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Over 150 Artists Call for Leon Black's Removal From MoMA's Board Over Jeffrey Epstein Financial Ties

In a series of statements, artists including Nan Goldin, Michael Rakowitz, Xaviera Simmons, and Hito Steyerl have urged the Museum of Modern Art to address Black's presence on its board.

by Hakim Bishara
February 4, 2021

Over 150 artists, art workers, and activist groups are calling on the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York to separate itself from its chairman, billionaire Leon Black. Michael Rakowitz, Xaviera Simmons, Hito Steyerl, Nan Goldin, MoMA Divest, and Decolonize This Place are among the many art world figures urging Black's removal over his links to convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein.

Last week, Black announced his plans to step down as CEO of his private equity firm Apollo Global Management after an independent report found that he paid Epstein \$158 million in fees between 2012 and 2017. The report, conducted by the law firm Dechert, found no evidence that Black had participated in Epstein's criminal conduct, but revealed the extent of the close financial ties between the two. According to the report, Epstein advised Black on trust and estate planning, tax issues, and matters related to the billionaire's vast art collection. Epstein's services saved Black around \$2 billion in taxes, the report says.

Meanwhile, Black continues to serve as the chairman of MoMA's board of trustees, a role he assumed in 2018, despite mounting calls for his removal. The *New York Times* reported that in an email to MoMA trustees last week, Black showed no sign of

stepping down, telling his colleagues: “I look forward to seeing you at our February board meeting.”

Now, artists are amping up pressure on the New York museum, with a series of statements provided to Hyperallergic by leading artists and art groups urging MoMA to address Black’s presence on its board. (Each of the four statements is reproduced, in full, at the closing of this article.)



MoMA visitors gather around Edvard Munch’s “The Scream” on display at MoMA. Black purchased the work in 2012.

“We, as artists and art workers, support the removal of Leon Black from the board of MoMA for reasons that have already been stated by many others,” says one statement signed by 157 artists

and art workers. “However, this should be considered the bare minimum.”

Signatories include Nicole Eisenman, Andrea Fraser, Baseera Khan, Noah Fischer, Paddy Johnson, William Powhida, Guerrilla Girls, the Dismantle NOMA collective, and Artists For Workers. The list also includes Iraqi artists Ali Eyal and Ali Yass, who participated in the 2019-2020 MoMA PS1 exhibition *Theater of Operations: The Gulf Wars 1991–2011*.

“Beyond [Black’s] removal, we must think seriously about a collective exit from art’s imbrication in toxic philanthropy and structures of oppression, so that we don’t have to have the same conversations over and over, one board member at a time,” the statement continues. It concludes:

This thinking can only catalyze action once we state plainly: We do not need this money. Museums and other arts institutions must pursue alternative models, cooperative structures, Land Back initiatives, reparations, and additional ideas that constitute an abolitionist approach toward the arts and arts patronage, so that they align with the egalitarian principles that drew us to art in the first place.



Protesters outside of MoMA in October of 2019.

The group MoMA Divest, which crashed a VIP preview at MoMA in 2019 before it reopened its refurbished galleries to demand prison divestment and staged a protest at MoMA PS1 on the closing day of *Theater of Operations*, provided Hyperallergic with a separate statement that addresses Black's other business dealings, which include ownership of Constellis (formerly Blackwater), a private military company that operated in Iraq.

“Recent confirmations of MoMA Board of Trustees Chair Leon Black’s deep financial and personal connections to Jeffrey Epstein underline the problems that MoMA and other major museum boards face and have failed to reckon with in any meaningful way,” MoMA Divest’s statement reads. “We note that Leon Black’s corruption extends far as his ‘investment’ firm is also the owner of Constellis, formerly known as Blackwater, a private military firm which was banned from operating in Iraq after its staff were charged with war crimes (when MoMA Divest peacefully protested this last year in solidarity with exhibiting artist Ali Yass,

PS1 responded by calling NYPD). Those war criminals were part of the recent spate of pardons by Trump.”

The group continues with criticism of other billionaires on MoMA’s board:

Leon Black is not an anomaly. Five MoMA board members — [Steven] Tananbaum, [Glenn] Dubin, [Steven] Cohen, [Leon] Black, [Larry] Fink — have been identified and targeted by different groups over the last year for their ties to war, racist prison and border enforcement systems, vulture fund exploitation, gentrification and displacement of the poor, extractivism and environmental degradation, and patriarchal forms of violence. Board members also have ties and donate to the NYPD Police Foundation.

