

# Hanna Hoyne: Interpretative-Knowledge Making by Means of Public Art (Part 1)

By [Hanna Hoyne](#) & [Anna-Sophie Jürgens](#) | Series: [Street art, Science and Engagement](#)

*Abstract: Hanna Hoyne is a multifaceted visual artist who explores and shapes public space through sculpture, installations and street art murals with the aim of raising awareness about both the urban environment we live in and global issues around sustainability and environmental responsibility. In the first part of this conversation, Hanna reflects on how her academic background and research experiences have shaped her creative public artworks and her understanding of public art in general. The second part focuses on her environmental concerns and the power of street art to tap into, and stir up, our environmental consciousness – and inspire biophilic action.*

**Hanna, it is a great pleasure to welcome you to the online journal w/k! You are a visual artist specialising in public space design in the form of public sculptures and murals, performances and installations; you are also a curator, researcher and mentor. Between 2006 and 2017 you worked as an academic at the Australian National University and University of Canberra, and as an educator at Canberra Museum & Gallery and the National Gallery of Australia. Your collaborators include cultural agencies, landscape architects, developers and, most recently, the Environment Planning & Sustainable Design Directorate and Suburban Land Agency of the Australian Capital Territory. You use your art to conceive and design sustainable and imaginative living spaces and to raise awareness of ecological responsibility for our planet. All this is extremely interesting for w/k, and in this article, we invite you to reflect on how environmental themes, research and engagement inspire and shape your work, with the aim of better understanding the artistic concept behind your science-inspired and environmentally-themed art practice. In the first part of our conversation, we will focus on the knowledges you explore in your artworks and your definition of public art.**

Hi. Thank you for inviting me here.

**Hanna, you were an academic for many years before turning to art - public art in particular - full-time. To what extent does your academic background influence your art?**

I was an art academic, so art was always central and full time in my world! But actually being an art academic and an artist is a sort of double career path; both are super competitive and demanding. I loved the university but I needed to just follow one path.

Research has informed my practice since the beginnings. There is play in the way artists can research (perhaps similar to the way musicians or dancers might research): Artists can source from within themselves, and from the outside world. In the studio they might follow their inner cues and let the material or method that they are exploring give them feedback – which they in turn respond to – and so a creative dialogue is woven, between the artist, their way and their artistic stuff.



Hanna Hoyne: *Wing Grower*, work in progress (2009). Photo: Amanda Stuart.



Hanna Hoyne: *Wing Grower*, Cosmic Recharge Series (2009). Photo: Amanda Stuart.

My experiences – and possibly that of many artists – get churned in this space. Everything gets swirled

around and filtered in this cocktail – our biographic baggage, our ideas, affiliations, cultural influences, politics, scientific knowledge, ethics, spiritual stories, our sense of belonging or isolation, of engagement or displacement, our psyche and our future wishes. All these concepts and theories and ideas get *synaptically* connected and tested in a loose and unstructured way; and somehow filtered and sublimated back into the artwork that evolves. It sounds easy because the method of making new associations across all sorts of human knowledges is somehow intuitive; you can take risks and be far-fetched; you can be absurd and illogical; you can be humorous and irreverent or offensive. But it actually takes a conviction of perception, visual literacy, discipline and rigour to practise in this way, to be able to tap into your creativity regularly. The romance with the muse is a complex affair!

### **What are the lasting imprints of academia in your (art) work?**

When I turned 40, having birthed my second child, I decided to transition from academic sessional teaching and gallery shows into the public space field as a freelance contract worker. From the frying pan into the fire! So there I was, suddenly out in the world trying to rumble with the big guys who build our cities and decide which space is public. I am still trying to map this space. It is really an education about big money, vested interest in city building and how government relates to each of the entities involved. It is fascinating and frightening. It has taken me a long time to see how both academia and the arts sectors in Australia are pressurised in very destructive ways. This affects the output of those sectors greatly. This understanding has been good *and* bad for me as a female artist and as a person trying to carve out a living and contribute to society in meaningful ways.

But about the lasting imprints of academia ... I reckon critical thinking and many different possible research methods is what I took with me from university since my first time round at art school in the mid-nineties. Plus, a kind of true love for a safe space where human ideas and knowledge can be nurtured and developed, not bound up in profit or product making. Where industry supports research, it is often with vested interests; or other knowledge disciplines get neglected or undermined by quantitative priorities. The arts and humanities are often the first to get the axe. As I get older, my loyalty to the safe space for knowledge exchange grows.



