

Alla Myzelev in Conversation with Marine Tanguy on Commercial Public Art and Art Agency

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Abstract

An advocate for urban artists since a young age, Marine Tanguy launched MTArt Agency in 2015. MTArt is the first talent agency for visual artists worldwide. MTArt Agency was behind the largest public art painting in the world: the project of Saype in Paris supported by 30 companies including the Eiffel Tower and the Guardian Media Group.

AM

While you represent an artist talent agency, you are probably privy to so many conversations about public art. Perhaps let us start by explaining what MTArt is? What MTR does and how did you come to do what you do?

MT

MTArt agency is a talent agency to start with, which means that it represents what we believe to be winning aspiring artists. We are a creative agency as well that integrates the arts in different environments. And in terms of how I got there so I was asked to be the Gallery director of the Outsiders Gallery in London when I was 21. And so I was in London, and then two years later was approached by an investor to open and mount Gallery in LA so it is very much what you do with the states where you have an investment visa. And, you know, you get covered on financially but then you have to do all the sweat equity, which is you basically kind of put the business together and, and all the contacts and everything. When I had the business in Los Angeles, I was very fortunate to be exposed to the top talent agencies that were kind of running the place because obviously LA

is very much run by the talent agencies, and there is one man that had an enormous impact on the way I think about things. He is Michael Ovitz. We started CAA talent agency, so CAA, UTA and William Morris are the three biggest agencies in the world. I was lucky to be there at age 23 and to get to regularly meet him. It was like informal mentoring. I was able to get to have constant access into his mind and understand how he had basically built that talent agency. That truly fascinated me because I struggled with a galley model that I thought was a shop. It was a luxury shop to buy or to sell art, but it is creative in its approach to art. I love that with the talent agency, it could be really strategic and you can support talented artists.

AM

This is a very unusual start for a gallery manager. How did you reconcile your dissatisfaction with the gallery model with the interest in the talent agency?

MT

I had to leave that partnership and start my own company, which is almost five years ago now. I build the first agency into the art space. My thinking really was quite interesting, I think. I took three cultural exposures that I had, which is French, the UK, and the States. As you know, the French are pretty socialist. So there is that angle to MTArt by the very fact that we integrate the arts into all environments for our artists, by the very fact that we build them up, not just in the luxury context, and that we have, open application process and selection committee that we've used fairly. That is actually the ethics of more of a left-wing way of thinking, which I think is interesting because this is being merged with a marketing and commercial heavy side of things, which is very Los Angeles and Hollywood in that sense. This we again merge with the way how in the UK we are running a business.

So I think that is kind of what we put together, and that was very much at the heart of my value system because I love art and very lucky now to be surrounded by it. I'm also aware that I couldn't just be purely on the luxury side. I have to make sure my artists have an impact through arts, which is how MTArt became the first B Corporation certification and is certified as ethical versus tenable, which is very rare for this sector. Art in the urban public space was one of the first things that make an impact because it pays for my talents so it makes sure my talents are okay. It makes sure the urgencies, and access to the arts. It also respects the idea that art integrates itself with our environment. We use resources that are existing and enhance them. So, it felt very aligned with all the values that the business had at heart.

AM

I am fascinated with the combination of the socialist approach and the business approach. Because the main criticism of the arts, especially public art is that it does use so much of taxpayers' money.

MT

Many people see public art as a charitable thing to do but not as a business venture. For me, you had to enter the business side because it had to be a key element. So, we looked into the economics and how we can prove the impact that art has and justify it economically so that we can integrate it businesswise. Our expertise is based on that economic study. We believe in all those values of public art, but we also make sure that from a cost perspective, the impact is measured. We can prove that art is impactful. So this is part of the company's approach. We have always supported artists who had a very strong social subject and that goes back to one of your questions. We have not supported artists who are decorative but I have nothing against that. It just goes back to our philosophy at the start of the business. We always consider how we can use the artists in a promotion or marketing end of things, towards the content that may be stuck in academia so the urgencies could be reduced. That way, we could enlarge the engagement in the arts, and I think this is why it is a really interesting business to lead. I am thinking of one of my artists, Saype. He has invented a material that is biodegradable to conduct large public art paintings and avoid harming the environment. He could maintain a conversation with academics but meanwhile, we have a very commercial strategy applied to her carrier. So the two public and private streams feel really aligned, and they are at the heart of the business that we lead.

