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The Big Trouble with Bloomberg at Momenta Art

by [Corinna Kirsch](#) on [October 3, 2012](#) · [10 comments](#) [Newswire](#)



Interior view of "Occupy Your BFF" at Momenta Art

The idea behind Occupy Museum's current project, [Occupy Your BFF \(Bloomberg Family Foundation\)](#) at

Momenta Art, was to take financial information that already exists in the real world and showcase it in an art gallery. There's print-outs of the Bloomberg Foundation's I-990s, a video showing Michael Bloomberg's living room, and charts documenting economic disparity in the States—all the type of stuff that can be found online. “The information is engaging in a way that could only occur in an art gallery,” Occupy Museums organizer Imani Brown told us. All this sounds pretty basic to us, but Occupy's target of choice—Bloomberg—has become a serious issue, giving rise to suspicion surrounding the recent departure of a Momenta Art board member.

That board member, we were told, left due to a conflict of interest stemming from his wife's relationship to Bloomberg. Board member Laurence Mascera fits that profile. He has served as Director at Barclays Capital and Chief Administrative Officer of Broadpoint Gleacher, and his wife, [Carol Mascera](#), has worked in the legal department for Bloomberg since January of this year. He left the board prior to Occupy Museum's latest discussion panel “Big Philanthropy and the Bloomberg Family Foundation: Whom does it benefit?”, to be held this Friday, October 5th.

This whittles Momenta Art's board to only non-dues-paying members. Understandably, board members have opted not to comment on the current shake-up.

The biggest possible irony in all this could be that Momenta Art makes no attempt to cover up the fact that their organization receives funding from the Bloomberg Foundation. That fact shows up in the vinyl lettering outside Momenta Art's front door, and it's mentioned on a cardboard sheet in the gallery tacked up by Occupy Museums.

“We didn't want to hurt Momenta,” Occupy Museums' Noah Fischer told us over the phone. “We felt like it was our job and role to bring that information to the forefront.”

Momenta Art co-founder Eric Heist extended an invitation to Occupy Museums after seeing their set-up at the Berlin Biennale. That invitation would not seem out of place for the decades-old organization focused on promoting artwork that deals with social engagement.

All told, Momenta Art will recover: board turnover is inevitable for any non-profit. This would have happened eventually, and if not with Bloomberg, then another foundation. Non-profit members are fickle as the wind, but here's hoping Momenta Art's next wave of new recruits will support the organization's goals.

Tagged as: [bloomberg](#), [Momenta Art](#), [occupy museums](#)

{ 10 comments }



Imani Brown [October 3, 2012 at 4:36 pm](#)

I am disappointed that this article has chosen to publish the trivialities of this incident, namely the name of the board member, rather than delving into the real question at hand: whether an arts organization that receives private funding can freely present work that poses critical questions of social and economic importance without fiscal repercussions. This issue is at the foundation of Occupy Museums' project at Momenta Art and the resulting resignation of their board member gives truth to

the power of private philanthropy and illustrates the urgency of reconsidering the growing ties between the private and public spheres. Momenta Art is a courageous institution for having given space to this conversation, and is fulfilling its role as a democratic cultural institution indebted to the public. I hope that folks will be encouraged to consider these larger issues and will participate in the discussion on Friday.



[Paddy Johnson](#) [October 3, 2012 at 4:52 pm](#)

The people involved in non-profit funding are not trivialities. Frankly, I'm surprised that anyone at Occupy would take that position.



[Imani Brown](#) [October 3, 2012 at 7:09 pm](#)

We are not interested in naming names or witch-hunting individuals; the discussion on Friday does not seek to demonize Bloomberg, his acolytes or his employees, but rather to use his foundation as one of several examples of the threat to integrity, ethics and discourse presented by private philanthropy.

When we announced a conversation to inform the public about the potential negative impact of private philanthropy, Momenta's board member, recognizing the power of this line of questioning, embodied that very threat by resigning from the board. The reward to Momenta Art for acting as an open venue for expression is a blow to their bottom line. We recognize that we must be on the verge of exposing a thinly-veiled truth: that private philanthropy is self-serving.

The point we want to focus on is that Bloomberg and others like him pay very little in taxes because they put money into their foundations instead. Through their foundations, they provide money to whomever they wish while sidestepping a huge tax bill via a tax loophole, thus withholding money that could be used to pay for the most urgent needs of the city. Some people say that Bloomberg takes away with one hand (cuts to essential city services like public education and homeless shelters) while giving back with the other (reinstating those services through personal contributions). We aim to show that this is simply not the case and that much is lost, fiscally and ethically, in the process.



[Paddy Johnson](#) [October 3, 2012 at 7:31 pm](#)

I don't think there's any implication of a witch-hunt here, and as this article hints at, I doubt the latest board member departure is solely to do with this show anyway. When was the last time a board member quite over a facebook notice, particularly after having received a press release for the show?

The politics of non-profit boards can be very complicated but turn over can be a good thing. You want people on your board who support what your organization stands for. Over time, that's bound to change, and so too should your board.



[Noah Fischer](#) [October 3, 2012 at 8:59 pm](#)

Paddy, you are probably right that this board member quit over more considerations than just our project which questions in detail the ethical practices of the Bloomberg Family Foundation. Yet my understanding is that these events were definitely connected and this is no small matter. It points to a simple fact about US funding for arts organizations: the 1%, Bloomberg-connected and otherwise, both sit on boards and offer grants where they presumably exert a strong influence over content, especially content which critiques the wealth inequality and tax shelters that they enjoy. This must lead to self censorship in most arts organizations; the invisible lines must be respected if you want your funding, keep your mouth shut about the worldwide economic crisis of the 99% and replacement of the public sphere with the private, endlessly celebrate philanthropy! Momenta has bravely crossed these lines and given us keys to their space to bring our Occupy message to the fore. The departure of the board member makes it clear how real this is and how much is at stake.



[Corinna Kirsch](#) [October 3, 2012 at 4:55 pm](#)

These two issues, of problems with board members and problems with grant funding on a citywide level, are not separate. They're tied up with one another, and that's not trivial at all.



[Valerie Kilmer](#) [October 4, 2012 at 12:22 pm](#)

I'm proud to know that there are still organizations out there like Momenta Art that are willing to take heat for courageous work. Arts orgs need to take a stand on issues that impact the sector. Private philanthropy is such a relevant problem for open expression in the arts and culture; it takes serious courage to raise it openly.

I say, SUPPORT MOMENTA ART and others willing to take risks, collaborate with risk takers, and speak out in ways that make an impact. And sometimes making an impact means losing a board member, but it's all worth it.

I just made a donation on their website (www.momentaart.org) and think you all should do the same.

– Val



[Elisabeth Kley](#) [October 5, 2012 at 11:32 am](#)

Momenta's board of directors deeply regrets and completely understands that our former Treasurer