

Art and design

# Let's glow: skaters descend on Liverpool's glow-in-the-dark skatepark

Like a weird volcano glimmering in the centre of a once rundown park, Koo Jeong A's new art installation is set to become a cultural destination

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Bright park ... Everton's brand-new interactive artwork. Photograph: Christopher Thomond for the Guardian

The first indicator that an interview with Koo Jeong A would stray from the norm came a week before we met. "Koo doesn't want to be recorded for the interview," came the tentative email from the PR. "But she has suggested using a stenotype and stenograph instead ... What do you think?" A stenograph, I should add, is a special type of typewriter, designed to take down speech quickly, and a stenographer is the person specially trained to operate it. They are mainly used in court; thanks to the modern wonders of dictaphones and iPhones their use in journalism is largely unheard of.

This was far from the first diva-ish demand to cross my path as a journalist, but it definitely ranked among the most unusual. "Fine," I eventually wrote back. "But you're going to have to source one yourself."



Concrete poetry ... Artist Koo Jeong A sitting on her fluorescent skatepark in Everton Park, Liverpool. Photo: Christopher Thomond

And so it was that I found myself in the bar of Kensington hotel joined not just by Jeong A but also Mary the stenographer, perched over her little typewriter. The main reason for our meeting is a large glow-in-the-dark skatepark called *Wheels Park* that Jeong A, an artist whose work strays between sculpture and site-specific installation, has just designed and built in Everton in Liverpool. The work is an interesting meeting of public art and the regeneration of a deprived area of the city, bringing together local skateboarders, the city council, neighbourhood community groups and Liverpool Biennale in this single pioneering project.

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Having prepared myself to be greeted with an artist steeped in pretension, South Korean-born Jeong A instead turns out to be the polar opposite. She is sweet and overwhelmingly polite, and the request for the stenographer comes not from vanity but a concern that her very soft, accented voice is too difficult to decipher when recorded.

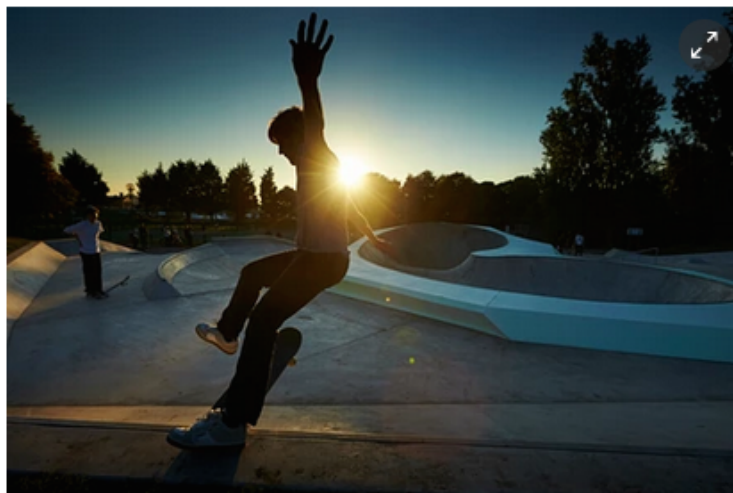
Her skatepark may be a theatrical installation, especially when aglow at night, but Jeong A herself is retiring and a reluctant interviewee. "I am not educated to talk about myself because Asians more or less just listen," she says apologetically. "It is a different attitude. It is a bit different now, but we are still very valued as ourselves on internal values, not to promote yourself."

Born in 1967, the daughter of an economist and a stay-at-home mother, Jeong A moved from Seoul to Paris to study at the École des Beaux Arts, and her conceptual installations have been exhibited everywhere from the Pompidou Centre to the Venice Biennale. According to Jeong A, her work can be categorised as poetry built with physical materials instead of words.

It was as a student in Paris that she met her long-term partner, the curator Hans Ulrich Obrist, and moved with him in 2006 when he took up his job as co-director of the Serpentine galleries. The pair now live between London and Berlin.

The Everton glow-in-the-dark skatepark is the second Jeong-A has designed, having created one called OTRO, in the depths of rural France in 2008. She was drawn to building an artwork that would reach out to a younger audience who would not usually engage with public installations, a piece of public art whose value lay in both its beauty and its practicality.

"I consider the work as something like dressing the deceased in brightness," says Jeong A. "It is a kind of idea from my native country where when people die they dress the corpse, but we dress the deceased in brightness, not like a corpse."



Wheels on fire ... skaters get to grips with their new park. Photograph: Christopher Thomond for the Guardian


In 2013, Jeong-A's project caught the eye of Sally Tallant, director of the Liverpool Biennial. As part of an ongoing regeneration project across Liverpool, the mayor had agreed to fund five new skateparks, and Tallant approached Jeong A to see if she would be willing to collaborate on recreating OTRO in Everton Park, one of the most deprived areas of the city.

“The site is an incredible space, so being able to do something that is unique is brilliant,” says Tallant. “Traditionally, Everton has been a very poor, dispossessed community and people would avoid it. This is not just a skatepark and sports hub, it is also a major piece of public art, and both of these things will draw people to this area who just wouldn’t have come here otherwise. Koo has made the park a cultural destination.”

Jeong A says she jumped at the opportunity, adding that it had been one of her most ambitious projects. Over a year she collaborated with young people from the local Shewsy Youth Club, as well as the wider skateboarding community, getting them to produce models and drawings of their own ideas of what the skatepark could look like and incorporating them into her own design.

It was also important, Jeong A tells me, that she spoke to girls as well as boys to make sure her design catered for the whole community, and even those who did not want to skate but just use the park as a social space. Jeong A and the designers visited other skateparks in the city, many of which have been built by the skaters themselves, to get a grasp on what the large Liverpool skating community would want from her final work and ensure a balance was struck between sculptural beauty and skating practicality.



 In deep ... the skatepark has one of the deepest 'bowls' in the UK. Photograph: Christopher Thomond for the Guardian



“I devised extremely steep, sharp angles, which would be a challenge to the most courageous and skilled skaters,” the artist says. “It was as if they would be the great mountaineers that the rest of us would admire. And with its glow-in-the-dark surface, I hoped the Wheels Park would offer an experience of contemplation.”

Jeong A described the design of the park like a potato, crafted and cut away until it comes to resemble an angular diamond, glowing at the heart of the park. At the centre is a large bowl, which, at almost three metres deep, is one of the largest in the UK, while round the edge, the park has been designed to resemble the streets, with railings, steps and pavement edges, catering to the street skateboarding style that is very popular in Liverpool.

The park officially opens on Monday but skateboarders have already begun to travel from outside the area to try out their boards on its unique design that resembles something close to a volcano. Tom Johnston, part of the team who

helped design the park, who is a keen skateboarder himself, says that skating on the work when it was glowing made you feel “like you are floating”.

“It’s pretty good,” says Johnston, swinging his skateboard under his arm with a grin. “It’s fast, it’s smooth and it’s challenging. The shallow end of the bowl invites you to get your confidence up, and then once you cross over the waterfall into the deep end, that’s when you get a real adrenaline rush. I know that people will come from all over the world to skate this.”

■ *Wheels Park opens in Everton Park, Liverpool, on 5 October.*

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