



The Feminist Killjoy Untangles Philanthropy

Norway's National Museum (Nasjonalmuseet) and Fredriksen Family Art Company Limited

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Abstract

In June 2019, The National Museum (Nasjonalmuseet) in Norway announced plans for a decade-long collaboration with Fredriksen Family Art Company Limited. The agreement gives the museum access to the Fredriksen collection of art and intends to generate a series of major exhibitions and significantly strengthen research. While this public-private partnership received some criticism in the press at the time, to date there is little or no academic research on the challenges of such an alliance. This article considers Sara Ahmed's concept of the "feminist killjoy" as a method to untangle the complexity of philanthropy.

Keywords

feminist killjoy; intersectional feminism; museum ethics; Nasjonalmuseet; philanthropy

Philanthropy and patronage in the arts are nothing new. Art museums have cultivated relationships with wealthy patrons throughout history. While Michael Massing claims art patronage dominates the museum world, Iain Hay and Samantha Muller argue we are now entering a "golden age of philanthropy."¹ This case study considers the ethical implications of a new public-private partnership, a ten-year collaborative agreement between Norway's National Museum and Fredriksen Family Art Company Limited (Fredriksen Family Art).² The partnership aims to publicly recognize Fredriksen Family Art's efforts to contribute to Norwegian society.³ By providing The National Museum with long-term loans, that is, access to what Fredriksen Family Art and The National Museum claim to be world-class works of art from their private collection, Fredriksen Family Art will assist the museum in attracting international recognition.⁴

This article is centered on: a visual analysis of gender represented in The National Museum's photographs that accompanied the press release following the launch of the agreement (ill. 1 and 2); a critical reading of the Art Collaboration and Loan Agreement; an analysis of discussion in the popular media; and telephone interviews with The National Museum's director of communications, Eirik Kydland, and photographer of the images, Morten Qvale.⁵



III. 1. From left: Cecilie Astrup Fredriksen, Kathrine Astrup Fredriksen, Karin Hindsbo and Stina Högvist. Photo: Morten Qvale / Nasjonalmuseet.



III. 2. From left: Cecilie Astrup Fredriksen, Stina Högvist, Karin Hindsbo and Kathrine Astrup Fredriksen. Photo: Morten Qvale / Nasjonalmuseet.

Drawing on critical scholarship regarding philanthropy, this article gives attention to the implications and significance of philanthropy from a Nordic perspective to the broader emerging research that encourages the scrutiny of significant benefactors of global capitalism.⁶ I examine this philanthropic endeavor in Norway in the context of international discussions on philanthropy in art museums. I selected Fredriksen Family Art's private donation for my case study in response to my observations of The National Museum's conflicting motives—the discrepancy between the museum's intentions and its public relations practices, as communicated through its press images.

In his book *Just Giving*, professor of political science, Rob Reich, suggests that philanthropy should be scrutinized as an exercise of power rather than celebrated as generosity.⁷ Drawing on Reich's research and feminist critique, this article argues that: when *art*, *gender*, *diversity* and *representation* are utilized in the face of philanthropy and marketplace ideology, problematic ethical implications, including the origins of capital and potential threats to academic freedom, become disguised as progressive development. As a framework for analysis I turn to Janet Marstine's "new museum ethics," a theory situated in a feminist-inspired mode of critical inquiry and founded on the idea that museums have moral agency.⁸

The Partnership

A key point in my analysis is that Fredriksen Family Art's generosity does not go unrewarded. Using its resources, The National Museum will provide art consultancy to build Fredriksen Family's private collection and increase its visibility and value. Arguably this aspect of the partnership agreement conflicts with Fredriksen Family Art's claim of serving the public good as they set out to benefit personally and substantially from its own philanthropy.⁹

