

# CREATING “COOL”

# WITH

# KIM HASTREITER

WORDS ALEC RECINOS  
PHOTOGRAPHY JOHNNY LE



These days, it's all mixed up. "Cool" means combining the unexpected, bringing together the high with the low, and drawing from art, film, music — everything. For this, we have Kim Hastreiter to thank. Here, the co-founder and former editor of Paper Magazine reflects on a life spent on the cutting edge of culture.

How exactly do you spot “cool”? Deeper and more elusive than just a trend — which, after all, is fleeting by definition — true “cool” seems to come from nowhere, and then, almost before you know it, it’s everywhere. There’s no formula to follow, no class to take, and it’s always — *always* — ahead of its time. Besides: If you have to ask, you’ll never know. Most people might catch on to cool once, maybe twice if they’re lucky, but for a select few it’s something almost compulsive, something they wouldn’t even know how to stop doing.

Kim Hastreiter is precisely one of these people, and for the past 40 years, all generation-defining movements — hip-hop in the ‘80s, the skate and street culture of the ‘90s, the dawn of the internet at the turn of the century, and the food-driven world we live in today — were first seen through her signature brightly-colored, oversized glasses. Hastreiter exploded onto the scene as one of the co-founders and editors of Paper Magazine, from its very first days in 1984 up until its sale in 2017. Much like Paper itself — which started out as a scrappy, DIY venture in downtown Manhattan, before going on to become the glossy magazine that broke the internet with Kim Kardashian — she has always been nearly impossible to pin down.

“I don’t even know what you call me. I don’t have a name. I don’t have any kind of a description,” she says when asked what she does. Coming from anyone else, such a declaration almost elicits an eyeroll, but with her, it quickly becomes apparent that it’s simply a fact. Between writing several different books, curating art shows, and working as an editor at Apartamento — and that’s just the tip of the iceberg — there really is no one word, no catch-all title that does Hastreiter justice. It’s no wonder then that even *she* isn’t able to narrow down how exactly she’s drawn to the cutting edge of culture. When asked, she pauses for a moment, before taking it back to her beginnings: “Well, I was always really good in a thrift store.”

Sitting across from Hastreiter — who is wearing a matching vivid teal skirt set, a neon green T-shirt, silver sneakers, and, of course, her trademark glasses — such a statement is self-evident. Artworks by legends (and old friends) like Keith Haring and Erik Brunetti share space in her apartment in the West Village with recent projects like a set of photobooks by the photographer and former Warhol associate Paige Powell, everyday objects like colorful pots and pans overflowing from the kitchen, and veritable treasure troves like her collection of Supreme skateboards. Every single object is amazing in its own right, and instead of competing for your attention, they somehow come together to create a truly unique expression of taste. It’s the embodiment of the high/low mix that made Paper so exciting, and has come to be associated with the avant-garde downtown scene where Hastreiter made her mark.

She’s become so closely associated with the city — and by “the city,” she means Manhattan, having gone on the record

as hating Brooklyn — that it comes as a bit of a shock to learn that she had a fairly strait-laced, suburban upbringing in West Orange, New Jersey. Close by and yet worlds apart from New York, Hastreiter’s childhood was largely spent in the same generic ways as many other teenagers: hanging out with the same friends she’d grown up with, playing tennis, and getting drunk in the park. Yet even here, she’s full of surprises. Instead of spending her summers going to camp or sitting by the pool, her mother would send her off on special projects.

“My mother was kind of like a hip, avant-garde person trapped in the wrong era,” Hastreiter reminisces, recalling that for her last summer before college, she was shipped off to the Arizona desert to help the architect Paolo Soleri build Arcosanti, his utopian city of the future. “That made me into a hippie,” she laughs. She slept outside amid scorpions and cacti, learned to use a jackhammer, and mixed concrete as she helped build the first structures on the site.

