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Amid Mounting Controversy, Leon Black Will Step Down as MoMA Chairman

After hundreds of artists called for his removal, the financier will not bid for re-election but will remain on the board.

by Jasmine Weber
March 26, 2021



Protesters outside of MoMA in February, 2017.

Leon Black, chairman of the Museum of Modern Art board of trustees, will not bid for re-election, according to the *New York Times*. According to the *Times*, Black will announce the decision

at a meeting on March 30 and intends to remain on the board after stepping down.

Earlier this year, an independent investigation launched by Apollo Global Management, Black's private equity firm, elucidated the financier's ties to convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein. The report by Dechert LLP found that Black had paid Epstein \$158 million in tax and estate planning fees between 2012 and 2017. Epstein also offered Black tax avoidance advice, which saved the businessman an estimated \$2 billion. The report cleared Black of any wrongdoing, but the investor promptly announced he would step down as CEO of Apollo, effective July 2021, but intended to remain at the company as chairman. Last week, citing health issues, Black also announced he would step down from both roles at Apollo, effective immediately.

MoMA has been under persistent scrutiny by members of the art world who encouraged the institution to oust the billionaire. In February, over 150 artists called on MoMA to remove Black and reconfigure its donor policies in statements signed by Nan Goldin, Xaviera Simmons, Michael Rakowitz, Guerilla Girls, and other figures.

Last week, Hyperallergic published an investigation into a behind-the-scenes controversy at the museum, of which Black was at the center. Artists featured in the MoMA PS1 *Theater of Operations: The Gulf Wars 1991–2011* exhibition raised attention to Black's connection to the private security firm Constellis, formerly known as Blackwater. In 2014, four Blackwater staffers were convicted for the murder of 17 unarmed Iraqi civilians, some of them children, in Baghdad's Nisour Square massacre in 2007. Apollo acquired Constellis for approximately \$1 billion in 2016.

Artists Michael Rakowitz, Jananne Al-Ani, and Rijin Sahakian voiced concerns with MoMA PS1 leadership after discovering that Constellis was still recruiting security personnel in Iraq, over a

decade after it had been prohibited from operating in the nation. They, and other participating artists, say they were disregarded and demeaned after speaking up.

Earlier this week, a coalition of artists announced a 10-week series of protests against the museum. “Whether Black stays or goes, a consensus has emerged: beyond any one board member, MoMA itself is the problem,” read a statement by the International Imagination of Anti-National Anti-Imperialist Feelings. The planned “Ten Weeks of Art, Action, and Conversation” will include training sessions, agitprop campaigns, direct actions at the museum and other locations, and a series of conversations focusing on “collective research, archival investigation, and speculative visioning concerned with post-MoMA futures.”

MoMA has not responded to Hyperallergic’s immediate request for comment.