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To cite this article: Ida Uppstrøm Berg (11 Jun 2024): To receive and to give something back – director’s perspectives on public – private collaborations in Norwegian art museums, International Journal of Cultural Policy, DOI: [10.1080/10286632.2024.2365290](https://doi.org/10.1080/10286632.2024.2365290)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10286632.2024.2365290>



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Published online: 11 Jun 2024.



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To receive and to give something back – director’s perspectives on public – private collaborations in Norwegian art museums

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ABSTRACT

The rapid growth of private museums, contemporary art, and the emergence of private collectors has changed public museums’ room for action and placed heightened pressure on museum directors worldwide. In recent years, Norway has witnessed a surge in extensive collaboration between publicly funded museums and private collectors. Based on qualitative interviews with eleven museum directors, this paper examines how they navigate and address criticism, challenges, and demands when collaborating with private actors, with a particular emphasis on private art collectors. Additionally, the study aims to uncover the opportunities that emerge from such collaborations. Findings reveal that public – private collaborations are seen as an inevitable solution for the future, driven by factors such as limited purchasing budgets, rising costs, and concerns about diminishing public support due to reliance on oil revenues. Despite facing challenges such as external criticism and collector demands, directors maintain an optimistic outlook regarding more public – private collaborations and advocate the opportunities they bring.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 10 January 2024
Accepted 4 June 2024

KEYWORDS

Museum management;
public–private collaboration;
art collectors; art museum;
donations

‘If we borrow art, we acknowledge its generosity, whether from private individuals or any other source.’ (Director)

Introduction

Globally, there is a widespread perception among cultural elites, art scholars, and museum curators that the museum landscape is increasingly swayed by economic agendas, often at the expense of their primary goals of art-oriented collections and research-based displays (Tanner 2003, 153). The rapid growth of private contemporary art museums, contemporary art, and private collectors has changed public museums’ room for action and placed heightened pressure on museum directors (Gnyp 2020; Kolbe et al. 2022; Larry’s List 2023; Velthuis et al. 2023; Walker 2019). In response to the 2008 recession, art museums throughout Europe and the United States faced financial restrictions due to a decline in government and corporate funding (Lindqvist 2012; McDonnell and Tepper 2014). Additionally, scholars have observed that across most European countries, culture faces challenges in maintaining its position in the welfare state (Bonet and Donato 2011, 7). Furthermore, southern and western European public authorities have encouraged cultural institutions to engage with private donors to augment their revenue (Rubio-Arostegui and Villarroyac 2022; Wu 2002). When public support diminishes, the cultural sector is pressured to prioritize operational

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management and marketing strategies, such as fundraising, corporate sponsorship, and expanding gift shops and restaurant operations (Mulcahy 2020, 13). Instead of focusing on art for art's sake, museums must adopt a neoliberal mindset and concentrate on their economic contribution (Alexander 2014; Frey and Meier 2010, 226). This shift, many argue, has fostered closer connections between business and art (Alexander 2018a; Chong 2013). Many public art institutions in western Europe and North America have been privatized, and those remaining in the public sector must often adhere to the same operational principles as private enterprises (Alexander et al. 2018, viii). These transformations have sparked concerns, and some researchers question whether art is endangered and if private entities wield excessive influence over public museums (Brown 2019; Fasche 2013; Quemin 2020; Veiteberg 2019). In a series of interviews conducted by Bechtler and Imhof (2018), museum professionals and artists voiced their concerns regarding the obstacles museums face in preserving their autonomy from private interests. As economist Don Thompson aptly notes, 'For museums, the most important customers are not potential museumgoers. Rather they are donors [...]' (Thompson 2018, 63).

In Norway, a longstanding tradition of state responsibility for arts and culture funding has been upheld, with substantial support continually allocated to this sector (Mangset and Hylland 2017). However, over the past decade, there has been a notable shift towards more public – private collaboration, primarily driven by heightened political pressure (Prop nr. 1 S 2016–17). The primary objective of this study is to elucidate the thoughts and perceptions of museum directors in Norway regarding public – private collaboration. This will be achieved by answering the following research question: *How do directors of Norwegian arts museums face criticism, challenges, and demands directed at them when engaging in public – private collaborations, and how do they seek to legitimize and leverage the potential of such collaborations?* To do so, interviews were conducted with ten directors representing museums that receive the majority of their funding from public means. Additionally, the study includes an interview with a director from a publicly funded art hall who has entered into numerous collaborations with private collectors.

The paper will generally address public – private collaborations, with a particular emphasis on those involving private collectors. This focus stems from the recent surge in significant collaborations between publicly funded museums and private collectors in Norway, which have garnered extensive media attention (Berg and Larsen 2024; Thakre 2019). Moreover, Veiteberg (2019) argues that private collectors have gained increased influence over public museums in Norway since the beginning of the 2000s. Therefore, capturing the directors' perspectives on these evolving forms of collaboration is crucial. Nevertheless, as directors indicated a need for increased support from private actors, the article will also investigate their perspectives on ways to amplify all forms of public – private collaboration, and their opinions with regard to strategies that might prove unsuccessful.