That experience, combined with the serendipitous fact that she happened to arrive at Washington University in St. Louis in the fall of 1969, meant that she quickly left her stable upbringing behind, joining the student protest movements and radically changing her style. “I remember my parents, when they came to see me, they were like, ‘Oh my God, what happened to her?’” as her once classic look had become completely eccentric, consisting of stringy hair, Indian dresses, and hiking boots. As part of her transformation, Hastreiter also promptly transferred into the art school at WashU, but not before taking a year off to travel alone through Europe and Morocco. Returning the following year with newly expanded horizons, however, even the art school seemed a bit dull. “It was kind of like, too straight for me,” she jokes — and she transferred again, this time to the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (NSCAD).

At first, Halifax — a city tucked away in the easternmost edge of Canada — might not seem like the natural choice, but like Black Mountain College in the early 20th century, it was much more about people than place. When Hastreiter arrived in the early 1970s, NSCAD was an incubator for experimental education, and the epicenter of the Conceptual Art movement. It’s here in the Hastreiter story — studying with the heavyweights of Minimalism and Conceptualism, including Joseph Beuys, Vito Acconci, Joseph Kosuth, and Sol LeWitt — that many of the elements that lead to her success begin to coalesce. Conceptualism was driven first and foremost by ideas and people. An international movement from the beginning, it relied on communities, friendships, and intellectual partnerships for its growth. The dispersed geography of the art also meant that the written word became essential, with books and magazines becoming artworks and exhibitions themselves, as in Ed Ruscha’s *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, or Seth Siegelaub’s *Xerox Book*.

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Several years after Hastreiter graduated, the school was shut down by the Canadian government, but by then she had already moved on to study for her Master of Fine Arts at CalArts outside of Los Angeles. Here she again found herself right in the middle of what she refers to as a “hot moment,” surrounded by art world standouts, and studying under John Baldessari with classmates who included painters like Eric Fischl, David Salle, Sue Williams, and Ross Bleckner. Whereas in Nova Scotia she had devoted her time to art — describing herself as a “total artist” — in Los Angeles she dabbled in the world outside, building a circle of friends that included artist and drag performer Joey Arias and the gossip columnist Janet Charlton (as well as Charlton’s boyfriend at the time, Arnold Schwarzenegger). As she became more drawn towards this crowd, she also began to wonder about devoting herself solely to her art. Though she was making diverse work, crossing mediums between painting, video, conceptual art, and photography, she remembers thinking, “This could get boring.”

Spurred on by John Baldessari, who had become her advisor and mentor, in 1976 she decided to move across the country to the center of the art world: New York. Essentially a rite of passage for everyone in her graduating class at CalArts, Hastreiter made sure to do it her own way, sneaking out of her apartment through the window in order to avoid her landlord before quite literally speeding through the night — “we got black beauties, tons of black beauties” — with Arias riding shotgun in her custom-painted pickup truck known as the Dragon Wagon. They barreled through the country with all her belongings piled up in the back of the truck and never looked back, ultimately getting an apartment on Houston Street together.

Though much has changed about New York over the years, it remains a fundamental truth that artists need studios, and studios cost money. This law held for Hastreiter as well, and as she set about finding her place in the city as an artist, taking meetings at galleries like Paula Cooper and trying to get into the Whitney Biennial, she got a day job at Betsey Bunky Nini, a funky, fancy store in Manhattan owned by Betsey Johnson. She started as a sales girl — “but I was like, a sales girl to Jackie Onassis,” clarifies Hastreiter — and soon began designing the windows as well. It was during this time that she also found a new passion: spending all night at the Mudd Club.

“I was like, ‘Oh my God, this is better than art,’ she remembers. “It was more cultural, because the Mudd Club was like, all art and music and film.” She let her art practice slide and increasingly devoted herself to going out, where she learned about hip-hop, mingled with Debbie Harry, and learned to embrace crazy, outrageous fashion, mixing finds from flea markets and thrift shops with avant-garde designers. It was through this unique style that she met the late legendary photographer Bill Cunningham.

“Bill Cunningham used to go insane every time I got off the subway. He would wait for me and he would always photograph me, and he would run pictures of me because I would always dress crazy,” Hastreiter states, and over time these encounters led to friendship.

