

## **APA, or Adventures of Marketing in Contemporary Art**

### **Artist & Market Relationships In Russia**

Whenever it comes to the relationship between artists and art market, we inevitably face the two mutually exclusive attitudes: the first is that true art and true artists are non-for-profit and should not even think about being for-profit; the second is that that very “true art” cannot exist without the art market. But let us put aside all the differences between what is true and what is not true because the subject is and will be covered in numerous books. Let us instead look deeper into what is happening in the Russian art system right now and how the artists and the market interact with each other. To keep it short, let us focus on two elements of this system: recently emerged online schools for artists and amateurs, and marketing for artists, also known as (self-) promotion.

What would be the fundamental truth that we need to analyze the events that occur at the intersection of art and business? Let us accept the fact that today’s art system does not provide any clear criteria for evaluating art projects because the art itself has no clear boundaries anymore. Quite the opposite, artists tend to mix a wide range of strategies, adopting methods and tools from various fields and bringing in know-how to put their ideas into practice. This ability to maneuver allows them to stay afloat amid the blurred relationships between gallerists, buyers, curators, and viewers. The marketplace is not an exception: creatives are actively capturing the area of business, both criticizing it and finding new opportunities. Even in Russia, where the art market is more of a pallid imitation than a reality, the projects inspired by art and business relations end up being, in our opinion, just fine. That is particularly true for those artists who got the chance to do their projects in the Western world where everyone gets to play by the book.

Thus, for example, back in the 1990s, a group of Russian artists established a joint-stock company called NMS AG (AO “Novaya Moskovskaya Shkola” — the New Moscow School LLC). The group members were searching for potential stakeholders to join their bogus firm project and taking part in shareholders’ fairs. During the International Fair of Liability Limited Companies (IAM — Internationale Aktiengesellschaft Messe), a visitor of the project’s exhibition stand could see the New Moscow School’s ad campaign “Reasons For Success” that stated: “Celebrating the hyperreality: the company doesn’t produce, but its stocks are growing!”; “An NMS AG shareholder is both a co-owner and co-author of the art!”; “Present your shares at shareholders’ meetings. A vernissage is a

shareholders' meeting!", etc. The group participated in international fairs of limited liability companies held in Hannover, Brno, and Frankfurt am Main as well as in exhibitions in different cities. During his interviews at that time, the group member Aleksandr Sokolov often spoke about art as a "success strategy", as "vita peracta" and "management and art management". At the same time, he had to master the theory and practice of financial and exchange operations to let the company function and its stocks grow<sup>1</sup>.

Founded in 2001, Art Business Consulting (the ABC group) unites the artists from Moscow, Russia, Maksim Ilukhin, Natalja Struchkova, and Mikhail Kosolapov, and centers its art practice on office workers and mid-level managers. Initially, an office was seen as a method of exposition and not as a tool of criticism. After a while, the ABC has turned it into a method for representing the whole modern market system. At the same time, however, the group holds back on the position of social criticism in its artworks and treats an office employee as a "low ranker", the traditional character in the Russian culture.

The juxtaposition of artists, business and art market themes is frequently present in both mainstream and non-mainstream art scenes.

In 2008–2009, Kirill Shamanov from Saint-Petersburg, Russia, the artist who also positions himself as the chief visionary officer of Tajiks-Art corporation<sup>2</sup>, jointly with Aleksandr Efremov, a science artist, founded a group called "Tajiks-Art" to criticize the "secondary importance of Russian contemporary art and the exploitation of man by man that infiltrated our capitalist society". Initially, the project had the form of a price list published on LiveJournal. The list included prices for the services offered by migrant performers that could "customize" and reenact any performance for a relatively small fee<sup>3</sup>. Thus, Tajiks-Art reenacted the performances by Marina Abramovich, Jonathan Meese, Santiago Sierra, Yoko Ono, Yves Klein, and other artists at the venues of Winzavod Center for Contemporary Art (Moscow), "Art-Moskva" (Moscow), and other art institutions.

In 2013–2016, the female artists Ludmila Anoshenkova and Anna Khodorkovskaya from Moscow, Russia, created a project *www.artstreamshop.com* to sell pieces of art in a "home shopping" mode. They also played it out onsite at

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<sup>1</sup> For more detailed information see: Ludmila Bredikhina, Aleksandr Sokolov, "Email Correspondence", *Moscow Art Magazine*, 2003, no 47.

