



**OPENING ADDRESS: DR GWENNETH MILLER**  
***Curating the Science Campus Art Walk project***

Good afternoon, Esteemed Colleagues, Artists and Friends,

Thank you for the opportunity to speak about the curation of The *UNISA Art Walk* (2019-2024). Being involved in this project has been an honour, and like most worthwhile things, a test of endurance.

My first engagement with Dr Louw was in 2018 at an International Ethics conference where I curated a showcase of Unisa alumni. Today's event is the culmination of this initial conversation, after a long road of planning and action. It is an event of great significance for every member of our dedicated team.

The topic of my talk today focusses on curation I thought it meaningful to visit some general definitions for *curatorship*:

1. A curator is a specialist in a particular field of study and who provides information, does research and oversees the use and enhancement of collections
2. Curation is the creation of exhibitions by combining objects in forever *changing and unexpected* variations to explore their *countless meanings*.
3. And an important aim is the Identification of provenance and histories works of art as part of their legitimisation process (in other words, their future) .

(Handbook for Museums 1994: 290).

The Latin for the word "curator" makes the most sense to me: Latin: *cura*, meaning "to take care", for the curator is in many ways a *keeper* of a cultural heritage institution charged with an institution's collections and *involved with the interpretation* of material.

So, to place it in simple words, it is my job to take care of the process, the artists and guide what is to become artworks.

*The curator as implicated in the production of the work, working closely with the artist as a commissioner or enabler and is concerned with the whole physical and intellectual experience of an exhibition or off-site project. (Sarah Cook 2008)*

**I want to give a small overview of the PROCESS**

Being part of a large institution, we prepared a concept document, rules and regulations, a website and - as it goes with institutions – created many forms.

In broad, the process we structured in **three steps**:

1. We made sure that the practice of transparency was followed: after creating a concept document, an official call with directives was compiled and distributed on social media and to the art world. The proposal asked, amongst others for detailed drawings. Guidelines were developed for adjudication and a selection panel was appointed. Internally renowned artist Usha Seejarim formed part of the adjudication panel to present an external voice. At the deadline the entries were collated, and the adjudication panel selected a shortlist together with independent specialist. Shortlisted artists were then given the opportunity to make a three-dimensional maquette.
2. A second committee with another independent adjudicator, Prof Avitha Sooful from the University of Pretoria, then selected the best maquettes, according to a list of requirements. Apart from aesthetics and concept, the requirements also considered whether the plans are practical, workable and inclusive of diverse perspectives. These final maquettes were exhibited publicly for the first time in 2021 at the Unisa Art Gallery. Today you see several of these maquettes on exhibition again.
3. The third step was contracting the selected artists or artist groups for the final works. The result that you see in the foyer and in the space between the Pityana, Calabash and Gerwel buildings, is some of the identified projects. This launch marks the first public unveiling, and we hope to have a second reveal when all works will be completed and installed. Not all of the installation here are completed and some will still be executed next year.

These three steps are in actual fact just the tip of an iceberg – a mountain of time and intense labour.

Making art requires an embodied thinking through materials and process, to tap the potential of matters and to gestate the abstract thinking about specific issues, transforming latent potential into magical forms.

#### **ARTISTS:**

I want to call forward the **artist groups** that have been involved in the immense dedication of the six evolving structures you see in **Unisa Art Walk** to date.

Allow me briefly to introduce: (after my introduction each artist present their statements)

**Marian Hester and Mbangiso Mabaso**, who created the physical and Augmented Reality (AR) work *Summer Solstice and Winter Solstice* (2021-2023). (Materials: Mild steel, urethane coated steel, solar lights, Augmented Reality filters).

Each work is a large steel shade awning which uses the solar angle at noon on the summer or winter solstice to cast shadows on the ArtWalk site, and which explore concepts and ideas relating to several different environmental science disciplines, including solar energy engineering, planetary heating and cooling, growth cycles of plants, recent discoveries in biology, and ecological damage.

Summer Solstice casts a shadow on the ground suggesting the phenomenon of ‘canopy shyness’: the tendency of trees of the same height in a forest to leave space for neighbouring trees. It is an example of co-operation and collaboration in natural systems. The cast shadow-image of the tree canopy will be at its most crisp at noon on 21 December (the summer solstice in the southern hemisphere).

Winter Solstice casts shadows against the wall of stylised subterranean tree roots, the shadows most crisp on 21 June (the winter solstice). Recent research has shown that trees communicate in previously unimagined ways and that their root systems are connected by mycorrhizal fungi in vast underground networks, in which the fungi assist the trees to communicate and exchange nutrients.