Over the past few years, there has been a notable surge in the literature addressing the various implications stemming from collaborations between public museums and private collectors and corporations (Abbing 2019; Proteau 2018; Quemin 2020; Shaked 2022; Van der Grijp 2014). However, apart from some notable exceptions (Alexander 1996; Bechtler and Imhof 2018; Moe 2016; Prokůpek and Divišková 2022), few studies are based on interviews with the actors involved. To fill this gap, this study aims to complement the existing body of international literature by providing empirical insights into the thoughts and perceptions of the museum directors directly involved in these complex dynamics in a country with a strong tradition for state-supported art organizations.

This paper will present an overview of the historical, political, and financial factors that influence the funding structure of Norwegian museums. Then the methodology employed in this study will be outlined before the findings are presented. Finally, the results obtained will be analyzed and discussed, drawing on concepts from organizational theory (Pfeffer and Salancik [1978] 2003; Powell and DiMaggio 1991; Scott and Meyer 1991) and gift economy (Mauss 2011). Following this introduction, this paper will begin by examining the theoretical framework that forms the basis of this research.

Organizational theory and gift economy

As Becker (2008) famously captured in his book *Art World*, arts organizations depend highly on their environments. This is especially true for nonprofit organizations, such as publicly funded art museums, which rely heavily on their environments for essential resources (Alexander and Bowler 2014; Lindqvist 2012). This dependence exposes them to institutional pressures and changes in resource availability. Hence, this paper will combine new institutional theory with concepts from resource dependency theory, as elaborated in Pfeffer and Salancik's ([1978] 2003) seminal work.

In understanding how museum directors are influenced by their environment, new institutional theory provides valuable insight into shaping institutional behavior. The evolving norms within the museum sector are particularly noteworthy, especially with the increasing contribution of private collectors to public art museums in Norway (Veiteberg 2019). Consequently, museums as institutions must respond to the demands of various stakeholder groups to secure support and establish legitimacy (Lindqvist 2012, 3). In this paper, I will use the term 'institutional environment' (Scott and Meyer 1991) to explain the norms, perceptions, and expectations the art institutions meet from the environment when entering collaborations with private collectors. Institutional environments refer to the cultural conditions, such as values, norms, and expectations, in an organization's environment that is significant for how the organization is perceived and, thus, affect the organization's legitimacy (Jacobsen and Thorsvik 2019, 196).

Furthermore, a key assumption of new institutional theory is that organizations within the same institutional environments are becoming more similar and isomorphic over time due to external institutional pressures (Jacobsen and Thorsvik 2019, 208). DiMaggio and Powell (1991) have identified three mechanisms to explain isomorphic change: coercive, mimetic, and normative pressures. Of particular interest for this paper is coercive and mimetic pressure. *Coercive pressure* stems from formal and informal pressure from organizations on which museums depend and from cultural expectations in society. In the museum context, these coercive pressures may come from diverse actors, including cultural policymakers, art world figures, donors, and organizations like the International Council of Museums (ICOM). *Mimetic pressure* is driven by uncertainty, ambiguous goals, and taken-for-granted perceptions of what needs to be done (DiMaggio and Powell 1991). Organizations seek to legitimize themselves through imitation by aligning with established and successful others.

To survive, museums are dependent on resources from government and private actors, and they have to interact with those who control these resources on which they are dependent (Pfeffer and Salancik [1978] 2003, 258). According to resource dependency theory, resource providers, such as government agencies, donors, or other organizations that art museums depend on, can exert influence and control by leveraging the availability or withdrawal of critical resources. The level of dependency on these resources determines the power dynamics between organizations and their external environment.

Both new institutional theory and resource dependency theory explain how organizations encounter competitive pressures and may depend on, or be impacted by, other environmental actors (Hessels and Terjesen 2010, 206). However, the two theories diverge in their explanations as to why external actors may influence organizations. While new institutional theory explains how organizations adapt to accepted preferences in their environments to secure legitimacy, resource dependency theory explains organizational behavior due to the organization's dependence on external resources (Hessels and Terjesen 2010). Since museums depend on legitimacy and resources from the environment to survive, these two theories will complement each other.

While resource dependency theory and new institutional theory will help shed light on how museum directors are affected by their environment, Mauss's (2011) theory on gift economy will help shed light on the social, symbolic, and economic dimensions of gift exchange between publicly funded museums and private actors. Mauss's theory, particularly his concept of reciprocity, illuminates the underlying dynamics and allows us to analyze the obligations and expectations that

emerge from these exchanges. According to Mauss, gift-giving is not a one-sided act but a social practice that establishes reciprocal relationships between givers and receivers. Reciprocity involves a cycle of giving, receiving, and giving back, creating social ties and obligations between individuals or groups, highlighting the symbolic power embedded in gift exchange. The expectation of return accompanies the gift, and the absence of reciprocation places the recipient in an inferior position. In the context of public – private collaboration in the visual arts sector, publicly funded organizations receive support, be it financial or nonfinancial, from private actors. In return, they offer various benefits such as visibility, resource access, and knowledge sharing. This exchange establishes a sense of reciprocity between museums and private actors, wherein both parties are expected to contribute and receive mutual benefits from the collaboration.

