saddam Hussein’s statue in Bagdad in 2003, presented as a jubilant act of the populace—ordinary people consolidating at the symbolic level the victory attained by military forces on the battlefield. Major & Perlmutter’s (2005) careful reconstruction of the origin of this iconic photograph shows how very few members of the public actually took part in the statue toppling and to what extent the event was staged for the media. Photojournalism manipulates interpretation and shapes discourses around symbols and political events, but the rapid global distribution and uncritical consumption of such images engender their own effects. Oscar Wilde famously postulated that art does not imitate life, the basic principle of mimesis, but “life imitates art.” Protestors want to see effigies burn and statues toppled, because the image of the toppled statue as a symbol of protest is deeply imprinted in their consciousness. People are drawn to repeating, staging, re-enacting, imitating or emulating memorable actions and symbolic gestures known through iconic images.

FIG. 2. — DEFACED STATUE OF KING GEORGE V, HOWARD COLLEGE CAMPUS, UNIVERSITY OF KWAZULU-NATAL

Photo: Sabine Marschall, October 2015.

Theory of Affordance

Beyond ideological and psychological motivations, I now want to argue—drawing on James J. Gibson’s (1979) theory of affordance—that the mere materiality and physical properties of a symbolic artefact can entice vandalism and destruction. Gibson coined the term “affordance” (derived from the verb) to denote opportunities and perils that the environment provides for those who inhabit it. More precisely, affordance refers to the entire range of possible actions and behaviour that the physical properties of elements, surfaces, and substances afford animals and humans. For instance, the characteristics of an object (size, weight, texture, malleability, mobility, colour, smell, etc.), provide a human being with many different possibilities of using, treating or interacting with it, many of which will be unintended by the producers of the object and other possibilities may only be discovered under specific circumstances. Such properties cannot be abstractly measured, as in physics, because they are relative to each person based on individual capacity and disposition (*e.g.* an adult can lift or throw an object that a child may not).

Gibson’s theory of affordance is an interactionist view of perception and action based on information received from the environment. It has often been

applied to animal behaviour—the heads of statues afford birds with an opportunity to sit and shit—but various scholars have referred Gibson’s theory to aspects of human behaviour or extended the notion of affordance. Observing an affordance effect in the environment does not mean that the respective action will actually be performed and one might investigate under what circumstances a person might act upon the discovery of a possibility. While J. Gibson’s theory assumed the physical presence of an object or a referent in the environment for humans to perceive affordance effects, S. Z. Caiani (2014) proved that even two-dimensional images of the referent may elicit related physical (re)actions. In other words, someone might spontaneously spit at a photograph of a despised monument. The photograph could also be a referent in its own right, prompting actions that cannot easily be executed on the physical artefact, such as scratching out the eyes.

Objects in Space

Long predating Gibson’s theory, R. Musil (1936) already observed how large-scale statues force us to evade them in our daily movements; how we can use their base as a protected resting place; and how they can assist us with directions as a compass and yard stick. Monuments, statues and commemorative markers of all kinds are essentially material objects in the public domain, which “produce space” in very physical ways by inhibiting our movement, regulating behaviour and physically impacting on bodily experiences. Such markers afford animals and humans with a range of possibilities for interaction depending on their location, size, shape, material, colour, etc. Through processes of socialization, acculturation, and discourse, individuals “learn” about appropriate types of interaction, but monuments are also built to impose particular modes of behaviour upon us. Scale and other design factors are deliberately utilized to imbue the monument and its surrounding space with a distinctive aura, forcing us to keep a respectful distance, inhibiting our movements, demanding small behavioural changes from us: stepping down, looking up, changing paths (Yampolsky 1995). Monuments structure public spaces, direct our gaze, and channel us along specified paths.

Towards the latter part of the twentieth century, international commemorative design trends began to promote the shift from authoritative, monumental schemes to more populist designs at human scale. This included placing life-size statues directly on the ground, allowing people to come face to face with their supposed heroes and encouraging new ways of physically interacting with them (Michalski 1998). In South Africa, this trend manifested itself

with some delay, but then became very popular during the post-apartheid period to foster identification and affirmative forms of engagement with the newly installed commemorative markers. While casual passers-by continue to ignore such statues, many visitors like to have their picture taken posing next to the effigy. The seated bronze statue of the popular musician, Brenda Fassie, in Newtown, Johannesburg (installed as part of the Sunday Times Heritage Project in 2006) is even conceptualized with an empty seat next to her and some visitors gladly take up the invitation “just for fun.” The statue of Albert Luthuli in KwaDukuza is designed with an outstretched hand that encourages people to shake hands with the struggle hero. Media reports showed then President Thabo Mbeki do precisely this during his official unveiling of the statue on 21 August 2004, hence promoting the perception of affordance effects that others can imitate in due course.²

