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One morning in 1494, the residents of Florence awoke to find their city blanketed in snow. On a whim, Piero de' Medici, the newly installed ruler of the city-state, decided to mark this unusual event by ordering an 18-year-old Michelangelo to make a snowman in the courtyard of his palace. No one, of course, has any idea what the sculpture looked like, but it is a fair guess that the result was probably the most incredible snowman ever built. Equally, no one knows whether Michelangelo was insulted by the frivolous commission, which is often cited as the supreme example of a patron abusing their power over an artist.

The relationship between wealth and art, or patron and artist, is an ancient one. Over time it has slowly mutated, as the relative social standings of those on either side of the equation have fluctuated. Nowadays, when contemporary artists are treated like rock stars and are far wealthier, patronage is considered an old-fashioned concept. But variations of the dynamic still exist, including, in recent years, the rise of not-for-profit galleries, which add a dash of philanthropy to the mix.

'If people realised how much fun it is to get up in the morning and do what I do, they would never think of opening a commercial gallery'

Calvert 22 is among the latest not-for-profit galleries to open in London this year, specialising in Russian and Eastern European contemporary art. It is the brainchild of Nonna Materkova, a native of St Petersburg who has lived in the UK since the Nineties, running Roslink, a corporate finance firm focused on Russia.

The gallery's first show, a group exhibition entitled *Past Future Perfect*, included work from the period between the end of the repression of artists under Soviet rule and the recent boom in contemporary art in the country. The show included installations by Alexander Brodsky, and Pavel Pepperstein's watercolour cartoons.

It is hard to know whether to admire or worry about Materkova's optimism in launching a not-for-profit gallery in the wake of a credit crunch and without any previous experience of working in the art world. But she clearly has impressive business credentials, and she also believes that the gallery's charitable status will give it a

leg-up in an economic environment that is threatening many commercial galleries. 'The amount of help I have received and goodwill that this project has generated is incredible,' says Materkova. 'I have no doubt that this is, at least partially, because it is not a commercial venture.'

Philanthropic donations to the arts are nothing new, but what makes Materkova's enterprise, 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 come from St Petersburg, where you are constantly surrounded by culture,' she says. 'I wanted more than my career, so I started reading about, buying and collecting art. This seemed like a logical progression.'

Materkova remembers going on a Sotheby's course on contemporary art, where she was taught 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 their art. She believes 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. Many would not be given the same freedom if they were organising exhibitions for commercial galleries; here, they will be able to take greater artistic risks. The *Past Future Perfect* exhibition contained the work of five contemporary Russian artists and was curated by David Thorp. A show of Russian video art, curated by Isaac Julien and Mark Nash, opens on 1 October.

Calvert 22 is far from unique. There has been a proliferation of not-for-profit galleries opening in recent years. One example is Raven Row, in the heart of Spitalfields, financed by Alex Sainsbury, a scion of the supermarket dynasty, which was until recently exhibiting the collages of Ray Johnson. Another is 176, which houses the Zabłudowicz Collection.

Parasol unit was founded in 2005 and claims to be the first not-for-profit gallery to open in London. Ziba de Weck, the gallery's 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, who is the wife of Pierre de Weck, the global head of wealth management at Deutsche Bank, says that Parasol unit is modelled on the kunsthallen on the



Art for art's sake

As commercial art galleries start to feel the pinch, a new wave of not-for-profit galleries is providing a lifeline for emerging artists

WORDS BEN WRIGHT PHOTOGRAPHY PHILIP SINDEN

Right Ziba de Weck, founder of Parasol unit, London's first not-for-profit gallery. Above Rachel Hovnanian's Beauty Queen Totem