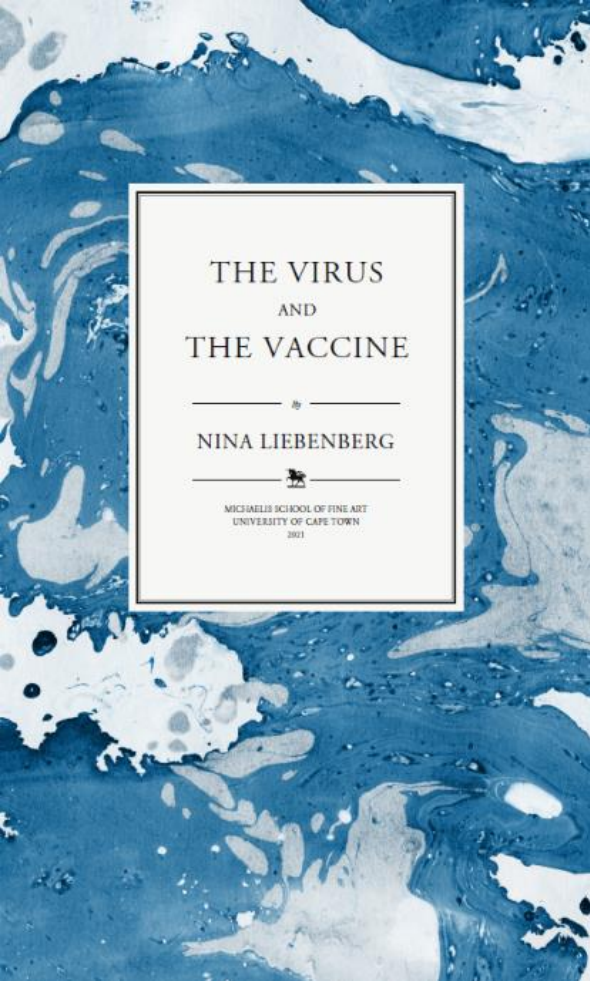




Nina Liebenberg  
Portfolio (three selected curations, 2018 – present)

*CHEST: a botanical ecology* (2018 – 2019)  
Iziko South African Museum, Cape Town  
Curation of University of Cape Town collections in  
combination with artworks



PhD dissertation cover & *CHEST: a botanical ecology*  
November 2018- March 2019  
Iziko South African Museum, Cape Town





*CHEST: a botanical ecology*

November 2018 - March 2019

Iziko South African Museum, Cape Town

Illness and disease affects us all. The treatment of these conditions, however, has been vast and varied, depending on the historical periods and the cultural context in and during which they are practiced. Situated in the Iziko South African Museum rock art gallery, where healing power is expressed in San paintings, this mobile set of cabinets explores a rich complex of healing practices through the display of a medicine chest which was donated to the University of Cape Town in 1978.

This chest belonged to a British dentist, who practiced in Cape Town from 1904, and who bought the chest for a hunting trip he undertook in 1913 to (then) Northern Rhodesia. The idea of the chest gives rise to a variety of forms of healing: from instruments used to exorcise evil spirits and children's letters written to celebrate a heart transplant; to medicinal flowers bought at the Adderley Street flower market. The exhibition aims to visualise and materialise illness and its treatment from historical, cultural and disciplinary perspectives.

Drawing on well-established historical and contemporary connections between the disciplines of Botany, Medicine and Pharmacology, the exhibits also suggest latent links which are at times political, at times whimsical.



Three instruments used in healing rituals to exorcise evil spirits, analysed by botanist, Professor Edmund February. The dancing rattles are made of the seed pods of *Oncoba spinosa* (Venda: mutuzwa) and the seed pod of *Adansonia digitata* (Venda: muvhuyu). The iodophone is made of wood that is unrecognizable due to its treatment. Courtesy of the Kirby Collection, South African College of Music.





