How to Live an Artful Life



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How to Live an Artful Life

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366 Inspirations from Artists on
How to Bring Creativity to Your Everyday

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A Call to Arms
2

January — How to Start
5
February — Love and Passion
43
March — How to See
79
April — Community
117
May — How to Find the New
155
June — Resistance
195
July — Freedom
237
August — Beauty
277
September — Time
315
October — Transformation
351
November — Memory
389
December — Joy
429

Acknowledgements
471
Credits
475

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How to Live an Artful Life

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A Call to Arms

What is an artful life? Living 'artfully' is not about optimising every moment of everyday life. It's about connecting to the world inside ourselves by consciously taking the time to pause and reflect on the world *outside*. In practice, living an artful life can heighten your sense of joy and expand your sense of beauty.

It's never been more important to turn to those who can help us lead creative lives. The world may be trying to turn us into machines, with creativity outsourced to the likes of AI, but we can still look, read, think, exist for ourselves.

That is where this book comes in.

To live artfully does not mean to be an artist full time, or to be an artist at all, or to always be going to museums or galleries. Although, of course, it can mean that. More expansively, it's a way of thinking and living which we can learn from artists and apply to our day-to-day existence, whatever and whoever we are. It can exist alongside our day jobs – and even enhance those day jobs.

This book is also the story of a year: a way to take time for yourself and your creativity every day. The intention is to build this way of seeing and living artfully over the course of twelve months, though you can begin anywhere in these pages and at any time of the year. Each entry will take about five minutes of your time to read and think about, encouraging you to slow down, go deeper, and notice the small details in the world around us. Together, the suggestions in this book work against the idea of busyness and unwanted distraction.

What follows is an entry for every day of the year, loosely gathered by themes for each month, from how to start, to love and passion, beauty, memory and joy. Each offers an inspiration from an artist alongside a short thought or exercise from me, and a note about the artist in case you feel inclined to learn more and discover their work for yourself.

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I've been meeting with, speaking to and interviewing artists across the globe for over a decade, sitting down with them in their studio spaces and hearing first-hand how they see the world. Many of the thoughts that follow have been gifted by those artists specially to this book, or have come from our conversations over the years. The rest are gathered from interviews, books, films and lectures that I have always cherished and kept close to me.

Sometimes there is an image of an artwork, or a story about 'art', because there's an energy to art – a spirit that lives inside of it that can enrich you when you bear witness to it. To train yourself to look carefully at an artwork is a way of training yourself to look at the world. As the novelist and writer Iris Murdoch said, 'Great art is liberating, it enables us to see and take pleasure in what is not ourselves.'

In a world built to distract us, let's find the time and space to pay attention and live artfully, day by day.

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JANUARY

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How to Start

January: a quest for clarity and discovery, a time for thinking about beginnings and fresh starts. A perfect moment to seek out and nurture new ideas, which can hatch when they are ready.

As the natural world teaches us, winter can be an important time for growth that is most likely invisible. While this work can be difficult, slow or even painful, do not despair. The year ahead is a great unknown. Time to embrace its energy and ideas.

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1 JANUARY

The power of art

'Art is a material act of culture, but its greatest value is its spiritual role, and that influences society, because it's the greatest contribution to the intellectual and moral development of humanity that can be made.' —Ana Mendieta

Art can come in all different forms: it can be tangible or ephemeral – a solid object or a fleeting performance; it can exist in the physical world, or in our memory. But its power lies in its spirit – it's this that can move us, offer us transcendence, and speak across time and cultures as a universal language.

When you experience an artwork, you don't just see it, but you feel it. That, for me, is where its greatness lies. The best thing we can do is take time with it. There is no right or wrong way to look at or engage with it. Great art keeps being surprising. If you are alive to it, the possibilities it will show you are endless.

Today, think about an artwork that moves you. What does it look like? Why did it remain imprinted in your mind? Take a moment to reflect on what made/makes it special to you. Where did you see it? How old were you then, and how old are you now?

I like to start the year with Ana Mendieta's *Silueta* series, which highlighted the artist's body – and later the absence of the body – in the earth across the United States, Mexico and Cuba, entwining it with nature, and connecting it to all of humanity.

Ana Mendieta (1948–85), born in Havana, Cuba, was an interdisciplinary artist and sculptor, known for her ephemeral/earth-body works.

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Source: 'Art and Politics', a series of dialogues at The New Museum, NYC, 1983.

What is an artist?

'An artist is someone who goes to a place where no one's been before, and brings back something we/you have never seen before but instantly recognise.' —Nick Willing, recalling a conversation with his parents, artists Paula Rego and Victor Willing

Why do so many of us all around the world take the time to look at art? What is the point?

Whenever people ask me why I pay attention to art I quote the definition above from Nick Willing.

Artists can make the unfamiliar familiar (and vice versa). They can show us something that we instantly recognise, despite it being made in a completely different world and context to our own. Using just twelve musical notes, musicians can express the human experience through melody; using tones and colours, visual artists can hold up a picture that can make our heart pound; through words and sentences, writers can connect us to the great web of humanity, stretching through time and place.

While we can never get inside someone's head, we can attempt to understand the perspective of others through their creations. Whose work will you look at today? How will expand your understanding?