Norwegian museum funding

State involvement in museum funding differs; historically, three different financing models have allowed for different actions by private actors (Stenseth 2005, 56). The British (or Anglo-Saxon) model combines private and public funding, with private donations playing a more significant role than the Continental European model. The American model primarily relies on private contributions, often supported by the state through tax incentives (Romolini et al. 2020, 14). In both Continental Europe and Scandinavia, it is traditional for the state to take responsibility for establishing public art collections (Stenseth 2005, 56). In her historical analysis, Stenseth (2005, 56) argues that Norwegian art collectors did not become influential forces like their counterparts in England or America. This can be attributed to several factors. Cultural policies in Norway did not actively encourage wealthy individuals and art collectors to become donors, and the idea of tax incentives for strengthening museum collections was not considered (Stenseth 2005, 57). Furthermore, centuries of union with Denmark (1380–1814) and Sweden (1814–1905) meant that a solid cultural capital in Norway was not established. Thus, Norway did not witness the emergence of a wealthy upper class inspired by the view that wealth obliges (Stenseth 2005, 57).

The notion of the state as the primary funder of cultural endeavors is deeply ingrained in Norway, with the state assuming significant responsibility for cultural life since World War II (Vestheim 1995, 13). The Norwegian state continues to provide substantial subsidies to the arts and culture sector, with 0.8% of the total budget allocated to this purpose in 2023. For example, in 2023, the Norwegian National Museum received 93% of its operating budget from the state. Despite substantial government funding, Norwegian museums face challenges such as stagnant purchasing budgets that fail to keep up with inflation. Scholars highlight a purchasing crisis within Norwegian museums and suggest that without enhanced public support, museums may increasingly depend on private donations and long-term loans in the coming years (Veiteberg 2019, 141).

However, there has been a recent push for increased public – private collaboration in the arts and culture sector. The Conservative coalition governments, under Prime Minister Erna Solberg (2013–2021), aimed to encourage cultural institutions to seek additional funding sources beyond public funds, promoting enhanced collaboration between the public and private sectors in the cultural sphere (Prop nr. 1 S 2016–17). This was a part of the previous government's so-called 'freedom reform' (*Frihetsreform*), with the goal to increase private funding for arts and culture¹ (Mangset and Hylland 2017, 314). Moreover, according to the museum statistics of the Arts Council Norway (2021), there were no major economic changes in the level of private funding in terms of monetary income between 2011 and 2021.

Beyond donations, deposits, and short-term loans, collaborations with private collectors may also involve more extensive collaborations, such as the National Museum in Norway's collaboration with the Fredriksen family (Berg and Larsen 2024) and 'Kunstsilo,' which is a collaboration between the municipality of Kristiansand and art collector Nicolai Tangen (Thakre 2019). Furthermore, public – private collaboration in the Norwegian museum sector takes place in various forms, with collaborations involving private collectors being only one. Additionally, they get monetary gifts and deposits

from foundations and through corporate sponsorships. In this paper, the term 'private actors' encompasses all types of collaborations mentioned above.

Methodology

This article is based on eleven semi-structured interviews conducted between 9 October 2020, and 23 June 2023.² Participants included nine directors³ and two creative directors from nine renowned visual art organizations in Norway recognized in their respective regions: eight art museums and one art hall. The informants were selected based on Jorunn Veiteberg's (2019) mapping of collection development at fourteen Norwegian visual art museums.⁴ Additionally, museums known to have collaborated with private collectors were approached. Furthermore, I recruited a director from an art hall well-versed in collaborating with private collectors through deposits and short-term loans. The art hall has also built its own collection with the support from private actors, drawing on funds and inheritances.

The eleven directors represent visual arts organizations that predominantly rely on public funding, and all have engaged in collaborations with private collectors, both of which were criteria for recruiting them. Their levels of experience, however, vary, with larger museums reporting more significant interactions with corporate funding and sponsorships. All the art organizations are located in Norwegian cities, with three situated in or near the capital.

Their identities have been anonymized to ensure confidentiality and to honor the interviewees' privacy. This was done out of respect for their preferences, as some individuals did not want to be identified. The selection of informants has been designated as A1–A10 for those from art museums, and A11 for the director from an art hall.⁵

To recruit the informants, I utilized public staff lists on museum websites. Contact was established either directly with the directors or through their assistants. Following best practices in elite interviewing, the written request clearly outlined the purpose of the research, my interest in interviewing them, and the questions likely to be asked (Lilleker 2003, 209). The interview guide was crafted by reviewing cultural policy documents, reports, earlier research, and relevant media articles. Typical questions were: Which collectors have you collaborated with? What has been your experiences with donations, deposits, or loans? How does the museum preserve its integrity when collaborating with private collectors? Can heightened collaboration with private collectors grant museums more freedom?

The interviews lasted between 42 minutes and 1 hour and 18 minutes, resulting in 12 hours and 51 minutes of recorded data. These recordings were transcribed and manually coded through repeated readings, generating 158 pages of single-spaced data. Based on the interviewee's preferences, the museum's geographical location, and COVID-19 restrictions, the interviews were conducted using face-to-face, phone, and videoconferencing platforms such as Zoom or Teams. All quotations are translated by the author.

During the data analysis, I identified four recurring themes that will be thoroughly presented and analyzed in the subsequent sections of this paper. These themes include criticism from the surrounding environment, the significance and potential of public – private collaborations, the demands and expectations faced, and the power of giving back.

