

COMPARATIVE MONUMENT (PALESTINE)

TOM NICHOLSON

NOTE Tom Nicholson's pages *Comparative Monument (Palestine)* are an iteration of a project commissioned by, and first presented at, the 2012 *Qalandiya International*, as part of the exhibition *Gestures in Time*, curated by Lara Khaldi and Katya Garcia Anton, held in Jerusalem, Ramallah, and in various venues throughout the West Bank in November 2012. Photography is by Tristan Da Roza. The project could not have been realized without the generous support of Jack Persekian, Director of the *Qalandiya International*; Jumana Abouboud, Tamara Tamimi, and the whole team at *Al-Ma'mal Foundation for Contemporary Art*; Lara Khaldi and Katya Garcia Anton; Denis Sobeh and Brad Haylock; and Clare Land. Tom Nicholson's involvement in the *Qalandiya International* was supported by *Monash Art Design and Architecture*, where he is a Lecturer in Drawing. The artist pages are courtesy of the artist and *Milani Gallery, Brisbane*.



I find nine monuments bearing the name "Palestine" in and around Melbourne: Avoca, Caulfield, Coburg, Donald, Kew, Longwarry, Mooroopna, North Melbourne, and Terang. These monuments commemorate the presence of Australian soldiers in Palestine during WWI and their role in the 1917 British capture of Bir Sab'a, or Beersheba (or Be'er Sheva, as it is known when it is captured and cleared by Israeli soldiers in 1948, its Palestinian population killed or gathered together and forcibly transported by truck to Gaza, Bir Sab'a becoming part of the new state of Israel).



I walk right around the edge of that vast open space, surrounded by a fence without a gate. It is wedged between the historical Ottoman city of Bir Sab'a and the Israeli new city, a glassy office block, a mall, an eight-lane road with traffic whizzing along in both directions. This is where the Israeli soldiers entered Bir Sab'a in 1948. It is the site of the city's Islamic cemetery. The low sun picks out the confusion of rocks and rubble and worn headstones scattered through the expanses of bare earth and long grass.



The sites of the nine monuments bearing the word "Palestine" are cleared. The nine monuments are gathered together. They are shipped from Melbourne to Tel Aviv, and transported by truck to Bir Sab'a. They are installed as a single line, each monument abutting the next, side by side, to create a sixty-meter-long monumental form that diagonally cuts across the busy road alongside the old cemetery, David Hacham Boulevard. This new monument blocks all eight lanes of traffic. All that stone, the bulk and weight of obelisks and rotunda and carved marble, become a kind of arrow, an over-scaled historical marker, pointing to that vast open space surrounded by a fence. It is a line for soldiers who would enter the city here. The nine inscriptions face the same way: Palestine. Palestine. Palestine. Palestine. Palestine. Palestine. Palestine. Palestine. Palestine.