In short, the rot is at the core of the institution, which includes PS1. MoMA/PS1 directors and administrators have quietly taken the dirty money in the name of art and made empty curatorial gestures towards political issues.

“Nothing short of a major reconstitution of the board, a change of directors, a public reckoning, and a reimagining of the institutional and curatorial mission of the museum is acceptable,” the group adds.



Protesters at a demonstration led by Decolonize This Place at the Whitney Museum on May 18, 2019.

In a statement titled “Fuck MoMA. An Open Call to Action,” activist group Decolonize This Place writes: “We are tired of the same shit making news over and over. It has become a banal routine. One place after another. Another institution, another oligarch artwashing their death-dealing profits, with womxn bearing the brunt of it all. This is not a PR crisis, or just a matter of toxic philanthropy. MoMA is a frontline of gendered and racialized class war, and we all have a responsibility to act.”

The group previously led months-long protests against the Whitney Museum’s vice-chair Warren Kanders regarding his ownership of a tear gas manufacturer. In the face of public pressure, Kanders resigned from his post on the Whitney board in the summer of 2019, and his company has since announced it will exit the tear gas trade.

“Letters, pleas, and backroom deals are not enough,” DTP continues. “After the removal of Kandors from the Whitney, after the George Floyd rebellion, after the open declaration of war by Fascists seeking to salvage white heteropatriarchal rule, we must do and demand more.”

“Board members are not the problem,” The activists add. “They only make the problem visible. MoMA in its entirety is the problem. Perhaps it’s time to abolish MoMA.”



Protesters outside of MoMA in February, 2017.

In a separate statement sent to Hyperallergic, artist Hito Steyerl wrote: “Let’s face it: by commissioning an art lubricated 2bio USD tax avoidance scheme from suspected pedophile Jeffrey

Epstein, chairman of the board Leon Black created a major reputational disaster for MoMA.”

Responding to Dechert LLP’s report, which clears Black of any wrongdoing, Steyerl wrote: “The description of [Black’s] activities positively sounds like a caricature of QAnon’s most delusional fairy tales about elite cabals — except that the NYT vouches for its facticity. The result: at present parts of MoMA’s board come across like an unhinged and depraved version of Marie Antoinette’s feudal court.”

Steyerl continued with thoughts about the wider imprecations of MoMA’s continued silence, writing:

The message sent by the museum is devastating. Apparently, it seems to care less about its reputational damage than Black’s own company which forced him to leave its post as CEO. This is a panicked and shortsighted reaction to say the least.

The damage created not only for MoMA but for the art world in general will most probably impact societies’ views on art for years to come. There are tragic historical precedents. Similar — if invented — stories were used by 20es and early 30es right-wingers in Germany to pit parts of the population not only against modern art but more importantly also against different minorities, with well known and disastrous consequences. The sad truth is: contemporary reactionaries will equally attempt to implicate the whole art world into Jeffrey Epstein’s crimes by association — if institutional accountability keeps failing, or is missing altogether.

What’s more: the rightwing reaction will be a special blowback for those minority artists, whose work the museum had just begun to finally rescue from structural institutional neglect. At this point though these bodies of work sadly look as if they were being

instrumentalized by the museum as cosmetic distractions to divert from its spectacular failure in protecting its own dignity.

This impotence risks contaminating not only the work of artists, but the art world as a whole. In a time when people worldwide are suffering economically, mentally, and physically, pursuits like art assisted tax avoidance start appearing for what they are: excesses of entitlement and privilege, undermining important services like Medicare, depriving health workers of desperately needed resources to keep people alive.

MoMA unfortunately doesn't seem to care.

MoMA has not responded to Hyperallergic' multiple requests for comment.

Collective Statement Signed by 157 artists, curators, and art workers

We, as artists and art workers, support the removal of Leon Black from the board of MoMA for reasons that have already been stated by many others. However, this should be considered the bare minimum. Beyond his removal, we must think seriously about a collective exit from art's imbrication in toxic philanthropy and structures of oppression, so that we don't have to have the same conversations over and over, one board member at a time. This thinking can only catalyze action once we state plainly: We do not need this money. Museums and other arts institutions must pursue alternative models, cooperative structures, Land Back initiatives, reparations, and additional ideas that constitute an abolitionist approach toward the arts and arts patronage, so that they align with the egalitarian principles that drew us to art in the first place.