Findings

Criticism from the environment

In Norway, certain partnerships between public museums and private art collectors have generated significant criticism in the media (Berg and Larsen 2024; Thakre 2019). When asked about the criticism directed at established collaborations and their personal encounters with such criticism, several directors stressed they had faced criticism for collaborating with private

collectors or corporations. However, the nature and extent of such complaints differ. One form of criticism revolves around what some directors describe as the lack of historical context, pointing out that public museums would not exist without contributions from private collectors. Furthermore, there were concerns about excessive focus on financial motives and suspicions about the intentions of private collectors, as illustrated by the following quote from one of the directors,

The fact that a few wealthy individuals can 'buy' cultural capital, does not sit well with all Norwegians. So, even if the gift may be ever so large, we [Norwegians] believe there are expected returns in some form. (A9)

Specific collaborations were so tumultuous that they resulted in personal repercussions. One director shared the unpleasant experience of being yelled at while walking through the city, stating, 'I had to take different routes to reach a meeting. I avoided the main street. I constantly felt harassed. It affected me' (A10). While this was an extreme case, several directors expressed discomfort with the public criticism, such as criticism in the local newspaper. Another director (A4) mentioned the controversy when the museum loaned artworks to a local hotel. Some art world actors and locals deemed it scandalous, perceiving the museum as selling public heritage to the private sector, suggesting corruption through favoritism. Despite the backlash, the director considered the extensive display of the collection outside the museum as a positive development, with the hotel covering the financial costs of the loan. Like many others, the director attributed this strong reaction to the novelty of such collaborations in the Norwegian context. Another director posited that the criticism surrounding these collaborations could be attributed to the strength of the state in Norway, pointing out that 'Many people believe that Norway does not need private support because the state provides everything' (A8). These criticisms reflect the normative pressures from the institutional environment faced by directors to adhere to the prevailing institutional logic favoring state funding in the cultural sector.

However, several directors express optimism that such collaborations will gain greater acceptance in Norway in the future and refer to other cultural institutions and countries where these collaborations are more common, 'In Denmark, you will be applauded if you manage to obtain sixty percent in earnings. So, it is quite different. But then you also have the large foundations' (A1). Moreover, reference is made to the science museums that have managed to build themselves up and achieve exciting exhibitions through public engagement and collaborations, "[w]hich we never see in our own public sector. It requires a mental reorientation and new ways of working practices to achieve the results of some successful science museums' (A7).

It is essential to note that not all directors have received criticism due to their collaborations. However, the public controversies surrounding private – public collaboration at both national and international levels indicate the potential risks museum directors face in upholding the legitimacy of the museum when engaging in such collaborations. Next, this paper will delve into the arguments put forward by directors on the need for public – private collaboration and the opportunities it offers.

The necessity and opportunities of public – private collaborations

There is a broad perception among the interviewees that public support for arts and culture is expected to face challenges in maintaining its current growth rate. The possible end of oil money, the ongoing conflict in Europe, and the aging population are among the factors that are highlighted as reasons. As one of the directors pointed out, 'This oil money will run out. We cannot say that the museums can continue exactly as they want with 100% public support' (A9). The directors widely concurred that there is an increased need for enhanced collaborations with private actors in the museum sector due to multiple compelling reasons. Focusing on collaborations with private collectors, the data analysis revealed three recurring themes while discussing the potential opportunities presented by such collaborations.

Firstly, many directors reflected on how collaborating with private collectors could offer the museum financial freedom to acquire international artworks and create significant exhibitions. There is a consistent emphasis on the inadequacy of public funding alone due to low purchasing budgets, and very few Norwegian museums can afford to buy international artworks (Veiteberg 2019, 134). Furthermore, it was highlighted that the resources needed to develop exhibitions are expanding. The evolution of contemporary art necessitates larger spaces and diverse amenities, including new media such as smell, taste, etc. As the director from the art hall highlighted, 'The concept of art has evolved to encompass so much more. It is no longer just a sculpture on a pedestal and a small painting by Matisse' (A11). Moreover, substantial expenses associated with heightened insurance costs and security requirements contribute to the mounting challenges that museums are currently confronting,

Museums increasingly rely on art collectors to lend significant artworks that can elevate an exhibition. This dependence stems from the growing facilities and conservation requirements, making it challenging to borrow works from national or high-profile institutions. (A4)

These institutional pressures are increasing museums' reliance on external resources. Borrowing artworks from private collectors is seen as a solution to this problem.

As expressed by one director, the enhanced artistic freedom achievable through a public – private collaboration is grounded in the increased financial freedom such collaborations offer: 'Freedom is found in the broader economic flexibility. It is much more cost-effective to borrow from collectors [...] enabling the realization of projects and exhibitions that might otherwise have been unattainable' (A11). This is also pinpointed by another director (A2), who contends that securing exhibition funding gives the museum financial freedom to think bigger and take more significant risks. These statements indicate that collaborations are crucial for broadening the museum's room for action. Additionally, they highlight the opportunities that arise from engaging in more substantial collaborations with private collectors, where support extends beyond loans and donations to include backing for exhibitions and related activities.