Part of each work is an Augmented Reality filter showing a 3-dimensional illusion specific to the artwork: a ghostly forest surrounding the viewer (Summer Solstice) and a root and fungal network extending to the viewer’s feet showing the speed at which these networks share information (Winter Solstice).

**Ingrid Bolton**, who created the recycled mural, *Sever* (2021-2023), sourcing, cutting and collaging copper cable, aluminium tubes and sheets, bolted onto the wall in proximity to an electrical light.

Copper may not be the driver our energy needs but it is the transmitter of power and essential in our daily lives. We rely heavily on it our homes, businesses, hospitals, schools and all our communication devises are powered by it.

Cable theft and loadshedding (the planned suspension of power so as not to adversely affect the grid) halts these connections. Everyday life is negatively affected to such an extent that even the county’s economy and long-term sustainability shrinks. The global demand for energy, and consequentially copper, is high.

This artwork deals with the severing of our connectivity, by any means. Networks are severed, communication is halted, and power is interrupted. By slicing through the cable, I refer to this severing. The cutting is a violent act, as is the removal of copper from cities. Communication, transport via rail and power supply are all affected by the lifting of copper, loadshedding and misallocation of funds. The separation reveals the inner assembly of the cable and the individual strands of copper and rubber. This process reflects the micro or individual connecting strand, within the macro or landscape of power outages.

My use of recycled cable is a conscious one. South Africa’s primary source of power is from coal, a fossil fuel. The burning of this fuel is causing carbon dioxide emissions which in turn is causing climate change. We, as a country, are big emitters of carbon dioxide. I use recycled materials so that I use what is there already.

**Reinhard Sonntag**, who created *Emergent Systems* (2021-2023), as he examines their interaction in the building, as a reflection of an institution to propose a space of confrontation of ideas. (Materials: Aluminium bars, recycled steel objects, galvanised nuts and bolts, recycled nuts and bolts, metal paper clips, galvanised binding wire, pop rivets)

The work is a sculptural construction consisting of approximately 15 cluster pieces installed on three concrete pillars. It represents a mix of emergent complex systems that ‘invade’ or ‘infect’ the building.

The work reflects my fascination with scientific complexity and the way in which living matter organises itself from basic building blocks to emerge as complex life-forms that co-exist on the same planet.

The sculptural pieces are built from a variety of metal objects acquired in hardware and stationery stores and collected in scrapyards. The configuration of their components is intended to accentuate the multiplicity, connectedness, and nonlinearity that characterise complex and chaotic systems. The sculptures represent various cellular structures, modes of protein folding, and viral processes. They are interspersed with graph-like fragments of pseudo-scientific data visualisation.

This composite sculpture broadly follows the pattern of a viral infection, and its organic and fluid appearance is meant to establish a visual contrast with the linear and solid appearance of the pillars on which it is installed.

In a playful glimpse into an aspect of the relationship between culture and nature, I imagine the way in which a tertiary education institution may be invaded by knowledge-carrying complex systems designed to challenge our hierarchical and linear perceptions of the world. These systems also reference the natural molecular recycling processes by which organic life sustains itself, as well as the complex biological and technological processes that sustain contemporary civilisation.

**Alicia Vermaak**, who created the layered Perspex portrait of Jakes Gerwel: *Point of View (Portrait of Jakes Gerwel)* (2021-2023). Plexiglas, steel table, led lights.

*Point of View* is a multi-layered sculpture that serves as a tribute to Professor G.J. Gerwel, often recognised as Jakes Gerwel. The sculpture honours his remarkable achievements and unwavering determination to succeed in education, especially amidst the discriminatory policies of apartheid.

Gerwel was a prominent South African academic, teacher, lecturer, and professor, who played a significant role in the transformation of South Africa and the higher education sector. He was a political and human rights activist who assisted in the transition from apartheid to a constitutional democracy and was respected in government circles. He served as Director General of former president Nelson Mandela's office and secretary of the cabinet after 1994. Gerwel held various academic positions, including chancellor of Rhodes University, honorary professor of humanities at the University of Pretoria, and distinguished professor at UWC, as dean of the Faculty of Arts.

*Point of View* aligns with UNISA's institutional vision promoting transformation and the desire of the institution to connect with society through art. It also addresses the concept of perspective and space in the arts.

The sculpture employs a precise viewing angle to generate a portrait, creating the perceptual illusion of a cohesive entity. The layers are arranged in a sequential manner, resulting in the portrait, contingent upon the observer's perspective. *Point of View* aims to positively impact Unisa students and the community by encouraging viewers to reflect on a remarkable South African educational leader and pioneer in transformation, by highlighting the valuable contributions that educators make in higher education and the community.