I like to look at Paula Rego's *The Dance*, 1988 (overleaf). Set under a moonlit sky, this painting shows the different stages of a woman's life. We see her dancing as a child, holding hands with her middle- and old-aged self (or perhaps her mother and grandmother). We see her pregnant, with her partner; with her back turned towards us as her lover's gaze suspiciously meets ours – as if he is telling us something she doesn't know. And finally, on the left, alone, bigger and stronger than the rest.

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Nick Willing (b. 1961) is a British-Portuguese filmmaker, who, among other titles, made *Paula Rego: Secrets and Stories* (2017), a documentary about his mother.

Source: The Great Women Artists Podcast*, 2021*



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Paula Rego, *The Dance*, 1988

Why should we look to art and artists?

'[Artists] help you make sense. And they help you make senses, your senses, and they give you back, at every level, your senses alive again, to yourself. Whenever you stand in front of or are present with . . . anything that is a piece of art, you attend, you're there, you're actually there and you're attentive, and something in you has been awakened to it. Even if you're having an argument with it, even if you really dislike it, even if you're in the presence of something that has made you furious . . . So we have in it a dialogue immediately where we are present to it and it is present to us. And there's something in the air, which is wordless. And at the same time asks for articulation. So all those things happen. As soon as you're present to art, all the thinking, all the renewing of our senses happens immediately.' —Ali Smith

Think of your favourite artwork. You might have seen it in a gallery, book or online. Show it someone else. Talk about it; debate it; articulate it; be present to it. Ask someone: what's that supposed to be?

If you don't have someone with you, have the conversation with yourself. When I'm in front of an artwork, I've developed a practice of downloading everything I see, think and feel in that moment. (I like to use the notes application on my phone, but handwritten or voice-recorded notes might be more suited to you.) I start by describing what I see, and go from there.

Ali Smith (b. 1962) is an acclaimed Scottish writer of fiction and non-fiction. Between 2016 and 2020, she completed a series of four stand-alone novels, grouped as the Seasonal Quartet, which track unprecedented events in living history. At the spine of each book is an artist: Pauline Boty in *Autumn*, Barbara Hepworth in *Winter*, Tacita Dean in *Spring*, and filmmaker Lorenza Mazzetti in *Summer*.

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Source: The Great Women Artists Podcast*, 2021*

How art can help us focus

'I like getting stuff out of the way so you can see something clearly, see it sharply, have it be new again. I think making things that appear simple is incredibly hard.

Something about photography is tied to a very specific relationship with the material world. It doesn't have to be, but the way I practice it, it is. So there's an act of observation, but it's not an act of objective recording. It's about framing something and seeing it and understanding that it's relational. It's how you're looking as much as what you're looking at.' —Zoe Leonard

How can you block out the noise in an overwhelming world?

'It's how you're looking as much as what you're looking at.'

Leonard shows us that we can use tools – like the camera – to find clarity in what it is that we are seeking to observe; to help us to look closer, and give our attention to the things that give us life.

It might take only a minute, but art can help us focus. What will you pay attention to, and how will you record what you have noticed?

Zoe Leonard (b. 1961) is an American artist, based in New York City, working across installation, photography and sculpture. She often uses repetition and sequencing to trace – and focus on – an image or object through time, and to see meaning in what might at first seem familiar. This can include photographing the same place or entity, whether it be a riverbank damaged by climate change, clouds out of a window, buildings or people. By using subtle shifts in perspective, or the changing of scale, she gets us to look closer and deeper – away from the overwhelming world around us and to think about the transient nature of our own reality.

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Source: Leonard, Zoe, 'Aerials', via Studio International*, 2018. Amended in a note to the author, 2025*

Keep a diary

'You can stand anything if you write it down . . .'
—Louise Bourgeois

Louise Bourgeois wrote her first diary entry when she was eleven years old, and never stopped. She had three types – 'the written, the spoken (into a tape recorder), and [her] drawing diary'.

Writing helped her to confront and process her trauma and anxiety – she felt that 'you can stand anything if you write it down'.

Bourgeois's compulsive diary writing was crucial for her creative output, as she turned to it again and again to help inform her artworks.

Sometimes writing a diary, or drawing – sketching doodles in whatever way works for you – can be the truest record of ourselves. It can document our deepest emotions, desires and fears, allowing us to access them even as the feelings pass.

Write it down, then lock it away or use it if you wish. But start now. You will never have this moment or this feeling back, and you never know what it will lead to.

The French-American artist **Louise Bourgeois** (1911–2010) was best known for her sculptures, prints, installations and fabric works, featuring motifs such as the spiral and the spider.

Source, quote 1: Wye, Deborah, ed., Louise Bourgeois: The Complete Prints & Books*, online catalogue raisonné (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2018), cat. no. 1228–9,* He Disappeared into Complete Silence*, first and second editions, 1947 and 2005; quote 2: Bourgeois, Louise, 'Tender Compulsions',* World Art*, no. 2, February 1995, reprinted in Bernadac, Marie-Laure and Hans Ulrich Obrist, (eds.),* Louise Bourgeois: Destruction of the Father, Reconstruction of the Father: Writings and Interviews 1923–1997*, London: Violette Editions, 1998*

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Put down your phone

'My advice to young people is to put down their phones. That's my advice. Don't think that it's okay to live in your phone. You have a lot more to say than Instagram. And a lot to experience in the real world. The most important thing is to stand in front of another person and breathe the same air. That's real knowledge that can't be found in your phone.' —Nan Goldin

While machines can be categorised as digits, humans can't. While machines can spark emotions in us, they can't show us love. While they can think, they can't feel. That's the job of the human, who has a limitless ability (or superpower) to recognise every emotion.

