Markets framed by culture

The role of local contexts in the rise of contemporary art commerce in Russia and India

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Patterns of career development in the field of art have become an important topic among social scholars due to the seeming arbitrariness of artistic success. Individual genius is not what lets one break through the high entry barrier of the art world and make it to the top of the ladder. One needs to be well connected to influential cultural intermediaries and institutions (Mulkay and Chaplin 1982; Giuffre 1999; Penet and Lee 2014), be based in one of the art world’s centers and actively engage in the social life of an art scene (Plattner 1996; Oberlin and Gieryn 2015), be ready to come to the assistance of your peers (Scott 2012), or just have an “apt” gender (Schmutz and Faupel 2010; Braden 2009).

Most of the studies on artistic careers focus on established Western art scenes and create a homogeneous picture where artists seek connections to prestigious gatekeepers and exhibition possibilities both in the market and in the non-commercial art scene. Institutional recognition and market success seem to go hand in hand, with exhibitions in (and, even more so, acquisitions by) important museums being crucial milestones in artistic careers, which increase prices that an artist can command (Vander Gucht 1991; Velthuis 2005; Khaire and Wadhwani 2010; Rodner and Thompson 2013). An advanced institutional infrastructure of museums and professionally run non-profit art spaces lends credibility to an art market (Bonus and Ronte 1997) and legitimizes the relationship between artistic and market values (Moulin and Vale 1995). This understanding of artistic success embraces the logic of the art field structured between the “pure” and “commercial” poles (Bourdieu 1996). In order to be successful, but not be considered a sellout, artists and the quality of their works need to be justified by disinterested judgments of influential peers and institutions, while commercial interests are consciously underplayed (Velthuis 2005). Art dealers, critics and non-commercial art institutions together run the consecration machine of the contemporary art world.

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1  The chapter has been submitted to *Poetics* as: Komarova, N. “Between the Market and Non-Commercial Art Institutions: Early Career Strategies of Contemporary Artists in Emerging Art Scenes”
Artistic career strategies outside of the established art scenes of the United States and Western Europe, discussed here using the example of India and Russia, do not follow the same logic. Instead, contemporary artists’ aspirations differ greatly and depend on the institutional composition of an art field. Thus, the habitus expressing disinterestedness in economic success is contextual rather than universal for the field of high arts, whereas early career artists in India do not have these considerations in mind and openly aim at commercial exhibitions and sales as indicators of success. On the other hand, the interest of artists in generating at least some income from the production of art is often considered as one of the indicators of professionalism (Finney 1993; Karttunen 1998; Throsby 2001) and as an indicator of success that is sometimes strategically played by Western artists (Velthuis 2011a; Penet and Lee 2014). This paper shows that in the Russian art scene this interest is not only actively downplayed, but is also practically absent for early career artists.

By comparing the two cases this paper argues that the institutional composition of an art field shapes artists’ understandings of success, their relationships to various art market actors and even types of art produced by them. It analyzes the effects that the market and non-commercial art institutions (such as museums) have on artistic production and on career strategies in emerging art scenes. It does so by studying artists from Moscow, Saint Petersburg, New Delhi and Mumbai, with the Russian and Indian art scenes representing two contrasting cases for the analysis.

Contemporary art markets that started developing only in the late 1980s and early 1990s are characterized by rapid economic growth and the rise of new elites that use art consumption as a marker of their social status (McAndrew 2009). Because private art collecting, inspired by exposure to cosmopolitan lifestyles, grows faster than governmental involvement in contemporary art, commercial art institutions often also develop quicker than the non-profit art spaces in non-Western countries. The Indian art scene can be taken as a typical example of such developments, with minimal governmental involvement and a boom in commercial art organizations (Poulsen 2012), such as art galleries, auction houses or hedge funds. Russia represents a rather atypical example of an emerging art scene: it has more limited, yet still impressive economic growth, an underdeveloped secondary art market and more prominent and varied non-commercial institutional art scene of museums, non-profit exhibition centers and art foundations. The two art fields differ in the relative prominence of commercial versus non-commercial art organizations and therefore make a good pair for comparison aimed at broadening the understanding of possible artistic career strategies.

To understand the interrelation between the institutional composition of an artistic field and career strategies, this paper looks at early career professional artists, who are already recognized by relevant gatekeepers (and thus have experience of participation in exhibitions), but are yet to reach the heights in their careers (or fail to do so). Their peculiar position in the two art scenes makes
them sensitive to the structuring power of the field. On the one hand, they are not strangers just aspiring to become artists who might not have a clear understanding of how an art world operates. On the other hand, they are not the established successful artists whose status could allow them to violate the general rules of the art world without negative consequences. Thus, early career artists understand the “rules of the game” in the respective art scenes and adjust their agencies in accordance with the environment they need to succeed in. The focus is on their subject-trajectories in the making (Bourdieu 1993).

This paper contributes to the empirical literature on artistic success by focusing on artists in the early stages of their careers. While a high entry barrier is widely recognized by scholars focusing on gatekeeping in cultural fields (e.g. Bystryn 1978; Janssen 2001; Joy and Sherry 2003; Bergsgard and Vassenden 2015), empirical studies of artistic careers and patterns of recognition mostly focus on artists who have broken through it long ago (e.g. Mulkay and Chaplin 1982; Braden 2009; Schmutz and Faupel 2010; Penet and Lee 2014; Oberlin and Gierlyn 2015).

This paper also contributes to the discussion on heteronomy and autonomy of artistic production and processes of cultural consecration (Bourdieu 1993; Featherstone 1992; Lipstadt 2003). It shows that embracing the economic logic in striving for success does not necessarily result in moving towards the heteronomous pole of cultural production and renouncing symbolic capital. It argues against the unifying inclination that is often subsumed by the Bourdieusian theoretical framework and suggests how this perspective can be useful in exposing differences in artistic fields.

In the rest of the paper, I first position this study within the existing literature on artistic career patterns, and discuss the relationship between market and non-commercial art institutions in the art world. Then I introduce the Indian and Russian art scenes, present the methodology and empirical data that I analyzed for this paper. Finally, I present the two cases showing how artistic career strategies are closely inscribed in the available institutional infrastructure of the two art fields. I reconstruct the available, aspired to, and taken artistic positions in the two fields from the perspective of early career professional artists.