<sup>2</sup> The artists named their corporation 'Tajiks-Art' after the ethnic group from Tajikistan that makes up the majority of labor migrants in today's Russia. Labour migrants take low-skilled, poorly-paid jobs and work in harsh conditions.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.kirshamanov.com/tajiks-art-rus>

different venues in Russia and beyond, including Austria and Romania. The artists called this real-time happening a “performance” aimed at “knocking the pathos off the art sales”. The show was broadcast live and then saved on the website.

Since 2017, Anna and Vitaly Cherepanov, the artists from Nizhny Tagil, Russia, have been running a project “Auction Kosti (Dice)”<sup>4</sup> on Facebook. Artists could join the project by providing their portfolio of artworks as lots to be “played dice” for. A buyer that agreed to play would roll the dice and see how much the piece of art costs: the first dice would indicate a digit in the ones columns, the second in the tens column, the third in the hundreds column, etc. Moreover, the participating artists could grant one of their works off the game to the auction organizers. Through this process, the collection “Auction Kosti (Dice)” was born. The artists have been showing it in various cities. At the time of writing this article (August, 2019), twelve games were held and one show was put on in Nizhny Tagil, Russia.

Self-organized auctions, fairs, and courses appear every now and then across the country. Artists’ eagerness to commercialize themselves, while criticizing the system for bending them to do so, is an obvious and reasonable strategy. Very often the strategy indeed aims at making a profit to keep an art space in operation, for example, the sales of artworks at Elektrozaod Gallery (Moscow) or the New Year’s sales “100 per item” at “Center Red” (Moscow) in 2016. The Saint Petersburg-based group North-7 was throwing art fairs in different locations. The biggest event called “Saint Dogvillesburg” was held in the “artists’ town” format, in the run-up to the New Year festivities, in Sevkabel Port. The fair was promoted as an alternative to the “dull commercial gallery format”, as a community of like-minded individuals from the Petersburg art scene, as a carnival, and eventually as a promotional way to introduce contemporary art to the urban community going beyond “intellectual borders hyped up by the museum and gallery establishment”.

Yan Tamkovich-Friske from Moscow in his art practice sticks to the strategy of misrepresenting the goods/money relationships<sup>5</sup>. Thus, when putting a show at Igor Markin’s gallery ART4 in 2017, he set to cheat on the gallerist’s buyers. The artist provided Markin with the “unsellable” pieces of art while tucking away the more significant works inside his raincoat, just like Aleksandr Petrelli usually does with his “Pal’to” (Overcoat) Gallery. While Markin put price tags on museum exhibits with amounts in excess of a thousand euros, the artist began to offer works from his self-organized exhibition for only 500 rubles (for about seven euros), stating

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<sup>4</sup> <https://actiondice.ru/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/my.darkest.light.will.shine>

that art should be accessible to everyone. As a result, visitors purchased all the works exhibited in the Tamkovich-Friske's "Pal'to" (Overcoat) Gallery, ignoring Markin and his "museum exhibition". During his anti-institutional protest Tamkovich-Friske proclaimed that now he would stamp and put up for sale variations of the same work under the title "Tuporylaya" ("Blunt-faced")<sup>6</sup>. He also announced the death of art and that he chose the path of mass production of "fast food art": "No more art. From now on, it is just business."

In 2018, the artist Denis Semyonov from Moscow launched an online space WCBG (White Cube Blockchain Gallery), "the art that wants to be alive. The sincerest, loudest, and the quietest show projects in Moscow, opening new dimensions of art, mailboxes, and badly closed attic doors<sup>7</sup>." WCBG projects include the Denomination award, "the least prestigious contemporary art award in Russia". Its mission is to suppress contemporary artists and to support the smallest art shows in the world.

As we can see, the use of business techniques did not hurt the practice of Russian artists and the whole artistic process. It turned out to be a natural way to reflect upon the relationships between the art and the market. Projects of this kind enrich the overall process of understanding entrepreneurial and marketing strategies in art and leave authors a wide discretion.

The art market and art business naturally draw most of their criticism from artists. But there are just a few art groups and projects ready to work consistently to transform this system. One example is the project "Artists' Promotion Agency" launched by Ilmira Bolotyan in 2018–2019<sup>8</sup>. The APA is a set of online and offline events aimed at the promotion of the artist herself; virtual and onsite coaching for unconfident, confused, or in-crisis artists, for up-and-comers, college graduates, and others. Presenting the visual content in a coaching-like manner and using Instagram as a platform for promotion, Bolotyan relatively quickly established her reputation as a specialist in the creative promotion and personal branding as well as in artists' and curators' coaching. She did all that without having any special education, relying solely on information gleaned from the Internet and on her personal experience.