**Linda Hanekom, with Gideon and Life Dlamimni**, who created *Kaleidoscope Alchemy* (2021-2023). (Material: Recycled windshield glass, Perspex, Aluminium, Steel, M1, Stainless Steel, bolts, nuts, OSB board and vermiculite concrete.)

Inspired by the entrance to the Science Campus library, in the GJ Gerwel building, this work is about development, gaining insight and vision. Like a book that is taking flight into another dimension, the recycled windshield glass panels form the focus, infusing new life into the old, discarded material.

The changing dynamics of the 26 panels guides the viewer's eyes to multiple directions. Several of the facets contain metals such as steel and lead, which is rich in symbolising alchemical processes of heat and melting, but more so, of the desire to change mundane 'stuff' and ordinary work rituals into the gold of dreams.

Like the Gerwel library, which will soon be filled with books, data of the sciences and cultural heritage, this artwork speaks of hidden knowledges to be uncovered. It's complex construction of triangles with vertical 'pins', which seem to move through the glass, is layered with abstract patterns of grids upon grids. Detailed planning, calculation and contemplation are hinged and connected like a forest of research.

The composition is intended to bring light into the space – a space that was previously only heavy concrete and a path to-and-from work.

The patterns of light that filter through glass facets onto the concrete suggest a kaleidoscopic place of wonder and imagination. One of the artist's aims is to inspire the viewer to consider the metamorphosis of weighty burdens into renewed perspectives: to develop perceptions that bestows becoming not only 'what' but 'how' we choose to exist to illuminate the way forward.

**Sue Clark and Artist team: Kabelo Maya, Daniel Maseko, Jens Juterbock, Richard Clark, with *Mthimkulu we mpilo* (2021-2023).** *Mthimkulu we mpilo* is the conceptual depiction of a phylogenetic tree of life, made from Cleared exotic gum tree trunks, and recycled steel.

*Mthimkulu we mpilo* is the conceptual depiction of a phylogenetic tree of life.

This structure speaks of the evolution of organisms and life and their continuing dependence on one another rather than slavishly reproducing a scientifically accurate example of a phylogenetic diagram. It is a loose visual representation of the evolutionary relationships among species.

In a traditional tree and branch structure the branches separate out and do not meet up again (bifurcating tree). In reality most organism "kingdoms" are reticulate (net-like), integrated and exist together. Bacteria exist in our guts and enable animals to digest food. Mycelium and Fungi connect plant life and are even said to aid plants communicate. The structure of this tree is such that it builds up and out like a traditional tree but in the stacked construction the many kingdoms and species become layers supporting each other with the most 'evolved' species being the most vulnerable. Remove a trunk and the whole structure becomes unstable.

Complex co-existences are required for a sustainable planet. Constructed from cleared exotic tree trunks and recycled steel elements, the cleared tree trunks, once invasive species, now take on a new life as they form the new structure. Recycled steel elements, fixed and embedded into the logs suggest the textures of various living organisms.

The sculpture pays homage to the interconnectedness of all life, inviting viewers to ponder the wonders of biodiversity and evolution.

A last person I would like to come to the front is **Chantelle Essex Ferreira**, who during her undergraduate studies at Unisa, created our Logo and project identity as a gift to the project. We want to recognise your work and vision, our sincere gratitude.

## **IN CONCLUSION**

I think you will agree with me that the conceptual underpinning of **Reduce, Reuse, and Recycle** has been applied with thoughtful consideration. As you heard, these artists challenge the split between thinking and making. This project clearly seeks to encourage creative output research and call out the false division between research and art.

The project achieved collaboration and capacity building between Unisa alumni, students, staff, public corporations and communities. It has changed the landscape and presence of this campus and it is encouraging that our management today emphasised that it aims to bring the Unisa Art Walk to all its campuses.

Public art has great bearing on the space and visitor relationship. South Africa curator Portia Malatjie (2013:367-368) argues that curation should challenge conventional art gallery platforms and add to other exhibition spaces, to create “the opportunity to work outside such institutional constraints.” This project goes a long way to meet challenges, with at least another angle on institutional support of the arts. “Curating is never ‘simply’ a matter of showing esteemed artworks or interesting artifacts. Instead, it is a discourse with all the overtones this word entails. Like any discourse, it consists of a range of performative speech acts that influence visitors, enriching them, guiding their thought processes...”

It is the intention of the *UNISA Art Walk* installations to be vehicles to inspire personal and social change and system regeneration.

I thank our Project Director Dr Thelma Louw for her vision and support, and my COD Prof Thomas Pooley for the time I could dedicate to this project.

Thank you.

## **References:**

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