Artistic career as a social process

Extensive research has been done into the structural characteristics of artistic fields and the valuation mechanisms employed by gatekeepers who make some artists more successful than others (e.g. Giuffre 1999; Rawlings 2001; Braden 2009; Schmutz and Faupel 2010; Penet and Lee 2014). The general argument about the social determination of artistic success (Giuffre 1999) follows the
famous “weak ties” rule (Granovetter 1973) and suggests that artists engaged in loose networks throughout their careers have more chances for success than those who have limited connections and remain faithful to their close social group. Yet, the mechanisms that stand behind this relationship remain unclear.

An assumption is that artists and institutions mutually influence each other’s prestige (Giuffre 1999; De Nooy 2002), which causes the fluidity of networks in the art world. Actors who perform gatekeeping functions are personally interested in the success of selected artists (Mulkay and Chaplin 1982; Penet and Lee 2014). In order to understand how social connections contribute to artistic careers, one needs to consider the interests of the different parties involved in the process of artistic production and promotion.

Stressing the importance of the configuration of an individual’s social network for artistic success, Giuffre (1999) does not question the configuration of an art field as a whole. Frequent change of representing commercial galleries can be beneficial for photographers in the thriving New York art scene, but in an art scene with a limited number of commercial galleries, social networks of different configurations may play a role. Local art scenes have different material and institutional affordances in terms of exhibition possibilities or proximity to key gatekeepers, and therefore can have a different influence on artistic success (Oberlin and Gieryn 2015: 28-29). The success of art depends on a certain composition of an opportunity space (e.g. a fast developing economy and newly wealthy people), resources within an art world (institutional affordances of an art scene) and discursive framing strategies, which are all closely interrelated (Baumann 2007).

The majority of studies that analyze artistic careers from a field perspective look at success retrospectively (e.g. Schmutz and Faupel 2010; Braden 2009; Quemin and van Hest 2015; Penet and Lee 2014; Oberlin and Gieryn 2015). While this approach allows the analysis of rich quantitative data, it can take into consideration only the artists who have already achieved considerable success, at least to the extent that they have a long-term contract with a gallery, exhibitions in important museums, and are reviewed by important critics, etc. The majority of artists, however, never make it into art history. If only because they are the main population of the art world, their career patterns deserve attention. This approach also does not take into consideration agencies of artists who are currently active in the art scene, have their aims and ambitions, and need to shape their careers within the available settings.

Few exceptions that focus on artists having marginal positions in the art world study the perspectives of artists themselves. Bergsgard and Vassenden (2015) study Norwegian performing artists with migrant backgrounds and Scott (2012) looks at DIY music producers in New Zealand who
lack economic capital. These studies suggest that the career strategies of under-researched groups participating in artistic production differ from those at the top of the ladder (or “sandpile”). Based on the Bourdieusian theory of capitals, their approach highlights individualistic rational calculation and emotional experiences, but does not question the structural influence of the particular fields in which they are trying to succeed.

Plattner (1996) discusses careers strategies in relation to the specificity of a regional art scene and the different values artists can have. Variation in ambitions, and aiming for subsistence from art, shape different career patterns and expectations. This perspective can be developed by conceptualizing an art scene as a field where artistic agency is shaped by the relationships with other actors relevant for artistic production. Thus, I focus the attention of this analysis on artists’ understandings of the roles that gatekeepers play, and on the structural possibilities and constraints that they encounter.

Composition of a contemporary art field

In the Western art world, artistic careers depend on the dense networks connecting market and non-commercial art institutions. New art of living artists is constantly in need of an independent body that could legitimately evaluate it (Galenson and Jensen 2002, Rojas 2012). With the rise of the dealer-critic system, the art market also became a source of recognition, replacing the State and the Art Academy (White and White 1965; Vander Gucht 1991). Yet, artists still need to gain a reputation that exceeds the market; otherwise, they are in danger of being seen as commercially driven, rather than interested in art for art’s sake. “Denegation of the economy” as a formative principle of an artistic habitus defines the scope of acceptable actions, in terms of art production, relationships with commercial and non-commercial institutions and aspirations. This principle becomes a mechanism of market legitimation (Bourdieu 1993, Velthuis 2005; Graw 2012). Symbolic capital, which is accumulated over time via active practicing of disinterestedness, is a resource that can later be converted into economic profit (Bourdieu 1980).

Museums and non-profit art institutions are the closest possible examples of necessary disinterestedness, and have a significant consecrating power that creates reputations, canons and hierarchies (Rawlings 2001; Fyfe 2006). “Placing” an artwork into a museum exhibition is often considered the “ultimate promotional activity” of a gallery. Yet it has to be employed with caution, not to expose economic interests or threaten the autonomy of curators (Winkelman 2009: 37). This widely acknowledged “relative heteronomy” of the contemporary art world (Graw 2012) represents a troubled yet symbiotic relationship between the market and non-commercial art institutions. Artists
aiming for recognition and success need to find balance in their actions and aspirations between market and non-commercial art institutions.

Disinterestedness in economic success is a natural element of an art world in which market and non-commercial art institutions are empowering each other. Yet, this relationship itself can differ from one art scene to another. Since the established art scenes of the Western world are so closely interconnected (While 2003; Crane 2009), the differences between the compositions of the global art scenes in New York, London or Paris seem to be small. Nevertheless, specific national regulations (such as subsidies for artists and institutions) inevitably affect local art scenes and artistic careers (Kuipers 2015). However, even though scholars have shown that the opportunities of artists differ greatly if they are at the center or the periphery of the art world (Quemin 2006), comparative research into differences in artistic career strategies in relation to different art scenes is practically absent. This paper aims to fill this gap by looking at the art scenes of Russia and India.

The emerging contemporary art scenes of Russia and India

In the past 20 years a number of new contemporary art scenes in different parts of the world have attracted the wide attention of the international art communities and academic scholars (Stallabrass 2004; Goodwin 2008; McAndrew 2009; Robertson 2011). The Indian and Russian art markets are considered to be among the fastest-growing and largest emerging contemporary art markets in the world (Velthuis 2015). Yet, just some 25 years ago, private commerce and an institutional infrastructure for contemporary art were practically non-existent there.

