

# Hilde Lynn Helphenstein Wants to Be the Art World's Anthony Bourdain

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Earlier this month, Hilde Lynn Helphenstein, the gallerist and curator behind the extremely niche yet wildly popular art world Instagram meme account [@jerrygogosian](#), posted a video in which she announced that Sotheby's will now be known as Hildeby's, and that as the auction house's new leader, she would be implementing a series of absurdist new policies: every wine bottle in the cellar would be free, every assistant hired on looks and family connections alone (the latter a silly but blunt critique of typical art world machinations).

If you've been among @jerrygogosian's 112,000-plus followers at any point over the past four years, the video came across as a classic bit: The account (its name a portmanteau of Larry Gagosian, the founder of the Gagosian gallery empire, and the *New York* magazine art critic Jerry Saltz) has become art world catnip for its playful trolling of the industry's heady self-seriousness. And while there's practically zero chance that the blue chip auction house will allow Helphenstein to carry out those plans, the fact that she is collaborating with Sotheby's is very much not a joke.

On September 23, a sale of work by emerging artists, titled [Suggested Followers: How the Algorithm is Always Right](#), will go live on Sotheby's Buy Now digital platform. Curated by Helphenstein, the artists represented were pulled directly from @jerrygogosian's Instagram network. The concept is a commentary on the ways social media algorithms influence taste, as well as a testament to the combined power of a follower base made up of gallerists, curators, collectors and museum staffers.

As Helphenstein wrapped up final preparations for the sale and its concurrent exhibition at Sotheby's headquarters in New York City, we spoke

with her about her journey from anonymous meme creator to guest curator at one of the most powerful auction houses in the world.

### **So, how did @jerrygogosian come to be?**

I contracted a disease that had me in bed for a year. I wasn't even thinking about followers; I just thought it was inside-track jokes. Then, it went from 100 people—which is about what I thought I'd get—to 18,000 in four months. In my opinion, pre-pandemic, the art world was at a place where it both needed and wanted to laugh at itself, but there wasn't an outlet for that yet. I think the account caught fire really fast because people were like, Oh my god, there's somebody who knows our secrets and that's hilarious. I still get messages every day from gallery administrators and senior directors of major blue-chip galleries being like, "You keep us laughing and on our toes." Sorry, I'm kind of bragging, but I'm proud of this: There have been a couple of collectors who have told me that they learned how to collect art ethically by following my account—and how not to be assholes. I'm like, "Oh, I taught you not to be an asshole—that's good!"

Among the works in the Sotheby's sale are two paintings of Helphenstein by her friend Avery Wheless, including *comfortability exposed*, 2022. "I had a little face work done that day and was in a lot of pain, so I just came home and stripped and threw myself in bed," Helphenstein says of the scene that inspired the above composition. "My cat, who's my guardian angel, was there on the pillow protecting me, and my boyfriend snapped a pic and sent it to Avery, like, 'You need to paint this.'"

Courtesy of Sotheby's



## **How did this whole Sotheby's thing come about?**

First, I didn't know if they wanted to tie me, Hilde, into it, or if it was just going to be Jerry Gogosian. I used to have a gallery, so I could curate a show at the snap of a finger. But I thought it was a more interesting challenge for an avatar to curate the show. It's crazy, but Jerry is now four years old. And because I'm followed by pretty much every gallery, major institution, big collector, et cetera, when I go to my "suggested" or Explore pages, Instagram shows me people who are going to be rising stars. So for the past four years, I've saved artists to an Instagram folder that's literally called "Paintings I Like." I realized that the algorithm caught on to what I liked in relation to my suggested follows or the people who are following me, so I decided to approach artists who appeared on that page. I had to make a judgment call on whose followings were big enough that I should get to them via email instead of DM, which was what I mostly did. You know, even Jerry

Gogosian sometimes gets sent to that other inbox. *[laughs]* It's funny seeing the final artist checklist and how the internet really pushed us together. As the show title goes, the algorithm is always right.

