

Surviving on Art:

An Artist on Instagram



The Content and Hashtag strategy we used to gain 10K+ genuine followers in one year

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1. A brief introduction

Before I get started, I thought I should just introduce myself. Most of you reading this will in some way be a little familiar with my wife Magdalena's artwork. Since 2016 I have been learning about how to build her artistic profile, both online and offline. The journey has been absolutely incredible and in October 2016 I readily quit my previous career of software engineering in order to support Magdalena full time. Whilst I can't pretend that it's always been easy, it's certainly been possible and her art, in various forms, provides our entire household income.

I began to realise that all this information that I've been absorbing and then applying may also be useful to other artists out there and Magdalena suggested that I try to condense it into courses. I hope that this first one about Instagram is useful to you. There are hundreds of free resources out there on the internet that provide some of the information that I'll share, but there's very little that's aimed explicitly at artists.

I could (and originally did) write pages about our experiences over the past few months but you're not here to read about us, you want to get on with learning about how we use Instagram. So here goes...

2. Instagram and art

Instagram has rapidly become the de-facto social media channel for the art world. According to the [2017 Hiscox Online Art Trade Report](https://www.hiscox.co.uk/online-art-trade-report/)¹, Instagram has now taken over from Facebook as being the most used social platform for artists, art dealers and collectors to disseminate and discover emerging talent.

How to stand out though? As an artist, how can you find your following amongst the millions of creatives around the world that are all attempting to get recognised?

I'm going to explain some of the most powerful techniques and approaches that we have used to bring abstract expressionist landscape and figurative artist [Magdalena Morey](https://www.magdalenamorey.com/)² from complete Instagram obscurity to having a following of over 10K in just under one year.

Instagram is an enormous platform (800,000,000 unique monthly users as of December 2017³) and there are an awful lot of exceptionally talented people out there looking for their opportunity to shine. Possibly one of the most important lessons that Magdalena and I have learnt since beginning this journey of a life supported solely by her artwork is that you make your own opportunities. You aim your life in the direction you want to go and make it happen. Nobody else can or will do it for you. Nobody else will care about what you do unless you care enough to make it happen. Once you have that mindset, it's amazing what opportunities appear.

How has being on Instagram helped us? Exposure. By regularly presenting Magdalena's work to a hugely diverse but also very relevant (more on that later) audience we have had various direct sales to collectors from various parts of the globe as well as numerous new contracts to exhibit with galleries worldwide. The only problem we've had from all of this is that it takes time to learn how to ship artwork to all of these places. That's one problem I'm more than happy to deal with!

If you have already succumbed to the starving artist myth, break that pattern of thinking. From a business perspective, art is a commodity. It can also be your way of life! It is possible to make a living from selling your art and building a solid foundation of exposure and support is just one aspect of the journey, but if you can get that in place, you will be well on the way!

1 <https://www.hiscox.co.uk/online-art-trade-report/>

2 <https://www.magdalenamorey.com/>

3 <https://www.omnicoreagency.com/instagram-statistics/>

3. Get a public account

Firstly, you'll need a **public** Instagram account. Sounds obvious I know, but the number of artist's profiles we've encountered that are set to private is just mind-blowing! Magdalena gets numerous requests to critique artist's paintings based entirely on the contents of their private accounts and it never ends well.

Whilst you're setting up your account, take the opportunity to link your Instagram account to Facebook to be able to make the most of the possibility of cross-posting, where you can share your Instagram posts to Facebook, or vice-versa.

Private to Public

If you've already got a private IG account loaded with holiday snaps, pics of the dog, the kids, your dinner, the car, etc, etc, please think very carefully about whether you want to make it public!

If you're promoting a holistic view of the art and artistic lifestyle and have already been mixing shots of your artwork into the general feed, by all means go for it, but do try to put yourself into the mind of someone, whether they be art collector, gallery or dealer, looking for art online. There can be something vaguely uncomfortable and voyeuristic about looking through a lot of rather personal photos whilst trying to find the photos that show what the artist is really about.

A gallery or potential art collector scouting for new talent is unlikely to be impressed by photos of your dog watching your kid taking their first steps (or vice versa) and whilst there is undoubtedly a certain niche of followers that would love to see photos of you on the beach, they are unlikely to help develop your artistic career.