While the two contemporary art scenes are seemingly undergoing similar developments, with the opening of commercial galleries and non-profit art institutions, and the establishment of national art fairs, auctions and biennales, the relative intensity of these processes differs due to the different socio-economic histories and government involvement in this sector.

Before the dissolution of the Soviet Union, official art production and distribution was controlled by the state, while private commerce for art was forbidden (Lazarev 1979). The artists practicing official styles were commissioned via Artists’ Unions, were exhibiting in the spaces of the Academy of Arts of the USSR, and sometimes were given salaries from these institutions. In India, since the period of the British rule, artists grouped into “Societies” that had similar functions to the Soviet Artists’ Unions, organizing large-scale and personal exhibitions, awarding prizes, helping with commissions and studios. In 1953, the Indian government established the Lalit Kala Akademi – the national academy for fine arts structurally similar to the Academy of Arts of the USSR. Yet, the
Indian government never forbade commerce for art or controlled the artistic output to a similar extent as in the Soviet Union. In fact, the first of the still-existing private art galleries in India opened as early as 1936 (Dhoomimal). Market activity and the economic value of art, however, remained very low for decades of the post-independence planned economy (Zitzewitz 2013) that promoted a “quasi-socialist frame of thinking” and disapproved of any forms of conspicuous consumption (Khaire 2011).

Despite these basic infrastructural similarities, fine art appreciation and consumption in post-independence India were confined to a narrow group of elites (Poulsen 2012), while in Soviet Russia (official) art was considered a public good and an ideological tool, being both highly promoted and regulated (Groys 2003). While both countries entered the last decade of the 20th century with small-to-non-existent contemporary art scenes (in the Western sense of the term), the “opportunity space” (DiMaggio 1992) for the new art scenes to develop was different. Even nowadays, in India the term “art” in the popular perception refers to traditional handicrafts and temple art, and fine art museums are rare (Poulsen 2012). Russia, on the contrary, met the turn of the 20th century with a wide infrastructure of museums and exhibition spaces, visited as a popular leisure activity.

Both Russia and India underwent significant transformations at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of 1990s. With the change of political agenda, the Russian government also changed its taste in art, and reoriented infrastructural resources to accommodate contemporary forms of art. The now privatized Artists’ Unions support artists who conform to the old tradition of realist painting (Kharchenkova et al. 2015). The Russian Academy of Arts has an infrastructure of five exhibition spaces in the Moscow Museum of Modern Art, and the Moscow House of Photography was transformed into the Multi-Media Art Museum, to give just a couple of examples. Quite a few new governmental museums have opened (e.g. the National Centre for Contemporary Art, with eight branches across the country), while established fine art museums have opened contemporary art departments (such as the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow, and the Hermitage in St. Petersburg). Finally, there is an elaborate system of municipal exhibition spaces, recently refurbished, to focus on consecrated contemporary art (previously they exhibited hobby art or the realist art of members of Artists’ Unions). Although it does not always have positive consequences (Bernstein 2014), the Russian government has an active contemporary cultural policy. The Indian government, on the contrary still has relatively little interest in contemporary visual culture, focusing its cultural policies on traditional art forms and cultural heritage (see, for example, Government of India RFD for Ministry of Culture, 2014). Thus, India has just one governmental art museum,2 the National

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2 In Moscow and Saint Petersburg alone there are eight prominent governmental museums actively exhibiting contemporary art or focusing directly on it.
Chapter 4

Gallery of Modern Art (New Delhi) that opened the new building devoted to 20th and 21st century art in 2010.\(^3\)

The liberalization of economies has brought changes to the private sector of the art scenes, since it has led to the emergence of new wealth and, hence, new art consumers. Both in Russia and India, art consumption has become a marker of distinction for the new rich, along with other forms of luxury consumption (Brosius 2012), which gave a boost to the development of the commercial infrastructure of galleries, auction houses, and art fairs (Komarova 2015). Yet, these developments are uneven in Russia and India on the side of both sellers and buyers.

Even in the lack of formal directories or comparable databases of commercial art organizations in the two countries, it is possible to argue that the commercial side of the Russian art scene is not doing as well as the Indian one.\(^4\) The key commercial mediators in the Russian art market, namely galleries, art fairs and auctions, show signs of crisis, with three out of the four leading galleries (Guelman, XL and Aidan galleries) announcing their closure in 2012, and Art Moscow – the main national art fair – closing in 2014. The only auction house for contemporary art, Vladey, opened in 2013 and has an annual revenue of about €2 million (both in 2013 and 2015). While the Indian contemporary art market also experienced serious troubles after the global financial crisis of 2008, the secondary market of auction sales is still more active. The biggest auction houses dealing with contemporary art (SaffronArt, Pundoles and AstaGuru) had a revenue of €13 million in 2013 (Kumar et al. 2015), and Saffron Art is considered to be one of the world’s largest online art auctions (Khaire and Wadhwani 2007). Christie’s opened a permanent sales room in Mumbai in 2013, and had a revenue of €13 million from its first sale. With an almost complete absence of governmental involvement in contemporary art, the commercial sector drives the development of the art scene (Sooudi 2015) not only via auctions, but also via commercial galleries often run by wealthy upper-middle-class collectors (Ithurbide 2010).

While wealthy Indian collectors tend to prefer private art consumption, or to open a commercial gallery (which gives them an opportunity to sell pieces from their collections as well), prominent Russian collectors seem to be more often involved in public support for art via the opening of private art foundations and museums (Milam 2013). The only private Indian museum of contemporary art, Kiran Nadar Museum of Art (New Delhi), opened in 2010. There is also one influential...

\(^3\) Other branches of the Gallery are exhibiting contemporary art irregularly.