"The first thing we did was decide what profile we wanted," stated The National Museum's director of exhibition and collections, Stina Högvist, about the development of The National Museum-Fredriksen Family Art partnership.¹⁰ *Diversity* and *representation* are the pivotal points of Fredriksen Family Art's collection profile.¹¹ An important frame of reference is the coincidental timing of The National Museum's new facility scheduled to open 11 June 2022 at Vestbanen in Oslo. The new National Museum will be the largest art museum in the Nordic countries.¹² According to The National Museum's director, Karin Hindsbo, Fredriksen Family Art's artworks will "bring in a stronger diversity perspective" to the new museum.¹³

Philanthropy in Norway and Beyond

How is the partnership between The National Museum and Fredriksen Family Art relevant to Norwegian cultural politics? Norway's long-standing democratic approach to the arts and generous public arts funding has established a model that is unique to the world and grounded on the idea that arts and culture are a vital part of a welfare society.¹⁴ This is apparent in the substantial governmental funds channeled into the arts. For instance, the Arts Council Norway, the advisory body to the central government and public sector on cultural affairs, handled around €150 million in state funding earmarked for arts and culture in 2020, which is about 10% of the national cultural budget.¹⁵ While this is historically the case, a shift occurred with the change of government in 2013. Norway's ruling right-wing government (led by Erna Solberg), in power from 2013 to 2021, zealously encouraged museums to generate their own revenue and sponsorship. In pursuit of sustainable funding models and with Norwegian political ambitions for museums to increase private funding, it is essential

for museums to consistently address institutional ethics.¹⁶ More often than not, museums, among other nonprofit arts organizations, are underfunded. As such they enlist a wide range of tactics to bring in income. Traditional models of philanthropy are subject to class, prestige and wealth. The nonprofit business model is complex and museums struggle for sustainability within this framework.¹⁷ Dedicated to its mission, The National Museum seeks out private funding to promote inclusion, diversity, gender equity and access for sustainable growth as it negotiates its place in a global cultural field.

Historically in Norway a number of art museums were founded with donations of private art collections.¹⁸ Donors have played and continue to play a significant role for museums. Well known donors include Knud Christian Langaard, Rasmus Meyer, Haaken Andreas Christensen, Rolf Stenersen, Asbjørn Lunde, Viggo Hagstrøm, Jon Dobloug, Christian Ringnes, Christen Sveaas and Nicolai Tangen. Meanwhile, the more recent tendency to increase private sponsorship in the arts and culture presumably arrived with Norway's right-wing government.

How do Fredriksen Family Art's philanthropic activities in Norway align with international discussions on philanthropy in art museums? As indicated by professor of marketing Karin M. Ekström, within prevailing market ideologies in society, businesses appear to have more agency than art.¹⁹ As governments gradually withdraw public funding from culture in the name of "austerity," increased reliance on private sponsorship is becoming normative in Europe and reflects the on-going process of marketization of cultural institutions in the neoliberal era.²⁰

The museum-philanthropy relationship is vast in its complexity and philanthropy itself is a contested concept, particularly in its "normative valence," as suggested by Siobhan Daly, who claims that what the public good is and how it should be served are inherent to philanthropy's contestability.²¹ In response to increased public pressure, art museums internationally continue to make strides toward greater transparency in endowment and general fundraising practices. Much of the critique and response to the patronage of cultural institutions is driven by the artists themselves, calling for art institutions to decline funding from controversial sources or what they refer to as "dirty money."²² As a result, a number of art museums turned down donations from long-term beneficiaries. Specifically, a month prior to the public announcement of the partnership between The National Museum and Fredriksen Family Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art (The Met) in New York announced that it would no longer accept donations from Sackler family members with ties to the opioid epidemic in the United States.²³ Subsequently, in 2021, The Met announced its decision to remove the Sackler name from its walls.²⁴ In the UK, the National Portrait Gallery and the Tate art galleries also halted donations from the Sackler Trust.²⁵ Similar decisions have been made regarding supporters from the fossil fuels industry. BP (British Petroleum) ended its 26-year-long sponsorship of the Tate in 2017.²⁶ In November 2019, the Scottish National Portrait Gallery announced it would not show exhibitions sponsored by BP.²⁷ After an eighteen-year partnership with Shell, the Van Gogh Museum halted the agreement in 2018.²⁸ In July 2019, Warren B. Kandors, then vice chair of the Whitney Museum of American Art, stepped down after scrutiny from the protest group Decolonize This Place (DTP) for his role as CEO for a company profiting from crowd-control weapons—for example, rubber bullets, batons, stun grenades and tear gas being deployed against migrants attempting to cross the southern border into the United States.²⁹