Not all commemorative markers are intended to be touched, but some people act upon perceived affordance effects nonetheless. Internationally, a few monuments have even become famous for such behaviour, as has Oscar Wilde’s lipstick covered tombstone in the Père Lachaise cemetery in Paris. Despite numerous efforts made by the authorities to prohibit and discourage the kissing of the stone, this type of physical engagement has become a tradition, if not a cult, performed out of genuine veneration or “just for fun.” The evocative power of some materials, images and shapes entices people to execute perceived affordances, whether the intention is affirmative, ambivalent, or destructive. People are compelled to touch protruding elements of bronze statues within easy reach and the respective shiny surfaces are both a manifestation and promoting model of this behaviour. Extended sections also lend themselves to being broken, sawn or hacked off or otherwise interfered with, as can equally be witnessed (*e.g.* the Paul Kruger monument in Pretoria’s Church Square, where the protruding sections of the guns of the Burgher figures have been targeted). Monument briefs in South Africa habitually request “vandal-proof” designs, but experience proves that individuals always discover new affordance effects latent in the artefact.

Monument initiators and designers lack the experience and perceptive angle of many regular occupants of public spaces, including vagrants, unemployed youths, informal vendors, drunkards, drug addicts and the destitute. The public urban space with all its structures, surfaces, smells, sounds and physical objects is a vital part of their daily living environment,

2. For example, the photographer Mark Wing took just such an image of President Thabo Mbeki shaking hands with Chief Albert Luthuli’s statue, during its inauguration as one of South Africa’s legacy pilot projects. The photograph was published in South Africa’s *Sunday Times*, on August 22, 2004, aside the caption “Struggle Giant.”

which they scan for opportunities of functionality in relation to their needs. They detect in monuments and statues affordance effects that might not be perceived by other viewers. One can sit or sleep on ledges, display one's merchandise on plinths, attach posters to vertical planes, perform ablutions in water features, urinate in monument niches. In due course, such utilitarian forms of bodily engagement invariably cause damage, which may not all be intentional or disrespectful, but simply an inevitable side effect of such "usage," underpinned by utter indifference about the intended meaning and purpose of the monument.

"Aesthetic Revolt"

Traces of damage or "modification" of monuments and cultural symbols are signifiers in their own right, whether these are deliberately inflicted results of vandalism and destruction; unintentional or accidental damage; signs of wear and tear; attachments or additions to the monuments, be they paint, objects or a smelly substance like urine. As G. Zubrzycki (2013) illustrates, even entirely unintentional, accidental damage can lead to the "iconographic remaking" of important symbols with far-reaching consequences. In her case study, a large statue of Saint John the Baptist, patron saint of French Canadians and national symbol, fell off a float in the course of protest action that accompanied a traditional Saint-Jean-Baptiste Day parade in Montreal in 1969, its head breaking off. In the following days, the media interpreted and narrated the events of the day, exploiting the symbolism of the accidental damage by relating it to the biblical story of the beheading of Saint John the Baptist. The saint thus "killed" eventually led to the discontinuation of the traditional parade and the emergence of new forms of national celebrations—an outcome even exceeding the aims of the erstwhile protestors.

Just as monuments and cultural symbols have no intrinsic meaning, the significance of their damage or modification—even if by accident—relies entirely on interpretation. Meaning can be cleverly manipulated and discursively constructed by members of the public, groups with vested interests and especially the media. It can equally emerge quite unintentionally and innocently as the process of signification takes on a dynamic of its own. Due to the nature of human psychology, the mimetic quality of the statue facilitates this process, as individuals cognitively perceive opportunities and relate them to familiar bodily actions and effects. Some visual and multisensory clues provided by the damage or modification resonate more strongly than others, as they precipitate memories of similar experiences and activate processes

of signification that tap into established repertoires of familiar stories about injury, defeat and death of heroes and leaders.

G. Zubrzycki (2013) develops the concept of “aesthetic revolt,” a process in which social actors “rework” iconic symbols to redefine national identity through destructive, additive or modifying interventions. Drawing on Keane’s theory of “bundling,” Zubrzycki (*ibid.*) proposes that material characteristics can endow an object with a life of its own; based on its material properties, which may even change naturally over time, a monument can take on new meanings, differing from those originally intended. This occurs because material objects always consist of a bundle of physical properties and qualities, of which only some are foregrounded at any point in time and interpretive context. But the full range of properties persist, leaving the object with semiotic potential that can manifest itself in changed circumstances. As M. Taussig (1999: 21) puts it, any monument carries traces of counter-memory; the repressed history is always already installed in the statue like a hidden flaw, awaiting to be revealed. Through aesthetic revolt, the reworking of the iconic symbol, the manipulation of its material shape and properties, the icon can alter its content or meaning, forfeit its sanctity, and perhaps push the articulation of new identities (Zubrzycki 2013: 428).