\(^4\) At the point of data collection for this project (2013), the maximum number of functioning commercial art galleries dealing with art produced by living artists that I managed to collect from multiple local and international sources was about 90 for Moscow and Saint Petersburg and about 70 for New Delhi and Mumbai. These galleries were working with approximately 1,600 and 2,800 artists, respectively (according to their websites).
private art foundation, Devi Art Foundation (Gurgaon), which was founded in 2008. However, simple counting of the Russian non-commercial contemporary art outlets run by private collectors shows greater scope for similar activities. Nowadays, Moscow and St. Petersburg have seven private art museums. The Garage Museum for Contemporary Art (Moscow) opened in 2008, and is the most internationally known among them. Russian collectors also run private art foundations that support individual artists, organize educational programs, and sponsor Russian representation at international art events such as the Venice Biennale. There are at least seven private art foundations visible in the non-commercial contemporary art scene in Moscow and St. Petersburg.

The Russian art field is characterized by a relatively well-developed infrastructure of governmental museums and exhibition spaces, and high involvement of private collectors in the public support of contemporary art. The Indian contemporary art field, on the contrary, seems to be developing more on the commercial side. As is common for emerging art worlds, the Indian contemporary art field has an undeveloped infrastructure of non-commercial art institutions,5 both at the governmental level and at the level of private sponsors, which is acknowledged by most of its participants. This paper studies the career strategies of artists within the given compositions of the two art fields.

5 Few exceptions are worth mentioning. One is the International Artists Association – KHOJ (New Delhi) – opened in 1997 as an annual workshop and expanded into an all-round art institution with internationally recognized Indian artists. Another is the Kochi-Muziris Biennale, launched in 2012 by Bose Krishnamachari and Riyas Komu.
Chapter 4

Methodology

Table 4.1. Characteristics of artists included in the sample.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Number of years</th>
<th>Known level of prices, EUR</th>
<th>ArtFacts ranking</th>
<th>Solo shows</th>
<th>Group shows</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Since last art degree</td>
<td>Since the first solo exhibition</td>
<td>Between graduation and the first exhibition</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>10 (3–16)</td>
<td>4 (0–8)</td>
<td>7 (1–23)</td>
<td>300–24,000</td>
<td>No–100,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>6 (3–12)</td>
<td>6 (3–12)</td>
<td>1 (–1–4)</td>
<td>3,000–30,000</td>
<td>3,001–100,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Average (min-max), at the end of 2012. Retrieved from public sources, including personal CVs and websites of artists, galleries and auction houses, international databases, online selling platforms.

This paper is a case study of two groups of actors whom I identified as early career artists\(^{12}\) in the contemporary art scenes of Russia and India. The primary data for the analysis are a sub-sample of in-depth interviews with 17 artists (8 from Russia and 9 from India – see Table 4.1) selected from over 130 interviews with various members of the two art scenes (primarily artists and art dealers), conducted in Moscow, St. Petersburg, New Delhi and Mumbai during the period April 2012 to June 2013. The interpretation is also based on secondary data about the artists’ educational backgrounds, exhibition and sales histories collected via C.V.s, public interviews and reviews, international on-

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6 An invited solo exhibition marks recognition as a self-standing artist by gatekeepers of the respective art scenes.
7 For artists without formal artistic education the number of years is calculated between the first mentioning of intention-
al artistic activity in their bios and the first invited solo exhibition.
8 Known level of prices is a vague category that depends on a number of factors. Apart from auction sales prices on art are usually covert. Top prices in this table are record prices from pre-2008 auction sales (as reported at ArtPrice). Lower levels of prices are from online selling platforms that are widespread in India and are practically non-existent in Russia. Prices also depend on the medium. Many Indian artists in the sample do works on paper, which are cheaper than installations and complex media objects practiced by Russian artists.
9 ArtFacts ranks artists according to a (publicly unavailable) algorithm that assigns point to artists for participation in commercial and non-commercial exhibitions around the world (weighted for their status on the international art scene).
10 From personal websites of artists, from the websites of their galleries or publicly available C.V.s at online art platforms (several were compared, if available, and the most extensive one – considered).
11 Two artists in the sample don’t have an artistic education. They are not included in the calculation here.
12 The age variation among artists is quite big in both countries (28–44 for Russia and 29–50 for India), so early career artists are not necessarily young.
line databases (such as ArtFacts and ArtPrice), and ethnographic observations at various art events (such as open studio visits or art fairs) conducted in the same period.

By “early career artists” this paper understands artists who began their careers not more than 10 years ago (graduated from an art academy or had their first exhibition) and who have had at least one solo exhibition in a commercial or non-commercial space. I only count events when the exhibitions were not organized by artists themselves; I take this to mean that they are recognized as artists by artistic communities. Born between 1963 and 1984, these artists have participated in one to fifteen solo exhibitions during their careers and up to 36 group shows (see Table 4.1). While prices in the art world are often negotiated in a covert way (Velthuis 2005), publicly available sources suggest that the value of their work varies between €300 and €30,000.

The larger project had an exploratory nature, therefore I aimed at maximal variation in terms of types of actors, their status in the two art worlds, and types of art they work with. In both countries I had a number of interviews with established and internationally known artists (also those who had just graduated from art academies). Yet, my attention was attracted to artists who are active members of the two art scenes but have not yet achieved the same heights in their careers, due to the striking contrast in their experiences, aspirations and ideas of success.

This group of artists is particularly valuable due to their specific sensitivity to the structuring power of an artistic field. Actively working on establishing their position in an art scene and the development of their careers, early career artists are perceptive of the properties of an art scene in which they wish to succeed. They are not yet universally recognized, and still have to overcome possible obstacles to work out the best strategy and their own perspective. Early career artists were vocal about their relationships with relevant actors in the art world, their perception of possible career development in their country and abroad, and their understanding of the role of commercial and non-commercial art organizations in artistic success. They are still nationally bound in their professional careers. In comparison, artists who have just finished art school and have hardly any exhibition experience were also very vocal about their hardship in getting the attention of gatekeepers, but their strategies may as well be naïve and misleading. On the other hand, established and internationally known artists are less dependent on the national art scenes, which this paper focuses on. Moreover, discussing the functioning of an art scene with established artists produces results which

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13 While 10 years is a somewhat arbitrary cut-off point, it was informed by extensive fieldwork and my judgement that allows extraction of a group of artists possessing the specific characteristics analyzed in this paper.