Philanthropy and Gender

In her book *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums*, Carol Duncan demonstrates the art museum as a “ritual space” where philanthropy, ethics and social issues of class, gender and race are all entangled.³⁰ Within this complex space, art institutions are the sum of their practices, funding and sponsorship included.³¹ Another essential point is that structural inequities and hegemonic forms of power are not immediately visible. “It’s a man’s world,” Duncan poignantly reminds one.³² She insists that the museum’s immediate space is gendered, and female images are normally scripted for men.³³ While female images are present, they masculinize the museum space by perpetuating existing heteropatriarchal norms.³⁴

As a means to illuminate patriarchal ideologies and identify what The National Museum-Fredriksen Family Art partnership embodies, essentially what the museum is “selling” to the public, I use Sara Ahmed’s concept of the “feminist killjoy”—that is, an individual, who could be of any gender, whose main task is exposing the patriarchal norms that are displaced and negated under public signs of joy.³⁵ Situated within intersectional feminism, the figure is discontent with the status quo and aims to lay bare the deeply ingrained inequities of class, gender and race in heteropatriarchal society.³⁶ Ahmed posits that we learn not to be conscious, not to see what happens right in front of us.³⁷ Acting as a “feminist killjoy” enables one to sharpen an oppositional feminist gaze to expose the patriarchal ideologies hiding in plain sight. In this case study, the “feminist killjoy” emerges in response to The National Museum’s celebratory stance on its new partnership backed by a positive consensus in society. From here I explore how the “feminist killjoy,” from an intersectional feminist perspective, might offer an alternative reading of the agreement.

The Ideology of Generosity

What motivates philanthropists to give to society? According to Cecilie Astrup Fredriksen and Kathrine Astrup Fredriksen, twin daughters of the Norwegian-born billionaire John Fredriksen (ill. 3), their underlying motivation for the partnership with The National Museum is to honor their late mother, Inger Katharina Astrup Fredriksen, who was related to Norwegian painter Nikolai Astrup and was the passionate art collector in the family.³⁸ The Art Collaboration and Loan Agreement stipulates that while on display, artworks from Fredriksen Family Art’s collection will be labelled: “Kindly provided to the New National Museum in memory of Inger Katharina Astrup Fredriksen.”³⁹ Use of the word “kindly” underpins an ideology of generosity, feasibly leading the public to the assumption that philanthropy is pure benevolence. Furthermore from a feminist perspective, adding a woman’s name to the male-dominated list of art patrons in Norway could be perceived as a progressive gesture. Or might it also imply the appropriation of gender so as to soften the ethical implications of John Fredriksen’s capital?

The ethical implications of the charitable generosity of private stakeholders are under scrutiny among scholars and institutions. To illustrate, the “feminist killjoy” exposes the ideology of generosity cloaking colonial legacies. Capitalism cultivates divisions of culture, race, ethnicity, ability, sexuality and gender.⁴⁰ For these reasons, critical attention needs to be directed at the colonial past, forms of violence and power that made the Fredriksen fortune possible. Regularly credited as the richest man in Norway’s history, John Fredriksen is a Cypriot citizen who resides in London and relinquished his Norwegian citizenship in 2006. Accordingly he avoids paying taxes to his country of birth. His companies include: oil tankers, dry bulkers, LNG carriers and deep-water drilling rigs, with capital made moving

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This Shipping Magnate Is Calling a Bottom in the Oil Rout

John Fredriksen wants to double down on the battered oil tanker business, even as his offshore drilling business sinks in debt



John Fredriksen in his Oslo office with his twin daughters—Kathrine, left, and Cecilie, who are increasingly taking responsibilities in the group.