*Breath sculptures*

Four individual breaths of children suffering from asthma captured and sealed in glass: Thaakira Salie (age 8), Ziyaad Small (age 10), Blake Leppan (age 9) and Jessie Allot (age 11). The breaths sculptures were made in the UCT glass blowing workshop, with the assistance of Andre de Jager.

### Forest

Bottles and pipettes sourced from the storage rooms of the Chemistry department and filled with teas made from local medicinal plants: *Balotta africana*, *Sutherlandia frutescens*, *Agathosma crenulata*, *Melianthus major*, *Mentha longifolia*, *Petroselinum crispum*, *Hypoxiz villosa* and *Salvia officinalis*.







Leaves collected from the gardens around Groote Schuur Hospital and analysed by UCT dermatologist Prof Ranks Lehloeny. Lehloeny treated these specimens as sections of skin and read them, accordingly, highlighting sections that showed signs of nummular eczema, acne, ageing, miliary tuberculosis and melanoma, to name a few:

*This section shows characteristics which could point at various causes. The darker raised sections could be blackheads as seen in acne (note the darker central area reminiscent of an open pore); villous hair cysts (a condition in which hair follicles are trapped under the skin to form pimple-like structures with the hair giving a dark hue in the centre; syringomas (non-cancerous proliferation of sweat glands); infections such as chicken pox or miliary tuberculosis in which the infection spreads from the blood onto the skin (miliary means it looks like a millet seed). It could also be metastatic melanoma that has spread from another area onto this skin.*





The nonsensical activity of reading the epidermis of a leaf for signs that correlate to dermatological markers references the nonsensical activities performed not so long ago in the broader context of the country, when an individual's skin was read and judged according to apartheid prejudices. Sourced from Groote Schuur Hospital, well-known as the venue in which the first heart transplant was performed in 1967, these specimens, now activated in terms of their racial connotations, also spoke to more occluded histories in the space, such as the lesser-known racial politics that formed part of the first heart transplant.

In 2017, while walking down Hospital Street, the main connecting passageway of the hospital, I investigated the object and textual displays that relay the history of the hospital. Reading the label of one of these displays – an unassuming collection of white crockery (plates, teacups, saucers and bowls) with different bands of colour around their edges – revealed a sinister past. The cutlery was acquired during apartheid, when each coloured band corresponded to the race for which it should be used. As such, these unassuming markings, simple circular lines on a white background, become unsettling evidence of past injustices.



*Planthology (Bulbine frutescens and Lessertia frutescens)*

Two medicinal plant specimens from Kirstenbosch National Botanical Garden, x-rayed at Groote Schuur Hospital. These two local plants offer a wide variety of healing properties and address the lacuna of indigenous treatments represented by the chest.

These works originally formed part of a series I made when I worked as a creative consultant in the PLC in 2011 and 2012 (see next image). A conversation with Yeats revealed that most of the plants she introduced to the environment had mysteriously died. In response, I x-rayed a selection of indigenous plant specimens – the starting point of many diagnoses in human medicine. In subjecting the plants to this process and placing the x-ray images in a space that foregrounds the diagnosis of human disease, I intended to create a heterarchical shift in this relationship, considering a world in which the degree of care directed toward human ailments might be replicated in treating diseases manifest in the botanical world.





*Diagnosing Loss* (2022)  
Michaelis Upper Gallery, Cape Town  
Curated by Nina Liebenberg



Mar. 2022

Loss functions arise in various applications of mathematics. For example, in the domain of machine learning the loss function measures how well an algorithm models a given dataset; the better the predictions, the smaller the loss. The problem may be formulated as follows:

understanding  
navigating  
measuring  
traversing  
estimating  
figuring  
calculating  
representing

# DIAGNOSING LOSS

$L$  is the loss function, and we want to find the parameter  $a$  which minimizes the distance between a data set  $x$  and a target  $t$ . A common choice for  $a$  is the mean.