### **Artists' Promotion Agency: How It Works**

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<sup>6</sup> [https://vk.com/wall-153738129\\_794](https://vk.com/wall-153738129_794)

<sup>7</sup> <http://wcbg.tilda.ws/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://taplink.cc/ilmira.bolotyan>

The APA project started as an Instagram blog<sup>9</sup> in September 2018. What actually turned the artist's blog into a promotion platform was the fact that the Russian art community fears of — or finds improper — talking about the commercial, integral, part of the artlife. Even though, the artistic background cannot be complete without knowledge of the marketplace and promotion of artists. The only public offline course about artists' promotion called "Self-promotion Strategies for Emerging Artists" is offered by "Free Workshops" at Moscow Museum of Modern Art. The course includes five classes taught by actual artists who shift every year. Bolotyan was invited to teach the course by the curator Daria Kamyshnikova in winter 2018. The course materials developed by the artist might have laid the basis for her new project — Artists' Promotion Agency (the APA).

What has been done so far to promote Bolotyan's Instagram in the new format? Ekaterina Romanova, the assistant of Ilmira Bolotyan, with the consent of the blog's owner, spoke about the key work stages: "Before having asked me to administrate the project, Ilmira had deleted all the previously published content except for her works from "Museum Date" project. At our first meeting, we discussed the concept of the blog and its promotion strategy, analyzed the competitors' profile, and looked deeper into the market niche and the content that we had — Ilmira's photos, biography, and plans. I agreed to participate in the project at once. For me, working with artists is an interesting and very special experience.

Then, based on the basic data, I drafted the blog's feed layout that subsequently changed a few times, from black-and-white and airy blue to plain black-and-red design, from pictures with captions to simply photos.

Visual content is the key to Instagram. So, we used Ilmira's photos — her portraits, shots of her works, sketches, and created new content doing photo sessions, shooting videos (or producing them under barter arrangements in exchange for Ilmira's counseling services). Barters are very popular on Instagram.

We also needed to develop a content plan, a system of topical and personal hashtags and categories. Ilmira wrote all texts by herself. It was decided that the only no-posting day would be Sunday. Sometimes Ilmira would create content in advance, sometimes on the day of posting, on special occasions or by mood.

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/ilmira.bolotyan/>

We have been in touch since the day we met, communicating on a daily basis. Any of us can text another at any time of the day. We often discuss the details, align on stuff. Instagram is a collaborative creation. This whole thing is basically the blog promotion strategy.

My responsibilities also included regular posting, targeting, layout design, photo-editing, ads negotiations, and sometimes photo shootings at Ilmira's request."

Late September 2018, a few weeks after the project started, thanks to her booming social media activity, Bolotyan got invited to teach a course on artists' promotion in December at the Higher School of Economics Art and Design School<sup>10</sup>. The course included only four classes but promised to teach students to analyze the artistic strategies of contemporary art practitioners as well as to develop their own self-promotion skills.

By uniting 13 active students of the course in late December 2018, Bolotyan created a closed group "We are artists"<sup>11</sup> on Facebook where she would answer questions regarding the art community, residencies, exhibitions, etc., monthly charging the participation fee of 500 rubles (for about seven euros) per person. Four curatorial course projects created after the lecture "An artist as a curator" were combined into one project "Artists' Promotion Agency" (APA) and submitted by Bolotyan to the contest "Workshops 2019" at the Center for Creative Industries "Fabrika". The APA won the "Experiment" nomination. Four group exhibitions of the students and their fellows — "A Normal Daughter" curated by Tarya Polyakova<sup>12</sup>, "The Contemporary Art Pyramid" curated by Aleksandr Mekhryakov<sup>13</sup>, "Y Landscape" curated by Anastasia Maslovskaya<sup>14</sup>, "Draw This! The Art Therapy Case for Seven Artists" curated by Olga Ornata<sup>15</sup> — were held at "Fabrika" in April–June 2019. The participants would chip in 500 rubles (for about seven euros) each on the show openings and took part in each other's projects, increasing the number of exhibitions for their CVs. After all, that is what really counts for an artist's promotion. For example, Lisa Neklessa got featured in each of the four fellow exhibitions.

