

arts



How to sell art to an oligarch



Your client owns a superyacht, three jets and a Premiership team. Now he wants some art. Here's how you get him to open his wallet, writes **Mark Kelner**

1 Consider a sex change if you're male
It helps to be a girl, or the daughter of another oligarch, or the model/ girlfriend of yet another. A supremely fashionable trifecta hybrid of such a species is exemplified in one, Dasha Zhukova, the founder of the Garage in Moscow.

2 Stay ravenous
Girl or boy, if you have bollocks, are cash-strapped and thus hungry, know this: the oligarch (and his underachieving brethren, the minigarch) usually have no need for art. It's luxury they desire, which is understandable after obtaining a fortune. Sometimes they want to understand better why art is valuable and, perhaps, expensive. Other times,

they're verging on the question "why bother at all?" It usually takes mere seconds for them to decide whether or not they're going to line your pockets.

3 Know your colours
I got my start in a gallery on the outskirts of Washington DC, where walk-ins would drop by and announce: "Hi. We have a red couch. Do you have anything in red?" And I usually did. It was the blues and greens that always threw me for a curve. Hence, I learnt of the decorative nature of the art business in our nation's capital, where suburban McMansions need landscape paintings too, as long as they are, like, lipstick red. If I called it "rouge", well, that was an extra \$500.

Something to match your red carpet? How about this untitled canvas by Yevgeny Rukhin (above left) or Leonid Lamm's Welcome to Capitalism (above)?



4 Keep your eye on the clock
As a client, nothing is more fierce in business than the American soccer mom with time on her hands. It's the opulence usually denied the oligarch class. The bored housewife can waver. The oligarch never will. It took years to get a certain meeting with a certain rich someone who changed my life. And given the opportunity (which I put down to hustling, luck, moderate language skills and good timing), I knew not to waste anyone else's.

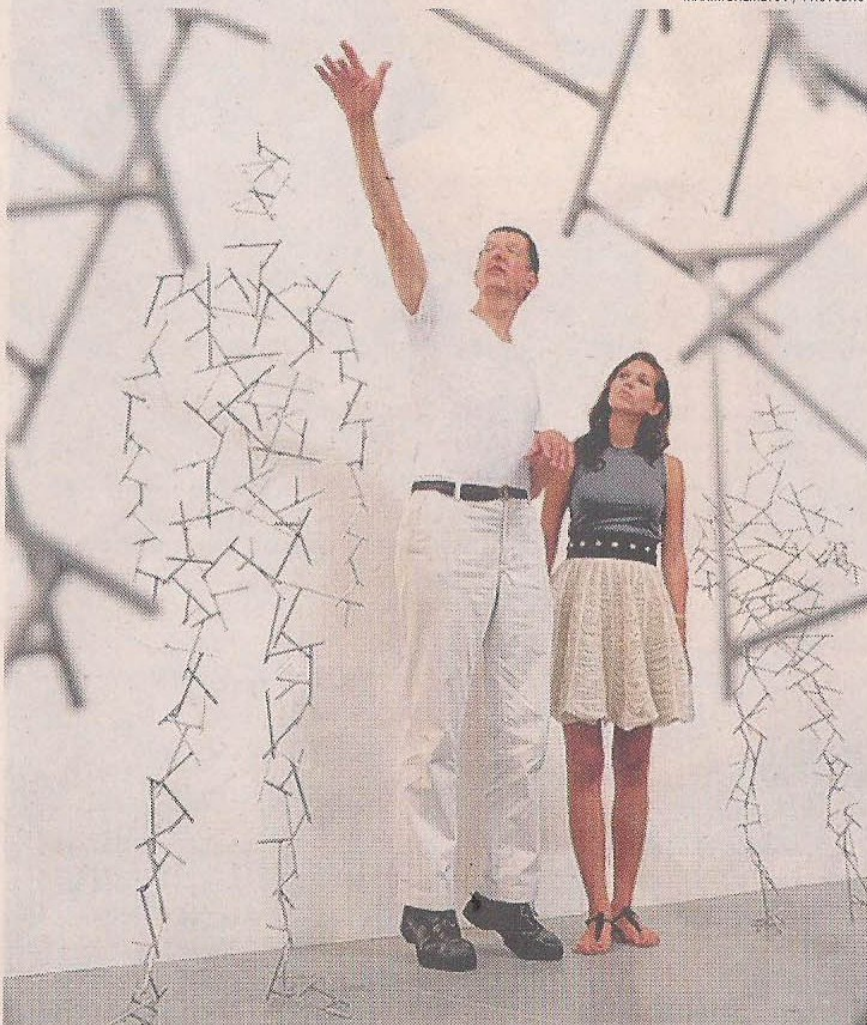
5 Never arrive empty-handed
Economy and credibility are key, as is showering them with gifts. I made an investment in a series of personalised, hand-signed, hardback-bound and (most

importantly) out-of-print Russian-artist-in-exile monographs, written in English, that no collector in Russia could ever possibly own. I brought a suitcase full of them to Moscow as gifts to anyone willing to take a meeting. Thanks, eBay.

6 Speak the language. A bit
Broken Russian is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, locals are endeared to you for having studied enough to get a few words out. On the other, you unwillingly become the evening's entertainment. During one memorable dinner at Cipriani's in London, I became the "Borat" of the Russian art world. And while I could speak of provenance and cultural repatriation, when I retold an "anekdot" I had learnt, I received a warning: "▶

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◀ “Mark, if you only knew what filth just came out of your mouth — and were Russian — well, let’s just say that I would not be responsible for your security.”

Truth be told, I knew exactly what I was saying, but felt the need to leave an impression. Poverty being a stable motivator, I had nothing to lose. And then it happened ...

7 Be honest. Kind of
“What qualifies you to sell this to me for the price you ask?” When it’s the owner of a private jet that wants to know, have your answer ready.

Years ago, as a side venture to support

The sculptor Antony Gormley with Dasha Zhukova, one of the prime movers in the Russian art market

the gallery gig, a friend had a business called Four Seasons (unfortunately, it had nothing to do with the hotels). It flogged potted plants and flowers in the spring, fireworks in the summer, pumpkins in the fall and Christmas trees in the winter. I worked them all, along with their spruced-up titles. I was in the Seasonal Vegetation Industry for three quarters of the year, interrupted by a summer’s expertise in the Explosives Industry. Rest assured, it was more profitable than art at the time.

So that’s just how I answered him, dumbfounding everyone at the table.

“Nu?” he said, which means “So?”

“Nu,” I replied, “the difference between us is that, in the beginning, [this was getting biblical] you happened to be selling blue jeans, cars, computers, then oil; you were making the most of the time you had, while you had it. I just happened to be doing it in the United States, and not at the precise moment when state assets were being privatised. Not in historically significant times. But the drive is the same. In truth, we’re not that different.”

He listened. It was a start.

8 Give thanks to the security industry

It was a risk to be so frank, to offer no talk of art, but there was no time to really consider what had just transpired.

A month later, I learnt that my new client had narrowly survived a murder attempt. It was never publicised. Let’s just say, years later, we’re still doing business, thanks to armour plating, bulletproof glass and the occasional “perfect find” for his budding collection.

Extracted from *A Hedonist’s Guide to Art*, ed. Laura K. Jones, published by Filmer/Artica at £15 tomorrow. Mark Kelner is a private dealer and curator based in Washington DC