Hanna Hoyne: *Cosmic Recharge Series* (2009). Photo: Amanda Stuart.

## KNOWLEDGES AND/IN ART

### **Would you describe yourself as a research-led artist? Or put another way: how can we grasp the research-inspired, knowledge-exploring underpinning of your art?**

I wouldn't call myself a research-led artist– perhaps an interpretative-knowledge maker\*\* by means of art. There is a lot of theory out there now about what practice-led research by artists is (Barbara Bolt and Estelle Barrett have written about this, for example; articles in w/k reflect on it). The meta-stuff we make in the studio could be described as a kind of interpretive knowledge-making and/or perhaps hermeneutic phenomenology... when artists work they engage/reflect/filter/make – the artworks pull together new forms of interpreting the world, and in turn, the artwork goes into the world and gets interpreted afresh by the individual lens of each person; by each culture; by each era. There are many ways artists re-interpret our world –to reimagine it, to analyse it, to tease apart the stitching and peer into the spaces between things. They love the liminal; the slippery ambiguities. They might create new associations between concepts, things, or materials; they often like to de-stabilize known things so that we can see them differently. Many varied ingredients can get combined in odd ways to bring an artwork into being. Being able to 'play' between these different ways can enable new discoveries.

Ideas I connect to are of the dialectic and the hermeneutic circle – a circularity in the way understanding emerges over a lifetime; a kind of back and forth movement in interpretive cycling through our own knowledge capital and tacit biases for possible meanings; and in turns over time, whatever issues reveal themselves in many different ways. I, for one, am always deeply conflicted by all the contradictory things that co-exist around me and within me. My mind is like a sort of dialectic box where every fact

lives symbiotic but in tension with a contradicting fact. It wears me out!



Hanna Hoyne & Anna Simic: *White (A Cage Opera Series)*(2005-2007). Photo: Hanna Hoyne.

**You continue to work with researchers and explore knowledges created by art. What artistic results has this led to?**

I guess the way I have conducted and then integrated the research has changed over the epochs of my life and projects. In the last decade it really has been environmental sciences, Australian Indigenous knowledge of Country and the way humans inhabit the planet that have influenced my thinking towards artworks in the public space. The Climate Emergency. Bushfires. And politics and everything involved in urban planning and city shaping. I have developed a new love for landscape architecture and biophilic city design.

My early public works were ephemeral, improvised, performative, not really saleable gallery objects. They were relational and interactive and all about the people around me and how I saw them fitting into the greater metanarrative of the cultural story radiating out around them.



Hanna Hoyne: *Empapered Bodies, Wrapped* (*Empapered Bodies Series*) (1997-2000). Photo: Hanna Hoyne.



Hanna Hoyne: *Unwrapping (Empapered Bodies Series)* (1997-2000). Photo: Hanna Hoyne.

Early on, all my influences were absorbed subliminally and emerged back out of the artwork in unexpected ways. In the late 1990s after art school, I worked with a lot of dancers and circus performers in Melbourne, and found that they also had a creative language, full of codes and research methods. I worked with Contact Improvisation artists, the artists coalescing around *A State Of Flux Dance Company* and *Strange fruit Theatre Company*. It was hugely exciting for me to cross-fertilise, and I made many wearable artworks for them to inhabit. Often these *inhabitations* were one long improvised performance exploring the pieces, and it was this intensely focused interaction that I would bear witness to and photograph. Another artist and friend I worked with over years was Anna Simic, a really unique and powerful performance artist. She still performs now as Anushka, quite often with her brother Mikangelo.



Hanna Hoyne & Anna Simic: *Grey (A Cage Opera Series)* (2005-2007). Photo: Carla Gottgens.

Then later, I learnt to research issues or cultures or science in more literal ways and to absorb and filter those things into my artworks. My public sculptures became like coded archives of my cross-cultural influences. Sometimes this can produce a lot of clichés, though. I always feel that a multi-layer filter is important so that influence doesn't just become appropriation or adaptation. My PhD project - *Cosmic Recharge* - was partly about understanding my cross-cultural influences: eurocentrism and orientalism, as a migrant and child of different culture parents, who were integrating into Australian culture but at the same time found great philosophical and artistic affiliations to various Asian cultures.