Be in the world. Talk to people. Go to places, even if it's not far. Look up into the expanse of the skies rather than into our tech-filtered selves. Revolutions won't happen on your phone. Take back your attention and give it to each other.

Nan Goldin (b. 1953) is an American artist who has transformed photography in contemporary art. Her work addresses the human experience with themes of love, loss, sexuality, violence, beauty, addiction and mortality. As an activist, Goldin continues to stand up to injustices committed by governments and global conglomerates.

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Source: Nan Goldin's Advice to the Young, *Louisiana Channel, 2023 (video); amended in a note to the author, 2025*

7 JANUARY

Experiment

'This feeling of experiment, like when you're young, you begin to write, you begin to fill up a page and you're just going to see where it leads you. You don't necessarily understand it, thank God. What would be the point in continuing if you knew everything about it?' —Deborah Levy

Practise forgetting to be self-conscious. See where it leads. Start to notice what happens as you just do it, write it, paint it, draw it. Remember that excitement is in the discovery of the unknown and joy is in the act of experimentation. What would be the point if we always knew the answer?

Deborah Levy (b. 1959) is a South African-born, British writer and the author of several critically acclaimed novels and non-fiction works including her 'living autobiographies' on writing, gender politics and philosophy: *Things I Don't Want to Know*, *The Cost of Living* and *Real Estate*. She has been shortlisted twice for both the Goldsmiths Prize and the Booker Prize.

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Source: The Great Women Artists Podcast, *2021*

Where do ideas come from?

'Most artists . . . their work comes from the most simple things because what artists do is just reinterpret the world, and the world is of a certain thing: it is what it is. What we do is sort of search out the strangeness within that and that's what I've done . . . I've looked for something and tried to unfold it and made a deeper way of looking at it – and hopefully a more profound way of looking at yourself.' —Rachel Whiteread

As a child, the sculptor Rachel Whiteread was fascinated by cardboard boxes that stored items like Christmas lights. While at first glance these boxes might seem mundane – often scruffily taped together due to reuse – they can also be seen as representing something meaningful. A memory of Christmases past; the container of an entity that could adorn something as enchanting as an indoor tree; a box that has the power to transport you back to your childhood self.

Whiteread holds on to these memories by casting boxes and household items – like spoons and hot water bottles – in resin or concrete, to preserve the significance of what they once contained.

Art doesn't need to draw from a grand place, it can come from the most ordinary things. Look closely at everyday objects, and show us something anew.

Rachel Whiteread (b. 1963) is a British artist who works across sculpture and drawing, in mediums ranging from concrete to resin, and in scales from minuscule to colossal. Discussing how her work gives, in her words, 'authority to forgotten things', Whiteread transforms familiar objects and buildings into ghostly replicas in the form of casts. Her sculptures have provided a commentary on social and political changes, reflecting a sense of impermanence and loss.

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Source: The Great Women Artists Podcast*, 2023*

Where do you make art? How can you make the best of what you have?

'In Chile, I painted in the closet because I didn't have a studio. In one painting you can see the beam of light coming through the door . . .' —Luchita Hurtado

An enduring myth of what an 'artist' looks like and where and how they work might be a large studio, canvases or sculptures everywhere, and a swarm of studio assistants. But the reality for most artists is the opposite – a small corner in a busy room, drawing in a sketchpad on a train, or using the streets as their stage.

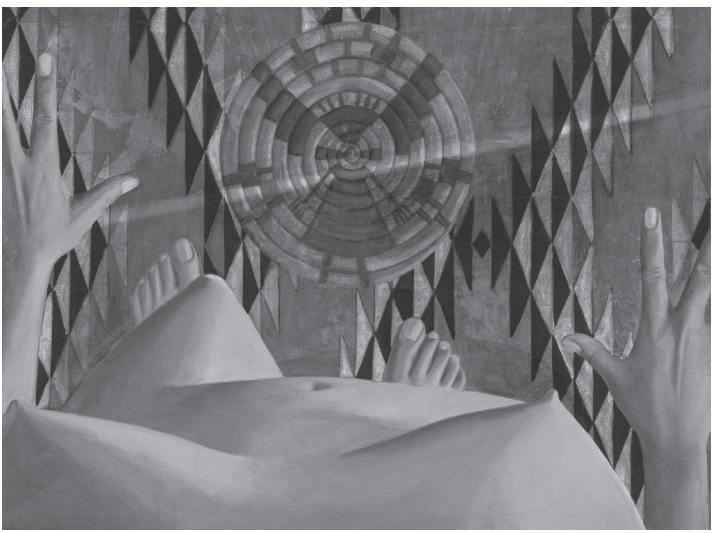
The Venezuelan-born painter Luchita Hurtado had her closet, so she used that. But she made the most of it. Maybe her painting, *Untitled* (overleaf), wouldn't have become what it was had that crack of light not come through.