AM

Could you talk about the process of applying for the artists? What does the artist do? They have to submit the application I imagine and then what happens when they are accepted?

MT

We get about 250 applications a month. That is basically artists applying to get into the agency. We have a selection committee that assesses aspects such as innovative techniques. That is what we assessed with Saype. So innovation is a very big thing. And then we also look at the social message to how they committed. You cannot just say, I care about x you have to demonstrate that you have been



Saype, Beyond Walls, 2019.

advocating for this, and you have had a small impact on what you advocating for. And then we look at the personality and that's I think what changes the way we think about the applicant's art. We really think in terms of people and talents- what creates success is the way someone leaves their carrier. We are not expecting someone to have business cards ready but we are expecting a level of drive and ambition.

So in total, we look for drive and ambition. There is obviously a caveat that we can put on the fact that they are artists but we have a firm belief that there is a type of personality event like athletes or musicians that can get you there. Because of the projects that we do at scale, it is necessary to pick these personalities because it is very challenging to lead them. Once we have put that person on and we think that is heaven, we issue a contract. It is for three years minimum. It gives you, financial support every month to pay for your cost. We also look at the resources of people behind

you to accelerate you in terms of PR, public art projects, works with partners, and digital partnerships. So we look at basically how can we get you there. They all definitely differences between our artists. Some of them will never do public collaborations because their profiles are not suitable. Some are much more suited to the collector side of things and public art but there will still be a strategy that will be basically tailored and applied. And then once the strategy is applied, basically we just strive to measure. When the strategy is being tailored, then it is being implemented with a team behind it. It is basically just we try to obtain as many objectives as we set for ourselves, basically.

AM

Do you have goals in mind when you sign an artist, where you would expect them to do X in three years?

MT

The objectives will change of course. For example, when Saype joined the agency he said, his goal was to do the largest public painting in the world that is biodegradable and we did it in six months. Some artists have a very fixed idea of what they want to achieve. I think of Saype, he is incredibly achieving in terms of the public art side. If I think of David Aiu Servan-Schreiber, he will be, high- achieving in terms of collectors and the art world; some of them are delighted. Clement is much more like the UN type of ambassador and again more on the social side. And if I think of Ania Catherine and Dejha Ti they are better on brand partnerships like the one they just did at the Serpentine Gallery with the brand Mithridate.

So success varies, but for us, success is needed obviously because we put a lot of resources behind them. And we can't renew their contracts without that but I think the variation and wishes for success are different.

AM

Could you think of a couple of artists that you represent whose work So, can you maybe think of at least maybe a couple of artists that you represent hope for the future and raising awareness.

MT

We are always defined personally as a funder, as someone that is a pragmatic optimist. This is certainly the way we look at artists. The way to think about it is that the artists basically strive for change or progressive change or kind of triggering a change in people. And the way that is triggered is through a pragmatic optimism. Right now, there is a big project that we just got where we specifically asked, in light of the crisis to respond to the idea of pragmatic optimism. Silver Lining is a public art project by our artist duo Ania Catherine and Dejha Ti and the esteemed poet Greta Bellamacina located within the world-renowned neighbourhood of St James's, found nestled between Haymarket and Piccadilly within the City of Westminster. Project organizers have taken the side of saying, you know, art will be that trigger. Hope will be generated and hope obviously changes things but we do not have provocative

artists. Our artists make you think basically and then it is up to your hope to change things. I think that our public art projects represent a fight for something that is almost impossible but our artists accomplish it. And in this sense, it becomes more like hope that if you put enough work ethic and enough community support into it then it could actually result in something positive.

AM

Did you ever have anyone who was controversial in your roster of artists who you had to defend in the public eye or received a lot of criticism?