Integrating Zubrzycki’s conceptual approach with Gibson’s affordance theory, one may say that the “reworking” of monuments and cultural symbols also changes their affordance, resulting in the potential discovery of new affordance effects. A crack, for instance—whether deliberately inflicted, resulting from utilitarian (ab)use, or simply natural weathering—provides new opportunities for breaking, bending, inserting substances, attaching objects, etc. What was started by one person, with or without specific intention, can hence entice another to follow up with subsequent action, opening up new opportunities for yet others. Each of these acts leaves its own trace as a signifier and new meanings that emerge through these modifications can, in turn, fuel the imagination to search for new affordance effects, hence starting a chain reaction between significations and affordances.

#RhodesMustFall – The Aftermath

The “Rhodes Must Fall” campaign indeed achieved the removal of the Rhodes statue, a quick symbolic measure of appeasement, but the students’ wider demands for transformation are far more difficult to attain and currently absorbed into the nation-wide “Fees Must Fall” campaign marked by intimidation, violence and “vandalism” in its own right. The most influential

and lasting aspect of the “Rhodes Must Fall” campaign was arguably that the hashtag “MustFall” became an ubiquitous part of the nation’s colloquial vocabulary, being applied to any imaginable cause from politics to sports and cooking. On the monument front, not much has changed. Most defaced statues were quickly cleaned up or repaired, very few have been removed or relocated. Only in exceptional cases, statues still bear traces of their defacement.

In January 2016, seven men posing as council workers attempted to topple the Rhodes statue in Company Gardens in Cape Town by cutting into the ankle of his right leg with an angle grinder, but fleeing when confronted by a park manager (Dano 2016). By the time of my last visit (September 2016), the statue had not yet been repaired. Observing that the incision is precisely where one would find the Achilles tendon opens up opportunities for evocative interpretation and the forging of compelling narratives that—if strategically disseminated—could provoke others to carry out actions afforded by and focused on the incision, whether these might symbolize healing, mutilation or death.

The King George v statue on the Howard College campus of the University of KwaZulu-Natal remains in its paint-splattered state to the present day. Presumably, the university means to signal that the debate is still ongoing and the fate of this statue and other symbols of the past on the university’s five campuses is still to be determined. Removing the traces of political protest carries a political message in its own right and could be perceived as provocative, especially in the current context of volatility over the “Fees Must Fall” campaign. A recent visitor from Germany, largely unaware of the “Rhodes Must Fall” campaign, believed the colorful paint splashes to be a creative intervention by art students or a light-hearted fun take on a grave leader of Empire. Sometimes new flyers unrelated to the erstwhile protest and even commercial advertisements are temporarily affixed to the statue, opportunistically exploiting its high visibility. As a signifier, the traces of defacement can mean different things to different viewers and provide convenient affordances entirely unrelated to the statue’s purpose and meaning as a commemorative symbol.

When the familiar seated statue of Rhodes at UCT was removed, the empty plinth remained, not only providing new affordance, but virtually crying out to be filled, as absence is a powerful signifier in its own right. This was formally acknowledged when an anonymous artist painted the “dark shadow” of Rhodes across the path. In line with a recommendation pronounced in an official heritage report prepared for UCT and Heritage Western Cape (Attwell & Associates 2016), the university has opted to retain (and presumably maintain) this “negative” shadow. The report further recommends the retention of

FIG. 3. — TEMPORARY INSTALLATION ON THE EMPTY PLINTH
OF FORMER RHODES STATUE, UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN

Photo: Sabine Marschall, September 2016.

the empty plinth as a “reclaimed space,” as it was noted that students “enjoy the platform as a space for theatre, drama and public gatherings and other forms of creative expression” (*ibid.*: 38).

Not only does the plinth afford opportunities for performativity, but also artistic interventions and temporary installations. At the end of September 2016 (around Heritage Day), it was adorned with a makeshift arrangement consisting of a black plastic chair affixed with a large wooden cross-draped with green material. Two “plaques” were attached to the plinth. The one read: “Here sat a vanguard of oppression & colonialism. The contested memorial to Cecil John Rhodes was removed from this place on 9 April 2015.” The other one invited viewers to “have a seat and dream about our future Africa.” Rhodes is gone, leaving behind his empty seat, which awaits to be filled with a deserving new hero, in the meantime encouraging reflection about institutional identity and national/continental values. The installation may be intended to convey a “Rest in Peace” (RIP) message, presumably addressed at Rhodes, but the specific combination of visual elements can also be interpreted as the empty throne, a classic symbol of the invisible presence of the Almighty in Christian iconography. Rhodes is now with God—or is he God? As a signifier, the semiotic range of this installation facilitates a multiplicity of readings; as an object in space, the chair affords opportunities for playful or provocative performativity. However, the installation soon disappeared, once again vacating the plinth for other affordances.