Making the best of what you have is your greatest advantage.

Luchita Hurtado (1920–2020) was a Venezuelan artist who was based in Los Angeles, USA, for much of her life. Constantly experimenting with different art forms, scales and subject matters, which created unexpected perspectives – from looking down at her body to straight up at the sky – Hurtado, through cosmic motifs and geometric abstraction, investigated universality and transcendence.

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Source: Lewin, Rebecca and Constable, Joseph (eds.), Luchita Hurtado: I Live, I Die, I Will Be Reborn*, Serpentine Galleries & Koenig Books, 2019*



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Luchita Hurtado, *Untitled*, 1969

How do you find your language?

'How do we choose our specific material, our means of communication? "Accidentally." Something speaks to us, a sound, a touch, hardness or softness, it catches us and asks us to be formed. We are finding our language, and as we go along we learn to obey their rules and their limits. We have to obey, and adjust to those demands. Ideas flow from it to us and though we feel to be the creator we are involved in a dialogue with our medium. The more subtly we are tuned to our medium, the more inventive our actions will become. Not listening to it ends in failure. (Years ago, I once asked John Cage how he had started to find his way. He will not remember it. "By chance" was the answer.)

Students worry about choosing their way. I always tell them, "You can go anywhere from anywhere".' —Anni Albers

Look around you. Let ideas come to you. Whatever you choose now does not have to determine what you do for the rest of your life. Catch some ideas, let go of others, and remember no work is ever 'finished'. Embrace the knowledge that every sketch, play, idea, sentence, can lead to something else.

Anni Albers (1899–1994), who was born in Germany and died in the USA, was one of the foremost artists working in fibre in the twentieth century. She was also a great educator, as a teacher at the Bauhaus (Germany) and Black Mountain College (USA).

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Source: Albers, Anni, 'Material as Metaphor', statement on panel 'The Art/Craft Connection: Grass Roots or Glass Houses' at the College Art Association's 1982 annual meeting, New York, 25 February 1982

Look out for the small details

'To me, lots of things come and go quicker than I can catch them. I mean, they have such clarity and at the same time they're moving faster than I can catch. And sometimes they will come back again. [. . .] Things are given to everyone all the time. I think artists just pay attention to what they're given. And then they run with it, see where it takes them – but it's about having trust in what you're given.' —Kiki Smith

Every second of every day we are confronted with so many small details, from plants to trees, the many people we pass, to the cloud formations in the skies. While we miss most things, it's important to try and 'catch' those that enter into our surroundings while we can.

Look up from where you are reading: what do you see? Is it a detail you have noticed before? Does it surprise you? What do you know of where it comes from? Be attuned to the world, and see what it gives you back. Trust that you can make something from what you see.

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Kiki Smith (b. 1954) is an American multidisciplinary artist known for her tapestries and sculptures that often address themes of mortality and decay, the body and the earth, what it means to be human, and our relationship to nature.

Source: The Great Women Artists Podcast*, 2023*

Why ideas are best when they change

'What's very, very important is allowing yourself to not be fixed by your original idea. I'm definitely an artist that enjoys the journey. I'm not particularly attracted to work that is an idea that is just made. I actually like art that has evolved and become something that the artist wasn't intending to make . . . For me, that's a much more interesting artwork.' —Tacita Dean

Dean often works in analogue film. She uses a photochemical camera, which, by its very nature, prevents you from seeing what you are initially making – unlike a digital one. Only when you process and print, when you turn the lights on, can you uncover it – with the image or moving image revealing itself.

This is a reminder that ideas can't be fixed in advance. As with anything in life, you have to let an idea become its own thing.

Tacita Dean (b. 1965) is a British European artist who works with drawing, photography, installation and found objects, but is best known for film. She is interested in capturing the 'truth of the moment, the film as a medium, and the sensibilities of the individual'. Her analogue films – painterly and unpredictable – at times become portraits of the medium itself.

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Source: The Great Women Artists Podcast*, 2021*

Get out

'First of all. I hate the studio. I think the studio is a trap for me.'
—Marina Abramović

There is no right or wrong way to live artfully. But if there's one thing: don't stay trapped in your space. Go out and look, observe, engage. Ideas can come from anywhere: from walking a few steps outside your front door to visiting far corners of the world, or even travelling through time with objects in museums, or empathetically through books. Where will you visit today?

Marina Abramović (b. 1946), born in Yugoslavia (now Serbia), is considered as a pioneer and 'warrior' of performance art. Since the beginning of her career, Abramović has stretched the limits of the body. Early works include *Rhythm 10* (1974), which saw her declare herself as the object, and instruct the audience to use props on her as they wished. She has continued to break boundaries for the last five decades and counting.

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Source: The Great Women Artists Podcast, *2022*

See the extraordinary in the ordinary

'An artist is not special. An artist is an ordinary person who can take ordinary things and make them special.' —Ruth Asawa

American artist Ruth Asawa is known for her cocoon-like sculptures made from looped metal wires. They typically hang from the ceiling and, when lit, they create shadows and unexpected shapes and lines (see overleaf).

But at the root of these sculptures is a single, simple entity: wire.