At this point, it should be clear that there’s never been a master plan, or even a five-year plan, for Hastreiter. Instead of grand schemes and structure, she relied on intuition and passion. “Whatever I do is accidental,” Hastreiter declares proudly, “just like, an accidental career,” which is exactly how she came to work in print media. One morning, as Hastreiter got off the subway, Cunningham rushed up to her and said, “You need to have this job at the Soho News.” “There’s this job as style editor and they want me to do it, but I don’t want to do it,” she remembers him saying, “but you’d be perfect for it.” Though she loved the Soho News, Hastreiter hesitated at first — “How can I do that? I’m an artist” — before accepting.

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Her work as a style editor may have lead Hastreiter further away from her own career as an artist, but it gave her a platform to collaborate with and promote the artists she met throughout the city, like Robert Mapplethorpe and Timothy Greenfield-Sanders. This type of process came naturally after her time at CalArts and NSCAD — “I would just do concepts,” she states — and in addition to filling in her eight pages every week, she continued to go out every night, generally to either the Mudd Club or Club 57, where she met John Sex, Ann Magnuson, and Keith Haring. Luckily, so did everyone else at the Soho News: “We didn’t start work until one in the afternoon, and everyone was on drugs, and everyone had pink hair, and it was crazy.” It made for a memorable, if chaotic, working experience — Hastreiter remembers that an artist once came in and cut off the finger of the critic who gave him a bad review — but it certainly was not the best business model, and just two years after she joined the paper, the owner sold it to a British firm that shut it all down six months later.

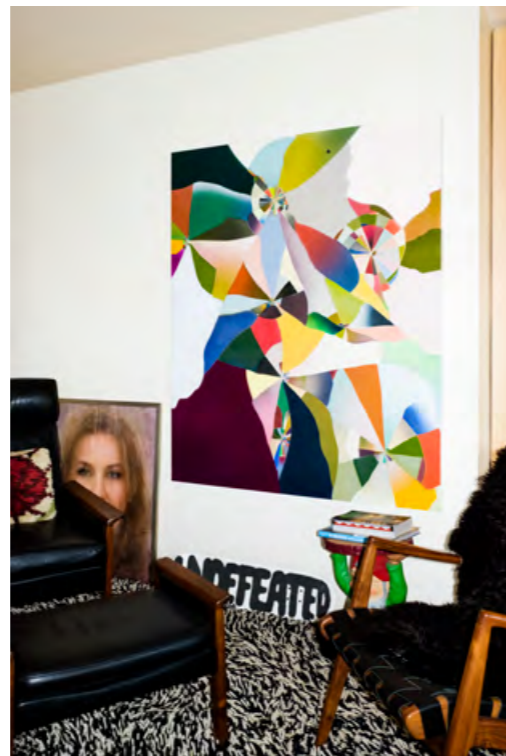
Jobless again, Hastreiter followed a friend’s advice to go to Condé Nast, and for a time she worked as a columnist for Mademoiselle while freelancing for other titles, like Vanity Fair. Shifting from a downtown weekly, where she had complete creative control, to one of the largest media corporations, where she was just another part of the bureaucratic machine, created tension almost immediately. “I started doing stuff freelance, but I hated it. It was disgusting, it was corporate, so I didn’t really want to work there,” Hastreiter remarks. Instead of becoming bitter and jaded, however, she focused her dissatisfaction and hatred of all things corporate to fuel her next project. “So then I was just like, we have to start our own paper. That’s how I started Paper.”

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Born out of her apartment on Lispenard Street just below Canal, Paper set out to be everything Condé Nast was not. Instead of a corporation, it was a true community. Hastreiter met her co-founder David Hershkovits while they were both working at the Soho News, where they quickly bonded over going out, and they filled the pages of the early issues with work by their friends. Hastreiter's parents even pitched in, and she remembers that her father would often drive and distribute the issues to newsstands around the city. Of course, the lack of any kind of funding or backing created a constant financial strain, and many of the aesthetic and stylistic choices that came to define Paper were originally born out of a harsh economic reality: They simply did not have the money to do it any other way. This trend, Hastreiter notes, continued throughout Paper's existence, but far from forcing concessions, it was frequently the driving force for the magazine's constant innovation. Even the iconic fold-out poster design of the early issues — which helped set Paper apart from anything else available — was only devised after they realized they could only pay to print sixteen pages.

