

# On pursuing what you love



Art Historian Katy Hessel discusses the importance of equity in art, collaborative research, and following your instinct.

July 10, 2023 -

As told to Kate Silzer, 2206 words.

Tags: [Art](#), [Podcasts](#), [Curation](#), [Process](#), [Identity](#), [Success](#).

**To start, I wanted to congratulate you on your book, The Story of Art Without Men. How are you feeling now that it's out in the world?**

What's amazing about being an author and creating something tangible and physical and putting it out in the world is that actually, it kind of gets to have a life of its own. It's just a privilege that people would read it. It's just what's inside my head in a way. To be able to share that with the world is so wonderful.

**You've gotten a fair amount of press so far for a first book. How are you adjusting to the spotlight?**

It's great because at the end of the day, it's not really about me, it's about the subject. I honestly don't mean that like, "Oh, I'm so humble." I believe in the subject so much and the fact that I get paid to write and talk and speak about art all day is such a pleasure and honor. I'm just so thrilled because I'm completely obsessed with this subject and completely obsessed with every single artist in this book. If people like that, then let's talk about it.

**Why do you think art is important? What does art mean to you?**

You know what? "Why is art important?" You are the first person who's actually asked me that, ever. Which is insane. Art history for me, and art in general, is a visualization of the world from an individual's perspective. What I love about it is it's looking at the history of the world in every different movement, shape, form, background. It's looking at how an individual saw it. I think that's what connects me to it and makes me so excited. It connects me to women a hundred, 200, 300, 400 years ago.

I think about someone like [17th century painter] Artemisia Gentileschi. It's just what she went through and how she dealt with it. Not just the shocking things, but dealing with life as a woman. Our voices don't often get heard and it's really important to talk about things.

When I think about Barbara Kruger's "Your Body is a Battleground," when I think about Jenny Holzer's "Abuse of Power Comes as No Surprise," or I think of Zoe Leonard's "I Want a President." Every single work here shows me something about the world that I didn't know, but I instantly recognize. It shows me something about myself that I didn't know, but I instantly recognize. That's the power of art.

It's all these things about life and all these people went through it before us. Somehow, they managed to visualize it in such extremely poignant and emotional and brilliant ways and showed them to us. That's the power of it. The fact that so much of this has been somehow erased through our museums is a travesty, because all these stories matter.

**What is your research process like, both for your Instagram and your podcast, but also for the book?**

It's such a range. I've been doing my Instagram for eight years, so I do have quite a grasp on a lot of women artists. What I love about the podcast is that I speak to the world's most amazing artists, but I also speak to scholars who have been doing this work forever, behind the scenes. I think it's just as important to spotlight those behind the scenes.

For example, I interviewed this woman called Sue Tate who lives in Bristol in England and she's just been doing the work quietly, but so succinctly and with such depth, for 30 years, longer than I've been alive. It's so important to spotlight these people and talk to those people, but research really just comes from all over. It can be academic journals, it can be an exhibition, it can be a conversation.

I think I'm very conscious about when I go to museums [to ask], "Where are the women artists?" Always, if I see a woman's name, I'm like, "Okay, let's look her up." It comes from that or it comes from people being like, "Have you ever heard of this person?" It comes from scrolling through Instagram and finding out about something. We have such an amazing well of knowledge to get that information from these days, so it's amazing.

**I appreciate that you chose to use relatively accessible language as a way to combat the elitism in art. Especially for people who aren't used to art history, it can feel very overwhelming to dive in.**

I want a 13-year-old to pick this book up in a library, who has never even stepped inside a museum or gallery, and see something of themselves in it and somehow feel like they can be part of it. It should be a conversation with everyone. If we're not seeing artwork by a wide range of people, then we're not seeing society as a whole. That also applies to people behind the scenes as well. It's not just the artists.

I remember being very moved by reading Hilton Als's writing on Alice Neel. He spoke about being a kid and his experience of seeing a work by Alice Neel and feeling included and it's like, that can make Hilton Als. It's the power of all of that.

**You have your Instagram, you've got your podcast, a column you write for *The Guardian*, you have the book, you've curated exhibitions. What appeals to you about working in all these different forms?**

They all totally inform each other and they're all such a joy. Looking at artwork in a book versus looking at it on a gallery wall is a very different experience. If I can do both, that's extraordinary. I never thought that I'd write a book in my life, I never thought I'd ever be able to curate an exhibition in my life, but I did. Hopefully, it's possible for lots of other people as well. I always think nothing happens overnight. When I was 21, when I started the Instagram, that's what I had. My first exhibition was in the foyer of an advertising agency, because I didn't have anywhere else to put on an exhibition.