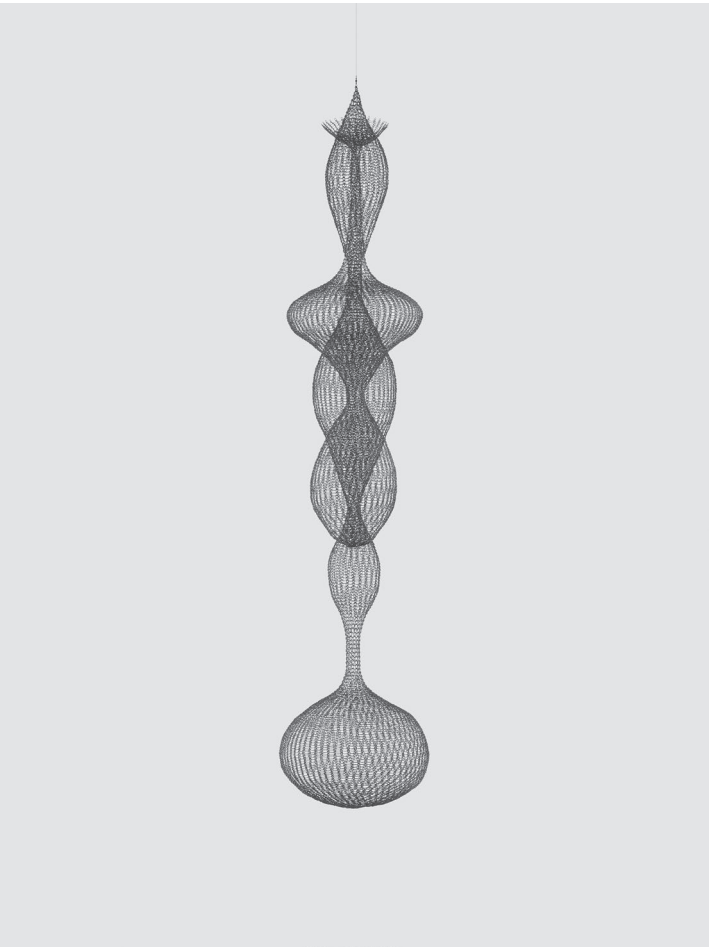
The artist's job is to see the potential in something. From a single word that can be joined up into a sentence that can grow into a paragraph, speech or book; to a tube of paint that can be used to create an image that might shape the way someone sees the world.

Don't idolise the rare, enjoy the familiar. How will/can you transform something ordinary?

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Ruth Asawa (1926–2013) was an American artist recognised for her wire sculptures and public commissions, and as an influential educator and arts advocate in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Source: Nathan, Harriet, 'Oral history transcript/Ruth Asawa', Bancroft Library, 1974 and 1976



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Ruth Asawa, *Untitled* (S.237, Hanging Six-Lobed, Interlocking Continuous Form), *c.* 1958

15 JANUARY

Be porous

'One of the more important things that we can do as thinkers is to remain porous to the ideas that the artist is conveying, as opposed to what I would want them to do. It doesn't mean being a supplicant, but it means submitting to this experience, that they have been so generous enough to share with us. Because it's a great act of generosity to make work, I think.' —Hilton Als

When we are porous to the ideas of artists and writers, we can gain a much deeper understanding of their craft, leaving us with new ways of thinking about them.

Als, an acclaimed writer and critic, is also a curator. Some of my favourite exhibitions curated by him are 'portraits' of writers, such as Joan Didion or James Baldwin. They feature existing artwork by a range of artists that speak to and ask questions about the subject's life and work.

If you were to 'curate' an exhibition of an artist or writer, what objects, images and films would you use?

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Hilton Als (b. 1960) is an American writer, critic and curator, known for his non-fiction books and contributions to *The New Yorker*.

Source: The Great Women Artists Podcast*, 2023*

Keep looking

'It is a very interesting exercise. I think you go through different phases as you're observing, and certainly, many of the phases involve extreme resistance to the exercise.

You're sitting there in front of the mirror, or an artwork, and just really resenting the whole idea. But then eventually that resentment fades, and you start to look at something else. So part of the experience is observing the ebb and flow of your own resentment and resistance to that kind of deep observation.

But then there are moments where you suddenly realise, "Wow, I just noticed something that I would never have noticed had I not been doing this." And that leads to a whole new area of inquiry with that object, whatever it might be.' —Ruth Ozeki

In 2022, Ozeki published a part-experiment, part-memoir titled *Timecode of a Face*, which follows a time log of her findings when she took a mirror, placed it on her Zen altar, and looked at herself for three hours. Observing closely the lines on her face, she was reminded of her own memories and even connections to ancestors. From this, she wrote the story of her life.

Ozeki was influenced by the essay 'The Power of Patience' by art historian Professor Jennifer Roberts.

Today's entry is an exercise. Can you look at something – an artwork, a photograph, your reflection – for ten minutes, thirty minutes, an hour, or more, keeping a time log as you go? What will you find?

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Ruth Ozeki (b. 1956) is an American-Canadian Zen Buddhist priest, and author of the novel *A Tale for the Time Being*, as well as several other fiction and non-fiction books.