15 - 29 April 2022, 10am - 3pm (Mon - Fri)

Michaelis Upper Gallery, Hiddington Campus, 31

Orange Street, Gardens

Enquiries: [ninaliebenberg@gmail.com](mailto:ninaliebenberg@gmail.com)



'Diagnosing Loss' is an exhibition that attempts to understand, navigate, measure, figure, calculate, and represent what we understand as loss. It takes, as its point of departure, the research conducted by social scientist Halina Suwalowska (Ethox Centre, Wellcome Centre for Ethics and Humanities, GLIDE Collaborative, University of Oxford) and artist Anna Suwalowska (Royal College of Art). The paintings featured in the exhibition (from their show 'Beyond the Body') examine the procedure of the autopsy as a last act of trying to understand the loss of life, and they grapple with how scientific and ethical standards on this procedure have changed over time and the dilemmas it poses to different cultures. 'Diagnosing Loss' extends these ideas by bringing together several artworks from Michaelis School of Fine Art staff, students, and graduates, along with objects sourced from the university's Physics, Pathology, Mathematics, Chemistry, Special Collections, Anatomy, and Biological Sciences Departments. These artworks and objects convey the different ways disciplines study and represent, but ultimately fail, at diagnosing loss.

Curated by Nina Liebenberg.

Featured artists:

Hope Gangata | Daya Reddy | Fritha Langerman | Ziyaad Small | Blake Leppan | Jessie Allot | Thaakira Salie | Carola Friess | Seth Kriger | Anna Suwalowska | Pippa Skotnes | Voni Baloyi | Katlego Diseko | Gabriel Baard | Khumo Magano | Caroline Powrie | Lynne Lomofsky | Nathalie Viruly | Ruby Wilson | Samuel Jordan

Link: <https://www.ethox.ox.ac.uk/blog/2018beyond-the-body2019-2018diagnosing-loss2019-a-conversation>



*Diagnosing Loss. 2022. Installation view.*





## Loss functions

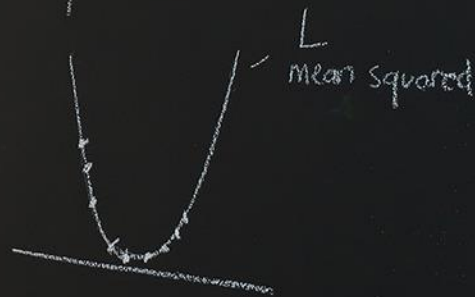
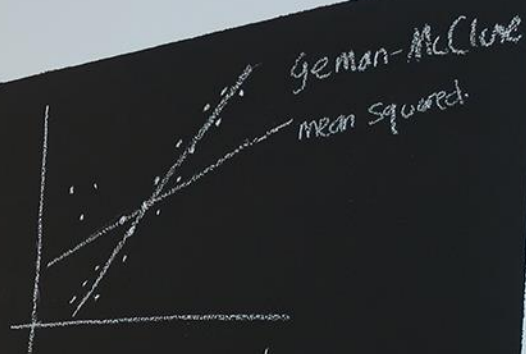
Daya Reddy - March 2022

Loss functions arise in various applications of mathematics. For example, in the domain of machine learning, the loss function measures how well an algorithm models a given dataset: the better the predictions, the smaller the loss. The problem may be formulated as follows:

$$\arg \min_a L(f_a(x) - t)$$

$L$  is the loss function, and we want to find the parameter  $a$  which minimises the distance between a dataset  $x$  and a target  $t$ . A common choice is the mean squared error, for which  $L \sim e^2$ .

A better choice for the data shown is the German-McClure function.  $L \sim \frac{e^2}{c^2 + e^2}$  ( $e$  is the error,  $c$  is the constant).



Diagnosing Loss. 2022. Installation view.



Dr Hope Gangata

2004

*The Paper Cadaver Project*

BSc Honours in Human Anatomy and Physiotherapy student Hope Gangata conceptualised and produced this project in 2004. Made from hard paper, string and staples, the model assumes the body of a five-year old boy and can be used for teaching and for exam purposes across a continent where anatomical visual aids are either too expensive or sometimes hard to source. Accompanying this display are the files containing the blueprints for each component of this model, which can be printed out and assembled anywhere in the world.



