

On joy, communal care, and designing liberatory futures



Art Director, designer, and artist Annika Hansteen-Izora on being open to the unknown, allowing your creativity to transform and change, the importance of friendship, and amplifying Black voices.

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As told to Elle McKenzie, 2667 words.

Tags: [Art](#), [Design](#), [Activism](#), [Poetry](#), [Culture](#), [Inspiration](#), [Identity](#), [Multi-tasking](#), [Focus](#), [Independence](#).

As the creative director for [Ethel's Club](#), [Somewhere Good](#), and [Form No Form](#), how do you manage to fulfill your vision while simultaneously centering the Black and POC voices adjacent to the project?

To me, fulfilling my vision is about centering Black folks. It is about centering people of color (POC). As creative director, I use whatever creative means I have to fulfill my vision. Here, I turned to design as the tool. Design is a tool for experimenting. Design is a tool for play.

Design, in an industry sense, is so often informed by a euro-centric design canon. I wanted to question how the creative direction here could be a direct act against that.

When I was thinking about the visual design of [Somewhere Good](#), [Ethel's Club](#), and [Form No Form](#), I was thinking about how Black people and POC are always told to hide ourselves, to dim ourselves down. We are denied from showing up as our full selves. So all of these designs were about boldness, bold colors, and bold type. I was thinking about how we could claim space visually...in a way that's bright and vibrant—just like we are. Joy is a source of inspiration for a lot of my work. The iconography is inspired by Black and brown hair. I wanted everything about the design to always be centered in Black and brown joy.

My vision is not separate from my community. They both are always working together, nourishing each other, it's all going in a cycle.

Can you speak more on, or guide us down, your personal path that led you to a life of creative directing?

My journey towards creative directing has been in loops. Although, what creative journey isn't? But I have been creating since I was a kid. My dad is an old-school tech nerd, so I was always around computers, and I also grew up in a really artistic house. For me, I was always seeing this blend of the digital, of storytelling, of music, of art, and it all wove together. I made zines as a kid and did journalism in High School.

I think this really came together for me in college, when I went to Oberlin College and I studied Sociology and then triple minored in Africana Studies, Gender and Sexuality Studies, and Comparative American Studies. I feel like the biggest impact college had on me wasn't actually the academics, but rather was what I was doing outside of that. I was working at a music venue and also creating a poetry group.

And in both of those spaces, I was creating flyers and graphics, while communally creative directing spaces from

the ground up. I was learning and growing from my peers, and I realized how art, community, and digital worlds could work together. I moved forward in that and I actually went the route of being a UX researcher. As creative as my family is, I saw creativity as something that was a side project, not necessarily something that could be my full career.

But after pursuing a career in research I realized, "Oh my god, I cannot do this." I had graduated from college and moved to Portland, Oregon, and I was very depressed, I didn't know what direction I wanted to go. But I began to find healing by sharing my poetry in Black and brown art spaces, and meeting my now creative partner Salimatu Amambebe. They founded a project called Black Feast, that celebrated Black artists and writers through food, which I now creative direct alongside them. These introductions helped me tune in and be like, "What is it that makes me happy?" And that was creative communities. It was learning via design and art.

I think a lot of the time, people like to put me into the box of a designer, but I really do rep creative direction as a whole. I play in design, digital tools, poetry, in community space making, and all of that flows together to me. People like boxes and binaries, we like to be able to "place" one another. So creative direction as a way for me to play in any mode of creativity spoke to me, and has now guided me as my full time career.

To further expand on Black people being boxed into certain careers... We're told that artistry can be a hobby, never really a profession. So I love how you really took your passion and formulated it into a career that not only uplifts you, but also collectively benefits and impacts on our own Black community for the better. And with all the global uprisings against systemic oppression and the fight for Black liberation, rightfully showing no signs of slowing down, why is it important to uplift the voices of Black grass-root activists and organizations pushing for racial justice in our communities?