But I want people to understand who I am and where my art comes from!

Presenting some background about the artist is certainly not a bad thing, it just needs to be considered in the context of a professional profile (more about that later). Do you really want potentially tens or hundreds of thousands of people seeing your personal photos?

Do take the time to think about whether you should save your private account for friends and family and create a new professional Instagram account that only portrays the aspects of your life that will actively help your career.

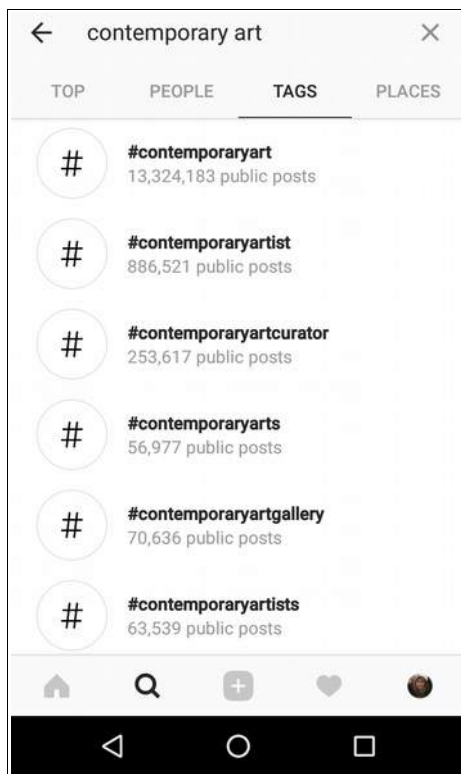
Once you've set up your account, make sure you add a little description in your profile. It's also the only place on Instagram where a link to your website will actually work, so make the most of it!

Create your hashtag list

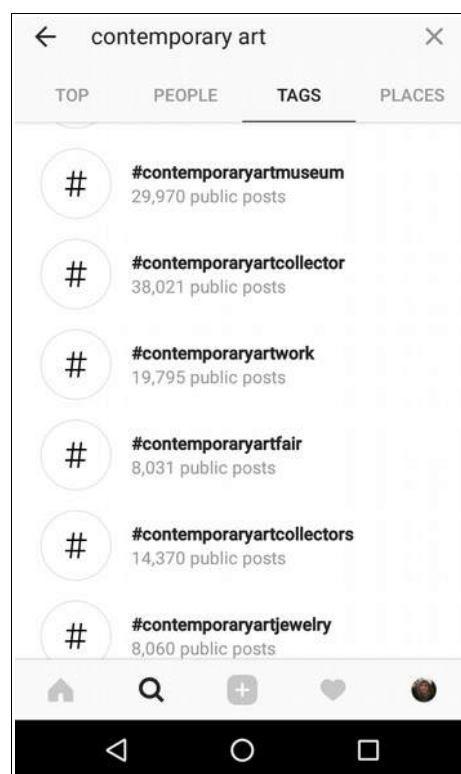
Next we're going to need somewhere to store the list we're about to create. Personally I use a spreadsheet as I find it easiest to sort it later on.⁴

Now comes the interesting part:

Using the search box, enter a search term and switch to the “TAGS” tab. I'm using “contemporary art” as my search term:



1st page of results



2nd page of results

As you can see, Instagram doesn't just return the term that you searched for, but also gives you suggestions of other search terms that may be relevant.

In the example above, all of the terms returned on the first page of results look relevant to my intended usage and each term has been used in lots of public posts.

⁴ If you don't already have Excel or Numbers (on the Mac), the free spreadsheet included in [OpenOffice](http://www.openoffice.org/) (<http://www.openoffice.org/>) works well.

5. Content

In marketing terms, **content** refers to whatever it is that you are presenting to your audience.

Types of content

As an artist you are in the rather enviable position of having a large amount of your content immediately available in the form of **your artwork**.

There's other content that you can include too. Art collectors appreciate a good backstory behind the artworks that they own and your Instagram feed is the perfect place to give potential collectors a bit more of an idea about the artist behind the art.

What inspires you?