As a follow-up to the project, the final event where Bolotyan met her followers was held, and the catalogs of each project were printed out and then placed in the

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<sup>10</sup> <https://design.hse.ru/sunday/118>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/groups/350472122430417/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/events/2313690822179460/>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/groups/275458256506860/>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/events/1088488444685610/>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/events/343360109689755/>

Archive of Contemporary Art at the Garage Museum. This way, Bolotyan enabled her students not only to gain artistic and curatorial experience, which became a debut for most of them, at a cultural institution. She also created conditions for them to win the contest at the CCI “Fabrika”, even though the age of participants and the format of their shows did not meet the contest’s requirements, to get media coverage, create a CV and portfolio in just a year, and finally earn a place in art history by getting the artists and curators registered in the Russian Art Archive Network (RAAN)<sup>16</sup>. Bolotyan was listed as a project coordinator at “Fabrika” where she was actually performing this role while replying to the participants’ questions, helping them at the display, dealing with the press, and promoting the projects in social media.

Moreover, Bolotyan was invited to be a curator on contemporary art at the Anna Radchenko Academy<sup>17</sup> to mentor artists at Radchenko’s private club “Breakthrough”. She was also teaching the course within the program “One Step Ahead”, grading assignments of student artists in all modules. Late July 2019, Bolotyan threw a two-day intensive course “Personal branding for artists and designers” jointly with the marketer Tehhi Polonskaya at the British Higher School of Art and Design<sup>18</sup>. The artist also gave lectures on self-promotion at the Respublika bookstore, participated in the online workshop “A Rich Artist” by Olga Volna, and joined the round table on the same topic organized by Untitled Foundation<sup>19</sup>. Besides, Bolotyan was selling the audio interview with Russian artist Taus Makhacheva about the artist’s promotion<sup>20</sup>, collecting money through the APA platform to produce catalogs of her students’ exhibitions and organize lectures featuring the speakers of the project “The Contemporary Art Pyramid”<sup>21</sup> created by her student Aleksandr Mekhryakov. She also created her own course “Self-promotion for artists in the regions and beyond”<sup>22</sup> that, however, became a poor success, despite targeted advertising and multiple giveaways. It turned out that artists were more interested in Bolotyan’s face-to-face counseling rather than in independent course work. That confirms the well-known marketers’ point that personal branding implies more direct communication with followers.

At the same time, Bolotyan kept providing counseling services to artists. Since January till July 2019, she has advised a total of 80 people — mostly women —

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<sup>16</sup> <https://russianartarchive.net/en>

<sup>17</sup> <https://radchenkoacademy.ru/creative>

<sup>18</sup> [https://britishdesign.ru/about/tutors/127604/?sphrase\\_id=133385](https://britishdesign.ru/about/tutors/127604/?sphrase_id=133385)

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.winzavod.ru/calendar/round-table/mekhanizmy-samoprodvizheniya-khudozhnika/>

<sup>20</sup> <https://agency.ilmirabolotyan.com/audiozapisi>

<sup>21</sup> <https://agency.ilmirabolotyan.com/piramida>

<sup>22</sup> <https://agency.ilmirabolotyan.com/kurs>

from different towns and countries. Some of them took more than one consultation, even though, Bolotyan's sessions were designed to provide each student with a roadmap for a year ahead. The ultimate elements of the plan included advancing education and self-learning, developing at least three new projects, building a portfolio, CV, and writing an artist's statement. Almost everyone shared a favorable feedback after the consultations but the measurable positive results such as shows and promotions held by those who stayed in touch with Bolotyan, can be demonstrated by the following persons: Irina Vershina from Vladivostok, Valentin Trusov from Saint Petersburg, Darya Eliseeva from Yekaterinburg, Oleg Semyonovykh from Chelyabinsk who got a place on the Fabrika's Workshops program in 2019, Marina Clemente from Paris (France), Irina Polonskaya from Haifa (Israel), Olga Bubnova and Asya Dobrovolskaya from Moscow.

Can promotion of Bolotyan as an artist via Instagram be seen as a success? It is no secret that today, the Instagram community is a commercial enterprise where promotion and the number of followers depend on the content and most importantly on the financial input. On the one hand, the growing demand for Bolotyan's services shows that she managed to find the key tender point of her target audience. On the other hand, Bolotyan and her assistant decided to grow the audience of her blog without inflating the number or paying high publicity costs. Since the project started, Bolotyan spent in total only 11,500 rubles (for about 170 euros) on advertising. For comparison, according to Ekaterina Romanova who has been working for a vast variety of bloggers and brands, some of the fashion bloggers she advised would spend as much as 150 thousand (for about 2175 euros) to 1 million rubles (for about 14,495 euros) on advertising per month. In the case of Bolotyan's promotion, Facebook ads and posts by some third-party Instagram users were used. A very specific niche of Bolotyan's blog played an important part, too. Paid advertising could be only efficient in spaces where its target audience would go, and that turned out to be a problem. The thing is that most people who write about art on Instagram do not usually advertise their accounts. When it came to the blog promotion via user accounts on related topics, everything would come down to the user's work ethics. Russian Instagram is like a wet market where there are no written rules and everything is about reputation: a blogger may advertise the content for all it's worth or may post a single story. It is entirely up to this blogger to decide and the person who paid him or her for promotion is left unprotected. However, after using these promotion tools, the number of Bolotyan's followers has increased from 703 to 4000.