I hear a lot of language calling this a "time" or a "moment," but for Black people, this is our day to day—and it's being inflamed by, I feel like, a lot of white panic, white guilt that's been fueled by Black death. It's an exhausting space to be in, to not be fought for unless it's due to our death. But it's Black activists, Black trans, queer, and nonbinary folks and women, both here today and in spirit, that teach how liberation can be rooted in our joy, our care, love, and pleasure. That knowledge teaches how healing must happen at an interpersonal and societal level, how the community and the individual must care for one another, and the liberation that blooms from that. As an artist, I want the futures I'm dreaming of and creating from to be rooted in this knowledge.

We need to uplift Black organizers & artists beyond just a moment. This can't just be a point of reference or temporary facade of white allyship. We need to center Black organizers and artists, because they teach us that when we're talking about freedom, we're talking about how to turn that into a long term practice, a forever practice actually.

A sustained forever practice.

Yeah, exactly.

And the last few weeks I personally feel like there's been an increase in PR campaigns within various industries and professions calling for inclusivity. So much so, that it's coming off performative at times. As a Black, queer, and non-binary creative, how does it make you feel to witness these major brands seeming to only call for change in the wake of Black tragedy and suffering?

[laughs] Oh I have so many. Speaking for myself, I'll talk about design specifically. I've watched almost every major design firm put up some kind of sans-serif post that says, "We hear you. We stand with you." And that just makes me feel like, "Well, why weren't you hearing us before?" Because these are all the concerns Black people have been saying long before, and many of us were probably fired, not hired, not given a raise, silenced, for bringing them up.

There's a lot of, "We're going to do better." And I'm thinking, okay, where's your acknowledgement of all of the

harm that you've caused for Black people though? Accountability requires acknowledgement of harm caused.

I want these brands to actually consider how they can enact real change. For me, that looks like opening up your wallet and giving resources, and acknowledging the harm that you've done before, then creating real plans around that. From collapse comes building, and I'm hopeful for change—we are witnessing the fall of giant structures for the violence that they've caused.

It's also been kind of amazing to witness the demise of celebrity culture for their failure to show up with accountability. And you're absolutely right, how can these brands move forward without looking towards their past to acknowledge the mistakes they've made and the challenges they've created for Black creatives. What are some challenges you have overcome that have made you a better creator?

I feel like one of the biggest challenges that I've had is being boxed in to a certain category of creativity. I remember when I was job searching after transitioning from research and strategy into creative, and what a lot of people told me is "we can't narrow you down. We don't know if you're a designer or a strategist, and we need you to better align yourself."

This was a disservice to my creativity because I look for inspiration from all sources. I'm referencing the knowledge of Emergent Strategy, Pleasure Activism, Afro-Futurism, disability justice, Black liberation, art, music and design in my creative direction. Overall, I'm allowing my creativity to take up as much space as possible and allowing it to shift over time and be expansive.

As a Black, queer person in the world and navigating creative industries, I've been forced to quiet myself. I recognize that reclaiming space for my creativity is also linked to my personal liberation and personal care. I play with my creativity like I play with my gender, they are entities that are constantly shifting. Each form of my creativity is working together and has helped me expand. Helped me better serve my communities. I'm playing in all these different pools and I'm allowing myself to transform and change as I want to.

With these multiple avenues as a creative director, how would you define success and how do you define failure in the realm of your creative work?

Success, to me, means I made an impact on someone. My work is centered in joy, on community, on care, it's centered on Black and Brown communities. To reach somebody within my community and help them feel seen, is a successful project for me. And that can be through the smallest measures. But if I helped someone feel joy, that's success to me.

I want failure to not be such a frightening word. I've had failures in my creative journey, many of them. But all of them have been such critical junctions from which I've sharpened my craft. I've become stronger in my voice. I've been more accountable to myself, more accountable to my communities. And all of that is a part of making actual sustainable ecosystems of creativity, ones that can last and create change. Ultimately, what I'm trying to do with my work is pull the futures that I'm dreaming of into the present.

As you strive to achieve this success as a creative director, you're also a talented poet. Do you apply this same method to your work as a poet?