### Neck support

Made from oak, this object is used to support the neck during a post-mortem examination. It is literally invested with traces of hundreds of losses - its scarred and worn surface analogous to a wounded, ill and traumatised body. Courtesy of the Pathology Learning Centre, UCT.



*Refiguring bodies of thought*  
2022

A curation by the Honours in Curatorship class of 2022 (Seth Kriger, Samuel Jordan, Voni Baloyi, Katlego Diseko, Gabriel Baard, Khumo Magano) using an educational anatomical bust as a prompt to think about everything except anatomy. Compiled along one string and draped over the bust, these associations create new relationships between the words and the object, as well as the different associative trajectories of each curator.





Most of the exhibitions I curate also form part of my teaching curricula and serve as tools for students to test theory in practice. During the process of installing the exhibition, I ran workshops with the Honours in Curatorship students, in which they curated scientific and medical materials in a variety of ways that represented alternative ways of understanding these materials and their disciplines and for interrogating what these fields sometimes present to the public as self-evident and objective. On the opening night, the researchers from Oxford, our own Michalis co-hort of past and present students and staff, as well as the students from the Social Anthropology Department met in the Anatomy lecture theatre to listen to a range of interdisciplinary presentations, and then visited the exhibition where they engaged in discussions with each other.

*Object Studies* (2023)  
White Studio, Uniarts, Helsinki  
Curated by Nina Liebenberg





This exhibition formed part of a larger Research Symposium, held at Uniarts, Helsinki in December 2023. The focus of this day was a strange collection of objects. These objects were sourced from research environments at the University of Helsinki, Aalto University, Uniarts, and the city archives, and represented human-disease-plant relationships from a variety of perspectives. During the morning, a series of short presentations expanded on individual objects, whilst the afternoon's practical workshop used curatorship to highlight various connections and intersections within the collection and encourage communication across research fields.

Link to programme:  
<https://www.uniarts.fi/en/events/kuva-research-days-day-3/>

Recognised as the first female photographer  
Adkins started producing the cyanotype  
would make up *Photographs of*  
*Cyanotype Impressions* in 18



*Polypodium scolopendria*  
in fruit



*Polypodium scolopendria*  
in fruit









# Pause for Thought: The Public Sculptures of Rachel Whiteread

CHRISTOPHER BUCKLEY



Rachel Whiteread's name is still inextricably linked with her first public commission, the now legendary *House* (1991), a cast of the complete interior of a building in London's East End. Although it had a lifespan of no more than two and a half months and was made when the artist was only thirty years old, *House* has become a benchmark of twentieth-century public sculpture. Over the next six years, three other extraordinary public commissions were to follow, in New York, Vienna and London, all of which confirmed Whiteread's singular talent and rare sensitivity in handling the complexities of public space.

By 1995 Whiteread had established herself as a major player on the international museum circuit. But success in the museum does not necessarily guarantee the successful handling of a public work. To operate outside the safe four walls of a gallery requires completely different skills in an artist. As Daniel Buren, the French conceptual artist and museum guru of public sculpture, pointed out:

*Art in the street? Why not? But only if it is thought, tested and reconsidered. It would be a mistake to suggest that there is a kind of equality between the museum and the street. They have little in common. And a lot of difference. The point is that the unfettered freedom given to the artist in the museum no longer obtains in the street. The point is that in the city, politics and economics are involved in everything.*

Whiteread certainly came to experience these concerns most acutely, yet refused to be defeated by administrative restrictions and political wrangles.