As we can see, in the APA project, Bolotyan uses participation format by engaging creative people in artistic and business activities without bending under the commercial system of the existing market but applying its — and her own — tools to influence the market and its changes.

## **Infopreneurship In The Arts**

The APA is a unique case that has become feasible under certain economic and cultural conditions of the 2010s. The project emerged amid booming motivational and educational businesses. The explosive growth of online schools and courses has been driven by particular players who tried to profit from the trending professional, motivational, and life coaching industry. This trend may owe its origin to Anthony (Tony) Robbins, a bestselling author of “Unlimited Power”, listed under “World’s 100 Most Influential People” by Forbes.

The Russian infobusinesses such as “Business Molodost” (Business Youth), Synergy (University and Digital Forum), “Transformator” (Transformer), ACCEL, and others borrowed Anthony Robbins’s ideas and localized them. The basics of building credibility for an infobusiness or an infoguru usually come down to showing off the greatest achievements of a coach — his or her business interests, luxury cars, real estate, and multimillion profits. Then, the coach would tell a story representing himself as an average Joe who used to live just like everybody else in the room but eventually succeeded. The coach would then use slides and videos to make the information easier to understand and thus to motivate the audience. Motivation is the key product of infopreneurs, wrapped up and sold as educational content.

The audience of infopreneurs is the people who tend to be driven by external motivation. The goal of motivational coaching is to give people hope and make them believe that they can do better, inspire them and provide easy-to-use tools to achieve the goal. Most of the information offered by coaches is available online, can be found in business literature or provided by actual professionals during dedicated courses. The motivation problem, if it really exists, shall and must be treated by expert care. But if the person who lacks motivation gets addicted to motivational trainings, he starts to crave for a regular dose to make a boost. Infobusinesses benefit from such people and keep selling them more courses and workshops.

The most infamous player in this market is “Business Molodost” (Business Youth), hereinafter — BM, the company of a mixed reputation: some idolize its founders, others accuse them of fraud and sectarianism. The term “infogipsies” was coined to describe people who teach not very useful things and then charge their students for it using little tweaks and guerilla marketing. These usually include the founders of BM Mikhail Dashkiev and Petr Osipov, as well as Ayaz Shabutdinov, Dmitry Portnyagin, Andrey Parabellum, Artyom Maslov, and others.

The Russian online website Rusbase lists the following methods that BM uses in their work<sup>23</sup>:

- The elements of sectarianism: encouraging new member acquisition, playing on people’s complexes and low self-esteem, treating founders as gurus;
- Exaggeration of the course leavers’ achievements;
- Reluctance to refund money if a buyer is not satisfied with a service;
- “Pyramidality” when “an infobusiness originates another infobusiness”, e.g., a school establishes a new school or a range of courses. Its authors teach their students how to found new schools, so then the students could start up their own information businesses, etc.;
- Populism and oversimplification of educational material: the content is presented by the “maximum result, minimum effort” formula, which is not true to the real business situation;
- No guaranteed results and no responsibility for the actions of the course leavers on BM’s side.

But with regard to the above mentioned, Rusbase points out that, according to many students, BM did get them motivated to start up their own business or to upgrade an existent one. The plus points also included the clear and concise presentation of the content as well as new networking opportunities for the students.

As can be easily guessed, the infobusiness in Russia could not but embrace the art industry and very soon the following initiatives appeared and are still in business as of now:

- “Op Pop Art”, the pop art school of Anastasia Postrigay, which offers the courses “Art History 101”, “Contemporary Art”, “How to Read a Painting”, etc.;

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<sup>23</sup> <https://rb.ru/longread/biznes-molodost/>

- “Synergy Art Academy” by Elizaveta Frolova, which offers the courses “Art Exhibitions from A to Z”, “Contemporary Art and Art World”, “How to Make Money with Art”, “Art: From its Origins to Our Time”, etc., plus art tours, art breakfasts, and art nights;
  - “Artpazl” by Sergey Guschin, the gallerist who authored the course “The Secrets of Painting Masterpieces”;
  - “Sreda Obuchenia” (“Learning Environment”) by Mikhail Vrubel that opened “the first-ever online Russian contemporary art school” run by its “leader”, the artist Arseny Zhilyaev;
- and others.

