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Be Open's Sound Portal at London Design Week

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By **Hettie Judah**

The black rubberised structure squatting in Trafalgar Square during London's tenth annual Design Festival was the first in a series of sensory-focused installations to be rolled out across major international design events over the next 12 months. Commissioned by Be Open, a foundation backed by Russian-born billionaire Elena Baturina, the Arup-designed Sound Portal blocked out the square's ambient noise to create a sensory-deprivation chamber, sharpening the ear for sound. Described as a design experience that you couldn't see, the chamber hosted five bespoke audio installations, ranging from Nathaniel Mann's Ambisonic recordings inspired by Horatio Nelson to Ivan Pavlov's spiritually abstract chorale for electronic voices. Further installations focusing on the remaining four senses will be presented at prominent international design events over the next 12 months, starting with touch at Design Miami in December.



Be Open Sound Portal interior, Trafalgar Square, London. Photo: Arup/Thomas Graham

The Portal and its sensory counterparts are the most publicly visible manifestation of the Be Open Foundation, a somewhat polymorphous organisation with a \$100 million purse launched at the Milan Design Festival earlier this year. Billing itself as 'a creative think tank whose mission is to promote people and ideas', the foundation has, in the space of six months, administered three rounds of design awards (two to young designers, one for educational institutions), presented four exhibitions (one of Russian contemporary art, two design and the Sound Portal) and sponsored dozens of talks and conferences by leading thinkers and makers in design and allied fields.

There is a scattershot urgency to all this that will no doubt ruffle feathers – particularly among those who dedicate the better part of a year to raising funds for Design Week events that are arguably better researched and much less publicised. Decisions and developments within the foundation seem to take place at the kind of speed that can only be achieved with hearty financial lubrication. Be Open's remit and policy are not yet clearly defined – back in April there was earnest discussion of the importance of providing a platform for Russia's contemporary art scene, and Julian Schnabel appeared as a keynote speaker at a conference on happiness in Milan. By the time the Be Open events kicked off in London, art seemed to be taking a backseat in favour of a more thoroughgoing interest in design.



Be Open Sound Portal, Trafalgar Square, London. Photo: Arup/Thomas Graham

Overall the gist of Be Open's mission seems to be to foster and promote creative thought that goes beyond the repetitive mainstream of commercial product design. Do we need more design awards? Yes, always: it is incredibly difficult for designers to make any money early in their career, particularly in less immediately commercial fields. The more, and more diversely-awarded, purses there are out there, the more support there will be for those doing interesting work and the more creative minds there will be attracted to the industry. In the era of TED, do we need more talks and more conferences? A more measured 'yes', so long as we can get beyond a roll call of the usual suspects trotting out their after-dinner routines for an expensive circle-jerk of power players. Conferences that are accessibly priced and well conceived enough to challenge and stimulate the speakers themselves could have the potential to stimulate new ideas and partnerships. The most recent Be Open conference in London had the nerdy dream ticket of Tom Dixon and Matthew Herbert on the same stage talking about sound.

Despite a tendency to fluffy pronouncements about making the world more beautiful and fostering harmony and happiness, Elena Baturina is no expensively coiffed social x-ray. A self-made billionaire, her husband Yuriy Luzhkov was for 18 years mayor of Moscow, and she is ranked by Forbes as Russia's richest woman, worth just in excess of \$1 billion. Her own tastes may lean towards Sèvres porcelain – of which she is an important collector – rather than more contemporary works, but she is certainly coming to the field of design with an unrivalled knowledge of manufacturing. While her business interests are currently in property development, the bulk of this former factory worker's fortune was made in the construction industry and from a plastic-products company that made crockery and furniture.