PHOTO: ELIN HØYLAND/DAGENS NÆRINGSLIV

By [Costas Paris](#)

Updated June 27, 2017 10:24 am ET

III. 3. John Fredriksen with his daughters Kathrine Astrup Fredriksen, left, and Cecilie Astrup Fredriksen, screenshot from *The Wall Street Journal*, 27 June 2017. Photo: Elin Høyland / Dagens Næringsliv.

Iranian crude oil during the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s, as well as shipping oil to South Africa during apartheid.⁴¹ As the largest shareholder in MOWI, one of the world's biggest salmon farming companies, Fredriksen's greatest assets today are in fish farming.⁴² Might the destructive environmental consequences of salmon farming and Fredriksen's use of tax avoidance strategies present key issues of ethical accountability? Then again, how accountable are museums for the activities of their private sponsors? In recent literature on innovative and sustainable museum development, scholar-practitioner Robert R. Janes argues that marketplace ideology, capitalistic values and corporate self-interest are not the way forward.⁴³

While The National Museum's directors expressed their happiness with the partnership in the newspaper *Morgenbladet* on 21 June 2019: "We have a lot of fun when we are together,"⁴⁴ it may be that not everyone is happy. The "feminist killjoy" might interpret their happiness as a defense against feminist critique; the myth that feminists kill joy because they are joyless.⁴⁵ By rejecting patriarchal norms, the "feminist killjoy" shows there are more perspectives to the situation, and that signs of happiness may conceal forms of power and

violence.⁴⁶ Specifically, intersectional feminism kills joy surrounding the alliance of the patriarchy and capitalism to reimagine gender justice in an anticapitalistic form.⁴⁷

Arguably, philanthropy is rarely pure generosity but results from a donor's desire for prestige or social licensing.⁴⁸ As Susan Raymond, Iain Hay and Samantha Muller explain, the trend in contemporary philanthropy is not only that donors strive to maintain power and control over the funds they give away, but that they actively attempt to shape the frameworks of public institutions, such as art museums.⁴⁹ A clear example of this trend is the partnership Fredriksen Family Art landed with The National Museum. With an agreement that is framed as a collaboration, Fredriksen Family Art ensures that the access they give to art and funding is repaid. For example, as part of the agreement Fredriksen Family Art will establish an advisory committee comprised of four members or fewer appointed by them.⁵⁰ Moreover, in collaboration with Fredriksen Family Art, The National Museum will conduct an exhibition series called the "Fredriksen Commissions."⁵¹ One of the downsides of giving a privately held corporation the power to influence and frame a public institution like The National Museum is that it poses a risk to academic freedom. With integrity at stake, the museum must be independent and free from pressure from other interest groups, whether organizational, strategic, financial or political, such pressure that could influence and perhaps compromise its practices and results.⁵²

Central to the "new museum ethics" is radical transparency and sharing of ethical challenges with diverse stakeholders to encourage problem-solving and build trust.⁵³ A specific example of The National Museum's hesitancy to critique occurred on 2 July 2019 during an NRK public radio interview, when art historian Tommy Sørbø asked The National Museum's director Karin Hindsbo the source of the Fredriksen capital. The program host, Gry Elisabeth Veiby, interrupted Sørbø mid-sentence and said: "We are not going to go there." Although the public debate failed to address the source of the capital, the public must assume that museums evaluate their philanthropic sources to ensure the benefactor's practices reflect the museum's core values, vision and mission. What is notable is The National Museum's willingness to grant prestige in a public space to a donor who uses tax avoidance strategies.⁵⁴ Fredriksen's tax-dodging practices are inherent to the partnership itself. According to the Art Collaboration and Loan Agreement, Fredriksen Family Art will not be liable for any obligation to pay either Value Added Tax or any other import tax to Norway in relation to the collection.⁵⁵