Secondly, collaborating with private collectors to acquire international artworks and create large exhibitions is highlighted as essential to strengthening the museum's international focus. The importance here is to show Norwegian art in a global context. As one director pointed out, 'Norwegian art has not been created in a vacuum. There has always been a world around that has influenced a lot' (A1). This goal is not exclusive to the largest and most significant museums; even one of the directors from the smallest museum in this study emphasized the significance of a huge donation, stating, 'The collaboration made it possible for us to be a museum that thinks not only nationally but also internationally' (A6). Furthermore, as emphasized in a prior study (Berg and Larsen 2024), more high-class international art could strengthen the museums' position internationally, as the director from one of the largest museums stated, 'The keyword for the collaboration is "international." This collaboration is about raising a global investment in the museum' (A1). Displaying works by internationally renowned artists of significant importance enhances the museum's credibility (Duncan 1995, 60). Moreover, using the collector's name is also described as a bridge to a global position,

Our museum has never appeared in the *New York Times*, *Financial Times* in London, or *Politiken* in Denmark. There, they wrote about the [collectors name] Collection and the museum [the museum's new name]. (A10)

Given its nonexistent recognition outside Norway, the director believes using the collector's name to build international relations will be more effective. This enhanced visibility extends beyond collectors to include companies or other partners, enabling museums to reach new customer groups and gain awareness in novel ways.

Finally, public – private collaboration is driven by a desire to align with global developments in the museum field. Most argue that 100% government support is best because it creates financial security. However, it has also been pointed out that excessive government support could hinder the

museum's development. One director here cites the Victoria & Albert Museum in London as an example of successfully cultivating a significantly larger audience interested in art. The director argues that the success is not attributed to a loss of sponsors but rather a decline in public support, compelling the museum to align more closely with the audience to attract additional visitors. The director argues that this trend will eventually reach Norway, stating,

This tendency has not yet arrived because we have a very rich public economy compared to many other countries (oil money). That is also a problem because the changes we see internationally do not happen in Norway. We can afford not to engage on a high level in collaborations and cooperation nationally and internationally. They work in a different way abroad; they are more collaborative. (A7)

The state is, by several, likened to a 'sleeping pillow'⁶ that hinders growth and prevents Norwegian museums from keeping pace with international advancements. As one of the directors puts it, 'I believe the state is too unchallenged, and there should be more initiatives to encourage private citizens to do more and contribute further to society' (A8). Simultaneously, the importance of having public funding as a base was emphasized, citing its role in fulfilling the social mission. This stems from the tendency of private actors to focus on more visible elements rather than fundamental operational aspects such as dissemination, conservation, and maintenance. It was stressed that private funding should complement, and not replace, public funding.

Demands and expectations – 'why can't they just give it away?'

The ultimate ideal is for the museum to be given money to buy their own artwork or to spend on whatever they desire. However, as pointed out by several, 'It is uncommon to receive things like that without any further ado. That is what everyone wants, but it never happens in practice' (A1). For instance, in museums, some directors agree to name rooms after collectors or corporations they collaborate with. This is justified, among other reasons, by the high-level nature of the agreement (A1) and as a means of demonstrating that they are collaborative partners (A10). Other demands could be more challenging to manage. For instance, several described instances when they or their predecessors entered agreements with specific expectations regarding the artwork to be exhibited.

However, the most frequently mentioned demand is what I refer to as *all-or-nothing donations*. This occurs when a private collector offers multiple artworks or an entire collection, but the museum is interested in or has the capacity to accept and take care of one or a few pieces. To put it slightly more bluntly, one of the directors asks, 'You are offered fifty works by the collector's mother, in much need of conservation, and one wonderful Courbet. Package deal. All or nothing. What should you do?' (A4). Another director (A5) shared that they are presently in a situation where someone is willing to donate a significant work by a renowned artist to the museum. However, the requirement is that, at the same time, the museum must also agree to take some 'non-museum quality works' alongside the primary artwork. In this scenario, the museum will accept all the donated pieces because the main artwork is of considerable significance. Nevertheless, the collector is informed that the other artworks will be stored in the museum's storage facilities, with minimal likelihood of them ever being exhibited at the museum.

Another director stated that they have started to become stricter with taking in the all-or-nothing packages '[b]ecause it has happened that we have been required to show five bad works' (A1). The challenge with these donations lies in their contribution to the overcrowding of storage facilities and with museums accepting works that eventually become part of cultural history, regardless of whether they align with the museum's artistic goals. On the other hand, it is difficult for museum directors to reject these 'packages' because the collectors own an artwork that the museum wants to possess and find essential for its own collection. Sometimes, but seldom, they get donations without demands. One of the directors described his once-in-a-lifetime experience: 'Once, I received a phone call from a collector who said I could select some top works from his collection, and he did not want

the name to appear on the label. This is the greatest experience possible' (A8). This was seen as the ultimate ideal.

One director describes their relationship with a collector as an emotional roller coaster and underscores that regardless of how well-crafted the arrangements may be, there can still be a lingering sense of pressure that influences one's work:

Even though the collection has been donated, he will not let go. It is his child that he has given away. [...] Collectors make donations with such heartfelt dedication, don't they? Furthermore, that means they cannot quite let go of the collection, even if it is given and the museum has full disposal rights. (A6)

In line with Mauss (2011), this finding indicates that even when a collection is donated to a museum, private collectors may still have specific expectations and desires regarding their collections. Consequently, museum directors feel obligated to address and accommodate these expectations, potentially impacting their day-to-day work.