Source: The Great Women Artists Podcast*, 2023*

Get into the right frame of mind

'[Patricia Highsmith's] favourite technique to ease herself into the right frame of mind for work was to sit on her bed surrounded by cigarettes, ashtray, matches, a mug of coffee, a doughnut and an accompanying saucer of sugar. She had to avoid any sense of discipline and make the act of writing as pleasurable as possible. Her position, she noted, would be almost foetal and, indeed, her intention was to create, she said, "a womb of her own".' —Andrew Wilson on Patricia Highsmith

Where do you feel most comfortable? What makes you feel good? Sometimes it's not the 'making' that can be the hardest part, but getting going – and being in the right frame of mind. What does that look like for you?

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Patricia Highsmith (1921–95) was an American author of novels and short stories, famously known for creating the character Tom Ripley.

Source: Wilson, Andrew, Beautiful Shadow: A Life of Patricia Highsmith*, Bloomsbury, 2003, quoted in Currey, Mason,* Daily Rituals: How Artists Work*, Alfred A. Knopf, 2013*

Question authority, find out yourself

'During the seventies, and into the eighties, I was very much questioning what happens to art. . . . What [does] art have to be for, in perpetuity, longevity? What happens if it's not [long-lasting]? Is it such a terrible thing?

Those things made me question how art becomes institutionalised. That then requires certain aspects of authority to say "this art is good", and "this art is bad". I think that's what I was really trying to look at. Why is bad art bad? You know, who says so?'
—Phyllida Barlow

Who gets to decides what is good, and what is bad? What 'should' or 'shouldn't' art be? Should it hold our attention indefinitely, or for only a moment? Who has historically been able to decide what we can and can't see?

Ask yourself today: what do you find to be good? That is all that matters.

Phyllida Barlow (1944–2023) was a celebrated British artist, mostly known for her work in sculpture that could be simultaneously colossal and intimate, precarious and triumphant, made from cement, cardboard, fabric and chicken wire. An influential educator at the Slade School of Art, London, for four decades until 2009, Barlow represented Britain at the Venice Biennale in 2017.

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Source: The Great Women Artists Podcast, *2021*

19 JANUARY

Find your own rules

'I had actually come up with this different technique, because I hadn't known the rules. So I think that's what most of my work is. Because I don't know the rules. I just make some up.'
—Cornelia Parker

Were some of the greatest artworks made according to a formula, or were they made with a pioneering spirit? Did they show us something we already knew, or something that nobody had ever seen before?

Let's take Cornelia Parker and her fractured installation *Cold Dark Matter: An Exploded View* (1991; overleaf), which saw her blow up a garden shed (and its contents, such as bicycle wheels, hair curlers, old coke cans) and suspend the remains from the ceiling. She hung them on metal wires and added a light bulb in the centre of the fragmented items.

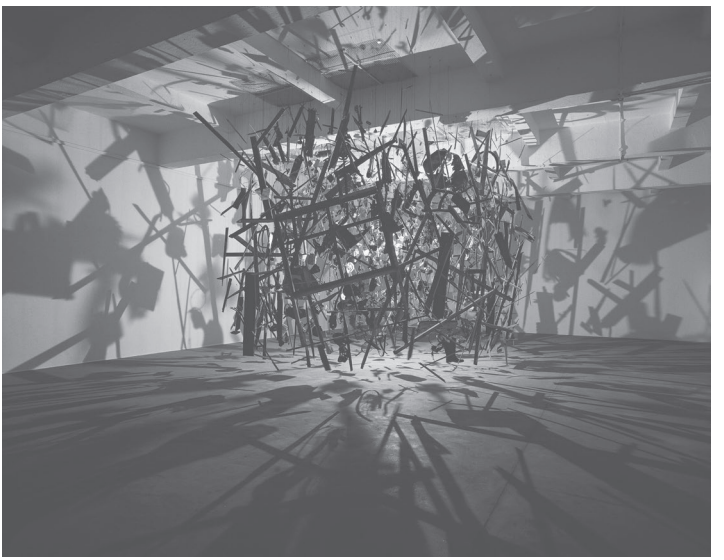
See the work in person, and it will distort everything you think you are looking at.

When it comes to making art, there is no textbook or manual. If you're abiding by that, then you're probably making a picture, not art. Art is about invention, possibility, rule-breaking. What will you do today that no one has done before?

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Cornelia Parker (b. 1956) is a British artist who works across a spectrum of mediums, from sculpture to installation, reconfiguring, resurrecting and transforming familiar objects and materials.

Source: The Great Women Artists Podcast*, 2020*



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Installation view of Cornelia Parker, *Cold Dark Matter: An Exploded View*, 1991

What is the role and responsibility of an artist today?

'I believe that the new role of the artist is to create an art that is more than decoration, commodity or political tool – an art that questions the status quo . . . Making art today is synonymous with assuming responsibility for our fellow human beings.' —Agnes Denes

In 1982, Agnes Denes planted, grew and harvested a two-acre farm of wheat at the tip of Manhattan, for a work she called *Wheatfield: A Confrontation* (overleaf).

'Confronting' how people were mistreating and mismanaging the land, the work responded to the ever-evolving climate crisis and ongoing damage of land by capitalist structures for financial gain. It is a work made all the more powerful because it could not be made today: there is not a two-acre space available on the tip of Manhattan.

What can you make that holds up a mirror to the truths of what is happening in the world?