Aaron Hughes
Aaron Landsman
Abou Farman
Ajay Kurian
Alan Ruiz
Alberto Garcia Rodriguez
Alex Paik
Alex Zandi
Alexa Punnamkuzhyil
Ali Eyal
Ali Yass
Amanda Matles, Pratt Institute
Aminah Ibrahim
Ana Ratner
Anna Sew Hoy
Andrea Fraser
Andreas Amble
Andrew Ranville
Andrew Weiner, NYU
Ánima Correa
Anna Harsanyi
Ann Holder
Art and Labor Podcast
Art Handlers Alliance
Artists For Workers
Aru Apaza
Axe Binondo
Azikiwe Mohammed
Baseera Khan
Betty Roytburd
Blakey Bessire
Brett Wallace
Caitlin Cahill
Carlos Rosales-Silva
Chelsea Birenberg

Christina Chan
Christina Martinelli
Claire Mirocha
Clarinda Mac Low
Clark Filio
Claudia Hart
Dana Kopel
Danielle Dean
David Borgonjon
David Kramer
Denisse Andrade, Pratt Institute
Devin Kenny
Edi Friedlander
Emily Johnson
Emily Shanahan
Eric Golo Stone
Erin Murphy
Eriola Pira
Eugene Yiu Nam Cheung
Francesca Altamura
Frank J. Stockton
Franklyn Cain
Gee Wesley
Gordon Hall
Greg Lindquist
Guerrilla Girls
Haliadorable211
Hallie McNeill
HOUSING Gallery
Ian Epps
Isabelle Brouman
Jake Davidson
Jared Brown
Jason Simon
Jeffrey Grunthaner

Jennifer M. Williams
Jenny Dubnau
Jessica Wilson
Jesus Benavente
Jo Shane
Johanne Swanson
Johnson Study Group
Jonathan González
Jorge Rojas
Joseph Lubitz
Josephine Heston
Julia Kwon
Juliana Cerqueira Leite
Kai Matsumiya
Kat Zhao
Katherine Aungier
Katie Giritlian
Katie Grace McGowan, Detroit, MI.
Katy Bea
KJ Freeman
Kristan Kennedy
Lawrence Sanchez
lexi welch
Lia Gangitano, PARTICIPANT INC
Lilly Hern-Fondation
Lincoln Tobier, Los Angeles
Lissa Regnier
Liz Glynn
Luis Alexandre Casanovas Blanco
Lorelei Ramirez
Lucas Baisch
Manolis D. Lemos
Marnie Briggs
María Verónica San Martín
Max Warsh

Megan Elevado
Michael Rakowitz
Michelle Rosenberg
Mikeeh Zwirner (Institute of Museums Against All Fucked Up
Social Systems)
Mimi Bai
Minahil Khan
Mira Dayal
Moyra Davey
Nan Goldin
Nataša Prljević
Nia Nottage
Nicole Eisenman
Nick Wylie, Public Media Institute
Nikiesha Hamilton
Nikki Columbus
Noah Fischer
Paddy Johnson
Patrick Carlin Mohundro
Paul John
Paul McAdory
Peter Rostovsky, artist, writer, educator.
Rachel Valinsky
Ramón Miranda Beltrán
Rebecca Naegele
Rena Anakwe
Rindon Johnson
Rory Murphy
Ryan Oskin
Ryan Scullin
Sam Korman
Sara Grace Powell
Sara Magenheimer
Sari Weisenberg
Shanjana Mahmud

Sherko Abbas
Sophia Friedman-Pappas
Stephanie Acosta
Stephen Sewell
Sunny Iyer
Taehee Whang
Teresa Ross Tellechea
the Dismantle NOMA collective
Todd Ayoung, Pratt Institute
Todd Gray
V. M. McEwen
Valerie Chang
Vanessa Thill
Vijay Masharani
Wes Larios
William Powhida
Winslow Smith
Xavier Danto
Xaviera Simmons
Zazu Swistel

MoMA Divest

Recent confirmations of MoMA Board of Trustees Chair Leon Black's deep financial and personal connections to Jeffrey Epstein underline the problems that MoMA and other major museum boards face and have failed to reckon with in any meaningful way. We note that Leon Black's corruption extends far as his "investment" firm is also the owner of Constellis, formerly known as Blackwater, a private military firm which was banned from operating in Iraq after its staff were charged with war crimes (when MoMA Divest peacefully protested this last year in solidarity with exhibiting artist Ali Yass, PS1 responded by

calling NYPD). Those war criminals were part of the recent spate of pardons by Trump.