**Though I don't think everyone would necessarily agree with that.**

I'll tell you a story. I was in Maui with my friend Vajra Kingsley. We were doing yoga and I was reading a book of poems by Rumi, and at some point, I posted a photo of a white Persian cat that I had as a child on my Instagram. After I got back to the mainland, I went to my Explore page and there was a white Persian cat born of a litter called Maui. Her name was Rumi, and she was available at this place called Kingsley Kittens right down the street. I was like, "It's God"—and my friend Olive Allen, a VR artist who's very firm and Russian, was like, "What are you talking about? It was algorithm." I was like, "Fuck you!" *[laughs]*

**What it was like to work with Sotheby's after you firmed up the artist list?**

I'm so scrappy and bootleg-y. I'm used to doing everything: getting the artists in the show, finding the space, finding the collectors, finding the people who want to come to the opening. And I've worked with well-oiled galleries—I actually once quit a higher-up job to be an intern at a blue chip gallery because I wanted *[to experience]* that polished, finishing school style. But Sotheby's? It's an extremely well-oiled machine. It's been so amazing how each step of the way, there's been someone there to assist. Not just to assist, but to assist with professional finesse.

**Did you play a role in pricing the works?**

It's really up to the artists. Some of them work with galleries and some of them don't. I study and write about the market, so I know how things should be priced. If an artist is like, "What do you think about this?" I can say with pretty decent surety, "You should probably price it at this point." But some of

their dealers are like, "You know, that is where we have you right now. Let's not play around with it."

"She's such an amazing oil painter, it's unbelievable," Helphenstein says of Sarah Thibault. "The flowers are new for her." Above, Thibault's *Field of Tiger*, 2022.

Courtesy of Sotheby's



**You must have seen Jerry's following change quite a bit over the past four years.**

When I first started Jerry, it was hardcore art people who got every joke. Now that it's at 112k followers, people will be like, "What's primary access? Who's Zoe and Chloe?" [Ed. note: The pair is the account's mascot "gallerinas" and a running gag.] I'm just like, "Scroll back." It's funny because I have a couple random celebrities who follow me, like Katherine Heigl and Zoe Saldaña. Sometimes I'm just shocked. I'm like, How did you end up here?

**Do you know what Larry Gagosian thinks of the account?**

I have no idea.

**Does his gallery follow you?**

I don't think so. The Pace account follows, and everyone from Hauser & Wirth follows. Same thing with David Zwirner—their staff does, including Lucas [Zwirner, the founder's son and the gallery's head of content]. I think it's very political, even though at this point, the jokes are relatively soft. I'm not naming names or throwing hard balls. But I think there is still a politicalness to following, and especially to commenting.

**Apart from the following, how else has Jerry grown—especially in the time since you went public as the account's creator?**

I've started writing about my experiences going to all these art world things and putting them in a private mailing list. Really, my bread and butter is my writing, which I can't fucking believe. It's just five bucks per month—as I always say, cheaper than a latte. And I'm in the process of getting a TV show made, with some support from [Pace CEO and president] Marc Glimcher. He's helped me get the ball rolling in some ways that I wouldn't have been able to without him. Essentially, I want to be the female Anthony Bourdain of the art world.

"Marc Quinn is a member of the YBA [Young British Artists] and has been around forever," Helphenstein says. "I didn't expect him to say yes, but it turns out that all of his work over the last couple years has been related to Instagram as well. So when I approached him, he was like, 'Of course. It fits perfectly.'" Above: Quinn's *HISTORYNOW. Kim at Met Ball*, 2022.

Courtesy of Sotheby's

**So, instead of restaurants, going to galleries and fairs?**

Yeah, I want to take it global. As you know, the art world travels in packs. And it's actually a very small crowd. My partner, who was at Christie's for a while and now runs an art capital firm, loves doing numbers. So he made a formula, and we think that there are only 500 people maximum in the "real" art world, buying blue chip art and going to all the fairs. It's funny—I just came back from Frieze Seoul, and people there were air-kissing, like, "Oh, I'll see you in London, and then Paris, and then Miami, and then..."

## **The level of carbon emissions is so wild.**

That'll be incorporated into the show. It's about revealing—and not in a negative way, per se—all the things that people want to know and understand about the art world. I always think of my mother-in-law. She's like, "Explain it to me. Tell me about the artsy things." And I'm like, "Okay, first, we don't call them 'artsy.'" [*laughs*] But she doesn't mean it in that way. Like so many other people, she just wants to know.