Agnes Denes (b. 1931) is recognised as a pioneer of ecological and land art, as well as other art forms. Often working on a monumental scale, her visionary work deals with environmental, cultural and social issues, and is immersed in science, philosophy, history and psychology, addressing the challenges of global survival.

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Source: A note to the author; quote date 1978



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Agnes Denes, *Wheatfield – A Confrontation: Battery Park Landfill, Downtown Manhattan – With New York Financial Center*, 1982

You can use anything

'I started painting clouds – I was always looking at the sky. One day, I was lying in the field . . . Totally no clouds – blue sky – and out of nowhere twelve military planes arrive. They crossed like ultrasonic: "Vroom!" When they crossed, you have this incredible drawing from what they made in the air. I was looking, absolutely mesmerised, at this drawing . . . and I got this realisation. I could make drawings with the planes. I could use fire, water, earth, whatever . . . I could use my body.' —Marina Abramović

We're back to Abramović again. She's good to think about at the start of the year; she shows us that there are so many possibilities. Use whatever you have around you – from the clouds to jets that fill up the sky – but also what is stored inside you: love, anger, pain, humour, fear, sadness, loneliness, happiness, joy. The list is endless.

Marina Abramović (b. 1946), was born in Yugoslavia (now Serbia) and is considered as a pioneer and 'warrior' of performance art. Since the beginning of her career in the 1970s, Abramović has stretched the limits of the body. Early works include *Rhythm 0* (1974), which saw her declare herself as the object and instruct the audience to use props on her as they wished. She has continued to break boundaries for the last five decades and counting.

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Source: Abramović, Marina; Warsh, Larry (ed.), Abramović-isms*, Princeton University Press, 2024*

You can't go wrong doing you

'My mother used to say: "Take what you have to make what you need." In essence, you don't have to buy pieces, you can use what you have. Instead of going out there trying to get what other people have and what other people do – do you! You know that you can't go wrong doing you.' —Loretta Pettway Bennett, Gee's Bend Quiltmakers

When I was younger, I was terrified of writing 'about art' because I was too worried about getting it 'right' – too scared to say what I thought. As a result, my essays had barely any original ideas.

My life as a writer changed when I read a book called *The Lonely City* by Olivia Laing, which explores loneliness through the eyes of artists in New York City (Laing had just moved there). The book made me *feel* how exciting art writing can be, how it can be written about through any lens.

Choose your lens and say what you think. As Loretta Pettway Bennett says, you can't go wrong doing you.

Loretta Pettway Bennett (b. 1960) is part of the Gee's Bend Quiltmakers, an all-female, Black American community based in Alabama, USA, made up of more than four generations of women. They make their colourful and jazzy quilts for a multitude of reasons.

Source: The Great Women Artists Podcast, *2021*

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23 JANUARY

Smash it

'If you can't open the door, smash it down!' —Tracey Emin

How do you think Tracey Emin became Dame Tracey Emin? Smash it!

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Tracey Emin (b. 1963) is one of the most influential British artists, looking to her life for primary material, and creating work across painting, sculpture, installation, drawing and more.

Source: The Great Women Artists Podcast*, 2022*

You have not a moment to lose!

'Seventeen years wasted in eating, dawdling and frittering time away . . . Art is eternal, but life is short . . . I will make up for it now, I have not a moment to lose.' —Evelyn de Morgan

Nineteenth-century artist Evelyn de Morgan wrote this in a diary entry on the eve of her seventeenth birthday. She was one of the first women offered a state-funded art education in the UK, after the Slade School of Art opened its doors to male and female students in 1871.

Finally given an artistic opportunity equal to her male counterparts, it's not surprising that she felt she wanted to seize the moment. What would you like to seize? Write it down.

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Evelyn de Morgan (1855–1919) was a British artist, often associated with the Pre-Raphaelites. She is known for her meticulously rendered and often vividly coloured paintings of Biblical and mythological characters.

Source: via De Morgan Foundation archives

Power of experience

'Well, what is education? Education is your whole life. Everything is education. Good, bad or indifferent, all are important.' —Leonora Carrington

It can be easy to measure ourselves against those who have multiple degrees, a string of exhibitions or books under their belt – but, as Carrington says, education is your whole life.

You are never starting from ground zero. All experiences are valuable.

Leonora Carrington (1917–2011) was a British-born artist and writer who lived in France and Spain before settling in Mexico during the Second World War. She painted fantastical beings and creatures within scenes that were enigmatic, otherworldly, yet strangely familiar.

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Source: Leonora Carrington in conversation with Joanna Moorhead, Roma Norte, Mexico City, 2009

What does success mean?

'Success for me is staying true to who you are and not deviating from a path. I don't think my successes would've come to me as easily had I not committed to making the work in such a way that made me uncomfortable. I could've gotten the job teaching or could've made myself comfortable, but I didn't. I did a job that I didn't want to do, so I could do a job that I wanted to do.' —Amy Sherald

What do you want? What are you trying to convey? How can you go about making it happen?

Tomorrow's entry can help with the first steps.

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Amy Sherald (b. 1973) is an American painter of people known for intimate portraits that explore Black American life and challenge traditional narratives of race and representation.

