

Julian Schnabel Helps Controversial Russian Billionaire Launch Design Think Tank in Milan

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Photo credit Simona Piantieri

Julian Schnabel

by ARTINFO UK

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Today painter **Julian Schnabel** is the special guest at a three-day conference introducing the design think tank **BE OPEN** in Milan. The event coincides with the Italian city's celebrated design fair **Salone Internazionale del Mobile**.

BE OPEN is the brainchild of **Elena Baturina**, who made her fortune in the construction industry during her husband **Yuri Luzhkov's** 18-year tenure as mayor of Moscow. Luzhkov was brutally dismissed by president **Dmitri Medvedev** in 2010.

"[Luzhkov] was long admired for his no-nonsense organisational skills, but the latter half of his tenure was plagued by allegations of corruption as his wife, Yelena Baturina, amassed a vast fortune as a leading Moscow construction magnate, becoming Russia's richest woman along the way," the [FT's Catherine Belton](#) wrote at the time.

Gennady Terebkov, the director of the new think tank, has announced that she will invest a staggering \$100 million (£62.7 million) in intellectual development through the BE OPEN Foundation. Baturina claims to be a strong believer in design's potential for social change, and has surrounded herself with an impressive array of personalities to support her in her new venture: Chef **Carlo Cracco**, designer **Stuart Parr**, and fashion designer **Elio Fiorucci** are all talking at BE OPEN's inaugural event.

"I like the way that creatives' minds work," said Baturina. "We know that 'design thinking is always linked to an improved future' and it is that sentiment that is the driving force behind BE OPEN."

BE OPEN's first conference rather ambitiously aims to "exchange ideas about how design thinking can respond to and find solutions for current and future social, environmental and economic needs," with a particular focus on the relationship between Russia and Europe.

When asked about the theme of today's discussion, "Daily & Happy" — and in particular about his own speech, entitled "Art's Happy Gestures" — Schnabel answered in his typically whimsical manner: "Art's happy gesture is about the happiness I feel whilst working. How do you get through the day? I paint my way out of problems. I'm looking for a poetic reality that is running alongside the tangible reality."

"Verge," an exhibition of Russian artists flirting with design, runs alongside the conference. BE OPEN will continue to organize regular events and support a new, €10,000 (£8,251) award for young designers.