

APOLLO

ART BUSINESS



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RECESSION MAY BE GOOD NEWS FOR THE NEWLY FASHIONABLE PRIVATE NOT-FOR-PROFIT GALLERIES.

There is less than a month to go before her new not-for-profit gallery opens and Nonna Materkova, the founder of Calvert 22, is wandering through the dust produced by about 20 builders. The gallery will house exhibitions of contemporary art from Russia and Eastern Europe. There is clearly still a huge amount to do before the launch party but if Materkova is nervous, she doesn't show it. No amount of dust is dulling her enthusiasm. 'The amount of help I have got and goodwill that this project has generated is incredible', she says. 'I have no doubt that this is, at least partially, because it is not a commercial venture.'

Materkova comes from St Petersburg but has lived in the UK since the 1990s, running a corporate finance firm specialising in **Russian enterprises and investments**. Philanthropic donations to the arts are nothing new, but what makes Materkova's venture, and others like it, different is that she is bringing not just her money but also her time and business acumen to bear on the new project. 'I wanted more than my career so I started reading about, buying and collecting art', she says. 'This seemed like a logical progression.'

Materkova remembers going on a Sotheby's course on contemporary art where she was told all about the Indian and Chinese markets but nothing about Russian artists. When she asked about this she was told that there simply wasn't a market for it. She says that Westerners know about Russia's cultural legacy – the literature, music and ballet – but there is a gap when it comes to modern Russia's output. Calvert 22 has been conceived to help fill that gap.

Materkova argues that the gallery's not-for-profit status helps it to attract high-profile curators who would not have the same freedom if organising exhibitions for commercial galleries. It is opening with an exhibition of the work of five contemporary Russian artists, 'Past Future Perfect', curated by David Thorp, and is planning a show of Russian video art in September curated by Isaac Julien and Mark Nash.

Calvert 22 is far from unique. There has been a proliferation of not-for-profit galleries opening in recent years. Examples include Raven Row in the heart of Spitalfields, financed by Alex Sainsbury, a scion of the supermarket dynasty – and 176, which houses the Zabudowicz Collection. Parasol unit, founded in 2005, claims to have been the first not-for-profit gallery in London. Ziba de Weck, its founder and curator, says: 'These private undertakings are all slightly different. Crucially, I am not using Parasol to display my own collection.' She is too polite to use the phrase 'vanity project'.

De Weck says that Parasol unit is modelled on the *Kunstballen* on the continent, which seek to produce



high-quality exhibitions of cutting-edge art in museum-standard spaces. 'We also put a lot of work into the publications, as these are all that survive of the exhibitions', she adds. A curator by training, De Weck explains that running her own space is 'a way for my family and me to give something back, so, yes it is motivated by a certain amount of idealism but also by professionalism.'

It is clear that many not-for-profit galleries have benefitted from the boom years of the past decade, which have resulted in individuals amassing enough money to fund their own projects. But as boom turns to bust, will these galleries be able to survive on individual largesse, fund-raising and the occasional government or lottery grant? More interesting, what role are they likely to play?

One argument is that, as commercial galleries tighten their purse-strings and stop taking punts on unproven artists, not-for-profit galleries will provide an increasingly important platform for emerging talent. Some will be exhibiting work by art-school graduates, others – like both Calvert 22 and Parasol – will be introducing foreign artists to UK audiences for the first time. De Weck believes that the recession – traditionally a time of heightened creativity – will be good for not-for-profit galleries in other ways: 'In the boom-time, the commercial galleries had lots of financial possibilities and were able to offer higher salaries. It will now become easier for the non-commercial foundations to compete for staff.'

The Russian collector and economist Nonna Materkova, whose not-for-profit gallery, Calvert 22, opened in London last month. For more information, go to www.calvert22.com
Photo: courtesy Calvert 22, London