To preserve autonomy when collaborating with private collectors, the directors emphasize that they are the ultimate decision-makers regarding which artworks are displayed at the museum,

It is not like what you see is private. What you see is what the museums think is relevant and interesting. Thousands of works are kept in storage facilities, collected by private individuals, and given to museums, but most of them you never get to see. (A7)

According to multiple directors, they tend to decline donations more frequently than accept them. It was highlighted that numerous factors contributed to this decision, such as concerns regarding the quality of the object, difficulties associated with storage, or its incompatibility with the overall profile of the museum.

Furthermore, some directors made comparisons between private and public funding. One director pointed out that even though it may seem that no one is in charge when the public is the client, this is not the case:

Simply reading the documents that form the basis of the institutions reveals that they include numerous obligations. It is not at all different. At times, it is easier to collaborate with sponsors because they do not come with the same dedicated purposes. Sometimes, we get a [financial] package we can use freely. (A1)

The situation illustrates the coercive pressure (DiMaggio and Powell 1991) exerted by the government, indicating that private funding might sometimes offer greater flexibility as it can be utilized more freely.

This paper will now examine the directors' perspective on ways to enhance overall private support.

To give back – reciprocity

As expressed by most directors, a primary challenge in Norway is to engage private actors in general and to help them recognize the value of supporting arts and culture. They refer to sports, science, and health, which are well supported by private actors, but culture is less so. The Donor Matching Scheme was one of the cultural policy instruments designed to incentivize financial support for arts and culture from private actors in Norway (Kulturdepartementet, 2018–2019, 58). Under this scheme, private monetary contributions to art and cultural institutions were augmented by a state-funded markup of up to 25 percent of the donated amount. For example, if a private actor gave one million NOK to a cultural institution, the state added 250,000 NOK. As of 2021, the center-left government in office decided to discontinue the scheme. They argued that public cultural support should not be determined by the ability to raise private funds (Ministry of Culture and Equality 2021). However, it is worth noting that the current government's promised compensation for discontinuing the scheme has not been fulfilled. The directors expressed satisfaction with the funds they received through the Donor Matching Scheme. However, intriguingly, many used it as an example to highlight how it should not be. As one director noted, 'It does not benefit those who give; it only benefits those who

receive' (A8). Another claimed that the scheme 'does not recognize strategic collaboration with companies' (A10), pointing out that strategic collaboration is much more effective for the development of museums than pure monetary gifts. Another argued that they are not interested in collaborating with private actors to beg for money:

I say that [the museum] represents many values you can benefit from and enjoy. Furthermore, if it fits the strategy of other businesses or organizations, we can easily collaborate [. . .] To present ourselves as someone who needs gifts without reciprocation, without us giving anything in return, is to stigmatize us as poor beggars. (A7)

Furthermore, it is emphasized that collaboration partners should feel ownership to encourage private collectors and corporations to participate in public – private collaborations: 'It is strange not to be included in the decision-making committee if you contribute with a NOK 30 million sculpture. As long as you do not have the majority' (A1). Most directors express their eagerness to recognize such contributions and say they would love to reciprocate a gift; here, as conveyed by one of the directors:

If we borrow art, we acknowledge its generosity, whether from private individuals or any other source. I am sure certain rooms in the [museum] will have sponsor names. In a way, it indicates that we are supporters here [. . .] However, it is crucial to note that these sponsors will not have a say in selecting artistic content. (A10)

There is also a broad agreement among the informants that one must be able to see opportunities for introducing tax incentives to support art in Norway. It is argued that tax incentives could encourage more significant support and involvement from corporations in the cultural sector and motivate collectors to donate art. As one director pointed out: 'Such tax incentives could inspire the business world and other collaborators, compared to the Donor Matching Scheme, which is perceived as more inspiring for the cultural institutions than the contributor' (A7). Several interviewees find it strange that such a system is not already established. It is emphasized that sports have had this arrangement for a long time. As one of the directors points out: 'It is striking in Norway that you get a tax deduction for giving money to the Norwegian Bahai Association but not to art museums' (A5). Comparisons are also made with other parts of the culture sector:

If you look at the movie industry, there is an opportunity to have both public support and investors from private actors. Some of us aspire to engage in joint ventures with private investors to enhance and expand our artistic endeavors. In the movie industry, you can do that, but we [museums] cannot, according to law. (A7)

As a part of a broader study, I interviewed an informant from the Ministry of Culture who noted that numerous governments have considered tax incentives for many years, but little advancement has been made. The informant suggests the main reason for this is the potential loss of tax revenue the Treasury would then miss out on.

Discussion

Criticism and external pressure from the environment

Museum directors attribute criticism of collaborations with private actors to the strong influence of the state in Norway and the cultural norms of equality deeply ingrained in Norwegian society (Skarpenes 2007). Norwegian historian Francis Sejersted (1993) asserts that there has been a prevailing belief in Norway that equality holds significant importance, leading to a profound skepticism toward private power and capital (Christensen 2018, 136).