Besides, there are a lot of small learning programs such as the online workshop “Rich Artist” by Olga Volna.

Who can make use of such courses? Only beginners, who are familiar with the subject and, most importantly, have some disposable assets to buy the course. However, it is not always the case that the title of the course aligns with what the students expect to learn. For example, the course “How to Make Money with Art” — which on its face, has to answer the question that so many creatives ask — is in reality about auctions that are still a long way off for many students.

According to some of the founders, their learning programs enjoy great popularity and bring in good money<sup>24</sup>. But it is impossible to prove this information, just as to test the gained knowledge and real achievements of the course leavers. One possible way of finding it out would be to buy all the courses, apply them for expertise, and then to survey the course participants.

The strategic pattern of starting up an online art business echoes what infobusiness owners tend to teach: find a gap in the market, promote your product and yourself in social media, build your personal brand, create a range of products and landing pages that sell, inflate follower counts by paying for ads, create a sales funnel and start selling. Ilmira Bolotyan has taken a similar way, the only difference being that she did not pay the infobusinesses for their learning materials, but got them for free or bought them elsewhere for a small fee. Bolotyan took advantage of her ability to find relevant information and employed her assistant’s services.

“Having received some free materials on how to start an online school from ACCEL and then a few calls from their managers with sales offers, I turned to

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<sup>24</sup> As an example, read the interview with Anastasiya Postrigay: <https://incrussia.ru/fly/oppopart-span-kak-art-diler-raskrutila-svoyu-onlajn-shkolu-v-instagram-i-zarabatyvaet-na-lektsiyah-1-mln-rublej-v-mesyats-span/>

Google and found all the information available for free or for a lower price as part of other programs. Thus, I bought a similar course created by a woman from Donezk, Ukraine, for 3,000 rubles (for about 44 euros) instead of 35,000 rubles (for about 507 euros). During the course, I learned about the structure of such online schools, the communication styles used by teachers, their experience in using chat rooms, etc. That was sufficient for me to launch my own business project, and most importantly to learn everything by myself using Google and free (or really cheap) materials that coaches and instructors were giving away as tripwires and lead magnets.”

In an interview with *Kommersant*, the co-owner of BM Mikhail Dashkiev said: “We do not conceal the fact that we teach people the basic principles of analytics, marketing, and sales that 99 percent of Russian companies do not apply. [...] But despite the simplicity of these principles, for some reason, nobody knows them.”<sup>25</sup> The same is true for the existence of professional competencies in the arts. Bolotyan’s personal coaching was based on providing participants with the self-promotion tools that most professional artists are familiar with and that are publicly available — in particular in Bolotyan’s lectures and her reading list on art books. Was it a trick or a helping hand? The question is still open. As Bolotyan put it, some artists had no idea about either how to market themselves or what artistic activity actually meant. Most of them were also unable to start research because they did not know what exactly to search for.

In the very same interview, another co-owner of BM Petr Osipov said that the value of their classes is in “making people face reality”. In the event, the coaches would often coax — or let us say, “motivate”, which would be a stretching point, though — the people into doing things they were not ready for. Challenging the participants to start up their own business by all means, including by taking out a loan, the coaches did not warn them of possible risks and consequences. What makes the APA project different from other infobusinesses is that while getting people motivated and convinced that marketing tools can fast-track their way to the Russian art scene, Bolotyan provided the participants with the hard facts that in her opinion would accurately reflect reality. In fact, from the perspective of Bolotyan, everything that she taught and advocated during her programs was true. However, the use of marketing tools made the “truth” look suspicious and prompted new rumors within the Moscow art community, including the speculations on the author’s probable insanity.

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<sup>25</sup> <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2503360>

What Bolotyan did not implement in her project was what would take large investments and a lot of human resources. For example, the APA did not integrate any CRM software — an automatic database to manage a company’s interaction with each customer — or a team of sales managers who would call potential customers to convince them to buy a course. However, a lead magnet was used to collect email addresses and phone numbers of some targets and then an email newsletter was launched to share the latest news of the Agency and offer the email subscribers some new products.

Pretty much all Instagram posts were designed to sell, offering a particular product produced by Bolotyan, for example, exhibitions, lectures, workshops, courses, interviews, counseling services, masterclasses, etc. The posts were also aiming to build the expert image of the artist and to “benefit the target audience”. “Stress sales” came to be widely used, too, when the followers were notified about the end of the counseling period, which, in turn, made them buy sessions and pay for them in advance.

