

Expert Interview I with Anna Rose Kerr Creative Founder @ studioaro.se.
Including | thoughts on making a living through creativity, thinking new realities into being, and finding inspiration at art exhibits.

>> Anna Rose Kerr guest curated Strands on March 23, 2023. [Read it here.](#)

Tell us a little bit about yourself and what keeps you busy. How did you end up doing what you're doing today?

The country where I grew up, Aotearoa, has more Cannes Lions per capita than anywhere in the world. So when I was at school, trying to work out how to make a living through creativity, advertising was an obvious career choice.

I've worked in a huge variety of agencies over the past almost-twenty years, and on almost-every type of client business. However, a lot of my best known work is in either in alcohol or sexual health. (Someone once described my portfolio as like "a typical Friday night out in England".)

Alongside my career as a Creative Director, I've grown an artistic practice which explores and critiques our relationship to the internet. I now have a studio in East London where I am busy making big paintings and/or brand presentations.

What excites you most about what you do?

I love thinking new realities into being.

The majority of clients I work with are coming to me because they believe their organisation can make a positive change, but they just don't know exactly how. It's thrilling to think up ideas that move culture forwards. I've worked on campaigns that have shattered deeply held taboos about menstruation, rallied a nation to save local pubs, and raised the status of our teachers. Advertising is so present in our lives and when it's used to bring empowering messages it makes such a change to the rest of the (often hostile and unrepresentative) media landscape.

What beliefs define your approach to work? How would you define your leadership style?

We're all just people at the end of the day. We all operate with different values, and I try to create space for people to live out those values. If we feel like we're doing work which is meaningful to us, we'll all be happier and the work will be better. If no one on the team feels empowered doing a certain task - get AI to do it! And let all the humans get on with the work that brings them joy.

What has been the most rewarding project you've worked on and why?

I'm currently working on a slightly insane project to buy an industrial site in East London and re-wild it to include natural swimming ponds and community spaces. I joined East London Waterworks Park as a volunteer about six months ago because I believed in the vision and felt the branding could do with some love. But, there has been no time to sit down and make a lovely new brand book as we have been organising relentlessly. As a group of volunteers, we've raised over half a million pounds towards the purchase of the land, secured a philanthropic loan and started working with local organisations on re-wilding in the area.

There are about forty people with varying knowledge of graphic design who have access to our Canva, and are empowered to create and distribute stories about the campaign. Initially, my worst nightmare... but actually it's been such a huge lesson for me in how to work in a sociocratic way. I'm learning to let go of the little things to focus on the big picture. I'm now co-chairing the "comms" circle as we move our focus from communicating the needs of the charity towards using creativity to imagine the world we are building.

Next week, I'm running a session with dozens of our volunteers on branding and hopefully soon we will have time to sit down and make a lovely new brand book. In the meantime, it's been amazing to see how the art direction, copy and story of the project have moved forward incrementally with some gentle guidance and a lot of empowerment.

We are big believers in diversity -- Not only because we believe in equality, but because we also think it's better for business. The Black Lives Matter movement has shaped industry conversations around both global injustice, and also lack of representation in our industry. How do you frame these kinds of conversations, both internally and with clients? Is there an emphasis on action, or are the conversations really more about communication?

While I have lived experience of sexism, homophobia, classism and the UK Home Office, I also have the immense privilege of whiteness. I've always made a point of hiring people who have different cultural backgrounds to me; it's better for the work as well as for the world.

But, when the brief or client requires a conversation beyond the remit of the team, my approach is to get the experts in and handsomely pay them for their time.

In 2020 we approached Gal-Dem, who ran an amazing session for a (majority white) marketing team on when and how it was appropriate for brands to engage in the #BlackLivesMatter conversation. This took the emotional labour off the Black people in our team, who had rightly decided they didn't want to engage in this conversation with day-to-day clients.

Switching gears a bit, how do you find time to balance personal interests with your career? Do you believe work/life balance is possible? Anything you've implemented that you recommend that others try?

I've made a career out of my personal interests, so the distinction is perhaps a bit hard to define. However, prioritising my life is so much easier being self-employed. I swim with the waves. No client projects today? Great, I'll be in an archive researching a painting, going on a guided walk of local history or jumping on a train to visit a museum I've never been to. And, yes these cultural influences play back into my work, but it helps me reach a good at / away from my laptop balance.



What's your media diet? Where do you find inspiration?

Art exhibitions, Discord, audiobooks, interior design YouTube, Pinterest, TikTok, wandering the streets (as Roman Mars says "always read the plaque").

As you know, we believe there is so much value in having a wide range of teachers. What's the best piece of advice/knowledge you've stolen, and who/where'd you steal it from?

The best way to predict the future is to create it - I stole that off Cindy Gallop, who in turn stole it off someone else. It resonated strongly with me when I heard it and guides the work I make and the way I exist in the world.

Is there anything we should ask you that we didn't? If so, write your own question and then answer it below.

How do you stay creative? Follow your curiosity, and follow it off the screen and into the real world.