If you're a landscape artist, do you have any photos of the landscapes that make your paintbrushes want to sing? If you do figuratives, can you show a picture of your model (watch out for nudity though, Instagram is not particularly tolerant of it). If you're an abstract artist, is there anything that you could post that compliments your work?

Lifestyle photos

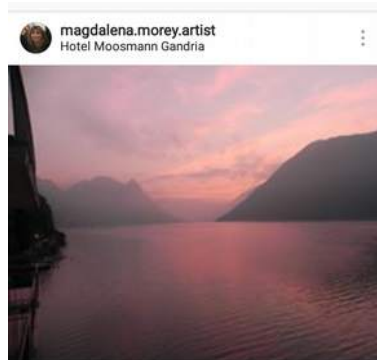
As we're on the subject of backstory, what about lifestyle pics? Are there any photos that you can post that help to give the viewer a better sense of who you are? What motivates you? What gets your creative juices flowing?

I am personally not in the slightest bit interested in photos of cups of coffee with pretty swirls, elegantly presented meals or duck-faced poses in some glitzy hotel unless they are directly relevant to a painting, but I realise that I am likely to be in the minority.

A photo of the artist at work in a messy studio or in a place that was of particular interest or inspiration is of far more interest and helps to give a better feel for how the artist works and how they live their life. There is a certain mystery surrounding the artistic process and lifestyle, so giving occasional glimpses into it can be a subtle way of keeping your audience engaged.

Magdalena's lifestyle photos generally get less engagement than the photos of paintings, presumably because her followers are far more interested in her art than her social habits, however, we have to remember why we include these photos; to bring a sense of who the artist is into the profile feed. If the viewer is faced with a screenful of paintings, no matter how beautiful they are individually, there is a certain monotony of subject. By breaking it up with the occasional non-painting photo, it is instantly more appealing and interesting.

Landscapes are a dominant theme in Magdalena's work so we occasionally include photos of scenery from places that have been particularly inspiring. These serve to hint to viewers how she interprets photos to achieve her paintings. They tend to get lower engagement rates than any other kind of post, however, they also open the way for some interesting tagging possibilities, helping to draw in potential customers that may not have otherwise encountered her work.



Landscapes

Studio shots are normally quite popular. People enjoy seeing the environment in which the artist works; coffee cups, paint splatters on the floor and walls, half finished canvases and a general feel that art is being made in the way that art should be made.



Studio shot

Location shots (aka holiday snaps), as was mentioned earlier, are fine as long as they serve a greater purpose than to simply show off. If the location had or has some specific relationship to the artwork, talk about it, explain it in the photo description. It all goes towards filling in the image that the potential customer has of the person who created their prized painting.



Location shot

Our experience of which type of content to use

Due to the fact that Magdalena is phenomenally productive when she's in the studio, we normally have a lot of paintings available that could potentially go online. Something that we discovered fairly early on though as we began to build her presence and her reputation as an emerging artist is to be consistent about what art you post.

Magdalena has painted many subjects in many styles during the past 20 years and when we first started putting her art online on her first website back in 2005, we added absolutely everything! This is a sure-fire way to confuse your potential collectors and I can't advise against it enough. There were flowers mixed in with pencil and ink drawings, glass paintings and acrylic seascapes, figuratives, mixed media abstractions and loads more! They were all utterly beautiful in their own right and at least we'd separated them into separate pages of her site, but to a potential collector there was no sense of consistency. No sense that one particular style or subject was more influential on Magdalena's artistic development.

The same thing applies to your Instagram feed. If you are in the habit of painting various subjects or using various techniques, consider the possibility of only displaying a subset of them on Instagram. How to find your style, or figuring out what you want to become known for, at least initially, is a huge subject and I'm currently discussing with Magdalena the possibility of writing another mini-eBook about it soon.

Now that she's established her own unique style, we concentrate on promoting Magdalena's landscapes as the dominant theme, with figuratives forming a less exposed yet continually evolving part of her portfolio. This represents her and the way she works well as she needs to have the figurative work to work on as balance to the landscape work.