14 Both in Russia and India, it is possible to “rent” an exhibition space owned by the state for your own exhibition. Exhibitions in these spaces (with some exceptions) have marginal status in the perception of the local contemporary art scenes.
pertain to the past rather than present. Therefore, the selection of early career artists for this paper represents a purposeful and theoretically oriented sampling strategy.

The two groups of artists may seem hardly comparable: when the interviews were taken, artists from Russia, on average, had more years of exhibition experience (6 vs. 4 in India) and scored higher in the Artfacts ranking15; artists from India on average had received their last art degree earlier (10 years ago vs. 6 for Russian artists), and took longer to get spotted by gatekeepers after graduation. Yet, I argue that these differences are caused by the institutional composition of the field and therefore are crucial for the analysis in this paper and allow drawing conclusions about the relationships between the institutional composition of an artistic field and artistic career trajectories.

There is a relatively loose framework that unites artists from these two groups: on the one hand they are already recognized by local gatekeepers (more likely commercial art dealers in the case of India, and non-commercial museums or foundations in case of Russia), on the other, they have only limited international exposure (with Russian artists having more than Indian) and limited market success (with Indian artists scoring better than Russian). Importantly, I argue that they take an intermediate position on the artistic success ladder within each country.

The number of artists analyzed for this paper is not sufficient to make generalizations about the art scenes of the two countries. The aim of the paper is to show the relationship between artistic practices and understandings of success, on the one hand, and institutional composition of the two art fields, on the other, and to suggest an adjustment of the existing theories and their application with regards to the structuration of the artistic field between the commercial and autonomous poles. A strong homogeneity in narratives of artists in each country, despite significant heterogeneity in artistic experiences (see Table 4.1), suggests that comparison of the two cases provides a robust foundation for this argument.

Importantly, the initial selection of artists for interviews (for the larger project) was guided by the same strategy in both countries: since the focus of the project was on the development of the contemporary art markets, artists were primarily approached via commercial galleries. Therefore, the much stronger involvement of Russian artists in non-commercial art projects (as discussed further) should be interpreted as an empirical finding rather than a sampling bias.

15 ArtFacts is a well-known international database that ranks artists according to their exhibition history. Exhibiting in internationally influential art institutions ensures higher positions in this ranking.
Indian case: the central role of commercial galleries

Indian early career artists are a rather diverse group. They have different levels of education: some are self-taught, some have studied in various colleges across India, others obtained degrees abroad. After graduating they tried working in a variety of cultural professions (PR and design, publishing, decorating, filmmaking) before they decided that they wanted to pursue an artistic career as their primary activity. This decision was informed either by becoming disillusioned or bored with more applied professions, or by getting finally spotted by a commercial gallery. What unites these artists is that they all have a relationship with a private gallery, are commercially active, and even if they do not directly participate in sales, have a position concerning prices, collectors and selling strategies.

Discussing the beginning of their artistic career, most artists focus on a solo show in a private gallery and the circumstances under which it became possible. Some had years of striving to get spotted by an art dealer, sending out their portfolios, others had the financial means and network connections to rent a space in a commercial gallery. While trajectories towards the first solo show differ, it is still a symbolic moment that marks entering the professional art world. An artist, who studied in Europe and returned to India to pursue his artistic career, strategically organized his first solo show himself:

The decision to have my first exhibition was the defining moment, when you say you are an artist by profession, [it] was about 8 years ago. That is when I had my first solo show here in New Delhi at [gallery name]. (113)

Exhibiting in a commercial gallery was a way to become visible in the Indian art scene – to announce his presence to the network of prospective art collectors.

Artists see a gallery as a crucial gatekeeper and a kick-starter of their careers. If foreign curators come to India, they go to “prime galleries, they do not want to go to other places” (119). Artists notice that if you are not from New Delhi or Mumbai it is hard to get into an art world guarded by dealers. An artist from a remote Indian city explained that initially she was not aware of the gallery world at all and that is why her artistic career stagnated:

[For] four years, I was not into Indian scenario at all, because when I shifted to Delhi <...> I was not aware of galleries at all, because [city name] was another place, which was not aware about the galleries. <...> After four years, there was a gallery that asked me for a show. And from there I got to another gallery, and the gallery scene, and the works got sold... (119)
Commercial galleries are crucial agents for professionalization and recognition in the field. Those who are not able to establish necessary connections with art dealers often try to organize gallery-like initiatives themselves. Renting an exhibition space at a private gallery is one strategy, another is to collaborate with each other and establish a permanent space where they can exhibit and sell their works.

Moreover, artists are generally ready to adjust their works to fit into the market and to get spotted by a gallery. One artist explained that he produced different artworks to see which ones worked better with art dealers:

“It is useful initially for an artist, who is young into the market, to have that variety [in his artworks] to allow the galleries to choose upon. [...] So that [the gallery] created a certain identity for an artist and if it works then the artist can perhaps take on that and build upon that a portfolio of similar art works.” (I5)

While other artists can be more concerned about the integrity of their artistic production, they also reflect that initially their art may have not fit the gallery format (I19), before they became assimilated into the art world. They claim to have appreciated extensive conversations with their art dealers, who shared their knowledge of the art world, and gave tips on how to better present their work (I39).

Working with the format that a commercial gallery would appreciate, artists think in terms of market demand: what collectors are more likely to buy, what their unique selling niche is, how to produce a marketable artwork. A Delhi-based artist, who had a solo show during the time of my fieldwork, explained why his art was interesting for the public:

“I work in paneling. I do not think a lot of people are working in paneling. But that is my unique selling proposal. I work with paneling completely, which takes a lot of time, a lot of detailing.” (I14)

Due to market orientation, most artists are confined to small formats that can be easily put in living rooms. While there are Indian artists known for large-scale installations, as well as internationally oriented Indian galleries that exhibit such works and support grand public projects, the most popular artistic form is still canvas, followed by sculpture and objects of a convenient size (Vermeylen 2015). This Delhi-based artist, for example, acknowledged that he had to limit the scale of his works:

“If I had my choice, I would create paintings which are 10 feet by 20 feet. I don’t have anywhere to put that and no one will ever buy that. It doesn’t become viable and creating work is also very expensive.”
Artists who deviate from the easily marketable format, make this choice consciously and have to deal with the consequences of this choice. An artist creating technologically advanced art objects described how she had to reduce their size to make them accessible for private collectors. She also worked out a system in which she had a prototype work for prospective collectors, who would then decide if they wanted an artwork and would finance its production. She came up with a mixed financial model combining sponsorship and commissioning:

\[ I \text{ am} \] thinking in terms of business now, because in India it is a unidirectional funding [from private collectors], so I cannot support myself from any other funding. Because I am working in a medium which is electronics, right now, it has made me think in terms of market economics. \(<\ldots>\) I cannot keep producing without selling, because each [object] takes me a lakh\(^{16}\) and a half rupees to produce, just production costs. (I77)

The production of large-scale or technically complex objects is rarely financed as an independent exhibition project in India. Since there are almost no museums or foundations, artists who wish to work with these mediums have to search for commissions. Installations and site-specific projects can be commissioned by corporate clients and placed in their premises or used as a public promotion campaign.

In the lack of non-profit exhibition spaces that regularly display contemporary art, the houses of art collectors are the only spaces where artworks can have some long-term visibility after being sold. Therefore, artists are often trying to keep track of who buys their works and how they are handled afterwards:

\[ \text{I think my pieces should go to good houses, the collector may be small. But sometimes a big collector just stacks up [artworks in a storage space] and I am not interested in that. So these smaller collectors with good houses is my intention.} \] (I77)

This artist even explains that her choice of medium makes it more likely that a work would be kept on display at home. Her artworks are kinetic, slowly deteriorating, and demand more-or-less regular maintenance, so storing them in a warehouse does not make sense.

\[ 1 \text{ lakh} = 100,000 \]
In the discourse of many Indian art market participants, the audience of contemporary art is equated to its potential buyers. For example, a Delhi-based artist explained to me his idea of career growth, where exhibiting was indistinguishable from sales:

You would display your work, you sell your work, people start appreciating your work and you start getting a much bigger audience. Demand for your work increases. (I14)

Artists cherish an opportunity to get exhibited at an art fair, which is seen as a chance to be spotted by collectors outside of the network of a particular dealer, and also as a way to establish connections with other galleries, since exclusive representation is not a wide-spread practice in the Indian art market. Thus, a Delhi-based artist was very proud to be exhibited in more than one booth:

I participated in the IAF and I also had a solo exhibit along with senior artists who are dead and their galleries were showcasing their works as solo shows. There were thousands of people who came and we had a fabulous feedback. <...> I was not expecting to sell anything at the IAF. It was more for me recognition and to get my name known as an artist, but I sold the work and was so happy. (I13)

If a gallery or a private house has the limitation of very small numbers of daily visitors, an art fair is a source of maximum possible visibility for an artist in India.

The substantial power of art dealers can also be seen from the amount of discontent expressed towards them by various other players in the field. They are criticized for curating exhibitions in their spaces, thus devaluing professional curatorial skills and presenting their tastes as objective evaluations of quality, and for paying for publications on their artists in key magazines, thus devaluing independent art criticism, etc. Early career artists see art dealers as the only powerful consecrating actor in the art scene who can promote their careers. Therefore, they adjust their strategies and even the art that they produce to the demands of the art market.

Young artists in Western art markets are also often spotted by commercial galleries first. Yet, the more prominent role of art criticism and the potential of getting invitations to curated shows or biennales inevitably affects their career strategies and makes them more keen on downplaying commercial interests. In the dramatically different situation of the Russian art scene, we will see how the active presence of non-commercial art institutions affects the agencies of early career artists.
Russian case: non-commercial art in the heart of the art scene

Early career artists in Russia who are in the spotlight of the current art scene seem to be a rather homogeneous group. Many of them have studied in the private Institute of Contemporary Art (Moscow) or the governmental Rodchenko Art School (Moscow), and have later participated in exchange programs abroad. They may have had exhibitions in private art galleries, but more often they tend to work with art foundations. Their works are not only exhibited, but are also in the collections of the main Russian museums. They have already won some key Russian contemporary art awards. Most of them have participated in more than one biennial in Russia, and some have exhibited at the Venice Art Biennale or at Documenta in Kassel. Thus, they have received substantial recognition from the field and in fact, they already consider themselves successful, at least at the national level, yet, they claim to have hardly had any sales and to be unable to sustain themselves by making art. Russian artists seem to have gained fast recognition and critical acclaim, but it does not have any influence on their sales. How is this possible? How do their careers develop?

Artists themselves characterize the art that they produce as “non-commercial grant art [that] deals with large sums of money, but is free from current demands of the public” (I103). It takes the form of large-scale installations, video art, or site-specific projects. These forms of art are promoted by contemporary art schools, run by established artists, critics and curators. These schools do not prepare artists for participation in the market, but introduce them into the network of art critics and curators, and promote conceptual thinking rather than commercial art. An artist, who first studied at a classical art academy, said that going to the Institute of Contemporary Art (Moscow) was an “existential choice.” Education there allows “to look at yourself from the outside, how you and others think, on different [art] forms and habits, <…> which decisions you make in art.” For this artist, life is divided into “before and after ICA. These are two different worlds” (I119).

Such art is not easy to sell (“not a fast commodity”), but at the same time, artists do not seem to need the market to fulfill their goals. They claim that the art market “causes tremendous damage” to art history, because art that stays in art history is biased by market forces (I103, I119). They consciously stay away from the market, but somehow are able to sustain themselves, produce art objects and develop their careers.

Note that all these possibilities barely exist in India, with the first and only biennale launched in Kochi in 2012, no national pavilion of India in Venice, the main award for contemporary art in India closing down after the 2012 edition and only two comparatively young and small awards existing for early career artists.
Avoidance of the market does not mean that artists do not have any relationships with art dealers. Some of them have never had any contact with commercial galleries; others have a gallery that represents them exclusively. While this form of artist–dealer relationship is widely recognized in the international art markets, in Russia it often does not involve any commercial profit from sales:

*My gallery, even though it is the most powerful and top gallery at the moment in Russia, anyway cannot provide for normal subsistence. [...] For them, I am rather an image-making artist. Only the top artists get sold, younger artists can only sell small articles.* (1103)

The term “image-making artist” implies that a gallery is interested in an artist as a source of status in the art world rather than a source of income. By promoting young talent and exhibiting cutting-edge works, galleries increase their symbolic capital. Art dealers sponsor the production of art works, negotiate the participation of their artists in important non-profit events and exhibit their projects in their gallery spaces.

