

Serpentine Galleries chief resigns in Israel spyware row

Yana Peel owns stake in husband's private equity fund that controls NSO Group



Yana Peel said she was 'saddened' by having to step down from what is considered one of London's most innovative galleries © Rex/Shutterstock

Mehul Srivastava in Tel Aviv, and **Anna Gross** and **Javier Espinoza** in London JUNE 18 2019

A leading Canadian philanthropist was forced to step down from the leadership of London's influential Serpentine Galleries after her interest in a contentious Israeli spyware company became public.

Yana Peel, wife of Stephen Peel, the private equity executive who co-founded Novalpina Capital, said she made her decision after what she described as “toxic” and “misguided personal attacks” on her and her family.

US corporate records show that Mrs Peel, who was appointed chief executive of the Serpentine Galleries in 2016, is an “indirect owner” of “25 per cent but less than 50 per cent” of Novalpina Capital Group SARL, a company with investments in the Novalpina Capital Partners I SCSp fund.

Mrs Peel has a passive and “single-digit” interest in Novalpina Capital Partners I SCSp which has a two-thirds stake in Israel's NSO Group, according to her spokesperson.

Israel's NSO Group makes spyware that has been tracked to the phones of human rights activists, political dissidents and journalists around the world, sparking several lawsuits. A case in Israel, for instance, alleges that NSO's software was used on a friend of Jamal Khashoggi, the Washington Post columnist murdered by Saudi hitmen.

“Mrs Peel has no involvement whatsoever in the operations and investment decisions of

Novalpina,” said a spokesperson. The Guardian first reported her ownership.

NSO Group is being sued in multiple jurisdictions by human rights campaigners who allege that the company shares liability for selling its sophisticated software to countries such as Mexico and Saudi Arabia, which have then turned them on political opponents, rights activists and even lawyers.





Yana Peel with Serpentine Galleries artistic director Hans-Ulrich Obrist at the Royal Academy Of Arts summer exhibition preview party earlier this month
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NSO says it has no knowledge of how its customers use its products, which turn cell phones into listening devices, turning on their cameras and transmitting all data, including encrypted communications. Last month, the [Financial Times reported](#) that the company had used a vulnerability in the WhatsApp messaging system to infiltrate phones.

Earlier this year, Mr Peel led Novalpina Capital in backing the leveraged buyout of NSO

Group by its management, valuing the company at approximately \$1bn. Mr Peel resigned from the [board of Global Witness](#) following the deal because of the human rights group's concerns over the "misuse of this kind of technology" which "can have a damaging effect on the work of NGOs and individuals and in the hands of repressive regimes . . . can be used to deadly effect".

NSO's flagship product Pegasus is used by governments and intelligence agencies to remotely and secretly hack smartphones.

Her stake in Novalpina is particularly contentious because NSO's technology was used to target at least one Mexican activist, Simon Barquera, at Mexico's National Institute of Public Health, according to the University of Toronto's Citizen Lab. The institute is supported by Michael Bloomberg, the chairman of the Serpentine Galleries, through the Bloomberg Philanthropies foundation.

Mrs Peel, who has supported many charitable organisations, said she was "saddened" by having to step down from what is considered one of London's most innovative galleries, and that recent attacks she had suffered over her husband's business could put donations for the art world at risk.

"I have dedicated the majority of my professional life to public service in the cultural sector," she said. "The world of art is about free expression. But it is not about bullying and intimidation. I welcome debate and discussion about the realities of life in the digital age. There is a place for these debates, but they should be constructive, fair and factual — not based on toxic personal attacks.

"If campaigns of this type continue, the treasures of the art community — which are so fundamental to our society — risk an erosion of private support. That will be a great loss for everyone."