In terms of which particular types of post work best, try a mixture of all of them. We tend to go mainly with the simplest option of a cropped image of a painting, occasionally interspersed with something a bit different to provide a bit of respite for the eye of anyone looking through Magdalena's profile page. Your profile page is where you have the chance to give people a visual overview of who you are artistically and sometimes it may be worth delaying a potentially highly engaging post of your most recent work for the sake of posting a less engaging photo of you at work, or of your studio or of something or somewhere that was particularly inspiring to you, that will provide some context for your work in your profile feed.

Experiment with mixing the posts up a bit and find out what works for you. I've seen some stunning artist's profile feeds that don't have a single cropped image in them, although to be fair, they tend to be from people that are focussing more on the interior design/interior décor angle for promoting their artwork.

8. Follower Strategies Using Hashtags

A follower strategy is a long term procedure or process that we can apply again and again that will help us to build our following.

Using the table in the previous section, we can begin to develop strategies where we select certain categories of hashtags to attract followers with the properties that we want.

As we have the potential to use 30 hashtags with each post, lets use them. There are companies out there that have done analysis on the effectiveness of using various number of hashtags in posts and there is clear evidence that posts that use all 30 hashtags do indeed do better. That said, there are also now warnings that constantly posting 30 hashtags may result in you being caught out by Instagram's new posting algorithm, introduced in January 2018, and it may be better to vary your quantity of hashtags a little (25-30). We are still experimenting with this.

Warnings and advice on how to stay on Instagram's good side

Instagram has somewhere in the region of 800,000,000 active users at the moment, that's not far off a billion accounts! There are an awful lot of users out there that generate spam and who apply every dirty trick they can possibly think of to get their *content* in from of you. Instagram simply cannot police all this activity manually, they have to rely on other users and computer algorithms to police the posts.

If your posts begin to get noticed by the spam-detecting algorithms you will find that if you don't change your posting habits, you are quite rapidly expelled from Instagram and all of your hard work building a following will have been for nothing.

Before they block your account there may be warning signs, such as shadow banning (see below) ... or not! There are various guides out there in Google-land about how to avoid being blocked, do take a look every few months or so as the algorithms change over time and you don't want to get caught out accidentally!

There is evidence that Instagram is more likely to treat your post as spam and temporarily *shadow ban* your account (this is where they make your hashtags invisible to everyone except your followers) the more hashtags you use. There's one very simple rule to avoid this happening – **keep it real**.

- **Don't use automation services** to deliver your post according to a fixed schedule, instead post it yourself as consistently as you can. If you miss your normal posting time, don't worry about it! Just post when you can. This will avoid the very obvious difference between the physical locations that your post was delivered from and that which you use to reply to comments (easily obtainable from the IP addresses), but the natural variation in posting times will reassure the monitoring algorithm that you are human and not another automation bot.
- **Don't copy and paste the same hashtags every day**. Mix them up
- **Choose hashtags that are relevant to your post**.
- **Include a mixture of highly popular, popular and less popular tags**.

10. Final words

Well, that's it. I'm sure that over time we'll figure out improvements to lots of things I've covered here, as well as the occasional head-slapping moment when I remember something that I could have included, but that's the nature of any course I guess.

I'm sure you'll find plenty of other ways to promote your Instagram feed, including promoting it across social media platforms. Give them go, see what happens and go with what works for you! There are no hard, fast rules beyond those that the Instagram programmers themselves impose. How you use it is entirely up to you.

I hope that I've managed to convey how Magdalena and I have managed to build her Instagram presence. We've been happy with the results from combining the strategies outlines above and as long as you don't annoy the spam detectors, there's no reason why it shouldn't work for you too.

I'm sure there will be people out there that will say “No, no, no! You shouldn't do this, you should do that”. By all means listen to what they have to say and if it makes sense, try it. I'm just sharing what we've been doing.

Most importantly, try to enjoy it! It's thrilling watching the numbers rise, but it's empty if you're not enjoying it.

I really hope that you've found at least something interesting and useful in the previous pages. If you've noticed anything incorrect or have any suggestions, I'd love to hear from you. You can get in touch either through Magdalena's contact page at www.MagdalenaMorey.com/contact or through info@magdalenamorey.com

Good luck and happy Instagramming!

Tom & Magdalena