Large-scale art objects produced by young Russian artists are almost impossible to sell, so an artist usually does not get any income from working in the form of installations. Yet, these artists do not want to produce smaller commercial artworks or do not know how to do it:

*I work on it [small-scale artworks] all the last years. But still [I] did not succeed in it yet. I mean I try, especially this year I wanted to adapt my large-scale works, to do some replicas maybe or something else, but it did not work out.* (1107)

In the Russian art market, dealers rarely can survive from commercial sales alone. They are known to have other sources of income (such as private sponsorship, a jewelry business or real estate) that support the operation of the gallery and allow them to focus on non-commercial projects. The outcome of such artist–dealer relationships is that a gallery provides artists with connections and an artist allows the gallery to increase its status as an innovative art space.

The artists rarely see private galleries as a driver of their career development and are focused on non-commercial forms of artistic recognition. As one artist stressed:

*Of course, I wish international recognition, but I have serious doubts that in my case it will develop via galleries. It will be rather the opposite, via some institutional exhibitions and other activities the art will gain value and might begin to sell, but also rather in a more museum format.* (1103)

While museums are more often seen as drivers of career development, the commercial side of re-
relationships with them is problematic. Artists mention that if they have had any sales, these were to museums. Yet, museums in Russia do not just expect the usual institutional discount (Komarova 2015), often they demand the works for free or simply withhold them after exhibitions. As one artist complained:

Horrible, [museum name] is just a Mordor\(^{18}\), because they did not even suggest buying my work, but took it and asked for a gift certificate. <...> I had a difficult situation then and I did not have a studio, I had no space to store the artwork, so it was a complete marauding. <...> I did not sign the document, but they still have my work. (I119)

Artists bitterly notice that museums have a bargaining advantage, because they are the only agent that has the capacity to store large-scale installation works:

_My works are very large; it is very hard to store them. Gallery [name] does not have a large storage for works. So that they do not rot in the country house, a number of works have been gifted, only because otherwise they would have been spoiled._ (I107)

An artwork exhibited and sponsored by a private party often ends up in a museum, which increases the artists’ visibility among large audiences. The artists’ public success is to a certain extent caused by the format of the works: they are less reluctant to give away works, because they do not have space to keep them. Yet, the capacity of museums is also limited, as one artist explained. Normally museums are not willing to take more than one large artwork by the same artist:

_That is it. [Now] artworks are in all museums and there is no urgent need [for museums] to buy more. <...> And I think that there are practically no works of mine in private collections._ (I103)

While public museums and private galleries have their own interests in working with non-commercial forms of art, it is private foundations that most often finance the whole industry, including exhibitions in their own spaces, and national and international public museums and biennales. Established by collectors, foundations rarely participate in the market for these young artists as buyers of artworks. Instead they perform a wide set of services for selected artists, who literally feel nurtured and do not see the necessity to deal with any other “service providers” of the art scene. An artist explained why she does not look for a gallery:

_“I like what the foundation [name] does, so far. <...> The foundation did a lot in order for the artwork_
to get produced, meaning production, transportation, publications, work with media. They communicated (with the media). I would not be able to do it [myself].” (I119)

This artist has a long-term relationship with an art foundation that introduced her to the curator of one of the most influential international non-commercial art events. Others get support for a particular project and sometimes do not even know where the money came from:

I had a bright event in my life. <...> The production of [my] work was financed, we got an enormous budget from a private foundation that wished to stay anonymous. [Gallerist name] probably knows, but I do not. (I107)

Yet, artists complain that such organization of artistic production has a disadvantage: the budget for the project rarely includes any fee for the artist. Among the actors involved in the production, transportation and exhibition of work, they are the only ones who do not get any money. Although the budgets of their projects are often enormous, artists rarely live from their art and survive with the help of spouses, by renting out apartments, by selling a car, etc. Yet, instead of trying to enter the market and make more commercially viable art, they cherish the creative freedom that non-commercial institutions allow. The art market for these artists has nothing to do with professional identity:

If [an artist] can survive with the help of some grant support or any other sources of income, then [the market] is not necessary. (I103)

In evaluating their careers, artists clearly distinguish between institutional and market success, “symbolic and material capital” (I120), and acknowledge that, in their case, there is no direct link between exhibitions in museums and sales:

I consider myself a successful artist, because I have many projects and I am mainly busy with professional activities, exhibiting artworks here, going somewhere abroad and so on. Yet, on the other hand, I cannot sustain [myself] from my work. (I107)

The system of non-commercial art institutions in Russia creates a situation in which all the involved actors can benefit from each other without the urgent necessity to buy and sell artworks. Contemporary art schools promote non-commercial forms of art that do not fit the tastes of regular art buyers. Artists have freedom to produce these works because museums, foundations and even commercial galleries are interested in them. Museums easily get these artworks as gifts because they have a capacity to store large-scale installations. Commercial galleries work with art that they
cannot sell to increase their symbolic capital. Private foundations sponsor the production and exhibition of such works, promote artists, and connect them to international curators. Thus, the whole process bypasses the commercial exchange of art. A relatively big number of museums and foundations create an art scene for the type of art that cannot be easily consumed, in terms of buying, by wider audiences of potential private collectors who are interested in art that one could hang above a couch or put in a living room. 19

Conclusion

The different institutional composition of the two art fields affects artistic career strategies on different interrelated levels of analysis. Artists in India are focused on commercial galleries as promoters of their careers that ensure legitimation in the local art scene. Artists in Russia instead build networks of connections with foundations, museums and curators. The careers of professional artists unfold differently in the two countries: Indian artists strive to get spotted by a commercial gallery after graduation; Russian artists get recognition from gatekeepers and start participating in a variety of art events early on (they make connections while still studying). This, in turn, is related to the type of art that is produced by artists in each country. Indian artists see customers of art galleries as their ultimate audience and produce commercially viable forms of art. Russian artists exhibit in public spaces, the production of artworks is sponsored by private foundations that perform as producers rather than end consumers. Artists are less confined by marketable formats.

