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# Tips for using Instagram as an artist

Pointers for effectively promoting yourself and your work through Instagram, by editorial strategist [Robin Cembalest](#).

Hi, I'm Robin. These days I'm best known now as @rcembalest, my handle on Instagram and Twitter. Before this, I was a writer and reporter covering art for publications all over the world, from Spain's *El País* to Japanese *Vogue*. And, as executive editor of *ARTnews* for 16 years, I launched the magazine in the digital era, which led to an obsession with tracking and understanding the new ways content was being produced and consumed.

In 2014, when *ARTnews* was sold, I decided to leave journalism and jump into the unknown by inventing a new career. Drawing on my early fascination with Tumblr, Twitter, and Instagram, I created a business to help arts organizations adapt to this new, social media-driven communications world. Since then, I've worked with dozens of nonprofits, museums, and galleries to not only design digital content strategies for Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, but also put them into action.

For artists, Instagram in particular has become an essential tool to build networks and careers. While it helps people build followings and follow trends, it's also a time-consuming obligation, an addictive distraction, and a trigger for FOMO and other art-world stressors. In today's world, what should artists be posting? And what do the numbers mean, anyway?

Below, you'll find some of the tips and strategies I share in my training sessions. I hope you find them useful.

– Editorial strategist [Robin Cembalest](#)

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## Play the long game

We've all heard about artists and dealers selling work through Instagram. It happens more and more often all the time, but buyers are just one target audience. Instagram connects you with people who will show your art, write about your art, fund your residency, award you a travel or research grant, commission a

public-art piece, collaborate on your social practice project... you get the point.

But there's more. Instagram helps you build networks, relationships, and friendships that continue to real life. So how can artists maximize the unparalleled potential of this platform to connect directly with audiences and achieve their career goals? Basically the strategy is just like journalism: Grab attention, and hold it.

## What are your goals?

Trying to get a gallery? Group shows are a great way for artists of all career levels to gain visibility. So in your Instagram posts, catch the attention of curators and gallerists by sharing talking points about your work's theme and intentions, medium and materials. Want a public-art commission or a social-practice residency? Create context by posting yourself in related settings. Are you a teaching artist, or do you lead workshops? Does your art practice connect you with communities outside the art world? Do you work in or with nature? Have you thought deeply about monuments? Find ways to convey your special qualities and expertise through what you post. Show you understand concepts of public art and community in the current moment, and what it means to work on the public stage. This doesn't mean just showing finished works—it means spotlighting your entire process and practice as it plays out, in real time.

## Image is everything

According to magazine tradition, readers take three seconds to decide whether to pick up a magazine. It's the same with social media (but you get one second instead of three)—so if you want people to follow your feed, make sure your pictures look good.

What does it take to ensure your photos are grabbing, and holding, attention? Take time to lovingly shoot, edit, and crop your pictures, framing them artfully. Make a practice of taking your photos with the light behind you, positioning your camera parallel to your subject. Highlight process with action shots. Showcase the alluring qualities of your materials, whether paint, clay, or found objects. Create compositions that please or tease the eye with their color, shadow, and angles. Using the Instagram app (or any of the many other photo-editing apps available), tweak your photos for optimum brightness and clarity.

There's a high bar for originality and inventiveness across social media, and not just in the art space: photos that look processed or overly edited tend not to do well, but ones that capture a distinctive perspective or defining moment stand out. That said, the image doesn't work alone: consider each post as a package, where text, photo or video, emoji, hashtags, and handle work together to amplify the message. Use your text to lead the eye back to the photo, rather than trying to tell the whole story each time. In your larger grid of photos, each individual post adds up to the larger story of who you are as an artist, what your work speaks to, and how it all comes together visually.

## Make your profile pop

While Instagram lacks the vast cover photo space of Twitter and Facebook, there's still plenty of "real estate" to maximize in your profile section so that potential followers can get a sense of you right from the start. Does your profile photo stand out? Does your blurb invite interest? If you're in a show, does it say so? Does your link look worth clicking?