Yeah, for sure! I feel like so much of my creative roots are in storytelling. Storytelling can take on infinite mediums. Photography is a form of storytelling. DJs are storytellers, dancers are storytellers. Poetry, for me, is about capturing a story. It's about capturing a melody. Poetry is also how I affirm that my voice is sacred. As a Black, queer creative, I'm fighting against every force that tells me that my voice is not worthy. That it's something that should be quieted and silenced.

I apply that same lesson to creative direction—it's about sharing a vision and story with the world. And they're both just rooted in that practice of being like, "Yeah, I'm here and my voice matters and my body matters and my life matters. And I'm going to share that with others, and perhaps if that reaches others, we can build something

new together.”

I love how everything seems to always meet back at your main passion, which is Black joy, Black liberation, Black communal care. How do you nourish your artistic side when you’re not creating?

I’m learning rest as a practice, and rest as a source of power. [The Nap Ministry](#) has been incredible in teaching me how to nourish my artistic side with rest. My friends have also helped with my nourishment. I think that platonic love is one of the most powerful forces in the universe. For real, I love my homies. And they are the ones that teach me that I am valuable and I am sacred, without having to contribute something. For artists and creatives, there’s this pressure to constantly produce, or we aren’t valuable if we aren’t producing something. I am practicing breaking down these capitalist ideas that I am not worthy unless I am producing something. It’s my friendships and the love of my friendships that has been able to help me break through these cycles.

So I play a lot with my homies. Dancing is also a source of nourishment. Getting flowers. Picnics. Tenderness towards myself as a source of power. It’s all these small moments that are really, really nourishing. Community love, friendship love, platonic love are all just incredible sources of joy.

Do you have any final words of advice or encouragement for aspiring creatives or experienced creatives that are struggling to portray their artistic energy that’s brewing inside them?

I feel like every single one of us has a unique offering, a unique gift, a unique story that nobody else can tell. Nobody can make your art except for you. So I urge you to believe in your creativity and in the light that your voice carries. Make belief a practice, put your ideas out into the world for yourself. For me, especially with every creative project, there is always a little fear, sometimes a lot. There’s always some imposter syndrome trying to tell me “who am I to think that my work is important enough to put into the world?” And I feel like I have to hold my fear with grace and let myself know, “I’m going to feel this fear and I’m going to do it anyway.”

I would also say, reach out to your community to help you. Don’t be precious with your work. I feel like being precious looks like believing that nobody’s going to get this concept except for you. Open yourself to the possibilities that emerge from sharing with others. Reach out to your community to make the visions that you want to create—teachers are everywhere. Don’t be afraid of the unknown. That’s actually a big one—embrace the unknown. Be open to what you need to learn, what you need help with...look to your unknowns as a source of play, as a source of spark, or as a source of creativity.

Annika Hansteen-Izora Recommends:

[Activation Residency](#) and its sub-project [Farming Futurity](#): A Black trans led arts residency and cooperative, that’s currently raising funds to secure land for healing and care for marginalized communities. Activation Residency teaches me so much about care and community as an essential source of liberation. You can donate to support Farming Futurity [here](#).

[List of Funds and Creative Ecosystems that support Black Folks](#), prioritizing those that center Black trans, queer, and non-binary folks, and Black women. Black creative ecosystems are building their own tables, and are critical sources of knowledge for liberation, creativity, and communal care. Our support for them must be continual and ongoing.

[Design to Divest](#): A Black-led collective of designers, artists, technologists and strategists working to divest design from Euro-supremest ideology by elevating the contributions of Black and Indigenous designers and meeting weekly to design for Black and Indigenous cause based organizations.

[All Black ASMR](#): Probably my new fav IG page, a visual channel of “sights and sounds that evoke Black delight.” Created by [Jazmin R Jones](#).

Flowers: To escape my apartment in our pandemic era, I’ve been going on little journeys to find them. Find a little park to gaze upon them, ask them questions, create a playlist as you walk to seek them out (I suggest [this one I made](#) in the theme of orchid butter & honeydew melons).

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Vocation

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