The distinctive composition of the two art scenes results in different meanings that artists attach to artistic success and autonomy. In India early career artists do not “shy away” from the market and have elaborate ideas about how to make their art commercially viable. The principle of “disinterestedness” does not play a big role in an art scene where art dealers control access to local, non-commercial projects or international exhibitions. In Russia, the active presence of non-commercial institutions creates an alternative economy (Zelizer 2006) that provides alternative self-sufficient tracks for artistic recognition, which do not translate into market sales. The explicit anti-commercial orientation towards art (reinforced during the Soviet period when art commerce was officially forbidden and nurtured early in art schools) promotes resistance identities among early career artists, who refuse commercial success as an indicator of their professionalism. Indian artists are, of course, also aware of the international discourse of “poor artist” interested in “pure art” and can

19 This path of consecration is perceived as dominating the contemporary art scene in Russia, yet it is not universally accepted. Middle-range artists, who more actively engage in selling their works, criticize the Russian art scene for its tendency to promote non-commercial art (I93; I94).
easily use it, when asked directly. Interest in commercial success does not mean that artists are not making art “for art’s sake.” They just do not have any other way to perform it in a given art field. Quitting applied jobs is their expression of artistic autonomy, mediated via market institutions.

Focusing on one dimension of institutional dissimilarity, this paper has paid less attention to other structural elements of an art field. For example, the influence of art education institutions could be studied in more detail. Poulsen (2012) shows that classical art academies become the epicenters of emerging art scenes outside the main art capitals of India (instead of museums, more common for the Western art worlds). The Russian case discussed here also suggests the strong influence of contemporary art schools, however I do not have sufficient data to elaborate on this. This paper also does not touch upon another important gatekeeper of an art scene – art critics. The main reason for this is the choice of artistic perspective as the primary data for analysis: artists themselves did not discuss the role of art critics in their careers. Looking beyond my two empirical cases, the generous governmental support for artists that existed in the Netherlands until 2008 affected their strategies of participation in the private art market, while subsidies to “top artists” were an important form of artistic recognition (Rengers and Plug 2001). Developing a research agenda on the interrelation between the institutional composition of art fields and artistic career strategies should take into consideration the multidimensionality of art scenes and the relative importance of various actors and organizations in artistic fields.

This is related to the more general argument of this paper that artistic fields differ. While the Bourdiesuan approach to analysis of artistic fields looks at them dynamically (Bourdieu 1996) and therefore potentially allows for (at least temporal) diversity, existing empirical research based on his theoretical perspective usually applies a universal bipolar structure of artistic fields that defines modes of production, relevant gatekeepers and types of audiences. To be considered art, such different domains of culture as architecture, rock music and cinema need to follow the same rules of the autonomous pole of cultural production (Regev 1994; Lipstadt 2003; Heise and Tudor 2007). Visual artists in consecrated contemporary art worlds are supposed to show little interest in commercial success and have an orientation towards “art for art’s sake,” and if they do not observably adhere to these principles they apparently “play” with the rules of the field (Cook 2001, Grenfell and Hardy 2003). This paper, on the contrary, shows that consecrated contemporary art worlds can have different “rules” depending on their institutional composition; that the ideal of “disinterestedness” in direct economic benefits is closely related to structural possibilities available to artists; that artists confined to the commercial scene as the only available source of artistic legitimation can develop a different understanding of “artistic autonomy.”
Russia and India have substantially different cultural histories and institutional systems, which makes a good case for comparison and for an exploratory study into the relationship between artistic careers and institutional compositions of artistic fields. Yet, I propose that the perspective presented in this paper can be applied beyond the developing art scenes as it allows for a more sensitive approach towards the contextual specificity of artistic careers in various art scenes, including the central ones. Cross-national differences may be less prominent in the Western art scenes due to their greater openness to international collaborations. Thus, Quemin (2013) shows that artists from some of the main Western art scenes (e.g. UK or Germany) still prefer to move to New York in order to have better career opportunities. Nevertheless, historically strong national specificities, such as the rich and geographically dispersed institutional diversity of the German art scene (Rüter 2006) or the long history of governmental support for artists and the art market in the Netherlands (Rengers and Velthuis 2002) still create different opportunity spaces for artists starting or residing in these countries and affect their career strategies.

Finally, this paper questions the idea that a developed system of non-commercial art institutions is an unconditional prerequisite for the smooth operation of an art market, as it resolves the radical uncertainty of the valuation of an artistic product (Moulin and Vale 1995, Plattner 1996, Beckert 2009, Velthuis 2005). The Indian case suggests that in a field that lacks non-commercial art institutions, this uncertainty is resolved within the market. Art dealers get into the privileged central position as the main gatekeepers of a developing art field. My interviews with art collectors in India suggest that they closely follow the opinion of art dealers in their aesthetic judgments. This situation intensifies market operation, but in the long term, may create a highly unstable market (as was exemplified by the collapse of the contemporary art market in India after the global financial crisis of 2009; Komarova 2015).

At another extreme of developing art scenes, an elaborate institutional system, in the case of Russia, substitutes for the market. This can be interpreted as the proliferation of mediators, rather than the symbiosis between the market and non-commercial art scene that art theorists and professionals advocate for. Thus, at least in the early stages of the development of an art scene, disproportionately strong non-commercial art institutions may resolve the uncertainty of artistic value, while at the same time hindering the development of art commerce.

The development of this proposition will require taking a closer look at the strategies of other art scene participants in relation to non-commercial art institutions, while comparison with the established Western art markets could clarify the limits for generalization beyond emerging art scenes. Participants of both art markets, well aware of the dominant discourse of artistic consecration, claim that their markets are “immature” and hence believe that their markets will eventually fit the
“Western model.” Yet, the current institutional compositions of the two art scenes create a complex balance of power relations, individual interests and aspirations, available infrastructure and even the material properties of artistic products. Therefore, it can be more resistant to change than is commonly expected.