MT

I am not sure if it was controversial in the sense that you mean but there are definitely comments. For example, when and I signed that the first AI artists we got quite a lot of weird, texts and comments and social media, from the AI community will felt that, you know, they were challenging things in a way that was not pleasing to that community. So there are instances when it happens. The thing, no one whether as a team or of employees or me as a founder, or my art is here to be liked; everyone is working to be respected. So, we understand that some things that we say may not be something that you like. That is why I think we are not controversial, we are more on the challenging side where we will challenge you, but we will not provide you or we will not be controversial for the sake of it. We can only instill a challenge and I think with that, you cannot get everyone to agree with you or like you. But I think we have rarely been in a place where people don't respect artists. People respond, comment, or feel triggered or challenged. Some of the artists are so passionate about the subject that not everyone agrees with them. But I don't think that's the point and I think that our role as an agency to get people behind them, that may not be agreeing politically with them but will be agreeing in terms of the long term ideas. For instance, I think of Saype. For his latest project, we were able to put the Financial Times next to the Guardian next to big Corporation companies. I think the Financial Times and The Guardian think about the issue the same way. It is important to get everyone who cares about the topic in one bed. We do not look at it politically, we look at it in terms of



Saype, Beyond Walls, 2019.

who can add value to that topic. I think that is the reason why I wouldn't consider the artists controversial. I would view art as controversial when it is political or provocative. Our artists are challenging you and not telling you what you want to hear. They put forward a well-thought idea that will take time to resolve and we include you in that conversation.

AM

For your artists do you help them with space and execution of the project or mainly with the PR?

MT

Completely depends on the project. We are aligned in wanting to make things happen. We are constantly acquiring contacts to help us make it happen. Ultimately, what I do is a network and the strengths of MArt are that it has a very strong network and community of people that basically help. But when it comes to project like this is really

the key thing is to have that network and make sure that artists get the right authorization, permits, or financial help. Whether you sell artwork or integrate art into projects or collaboration, it is done through the network. If my artist already has a contract we add more and initiate a conversation on what is needed. And we strive to do better than that but sometimes we get the project and permit and sometimes you do not. So we are recruiting for that. For example, just last week I had an artist, who had a really tough time with the confinement due to COVID 19 and decided not to sign the contract. So the level of HR is really heavy. You can manage if you love the job and you love people. My clients and my talents are demanding, but once you love the job, it doesn't feel demanding it feels normal because everyone cares about the best outcome. In the case of that artist, many people would not want to be woken up with an email like this or having to deal with it on Sunday afternoon. And so I think it is a demanding job if you think it is a job, but it's not demanding if it is integrated into your life.

AM

This is how as an academic I approach my job; it never starts at nine and ends at five. It is integrated into my life. I think of it as a lifestyle. Perhaps in the art agency, you attract more business-oriented people.

MT

Most people are looking at it as a job, and I think also the art world attracts a lot of egos and our job does not have to do with the ego. So if one of the artists has difficulties, I do not have an ego and if my clients have difficulties, I have again no place for it. For example, many people in the artwork would not be able to resolve things with that artist. We were backing down and putting no ego on the table to make it work. This is not the way I was taught to work in that sector, it is not the power dynamics that we were taught.

AM

What is the most important thing for MTArt?

MT

Fairness is really at the heart of our business model, for example, you should be able to apply to every opportunity within the arts and know the criteria by which you are reviewed. We want the most inspiring artist and we are not going to accept everyone but what we are saying that there is a lack of talent diversity and clarity on how it applied in the sector. And talent diversity can only happen if you are conscious of the bias and you are therefore line up the criteria and making the application process open. We are saying we love talent, we want the best talent, not the ones who can afford to be here or have connections to be here; just purely the most talented. I personally find it very interesting to explore the economics of creating fairness. B corps entire ethos is about doing economics for good. We are using economics to do something that I think is more socially fair. So I think I will always be in between the social benefit and economic benefit because once you have the economics on your side you can, you are able to put money behind people in a really good way. It is an understanding of how economics and social can serve together. I am

really interested in the relationship between public art and economics since it is not the relationship that you will expect will work out.

AM

Probably for these reasons you have no competition yet because there are very few people like you who understands both the art market and economics of art. People are unwilling to take the ego out, combine the expertise in both fields, and create something new.

MT

I think that is the important thing and that is why I think we have been very successful. In the arts now, there is the charity sector and commercial galleries but it needs something in between. Like, socially enterprising way of thinking about arts, so they can attract more finances from outside into the sector. MTArt will always be in that in-between space.

AM

Yes, that is what makes your agency unique and interesting.



Ania Catherine, Dejha Ti and Greta Bellamacina, Silver Lining, 2020