Source: Interview with Samra Khawaja, 2016, via the National Endowment for the Arts

The first steps can be small

'What is success? I think success is getting up each day and making a decision to create something, expressive or imaginative or innovative. I've taken that choice and stayed focused.' —Barbara Walker

Starting on a small scale can lead to the greatest work. How can we commit to doing something creative every day? Is it something artistic, such as drawing, that will leave you with hundreds of sketches at the end of the year? Writing something short that will help you amass a body of work over time? Seeking out a new subject, or learning a new language?

In October 2015, my goal was to teach myself about women artists past and present and to share my findings with whoever else wanted to learn along the way. I started my Instagram account, @thegreatwomenartists, and promised myself I would do it every day – and I did, whether by writing on the bus, in bed or at my desk, before or after my office job. By committing to a daily practice, and persisting with it, I have been able to give myself the greatest education possible.

We all need to be creative in order to survive life. What one thing do you want to commit to that you could be able to carry out every day or every week, for the rest of the year? Once you get going, you won't want to stop.

Barbara Walker (b. 1964) is a British artist who creates works on paper, paintings on canvas and large-scale charcoal wall drawings. They are filled with empathy, depth and emotion, and address the state of Black communities, their experiences and histories.

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Source: Gentleman, Amelia, '"I'm pointing a finger": Barbara Walker on her paintings about the Windrush scandal and her son's victimisation', Guardian*, 30 September 2024*

Catch those moments!

'One of the reasons I painted was to catch life as it goes by, right hot off the griddle.' —Alice Neel

The great American artist Alice Neel used paint as a way to 'catch life'. She painted the people who wandered in and out of her apartment – from journalists and writers to her family and neighbours – no matter their status. As a result, her paintings document the people who lived in and shaped New York City.

If you were to 'catch life', what would it look like? Would it be through paintings, to-do lists, diary entries or doodles? Choose a way to catch it; don't let it pass you by.

Alice Neel (1900–84) described herself as a 'collector of souls'. She was a painter of people, and always worked in her home-based studio in Spanish Harlem, and later the Upper West Side.

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Source: Hills, Patricia, Alice Neel*, Harry N. Abrams, 1983, reprint 1995, quoted in Carr, Carolyn Kinder,* Alice Neel's Women*, Rizzoli International Publications, 2002; 'collector of souls' quote: Hills,* Alice Neel

29 JANUARY

Take a chance

'I want that release. I can't go on a sheer program. At times I thought "the more thought the greater the art", but I wonder about that and do have to admit there's a lot that I'll just let happen and maybe it will come out the better for it. I used to plan a lot and do everything myself and then I started to take a chance . . .' —Eva Hesse

We will talk a bit more about 'chance' in September. For now, we can look to the German-born American sculptor Hesse as an example of someone who took chances with material and form. For her sculptures, she mixed machine parts with cord, plaster with industrial materials, and even worked with liquid latex.

She worked innovatively and unconventionally, and let her chance encounters with these materials guide her.

But she prompts us to ask – isn't all art about chance? Isn't all life about chance? From the surprises that arise to the encounters we have with people, Hesse reminds us that we are best off not being too precious. We have to let it happen, as she says, and 'maybe it will come out the better for it'.

Eva Hesse (1936–70) was a German-born, American sculptor who lived and worked mostly in New York City in the 1960s. Despite her brief, only decade-long career, Hesse was a profound experimenter. Always searching for a new material or form, she fused incompatible substances found lying about on her studio floor for her process-based work.

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Source: Nemser, Cindy, Art Talk: Conversations with 15 Women Artists*, HarperCollins, 1995*

It's up to you

'You can't sit around and wait for somebody to say who you are. You need to write it and paint it and do it.' —Faith Ringgold

We need stories by everyone in the world. You are just as qualified as the next person to tell yours. If you don't, someone else might for you.

Make it yours; tell it for yourself. Be vague, be specific; write down or sketch an experience or a feeling, and go from there.

Faith Ringgold (1930–2024) was a pioneering American artist known for her paintings, sculptures, story-quilts and children's books. Instrumental as an activist in the civil rights and feminist movements – and beyond – Ringgold, through her art, constantly challenged gender and racial inequalities and gave voice to the stories hidden by the media at the time.

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Source: Faith Ringgold interviewed by Betsy West, Makers: Women Who Make America*, Kunhardt Film Foundation, 15 July 2001*

Treat life as art

'Because of the routines we follow, we often forget that life is an ongoing adventure. We leave our homes for work, acting and even believing that we will reach our destinations with no unusual event startling us out of our set expectations. The truth is we know nothing . . . Life is pure adventure and the sooner we realise that, the quicker we will be able to treat life as art: to bring all our energies to each encounter, to remain flexible enough to notice and admit when what we expected to happen did not happen. We need to remember that we are created creative . . .' —Maya Angelou

You got here. The end of January. Take a moment to reflect on what you've learnt this month. Where do ideas come from? How can you seek out the details? Where can you go to 'make' art, and what can you use, that is entirely yours, to your advantage? The year has just started. We have eleven months to go. Use it wisely, but freely. As Angelou remarks, it is an ongoing adventure.

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Maya Angelou (1928–2014) was a great American writer, editor, essayist, playwright, poet, educator and civil rights activist.

Source: Angelou, Maya, Wouldn't Take Nothing for My Journey Now*, 1994, Virago*

FEBRUARY

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