

Xaviera Simmons, Nan Goldin, and 150 Other Artists and Activists Are Urging MoMA to Ax Board Chairman Leon Black

The signatories of a petition want MoMA to part ways with Black over his ties to Jeffrey Epstein.

Taylor Dafoe, February 5, 2021



Leon Black.

More than 150 artists, activists, curators, and collectives have signed a petition demanding that the Museum of Modern Art remove billionaire Leon Black from its board over the philanthropist's extensive ties to the late sex offender Jeffrey Epstein.

Prominent artists including Andrea Fraser, Nan Goldin, Michael Rakowitz, and Xaviera Simmons were among the 156 co-signors who issued a collective statement via Hyperallergic advocating for Black's removal from the MoMA board.

Last month, Black announced plans to step down as chief executive of the multibillion-dollar private equity firm he founded, Apollo Global Management, after an independent investigation found that he had paid Epstein \$158 million in fees between 2012 and 2017.

Black has shown no signs that he will step down from his role as MoMA's chairman, saying in a recent email to the institution's trustees, "I look forward to seeing you at our February board meeting," according to the *New York Times*.

The letter's signatories also say they see Black's resignation as only a first step. "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," the statement reads.

"This thinking can only catalyze action once we state plainly: We do not need this money."

The letter is the latest in a string of protests that artists and activists have launched against Black and his position of power at MoMA. Previous efforts have focused on Constellis Holdings (formerly known as Blackwater), a private security firm and defense contractor owned by Apollo. Employed in the US-Iraq war, Constellis soldiers killed at least 14 Iraqi civilians during the Nisour Square Massacre in 2007. (Former president Trump pardoned four guards who were sentenced to lengthy prison sentences for the crimes during his last days in office.)

Activist groups also weighed in this week with statements to Hyperallergic. MoMA Divest, a group that has organized, or otherwise participated in, multiple demonstrations at the museum and its sister institution, MoMA PS1, said that "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."

"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 continued.

In a separate statement headlined "Fuck MoMA," the group Decolonize This Place took the museum to task for being on the frontline of a "gendered and racialized class war."

"We are tired of the same shit making news over and over," the group wrote. "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."

"Board members are not the problem," the statement went on. "They only make the problem visible. MoMA in its entirety is the problem. Perhaps it's time to abolish MoMA."

MoMA did not respond to a request for comment.