The independence that came with this, however, proved to be essential, and it allowed Hastreiter to focus on Paper's founding concept: "To just tell everybody what was going on." Naturally, Hastreiter's vision of "what was going on" was unlike anyone else's. Refusing to define itself in the narrow ways advertisers expected, Paper crisscrossed between art, fashion, music, and film to focus on cultural movements in their totality. This allowed the same concept to be reflected in an outfit as much as a new musical style. Reflecting on her vision at the time, Hastreiter remarks, "I always loved the high/low look, that was my thing." Far from being superficial, the mixing of Manolo Blahniks with thrifted finds from Screaming Mimi's paralleled the other essential high/low combination at the time: the meeting of hip-hop and street culture from uptown with the arty punks downtown.

It was a new, nascent scene and Paper was right there on the front lines. Where other magazines might have been content to stand on the sidelines and comment on what they saw happening, Hastreiter and Paper dove right in, becoming active members of the scene and throwing parties — "the best parties" — that encouraged unexpected encounters and merged legends like Madonna, Afrika Bambaataa, and Glenn O'Brien. It also led to what later became a hallmark technique of Hastreiter's — connecting seemingly disparate people to produce startlingly original work. As she recalls, her very first collaboration of this type brought together none other than Vivienne Westwood and Keith Haring to create a fashion collection.

If such a dynamic institution as Paper can even be said to have a core practice, that would be it. Through fashions that faded, and scenes that came and went, the spirit of collaboration — of connecting people — remained the rudder guiding the course, steering Hastreiter into whatever was sure to be the next big thing. Being right on the money when it came to cool, however, did not always translate into bringing in money. "She paid me in clothes," says Hastreiter about connecting Westwood with Haring, "but they're good." In fact, it often actively got in the way.

"We were early influencers before that word existed," she states, but advertisers and agencies — whose ad buys were Paper's main source of revenue — struggled to understand the concept.

As a result, Hastreiter again had to innovate: "It was all survival, because we never had any money. Every single thing we did was to keep it surviving and keep it independent, so we wouldn't have to answer to anybody." She eventually brought her collaborations out of the underground and started hustling to get ads — her standard line at the time was, "Wouldn't you rather have 100 somebodies than 1,000 nobodies?" — by connecting brands directly with the cultural scene they so desperately wanted to reach. This might be standard practice now — "It's almost tired," Hastreiter remarks while musing over today's seemingly endless stream of collaborative releases — but at the time it was completely fresh. Eventually, this informal work developed into its own standalone creative agency within Paper called Extra Extra, setting an industry standard that so many magazines, including Highsnobiety, still operate by.

Out of the many projects and numerous brands she's worked on, Hastreiter's legacy might best be defined by her work with her first big client: Target. "I love Target," she gushes, even remembering that during her days as a hippie in St. Louis her parents tried to straighten her out by taking her there, so when she says it was a natural part of her creative process to publish a spread in Paper commissioning artists, designers, and architects to dream up a product they would create for Target, you believe her. Eventually, someone in the company heard about it, and the fantasy became reality, kicking off their series of now ubiquitous — and frequently critically acclaimed — high/low collaborations.

"Looking back, I can say I just did it all intuitively," she states matter-of-factly about her penchant for helping brands catch on to the next big thing before anyone had even heard of them. Her secret? "I would connect them with cultural players, and culture." Even as she became more involved with massive companies, she was careful to maintain the freedom and independence that allowed her to stay ahead of the curve, while always ensuring the artists she worked with did as well. "I'm very good at finding great talent, but when you're a good editor, you have to let the talent be free."

Really, that's what it all comes down to: the freedom to work intuitively, to move without constraints, and follow cool wherever it goes. Though her days at Paper are now behind her, it's clear these principles still drive Hastreiter today. As we sit in her apartment on the long, L-shaped couch — clearly designed to spark conversation and the sharing of ideas — she emphatically declares, "I'm not working with any companies, with any people I don't love. I don't want to do any work that's mediocre," dedicating her immense talents and taste instead to the pursuit of greatness. She still switches effortlessly between roles, but this resolve remains throughout, driving Hastreiter's discoveries to define decades with their half-lives then lingering far longer than anyone could have ever figured, mutating and evolving into something new, something now: a complete and total cultural movement.