Leon Black is not an anomaly. Five MoMA board members – Tananbaum, Dubin, Cohen, Black, Fink – have been identified and targeted by different groups over the last year for their ties to war, racist prison and border enforcement systems, vulture fund exploitation, gentrification and displacement of the poor, extractivism and environmental degradation, and patriarchal forms of violence. Board members also have ties and donate to the NYPD Police Foundation. In short, the rot is at the core of the institution, which includes PS1. MoMA/PS1 directors and administrators have quietly taken the dirty money in the name of art and made empty curatorial gestures towards political issues. MoMA’s director Glenn Lowry has said that Leon Black “continue[s] this tradition of visionary leadership with their passion for modern and contemporary art, strategic planning and financial expertise, and deep understanding of the Museum and its mission.” MoMA’s mission, then, must be artwashing; but it can no longer clean the fact that war and prison profiteering, child prostitution, and various forms of structural racism are part of the structure of MoMA/PS1. For a civic institution with civic responsibilities this is unacceptable. Nothing short of a major reconstitution of the board, a change of directors, a public reckoning, and a reimagining of the institutional and curatorial mission of the museum is acceptable. We also reiterate previous demands that MoMA/PS1 issue a public statement regarding their position on proceeds and donations that come as a result of violence from these issues, and start a transparent public investigation into any and all funds linked to these matters, including those in the various pension funds used by the institution; and that MoMA/PS1 begin a community-based process of reinvestment, redistribution, land restoration, and reparations in affected communities.

Decolonize This Place

Fuck MoMA: An Open Call To Action

We are tired of the same shit making news over and over. It has become a banal routine. One place after another. Another institution, another oligarch artwashing their death-dealing profits, with womxn bearing the brunt of it all. This is not a PR crisis, or just a matter of toxic philanthropy. MoMA is a frontline of gendered and racialized class war, and we all have a responsibility to act.

Letters, pleas, and backroom deals are not enough. After the removal of Kanders from the Whitney, after the George Floyd rebellion, after the open declaration of war by Fascists seeking to salvage white heteropatriarchal rule, we must do and demand more. Board members are not the problem. They only make the problem visible. MoMA in its entirety is the problem. Perhaps it's time to abolish MoMA.

MoMA was founded with the oil wealth of the Rockefellers. Since then, the museum has been a clearing house for capital, a showcase for domination, and an ecocidal machine. It has diversified in content, but in practice it has been an enemy of the poor and the marginalized, the fired and the furloughed, the displaced and the dispossessed, the detained and the deported, the dying and the dead. After the recent uprisings, MoMA and other cultural institutions are scrambling to proclaim their commitment to justice, diversity, and equity. How can an institution claim such values with predatory billionaires controlling it? Even visionary exhibitions like *Marking Time: Art in the Age of Mass Incarceration* cannot escape this contradiction.

Various campaigns and actions have said this in recent years: MoMA is anti-Womxn, anti-Black, anti-Indigenous, anti-Migrant,

anti-Worker. Not simply because MoMA has failed to be truly inclusive in its collection or programming or staffing. But because MoMA, as an institution harboring the likes of Leon Black and Larry Fink, is complicit in oppression globally, from the burning of the Amazon to migrant detention camps to gentrification and mass displacement, to the exploitation of womxn and children. If left unchallenged, MoMA will continue to pose a danger to humanity and the planet at large.

So what would it mean to abolish MoMA, and who will undertake this task? Such an effort requires us all. A stakeholder-led decolonization process could be a way forward to deal with this fuckery. Absent such an initiative, we encourage self-organized action so that MoMA will see the writing on the wall. Here is a Decolonial Operations Manual for people who wish to act autonomously. We remind the general public that the MoMA building is open every day of the week from 10:30 am to 5:30 pm.