Women as Image

How does The National Museum "sell" its agreement to the public? Author of *Civilizing the Museum*, Elaine Heumann Gurian, stresses that "all decisions [made by museums] are signaling."⁵⁶ She suggests that tone and content are as important as the position one takes.⁵⁷ As such, everything the museum does involves endless signaling, for example, from conventions in emails, to the appearance of the museum front desk and what food is served in the museum café. For this reason, one can interpret that the partnership between The National Museum and Fredriksen Family Art and the way in which it is communicated convey a subliminal message. The National Museum advertises itself as an institution that embraces diversity and representation, with ambitions to provide art experiences in "completely new ways" and advance inclusivity.⁵⁸ "We will be an open museum, where you feel welcome no matter who you are and whatever background you come from. That is why we are building a new national museum in Norway," stated The National Museum's director Karin Hindsbo in the newspaper *Dagens Næringsliv* on 27 February 2019. Does the partnership between The

National Museum and Fredriksen Family Art along with the accompanying press images convey this message? To address this question, let us examine the publicity photographs, the museum's vehicle for "selling" the partnership agreement.

The press took a largely celebratory tone and praised the partnership as a bold initiative. Their approval extended to their reaction to the press images, which the newspaper *Aftenposten* deemed "fantastic" and added that they should be awarded picture of the year.⁵⁹ The two photographs show The National Museum's leadership, directors Karin Hindsbo and Stina Högbkvist together with the new benefactors, Cecilie Astrup Fredriksen and Kathrine Astrup Fredriksen, daughters of John Fredriksen. The glossy pictures appear to celebrate the female body, glamor and attitude, while devoid of the core element of the agreement, notably art.⁶⁰ The photographer, Morten Qvale, is renowned in the fashion and advertising industry. Taking into account that Qvale was commissioned by the Fredriksen sisters is a specific example of how the private sector can direct The National Museum's marketing and public relations. Nor do the Fredriksen sisters have educational backgrounds in art. What is the meaning and significance of these representations; how is gender performed; who are the images for; and what is the communication strategy?

In one respect the images are novel in that they differ from the typical representations of philanthropists in the Norwegian press. The conventional subject is a middle-aged male photographed with artworks in the background. For example, Stein Erik Hagen, one of Norway's wealthiest and most high-profile businessmen, appears in the Edvard Munch room at The National Museum (the former National Gallery; ill. 4). The visual associates capital wealth with art and in this case a wealthy businessman with art history. Hagen's Canica Art Collection is one of Norway's most extensive private art collections, built with consultation from art historian Steinar Gjessing. In another example, art collector and museum patron Nicolai Tangen (who holds a master's degree in art history from the Courtauld Institute of Art in London) appears with artworks from his personal art collection in the office work environment (ill. 5). In sharp contrast are the Fredriksen sisters who dominate the photographs and are the front and center of attention.

While the "new museum ethics" stimulate public trust through transparency and relevance, corporate sites often use images of humans as an effective way to engage users and



III. 4. From left: Stein Erik Hagen and then director of The National Museum, Audun Eckhoff, in 2016. Photo: Tor Stenersen / Aftenposten / NTB.



III. 5. Nicolai Tangen in his London office in 2018. Photo: Signe Dons / Aftenposten / NTB.

to build trust.⁶¹ According to Eirik Kydland, The National Museum’s director of communications: “The aim of the images was to share the news of a new and important collaboration. A big accomplishment of which The National Museum was proud. All involved parties wanted good, press-worthy images, quality pictures that would draw attention. In the aftermath we were surprised by some of the reactions.”⁶² Kydland’s positive commentary reinforces The National Museum’s insistence that the agreement is *good*. Despite this, how might a “feminist killjoy” perspective counter a different reading of this publicity?

