

“Branding in the Art World: the Armory Show,” *BPO Group USA*, March 13, 2013



## Branding in the Art World: the Armory Show



The art world, enigmatic and mysterious, still purports to be a business. If your artworks do not sell you are out of the game. Galleries and art fairs, while providing a great playground for demonstrating their artworks to the visitors, still need to be appealing to their hearts to convert spectators to admirers and collectors, aka buyers.

It means that a gallery or an art fair itself has to be a brand, reliable and trustworthy, to attract buyers. And even big and famous enterprises have to rethink their marketing strategies and make updates to a brand. One of the best examples of such rebranding is the Armory Show, which opened its doors last week on the Manhattan Piers 92 and 94.

Founded in 1994 by four dealers as the Gramercy International Art Fair, this show became the largest in New York and one of the most important fairs in the international art market. The name is the homage to the legendary 1913 exhibition, which, for the first time then, showcased works by

avant-garde European artists along with their American counterparts. Throughout its years, the Armory Show was presenting such legendary names as Picasso and Pollock as well as the most cutting edge artists of a younger generation.

Thus the Armory Show became the leading Contemporary and Modern Art Fair in the world. Its mission is to showcase under one roof (literally, two) the most important artworks of the 20th and 21st centuries providing the access to a selection of the world's leading galleries. Besides, it offers exceptional program of art events and exhibitions throughout New York during the celebrated Armory Arts Week.

For more a decade, the Armory Show has been a queen of art events in Manhattan. It attracted top galleries, collectors, and artists by providing them with the annual opportunity to check out emerging trends and new artworks.

The scene has changed over the past four-five years. There were several factors having influenced the dominance of the Armory Show: the economic situation, some major galleries dropping out of the show, proliferation of other shows worldwide. Besides, the local start up of Frieze Art Fair in 2012 brought extra competition. All these factors have been challenging the Armory Show to reinvent itself. The Armory Show was criticized for being "too corporate, too big, or too much one booth after another," as described by Noah Horowitz, executive director of The Armory Show. So in other words, to be more competitive and successful, the Armory Show has to face a sort of an image problem and rebrand itself.

How is the Armory Show doing it? The following key steps have been made in this direction:

- **the concept of the show** has been rethought: the new fair became more gallery-driven, with more single booths. Entering the piers you feel like strolling along the city streets full of attractive art spots;
- the idea of **visual merchandising** has been changed: a Solo and Special Projects Program showcased single themes and artists. It makes the participating galleries focusing on the most representing while most distinctive art pieces. And as a result, the viewers get more clear impression and vision;
- also a new **branding program** for the Show was created by one of the Show's commissioned artists, Liz Magic Laser. The challenge is to update everything from the show concept to its merchandising materials such as T-shirts and totes;
- there was still a challenge to **keep the Armory Show distinctive**

from other contemporary rivals, and the answer was to **emphasize its American roots**. Visually it was powerfully done via placing a huge American flag on the entire end wall of the long rectangular fair's space. It became a stylish focal point of the room.

It is too early to analyze the financial outcome of this year's show as well as the connoisseurs' reviews. But being a part of the admiring crowd we heard chats and whispers saying that the "refreshed" show impressed the visitors. People noticed the difference (aka "rebranding") and took it positively. We will be following up the further updates to a brand and promotional strategies of one of the most impactful art shows in the world.



The Armory Show T-Shirt as a part of rebranding program executed by Liz Magic Laser.  
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