Furthermore, directors argue that economic uncertainty underscores the heightened need for collaboration with private actors. They express concerns about low purchasing budgets and potential future reductions in public funding. They value public support's stability and predictability, allowing them to fulfill their social mission and core responsibilities. Their apprehension lies in the potential scenario where the state reduces its support, leading to an increased reliance on private

actors. Consequently, collaborating with private actors is considered an additional resource that bolsters the museum's artistic quality and global focus. However, the directors claim that museums have become increasingly dependent on external support due to rising demands and costs associated with conserving and facilitating art, making exceptional exhibitions challenging. This observation is in line with Lindqvist (2007, 313), who claimed that the level of public support may never meet the ambitions of museum directors or cover the rising expenses for maintaining national collections and keeping up with international advancements in fine arts exhibitions. To achieve their goals, directors believe securing donations, deposits, loans, and financial contributions from private actors is indispensable.

To legitimize themselves, the directors mimic major international museums and other successful cultural institutions, such as science centers, sports, and the movie industry, by, among other things, showing how they have improved their exhibitions and audience alignment. This also speaks to the coercive pressures exerted by the Norwegian government, addressing instrumental cultural policy goals and not just 'art for art's sake.' Collaborations are legitimized as a responsible and necessary approach to ensure financial sustainability and avoid overreliance on diminishing public resources. This strategy is crucial for maintaining the institution's continuity and safeguarding cultural heritage.

Artistic integrity

In the fine arts, the phrase 'art for art's sake' suggests that art has intrinsic value and should serve no purpose beyond itself. However, critics and researchers studying the relationship between private collectors and museums express concerns that private collectors may exert excessive control over museums, ultimately influencing the future canon of art (Fasche 2013; Quemin 2020). Furthermore, this was one of the main criticisms against the highly debated collaboration between the National Museum in Norway and the Fredriksen Family Art Company (Berg and Larsen 2024).

The present study reveals that many directors have faced demands from private collectors when receiving donations or deposits, including display requirements and all-or-nothing donations, threatening the autonomy of artistic professionals. This contrasts with the idea of museums as autonomous entities and aligns with the principles of new institutional theory, which posit that organizations are viewed as responsive and dependent on external actors. While the directors emphasize the importance of maintaining artistic integrity and basing decisions on artistic competence rather than external pressures, the findings indicate that some directors acknowledge that the significance of a gift can impact their willingness to uphold these boundaries. One approach to obtaining these artworks is by conforming to the demands of resource suppliers (Alexander 1996, 11). Drawing on resource dependence theory, this demonstrates the power collectors can wield over museums, as most artworks are in limited editions. This emphasizes the significance of specific artworks and compels directors to make exceptions and acquire pieces they might otherwise reject.

Concurrently, the financial freedom afforded by these collaborations also enhances the art organizations' artistic freedom. This duality is also noted by Abbing, who recognizes that large donations to art organizations could be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, such donations often come with strings attached that constrain the organizations' autonomy and limit their negative freedom. On the other hand, they can potentially increase the organizations' positive freedom by providing additional funding and resources (Abbing 2019, 195).

Furthermore, the instrumentalization of culture emphasizes that culture is not an end in itself and thus threatens autonomy (Kann-Rasmussen and Hvenegaard Rasmussen 2021). Moreover, several perceived governmental funding as equally challenging as funding from private actors due to coercive pressures (DiMaggio and Powell 1991) exerted by the government. This observation is consistent with Alexander's (2018b, 38) notion, drawing on Bourdieu's (1993) distinction between autonomous and heteronomous fields within cultural production, that 'heteronomy in cultural spheres can come not only from the commercial but from the political field.' In Norway, this is particularly evident with the museums, where it is suggested that a sedimentary cultural policy has

given museums too many roles to fill, which can lead to an overload of responsibilities (Hylland 2017).

No reciprocity, no relationship

This research shows that the most renowned institutions have the most extensive experience collaborating with private actors and engaging in significant collaboration. In accordance with resource dependence theory, a heightened sense of insecurity tends to emerge when numerous organizations vie for the same resources. This principle is exemplified in the case of the Donor Matching Scheme, where the largest museums in major cities are perceived to receive the most substantial support (e.g. interviewees A8 & A4). This observation is echoed by Mulcahy (2020), expressing concerns about the privatization of the public sector in the American system, which can result in a form of Cultural Darwinism, favoring the survival of robust and prominent cultural institutions. The power lies with the donors to decide which organizations they want to support through economic funding, donations, deposits, or short-term loans. Intensified competition for resources could further foster isomorphism, as museums must adapt to the expectations and demands of resource suppliers in order to secure funding and support. To attract private actors, museums must consistently maintain artistic quality and engage their audience. A decline in quality could lead art collectors and sponsors to shift their support to other institutions, necessitating constant evolution and improvement to remain attractive partners for private collectors and corporations. The goal of reaching a higher international level, both in terms of contextualizing their collections by acquiring more international works and aligning with global developments in the museum field, indicates a wish to be a part of the global network of museums but could also be a goal to attract more collaborative partners. This pursuit could be seen as a response to mimetic pressure; by aligning with successful others, they want to position themselves favorably in the competitive landscape (DiMaggio and Powell 1991). This is in line with previous research from Denmark, which claims that willingness to engage in partnerships and networks with others has become a legitimization strategy for cultural organizations; if not, they will appear isolated and unattractive (Kann-Rasmussen 2019, 319).