## PUBLIC ART AND STREET ART

**Most of your art - your sculptures and murals - is art in public space. What makes art in public space so interesting for you and would you describe your sculptures as *street art*?**

Street art started to play a role for me about 12 years ago when I met my partner Byrd (for an introduction to Byrd's work, see the w/k article [Byrd: Art as Pictographic Space and Field Work](#)). He told me a lot of the history of how graffiti culture spread across the globe and transitioned to become this other phenomenon now known as "street art". He is really into activism in art and the peripheral spaces where art can occur outside of institutional spaces - things like artist collectives building little houses in the middle of big motorways or hidden homes behind massive billboards in urban train-stations; working with reclaimed materials; reimagining the idea of precious. My interest was the periphery in art as well, but from another perspective. I had been looking at how the Global South has been dismantling the big white art history canon; and Australian art's interesting, ambiguous position in that. So, we had a lot to talk about.

I wouldn't dare to call my sculptures street art, because they are somehow not propositional enough anymore. While they are in the street, they are now trying to be more permanent (and that involves massive fabrication costs); permanent and strong, to be shared and enjoyed by everyday people in the public space for a long time. When I was making gallery works, they defied the idea of value and ownership by being impermanent, made of cardboard or paper. But galleries are behind the vacuum-sealed glass doors of elite spaces that not everyone comes into. In the public space, there is a sense that the sculptures are for everyone and they belong to everyone.

I'm also interested in art as part of the built environment - Australian urban and suburban spaces are just absolutely exploding - in the face of climate change. While we desperately need more social housing and much more intelligent buildings, there is a disease of uniformity, an unhealthy amount of sameness and standardisation of streetscapes. Everyone, no matter how poor, should be able to have a home - standardisation helps this happen. But this should not entail a total evacuation of visual diversity, variety, distinctiveness and the fingerprint of Site and Country. The suburban sprawl is so fast that *place-making* agencies can't keep up with trying to backward-engineer already desolate zones; or trying to fast-forward-infuse a sense of history and lived-in-ness into newly mushroomed suburbs. At least they are trying though!

**However, you do create street art murals, often collaboratively. How would you characterise your street art, for example the cover picture above or the mural work below?**

Actually ... my first big room installation in 1996 had a surround-wall drawing of graphite pencil clouds, and paper clouds on pulley systems out the window. I have always loved drawing big. The cover image is a collaboration with the artist AEODE. The isolation of Covid allowed me to dive into my archive of drawings and go paint them with Byrd and AEODE. I do cosmonaut figure drawings that say wistful things about life. They float around in cosmic space; a bit melancholic and flawed. AEODE is a wonderful painter and musician from Cobargo at the South Coast of New South Wales, where my mum lives, and through the whole Black Summer bushfires aftermath we connected to paint some colourful healing stuff. She has an amazing practice of really densely patterned image making, with unbelievable colour palette that she just evolves in this visionary, organic way. Like jazz, but painting. I love collaborating

with her because she is totally open – and we just riff off each other. It is incredibly freeing to work in this way.



Hanna Hoyne & Byrd: *The Human Encroachment/ Black Summer* (2022). Photo: Hanna Hoyne.

### **How would you define the cultural power of public art?**

This is a big universalising question and so it is hard to avoid motherhood statements. But in my opinion the Australian urban context is actually a good example of how art can influence the collective conscious *and* conscience and cultural psyche and the shape of cultural expression. In the last two decades, the overlap of smart phones and social media platforms – with the consolidated global networking efforts of our mural street artists – was able to expand people’s understanding and appreciation of art and visual styles. It got young artists into the public space on big commission murals; it infiltrated into commercial territory; and it permeated into the institutions and *value holders* of high art practice, which in turn responded by carving new government and council territory to bring more visual art types into every new precinct being developed. So this is a really big gain for culture on a lot of levels.

**Thanks, Hanna. We will continue our conversation in Part 2.**

Details of the cover photo: Hanna Hoyne & AEODE: *Swimming Into Consciousness* (2022). Photo: Hanna

Hoyne.

**Tags**

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