Monuments as material objects in public space mark the intersection of power and the everyday. In the self-mythology of public memory, monuments are noble dispensers of societal education and moral uplift; at worst, they are silent, innocuous bystanders in the urban landscape. For detractors, monuments are authoritative obstructions imposed on the public, invidiously controlling our movements, manipulating us and corrupting the innocent minds of the young. Most of the arguments paraded in the monument debate that followed the “#RhodesMustFall” campaign are underpinned by this array of basic attitudes; demands and recommendations are, moreover, predictable along racial and political party lines.

This article has tried to open up another perspective by drawing attention to the commemorative marker as a physical object in space, characterized by specific material properties that afford opportunities for bodily engagement—in affirmative, utilitarian and destructive ways. It is the physical presence of

statues and monuments that structures public space and commands attention. Statues and monuments invite people to stop and reflect, be educated, uplifted and pay respect. One might equally say they restrict movement, inhibit activities that took place there before the “empty space” was “filled,” and manipulate our minds. Design features and physical properties of public monuments force passers—by and visitors to participate in the performance of pre-determined activities and preferred forms of behaviour, implicitly tying them into a larger cultural politics. Exploiting human psychology, the coercive aspect may be replaced by playful manipulation, enticing people to “buy into” the desired effect, much like advertisement and similarly reinforced by the media (e.g. shaking hands with Luthuli).

By the same token, the physical properties of monuments and statues enable and provoke damaging or destructive actions commonly labelled vandalism. For those sharing the “monuments as innocent bystander” attitude, such vandalism comes as a surprise and a shock; it seems completely wrong and uncalled for. For those with opposing attitudes, the monument has been a thorn in their eye for a long time; they see the statue as “crying out to be besmirched”; they may perceive affordance effects in this regard, but few dare to act on them.

In conclusion, complementing semiotic and discursive approaches to monuments, it is suggested here that more attention must be paid to such material properties of commemorative markers and the everyday engagements and bodily interactions that ordinary people have with these cultural symbols. To the extensive literature about the monument as a signifier with a potentially wide semiotic range of meanings, this paper has added a focus on the deliberate or involuntary traces left by physical treatments afforded by the material properties of cultural artefacts and how these feed back into the process of signification. It is hoped that this opens up new perspectives on societal and individual engagements with commemorative monuments in South Africa and beyond, as well as creating awareness amongst those who initiate and design monuments.

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ABSTRACT

The “#Rhodes Must Fall” campaign initiated by students at the University of Cape Town in March 2015 sparked a wave of statue defacements across South Africa and gave fresh impetus to the national debate about monuments of the colonial and apartheid era. Far less attention is paid to the pervasive neglect and defacement of post-apartheid commemorative markers and contestation over their meaning. This study advocates a shift from semiotic and discursive approaches to psychoanalytical approaches that foreground the individual and his/her multisensory physical engagement with monuments. James J. Gibson’s theory of affordance is drawn upon to examine how people in South Africa and beyond interact with monuments and especially statues—not as cultural symbols laden with meaning, but as material objects in space that afford opportunities for physical interaction—in affirmative, utilitarian and destructive ways. It is argued that such bodily engagements and the traces they sometimes leave on the commemorative marker can feed back into the process of signification and potentially produce new affordance effects.

Keywords: South Africa, James J. Gibson, memorial, monuments, physical interaction, public space.

RÉSUMÉ

Monuments et interaction potentielle : les engagements corporels multisensoriels avec le paysage de mémoire en Afrique du Sud. — La campagne « #Rhodes Must Fall » initiée par des étudiants de l’Université de Cape Town en mars 2015 réussit à donner une nouvelle impulsion au débat national sur les monuments de l’époque coloniale et de l’ère de l’apartheid. Beaucoup moins d’attention a été portée à la négligence et au vandalisme des marqueurs commémoratifs post-apartheid et à leur signification contestée. Cette étude prône une transition entre des approches sémiotiques et discursives et des approches psychoanalytiques, lesquelles situent l’individu dans ses multiples engagements physiques et sensoriels avec les monuments. La théorie de J. J. Gibson de « l’affordance » (qui peut être traduit par « interaction potentielle ») nous conduit à examiner comment les gens en Afrique du Sud, et ailleurs, interagissent avec des monuments et surtout avec des statues — pas en tant que symboles culturels dotés de signification et du sens, mais plutôt en tant qu’objets matériels dans l’espace qui fournissent des occasions pour une interaction physique — et celle-ci sur différents modes, affirmatifs, utilitaires ou destructifs. Nous postulons que de tels engagements corporels et les traces qu’ils laissent parfois sur les marqueurs commémoratifs peuvent alimenter le processus de signification en produisant de nouveaux effets d’affordance.

Mots-clés : Afrique du Sud, James J. Gibson, espace public, interaction physique, mémorial, monuments.