Study how people are using highlights—the excerpts from Instagram Stories that appear between your profile and posts. With a little strategy, there's a lot of potential to maximize the power of these prominently placed clips to share your message and talking points, giving curators, collectors, or media who might end up on your Instagram yet another way to connect with your creative vision.

## Be a character in your own story

People often announce they're "not into selfies," and use this as an excuse for not wanting to invest in their Instagram presence. Well, in art history, the idea that the portrait had to have a person in it ended a century ago. So it is with selfies. Even if you never post a selfie, there are lots of other ways to define yourself visually. Show yourself working—even if it's just your hand. Share your experience and your hopes, what you're doing and what you're seeing in your travels, museums, your friends' studios, the street. Share your eye by spotlighting creativity across other mediums, like fashion or food. Just because you're behind the camera doesn't mean you're not in the picture. Your eye and your inspirations help paint the full picture of who you are as an artist, so don't be afraid to get creative with how you showcase yourself in your posts.

## Your studio: Where the magic happens

I liked to call the studio visit the ask it's OK to go for. You can't ask someone to put you in a show, but you can ask them to visit your studio. You can't ask someone to put you in an article, but you can ask them to visit your studio. You get the idea.

So, use your Instagram to showcase your studio as a magical place where humble materials are transformed into profound works. Share your luscious pigment and fierce power tools. Demystify your process with Instagram stories that engage, enchant, amuse. Chronicle your progress, and don't forget to spotlight your team (if you have one) by sharing collaborative moments.

## Writing about your work

When considering what to write about your work, less is often more: readers want to be intrigued and informed, but not lectured at or marketed to. Keeping this in mind, use prime "real estate"—the top lines, before the click—to say the most compelling thing first. That might be the medium, the process, the subject, the title. Think of each Instagram post as a way to plant seeds that build interest over time. In this way, one insight can do more than two paragraphs of text.

There are certain occasions that call for longer texts, on personal or professional milestones, for example. When you do write longer, make sure there is a payoff! Then readers will be more likely to come along for the ride the next time you post something longer, instead of scrolling on by.

## (\$^(\$(!@!: About those hashtags

People love hashtags as a way to connect with new audiences. The thought is, you never know who might be scrolling through. That said, I've seen many a post with 10 likes and 30 hashtags. If the content's not there, the hashtags won't help.

Mass hashtags like #art might help you pick up random followers—but for building careers, fewer, targeted hashtags will attract more engagement from your target audience. The hashtags you use will depend on your goals. If you're working in activism and advocacy, specific movement-related hashtags can connect you with colleagues in your cause. If you're trying to reach curators and dealers to show and sell your work, #contemporarypainting isn't as likely to help. But #blownglass, #3Dprinting, and other medium-specific hashtags might connect you with people in your field.

## About those likes

Likes are causing so much social stress that Instagram is piloting a program to phase them out from public view. So, you know, try not to sweat the likes. They're useful as indicators of what kind of content does well in the long run. Otherwise, those likes and comments—often referred to as Key Performance Indicators, or KPIs, in social-media speak—don't always translate into your career goals. Looking at who is liking and commenting can be more effective than worrying about the numbers.

Instagram's where it's at in the art world. So do I need to do Facebook and Twitter?

While people are definitely leaving Facebook, the platform's groups feature remains popular, and creating Facebook event pages is still a powerful way to build audience and following by driving attendees to your opening, artist talk, performance, etc. Similarly, while Twitter isn't as huge in the art world, it's still where many journalists, activists, and nonprofits are most active. Especially if you're collaborating with professionals in other disciplines, Twitter is a great tool for monitoring news and connecting with colleagues and partners. Because of these specific uses, maintaining a baseline presence on Facebook and Twitter by posting every few months allows you to share news of your shows and projects, without investing a ton of time and energy. But, keep in mind, your posts won't have as much impact as they would if you invested time and strategy into maximizing each platform for its own particular benefits.

One last thought about the long game...

As you develop your creative presence on Instagram, be true to yourself—and be your best self, for sure. But overall, be authentic. That's the only way to make it work—and to make it fun!

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