In just one year, Bolotyan had spent around 150,000 rubles (for about 2,174 euros) of her own assets on the APA project, and that is the smallest possible amount. Some people may spend much, much more on starting up an infobusiness. Bolotyan earned about 400,000 rubles (for about 5,780 euros) by providing counseling services, giving lectures, and running intensive courses. Part of the proceeds went to support other Bolotyan’s projects and that, to some extent, proves the fact that marketing in the art sector can help artists relieve their financial difficulties.

## **The New Role of an Artist**

Up until now, the most common and institutionally approved form of an art group that would allow outperforming the art market has been an artist-run space, a gallery operated by creators. As the researcher Anna Arutunova puts it, the artist-run spaces represent the heaviest response of the art community to the shifts that occur in the global art industry of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. The artist-run spaces allow their creators to do interesting projects without any intermediary services<sup>26</sup>. Self-organizations have been and still are targeting specific problems: they serve to

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<sup>26</sup> Arutunova A. (2017). *Art Market In The 21st Century. The Room for Artistic Experimentation*. Moscow: HSE Publishing House. Арутюнова А. *Арт-рынок в XXI веке. Пространство художественного эксперимента*. М.: Издательский дом ВШЭ, 2017.

navigate between established institutions, support each other, reconsider the borders and status quo in the art world.

In 2015–2017, Ilmira Bolotyana was a co-founder and an active member of the artist-run space “Center Red”<sup>27</sup>. Interestingly enough, the idea of launching an educational initiative came across the minds of the Center’s members, but only the project “LAN” was brought to life by artists Leta Dobrovolskaya, Natasha Tarr, and Angelina Merenkova. The project drew in a lot of enthusiasts not just because of the free participation but also because of the gap between the high demand for contemporary art education and a low capability to meet this demand.

As the Internet and social media evolve, online education is getting more popular, which makes the members of “Business Molodost” (Business Youth) and other infobusinesses take advantage of this trend. Artists, too, can discover new ways to tell the world about their work. There are many creatives — and not just self-learners — who try to sell their works via Instagram, Facebook, and other platforms without any idea of how the art marketplace works. Most of the online courses and webinars are centered on the burning question of “How To Make a Living as an Artist”. The resolution to be proactive becomes the only viable strategy of survival when all the showrooms are booked for years to come, gallerists and art dealers can be counted on one hand, and curators and critics are too busy or just overloaded. The artist’s choice to take the lead and start promoting him- or herself makes it look like being independent.

Being dependent on something, namely on funding in the arts, is a pressing issue. The fact that art has always been worth money and had — and still has — a purchaser is deliberately ignored. On the other hand, the times we live in are infused with the attempts to debunk the image of an artist as an independent creative genius. But can we still use the word “genius” as the world has become a place where business, marketplace, and the art itself is part of our daily life? There are now artists who act as gallerists (Peter Nagy and Meyer Weisman) and businessmen, whose artistry overlaps with profit-making (Takashi Murakami, Jeff Koons, Damien Hirst). Some artists use commercial operations to perform their artistic tasks. For example, by opening a store, Keith Haring enabled direct communication with the audience, while Sarah Lucas and Tracey Emin (Pop Shop, The Shop) criticized their status of the poor artists.

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<sup>27</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/redcentr/>

In the early 1990s, the concept of an artist being a manager became a hot topic. According to the art expert Ludmila Bredikhina, the idea was executed in Russia in a very peculiar way: some artists literally turned into managers to supervise the newly opened galleries — The First Gallery, Regina Gallery. Today, working at contemporary art institutions, many artists and curators get to perform management functions, and Bolotyan is not an exception.

In the APA project, Bolotyan combines her role of artist-marketer with the role of artist-coach, turning the popular idea of personal branding into the “artist’s self-obsession”, well known to us from the history of art. Creating this image, this private artistic identity, was a conscious strategy. Bolotyan was appealing mainly to Instagram users who aimed to become an artist. She was using the language they would understand, catering to their tastes and needs. The APA project helped to bring the art closer to the public and make the status of an artist more appealing and accessible. Moreover, it seemed like the becoming of an artist-marketer outbalanced the primary function of an artist: to create unique objects. The concerns of growing an artist’s personality, building his or her personal brand, and finding a way to beautifully “wrap it up” for promotion in social media and public space came to the forefront of the APA project. An artist-marketer uses his or her own artistic experience as an example to illustrate daily situations and life cases that are clear not only to experts and fellow artists but also to non-specialist followers, i.e., to general public. It is a completely new image of an artist, who criticizes not so much the art market as the closed nature, aloofness, and elitism of the art community, trying to bring those who in the pre-tolerance age would be called “the crowd” closer to the group and help them get through the system by making a few easy steps. What really matters in the APA is not so much the works of the artists but the “socio-artistic structure” that have come through joint efforts of Bolotyan’s students and customers — her followers on Instagram.