The concept of the “male gaze,” first put forward by Laura Mulvey to characterize the scopoc regime of Hollywood film, and later further developed in studies of representations of femininity in visual culture, might aid our understanding.⁶³ Both images present frontal figures who look directly at the viewer. Although the women perform femininity in diverse ways, “diversity” is framed within a capitalist (or conceivably neoliberalist) system. The Fredriksen sisters reinforce a stereotypical image of corporate wealth, while Karin Hindsbo and Stina Högvist embody the cultural elite. While the “attitude” or perhaps androgyny performed by Högvist could be read as representing “girl power,” within marketplace ideology, girl power is a feminist trope. Embraced by high-powered women and linked to elitism and individualism, this variant of feminism propounds a market-centered view of equality, and thus supplies the perfect alibi for neoliberalism.⁶⁴ Sarah Banet-Weiser argues that the key selling point from a marketplace ideology sees “the ‘power’ in girl power as almost exclusively about consumer power—not a challenge of gendered power relations and rationalities.”⁶⁵ Corporate marketing and advertising campaigns adopt “glossy feminism” in

order to appear socially progressive and deflect criticism on the ways capitalism depends on oppressive gendered divisions of labor.⁶⁶

Considering that representation is the core function of museums, the press photographs have agency and must be taken seriously. Moreover, positive relationships are fundamental to successful public relations practice. Yet in my interview with Kydland, he revealed that decisions regarding *women as image* and photographer were simply a matter of practicality. No strategic planning was involved. Kydland added that “[i]t is unusual with young female art collectors and female art directors.”⁶⁷ One of The National Museum’s missions is to actively include more women artists in the collection and learning and engagement programming.⁶⁸ Perhaps the agreement will strengthen the position of women and women’s art at The National Museum? Is there possibly a new feminist perspective to this collaboration? To answer this, it is important to consider for whom the images are intended. Might the use of women only be an inspiring alternative to male museum directors and male art collectors? After all, there is a dearth of women in museum leadership roles and this quartet may be interpreted as progressivism from a feminist perspective.

The four women in the photographs represent positions of power and privilege, and in so doing hold considerable social, cultural and economic advantages. However, gender identity alone does not make this setting feminist. Women’s studies professor Chandra Talpade Mohanty asserts that women cannot be characterized as a singular group on the basis of a shared oppression.⁶⁹ When insensitive to class, race, and socioeconomic constraints, feminism underpins a market-centered view of equality that dovetails perfectly with capitalism and the prevailing corporate enthusiasm for “diversity.”⁷⁰ As a counter to this trend, intersectional feminism centers the convergence of race, class and gender to underscore that feminism must be anticapitalistic, eco-socialist and antiracist. In addition, intersectional feminism brings patriarchal power structures into question, helping one understand how the present is shaped by coloniality. Arguably, The National Museum appropriated, perhaps unintentionally, the female body and the novelty of the photographs to portray generosity, diversity and gender equity.

The National Museum accepted private wealth built on colonial legacies and tax avoidance to promote diversity and publicized the new partnership with press photographs through the lens of wealth, whiteness and privilege. It is ironic that the partnership between The National Museum and Fredriksen Family Art could indeed prove successful in advancing diversity and representation at The National Museum. While this may be the case, a key concern are Fredriksen’s business and investment activities which participated in creating conditions of inequity in the first place. Considering the ethical implications and what’s at stake, the “feminist killjoy” does not “buy” it. As indicated in my analysis, the agreement appears to embrace the superficial truisms of the marketplace within the on-going process of marketization of cultural institutions.⁷¹ By applying the “new museum ethics” as proposed by Janet Marstine and intersectional feminism we may develop the critical language needed to expose tropes for generosity and progressive development and move beyond status quo understandings of diversity and inclusion.

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Noter

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