In spite of these formal and material differences, the basic commitment made between art and time – *House* (Whiteread Memorial, Winter Tower and Monument) – was common to Whiteread's particular

## House

THE GROVE ROAD, LONDON E1

Solidifying and actualising emptiness, *House* was an extension of Whiteread's earlier cast of the interior of a Victorian room, *Ghost* (1990), which he added her international reputation. *House* can be seen as a formal and total stepping stone towards the of her *Belvedere Memorial* in Vienna. Crossing every material wall, the window with (apparently) concrete peeling away the actual 'skin' of the building, *House* became a kind of interior image of the intangible spaces that were once inhabited by those who once lived there (and whose ordinary impact, the shock of a witness with their gaze fixed on ordinary, private house lives and human inside out, of per transcendence into a kind of the archaologists, we had

Whiteread deliberately a Victorian terrace house, actually British, for her first public work. It makes a point about the fragility of the spaces in, worry about, and feel. This relationship to our environment and its memory is of course characteristic of Whiteread's work. Equally, *House* reference *House* to our museums, a historical *Ghost* and was to find the incarnation in the Vietnam. Though *House* has long since will, long to the today. Once a rough, so this East End borough, gentrified over the last two of condemned by *House* was the last one



## Pompeii casts

When the pyroclastic flow enveloped Pompeii, its inhabitants were buried. Ash solidified around their bodies. These eventually rotted away leaving behind human-shaped holes – found by archaeologists more than 1,000 years later. These casts reveal the final positions people and animals took as they tried to protect themselves.





anarchive



**THE GLOBE**  
A photograph of a globe, showing the Earth from space. The globe is dark, with a bright, glowing center. The text is printed in a small, sans-serif font.



**LISTEN**  
A photograph of a person's face, looking down. The person is wearing a dark hat and a light-colored shirt. The text is printed in a small, sans-serif font.



Handwritten musical score on a page, featuring several staves of music with lyrics and performance markings.

The visible lyrics include:

- ha m ha ha ni ni ni ni
- ha ha ha ha ha ha
- [a]

Performance markings and tempo changes include:

- a tempo*  $\text{♩} = 40$
- rit.*  $\text{♩} = 50$
- $\text{♩} = 80$  *rit.* *pp*  $\text{♩} = 50$

The background shows a blurred indoor setting with a warm light source and a dark object on the right.

Descriptions:

1. A specimen of 'Agapanthus campanulatus' from South Africa found in the Luomus herbarium, Helsinki, collected by a Finnish botanist in 1982 & a label of recognition to Anne Atkins, the first female photographer, who started producing the cyanotypes that would make up 'Photographs of British Algae: Cyanotype Impressions in 1843'.
2. Installation shot of *Object Studies*.
3. Magic objects made from birch (SME22032 & SME1087) used in healing rituals (sourced from the Satakunta Museum in Pori) & Aspen stem sections with compression collars, used to monitor growth (part of research conducted by Viikki researcher George Woodward). Reflected in the vitrine glass is a projection of Tacita Dean's 'The Green Ray' (2001), and on its other side, 'Creature' - a cross between a silver birch and a black alder created by Viikki researcher, Sampo Muranen.
4. A taxidermied Great spotted Woodpecker sourced from the Finnish Natural History Museum, floating on an enlarged print of the fragment of leaf margin of leafy liverwort attained from its feathers by Viikki researcher and presenter, Niko Johansson & a copy of Darwin's 'The Power of Movement in Plants' (1880) open on a 'Sleep of Leaves' page & an anaesthesia workstation from the Töölöö Hospital Museum & vinyl lettering spelling out 'päivännäkemätön' (a Finnish word meaning 'not to be seen by the sun/day' and relating to the magic objects in the vitrine next to it)
5. A mould made with dental material by Viikki researcher and presenter, Jasmin Kemppinen, of the epidermal layer of an 'Arabidopsis thaliana wildtype plant Col-0' & Rachel Whiteread's 'House' featured in a publication & a photo of Pompeii casts of animals observed by the curator in the Natural History Museum in 2017.
6. The anarchieve. See Zaayman, C. 2019. *Seeing what is not there: figuring the anarchieve*. University of Cape Town. Doctoral dissertation.
7. A page from the musical score of Chaya Czernowin's 'Adiantum Capillus-Veneris II', performed by Hanna Chorell, during the morning presentations.