Bringing students into a group and turning all sorts of people into a group of followers can help make a bigger impact on society and at the same time “create a work environment that is intellectually and emotionally stimulating” (Lind M.<sup>28</sup>). In this context, the teamwork means continuing critique of individualism and of the concept of authorship, which is directly connected to the key market mechanisms. Running the students’ shows at “Fabrika” and bringing the artists’ Instagram

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<sup>28</sup> Lind M. as cited in Arutunova A. (2017). *Art Market In The 21st Century. The Room for Artistic Experimentation*. Moscow: HSE Publishing House. Цит. по: Арутюнова А. *Арт-рынок в XXI веке. Пространство художественного эксперимента*. М.: Издательский дом ВШЭ, 2017.

followers to visit those shows has become an alternative to some conventions of the Russian art scene:

- The common exhibition practice when only an established artist can put on a show at a contemporary art institution;
- The long-lived art institutions that hardly respond to changes;
- Lack of funding;
- The closed nature of the art community.

The independently organized exhibitions, supported by “Fabrika” and funded by small contributions of their participants, proved to be more agile and swift entities, able to easily overcome the industry-specific difficulties. The successful tactics for survival in the struggling economy helped the artists come into the spotlight but most importantly gain new experience and — dare we say it — get motivated for further work. The next steps that the APA members might want to take are to gain visibility among art institutions, keep a high profile, and maintain survivable conditions till things go better.

The formats tested by the participants — non-profit shows, collaborations with musicians, DJs, photographers, multi-disciplinary experts, and nonartists — proved their feasibility and ability to resonate with the public. Making a profit at the APA was not a goal in itself; however, a few ways were invented to encourage mutual assistance through exchanging information for money. Thus, you can listen to all of the lectures in the project “The Contemporary Art Pyramid” by Aleksandr Mekhryakov for a small fee which will then go to support the second part of the project “Contemporary Art Network”<sup>29</sup> that its author puts into operation in Lysva, a small town in Perm Krai.

Criticism of the market system has become commonplace in the contemporary art industry. The realization that both for-profit and non-for-profit artists have no purpose other than achieving the maximum personal benefit helps to come off the high horse in terms of the relations between artists and the market and carry out more ambitious experiments to up-end those relations. A possible way out of this situation would be to find alternative ways for the artists to make money that are not necessarily driven by marketing and the market as well as to encourage collaborative efforts in the art community. That would keep the artists away from

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<sup>29</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/groups/2865047936843897/>

working “to order” for a fair, exhibition or any other event, allowing them to live adequately and play by their own rules, awaiting no gifts from the art institutions.

The final part of Bolotyan’s project was to put her Instagram account for sale. After consulting with the expert Valentin Dyakonov, it was decided to come up with multiple sale scenarios one of which Bolotyan would have to bring into life by the purchase/sale contract date.

## **Advertising**

### **INSTAGRAM ACCOUNT ON ARTISTS’ PROMOTION IS ON SALE!**

Starting from the 6<sup>th</sup> of August 2018, Ilmira Bolotyan’s account on Instagram has been taking off rapidly as a private blog with the educational focus. 3700 target users who belong to a very specific niche — contemporary art and artists’ promotion — have been following the account. Those are real and active followers as one can see from the comment section.

Throughout the whole period, only “fair” tools were used for the account’s promotion: no inflating, mass following, mass liking, or any other “dirty” features were activated. The account was also promoted via paid advertising or posting in user accounts on related topics. Instagram Live videos and stories were often created and shared.

A particular visual style based on Ilmira’s photos, event documentaries, and her works was invented. Along with the feed visual appearance, the header, highlights, and the profile picture were designed.

Permission to use the account implies the user password sending, relogging, and binding the account to a buyer’s credentials — a phone number and an email address.

Needless to say, all Direct Messages will be deleted. Do not count on getting access to the sensitive data)

The scenario of continuing the Instagram account operation can be bought under certain conditions that are to be stipulated.

To get more information about the price, send a direct message.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> At the time of publication of the article, all the content created by Ilmira Bolotyan on Instagram during the project “Artists' Promotion Agency” up to and including August 17, 2019, was acquired by Anna Radchenko Academy and now can be used and permanently deleted at the discretion of the head of the Academy.