This study's findings indicate that several directors attribute the need for evolution to align with the global network of museums, and express concerns about Norwegian museums being left behind because the state acts as a 'sleeping pillow.' This is also noted by Abbing, who claims that subsidies can lead to more exclusive art forms and encourage the sector not to modernize (Abbing 2019, 248). This aligns with prior research suggesting that museums receiving public funding often impose limitations on organizational change and discourage innovation (Camarero, Garrido, and Vicente 2011).

Several directors expressed concern regarding the government's strategy for enhancing public – private collaboration, criticizing the Donor Matching Scheme for favoring financial contributions over strategic collaboration. They highlight the imbalance in tax benefits available for contributions to museums compared to other sectors. It is argued that museums provide significant cultural value and should be engaged in collaborations that acknowledge and leverage this unique contribution. The call for implementing tax incentives demonstrates a desire to align with other sectors that already benefit from such incentives. Thus, it is argued that such incentives could play a crucial role in encouraging greater corporate support and involvement, as well as motivating art collectors to donate more pieces. Furthermore, a study by Sherer et al. (2019, 225) on resource dependency in arts organizations in North America found that access to multiple funding sources helps organizations attain independence from their environment, preventing a single actor from gaining excessive power.

The directors stress that they are not only interested in receiving gifts but also in giving something back to private actors. Following the principles of gift exchange, the directors find it necessary to provide private actors with a reciprocal gift of symbolic significance. Unlike

market transactions, where payment is exchanged for goods, gifts are tied to reciprocity and adhere to social norms (Mahncke 2016, 77). The gift is thus both free and bound. Additionally, gift-giving sustains an ongoing relationship, whereas market transactions usually end the relationship between buyer and seller. Reciprocity is thus synonymous with relation (Mahncke 2016, 79).

According to the directors, the Donor Matching Scheme fails to value this mutual dependency as private actors do not receive anything in return, hindering the development of reciprocity. Without reciprocity, there is no sustainable relationship, which can impede further support. In their pursuit of strategic collaborations, the directors highlight the importance of both parties benefiting from the collaboration. By doing so, both parties become actively involved in the collaboration. As a result, this distinction raises the question of whether museum directors possess a more profound comprehension of the gift economy compared to politicians in the Norwegian government.

Conclusion

Overall, this paper sheds light on the evolving landscape and challenges faced by directors of Norwegian visual art organizations as they navigate the increasing emphasis on economic contributions and private collaborations. Public – private collaboration is seen as an inevitable solution for the future, driven by factors such as limited purchasing budgets, rising costs, and concerns about diminishing public support due to reliance on oil revenues. Critics have also voiced concerns about the potential impact on the autonomy and integrity of museum professionals. This paper highlights several significant findings that are crucial for understanding how the directors are affected by these institutional pressures. As shown, directors recognize the expectations set forth by private collectors, including adhering to display requirements and considering all-or-nothing donations to acquire valuable pieces for their collections. Despite concerns about the demands of private collectors, the directors express a surprisingly optimistic outlook towards increased collaboration with private actors, viewing it as an inevitable shift as society moves beyond a pure welfare state model. Notably, the high level of government support makes Norwegian museums comparatively less reliant on private funding than, for example, their counterparts in the United States (Alexander 1996), which may lessen the pressure to meet private actors' demands. However, in times of economic crisis, there is a demonstrated decline in private support for the arts (Poling 2021), highlighting the vulnerability of changes in their external environment. Furthermore, this paper reveals that museum directors perceive collaborations as more than monetary gifts, emphasizing the importance of reciprocity and mutual giving.

There is an argument for policy changes, such as introducing tax incentives, to encourage private actors to donate more. The comparison with other sectors indicates a perceived inequity, which should be addressed to enable museums to pursue more strategic collaborations. Museums seek more than just financial support; they seek recognition of their cultural value and partnerships aligned with their strategic goals. This discussion emphasizes the directors' view that financial mechanisms like tax incentives are not merely fiscal tools but can also serve to achieve broader cultural and strategic aims. Walker (2019, 37) argues that the rise in private museums in recent decades is closely linked to generous tax incentives to foster arts philanthropy. Consequently, such tax benefits might lead private individuals to prefer establishing their own museums and donating art there rather than to public museums. This tendency could affect public art institutions as it might redirect potential donations away from them.

Moving forward, further research should examine the perspectives and motivations of art collectors in public – private collaborations. A deeper understanding of private actors' motivations and expectations will enhance our knowledge of these collaborations' dynamics and potential challenges.

Notes

1. The current government, a coalition between the Labour Party and Center Party, has discontinued this arrangement.
2. This project is approved by the ethics committee, Sikt – report number: 231137. Informed consent has been collected from all interviewees.
3. 'Directors' is used because they are leaders of the museum, or a section within the museum, but they do not necessarily use this term themselves.
4. Requests were limited to those with experience of receiving donations, deposits or short-term loans, with seven responding.
5. The data for this study are derived from a larger body of interview research consisting of 41 interviews, which give context to this study.
6. In English this phrase could be referred to as 'relying on a safety net'

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

The work was supported by the Norges Forskningsrad [302199].

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