It's all organically happened. I always think if I'm interested in this person or I'm interested in asking this person this certain question, chances are one other person in the world might be.

**What is your relationship to work? You're doing all of these different things, how are you avoiding burnout?**

Great question. People always ask me this and I don't know. I socialize, I have a normal life as well. I remember seeing a friend on Saturday, she was like, "Where are your hours in the day? I don't understand." I was like, "I don't know. I just love it. It's a joy and I would be doing it anyway." That's the thing with the podcast, is I'd make it anyway, regardless of whether people listen to it or I got paid for it or not.

The fact that I can make it my job is amazing and I want to inspire people to do the same. I always teach people how to do podcasts, because I'm like, "It's not that difficult. You just need a microphone and a headphone and a Wi-Fi connection and you can do it." It's all a joy and so it doesn't really make me feel burned out.

**You've been doing this work for almost a decade. How do you feel about being on this journey, on this topic for**

so long?

People can't believe that I still do the Instagram myself, but I just do. I like it and it's fun. I like to see people commenting and it gets me really excited. The way that it's connected me to people is extraordinary. There's no hierarchy on Instagram in a weird way, because we're all just there together. Will I do it forever? I don't know. Will Instagram last forever? I don't know. I'm very much an instinctual person. I just follow what I'm interested in. Also, I know when I'm not interested in something, because it's just so obvious.

**What does it look like when you're not interested?**

I just can't get myself to do it. It's like with my podcast, what I do is I interview some of my favorite authors as well. I'm interviewing Ali Smith, or I'm interviewing Deborah Levy in three weeks time. Maybe I read one of their books last year or the year before. I now need to go and just read all of their books in the next three weeks. It's like that challenge, I'm just up for it, and then as a result you are like, "Oh, my god, I'm so glad I did this, because my mind feels so much richer."

**Have you ever felt creatively stuck in any way, or has it just been full steam ahead from the start?**

I'm a bit of an obsessive diary writer and I document everything. I love writing letters to people. I'm like, "You don't have to be a writer. Anyone can do this." Can I show this quote I found? I was listening to a podcast by Sheila Heti, which is someone I'd never heard of and now I'm completely obsessed with her.

**I love her.**

Oh, my god. I've literally just gone down a complete hole. She says, "The number of people who feel like they have to get into creative writing baffles me. Why do you think this is something you need to do in an academic sense? Why do you need a degree to write? It doesn't make any sense to me. You were writing stories when you were 12 years old, why does it have to be conferred to you? To be a writer, all you need to do is write."

I always think if you do get a writer's block or whatever, just write a letter to someone or write an email. Write a letter to someone who's not even around any more, like, I don't know, your hero. I often send my *Guardian* article to friends, often my friend Dom, who lives in Mexico. I'm always writing it in the middle of the night or whatever. I write notes on the side and I'm like, "This is what I mean." He's like, "Why don't you just actually write that comment and put it in?" Imagine you are just explaining something to someone and then, I don't know, that's how I often get round to it.

**Do you have any interest in making art yourself?**

What drives someone to be an artist? It's the most fascinating thing in the whole world. People will literally relinquish every convention in the world and be like, "This is what I want." I'm just like, "That is amazing, you have to be the most extraordinary."

That's why I'm so fascinated by it, because I'm not an artist, but I love playing piano, I love writing so much. I don't know, there are so many different creative ways, but I'm in awe of people who make art. I mean, I was very experimental with my art at school and I would cast myself in mod rock and do all these ridiculous sculptures. I also love to make films and editing. I love making people books and I love making people letters.

[Artists] are the most extraordinary people because they see the world in a way that I could never even imagine. I want to grasp some of that, because they make the world what it is.

I remember interviewing Amy Sherald and she was like, "There is no plan B." I was like, "Yes, I love it." I love people who just go for it. I just am in awe of people who that's their calling. I think it happens to a few people on this earth and I just want to embrace it.

Is there anything else that you would love to share?

I really just want to get as many people into art history as possible. I want to try to be this conduit because the future of art history needs to be by people from all different perspectives. If I can facilitate any of that and introduce people to something, then my job is done.

**Katy Hessel Recommends:**

My London Library Membership card to get me into the world's best library, with stacks and stacks of endless books.

My scribbled copy of John Berger's Ways of Seeing to get me thinking about, seeing, and being in the world differently.

Nell Dunn's Talking to Women, a book of interviews with women—including artist Pauline Boty—from 1967. They're all around my age range when conducted, and I like to dip into it to listen to them and hear their wisdom about life, writing and art, despite them speaking over 50 years ago. Somehow, it still feels contemporary.

Yorkshire Tea

Hampstead Ponds

Name

Katy Hessel

Vocation

art historian, presenter, curator

□