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**Philanthropy and cultural autonomy:
rethinking economic support for the arts**

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Declaration regarding the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools

I, the undersigned, Ilaria Ramazzotti, student number 902785, enrolled at Ca' Foscari on the Master's degree programme in Economics and Administration of Arts and Culture, author of the thesis *Philanthropy and cultural autonomy: rethinking economic support for the arts*, supervised by Marco Baravalle, being aware of the penalties provided for in Article 76 of the Consolidated Law, Presidential Decree No. 445 of 28 December 2000, and of the forfeiture of benefits provided for in Article 75 of the same Consolidated Act in the event of false or misleading declarations, hereby declare, under my own personal responsibility in accordance with Articles 46 and 47 of Presidential Decree No. 445 of 28 December 2000,

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Introduction

Philanthropy has long played an important role in supporting cultural life. For arts organisations, whose activities often cannot be sustained through market revenues or public funding alone, private donations can provide essential resources for exhibitions, programmes, staff and institutional development. Yet philanthropy is not simply a neutral transfer of resources. The decision to give, the definition of what is considered worth supporting, and the conditions attached to funding can also shape the priorities and possibilities of those who receive it. Philanthropic support can therefore become a source of power and dependency, potentially compromising the cultural autonomy of the very organisations it seeks to support. This raises a fundamental question about how cultural support can be organised without reproducing the tensions between economic dependency and cultural autonomy.

This thesis addresses this question by asking: if philanthropy can compromise cultural autonomy, what principles can guide forms of support that avoid reproducing such tensions? Rather than considering philanthropy as inherently harmful or arguing that cultural organisations should become completely independent from external funding, the thesis examines how different ways of organising and governing resources can produce different forms of power and dependency. Its central argument is that where resources come from is only a part of the question: what also matters is who controls them, how they circulate, and how the relationships through which they are provided affect cultural autonomy.

The thesis approaches this question through three interconnected chapters, moving from an understanding of philanthropy and its role in the arts, to an analysis of

the power relations it can produce, and finally to the exploration of alternative forms of resource governance.

Chapter 1, “Understanding philanthropy”, establishes the conceptual and economic framework of the thesis. It first examines how philanthropy has been defined and understood, drawing on authors such as Frumkin, Payton and Moody to consider philanthropy as both voluntary action for the public good and an expression of private values and commitments. The chapter then traces the development of contemporary philanthropy, including the emergence of philanthrocapitalism¹, and examines its main actors and motivations. The second part focuses on the relationship between philanthropy and the arts. Drawing on cultural economics and research on arts funding, it considers why cultural organisations structurally depend on combinations of public, earned and private income, and examines the different forms through which individuals, foundations and corporations support cultural institutions. Chapter 1 therefore establishes philanthropy as an important, and often necessary, source of resources for the arts, while also opening the question of the power relations that such dependence can create.

Chapter 2, “The ambivalences of arts philanthropy”, develops this question by examining the relationship between philanthropy, inequality, private power and cultural autonomy. Drawing on scholars such as McGoey, Duvoux and Lechterman, the chapter first considers how philanthropic giving is connected to the concentration of wealth and the ability of private actors to exercise influence in the public sphere. It then brings these questions into the cultural field, drawing on Abbing and Bourdieu to examine the relative autonomy of cultural institutions and the ways in which economic dependence can affect

¹ The term philanthrocapitalism refers to a form of philanthropy that applies business principles to charitable giving, with the aim of making it more efficient, impact-oriented, and financially sustainable. It is based on the idea that doing social good and pursuing financial interests can be mutually beneficial. McGoey (2012) traces this idea back to older understandings of the relationship between economic success and the public good.

it. The concept of artwashing, informed by institutional critique and the work of Haacke and Fraser, is used to examine how cultural institutions can also contribute to the conversion of economic capital into cultural and symbolic legitimacy. These tensions are explored through four cases: Hans Haacke and the Guggenheim Museum, the Sackler family and cultural institutions, BP and Tate, and Warren Kanders and the Whitney Museum. Although different in context and form, the cases show how philanthropic and corporate relationships can intersect with questions of censorship, reputation, institutional governance and cultural autonomy.

Chapter 3, “Rethinking cultural support: Owneh and collective resource governance”, turns from these tensions towards the question of what might be done differently. It focuses on Owneh, a Palestinian collective initiative bringing together civil society and cultural organisations. The initiative emerged in response to longstanding concerns around foreign aid, donor dependency and political autonomy. The Palestinian context makes the relationship between external funding and cultural autonomy particularly visible, as cultural organisations have long operated within a system strongly shaped by international aid and donor priorities. This makes Owneh a particularly useful case through which to explore whether alternative principles of resource governance can address these tensions, and whether they might also offer insights beyond this specific context. The analysis draws on documentary material and a qualitative interview with Fida Tuma, Director of the A.M. Qattan Foundation and a member of Owneh. It examines the initiative’s three main tools — the Aid Watch, the Solidarity Fund and the Basket of Resources — and interprets them through literature on commons, care, gifts, reciprocity and redistribution, drawing on authors including Ostrom, Mollona, Tronto, Hyde and Villanueva. Rather than presenting Owneh as a complete alternative to

philanthropy, the chapter considers it as a situated experiment in collective resource governance, examining both its possibilities and its limitations.

Overall, the three chapters bring together bodies of literature that have often been discussed separately. Scholarship on philanthropy has extensively examined giving, its motivations and institutional forms, while more critical approaches have addressed the relationships between philanthropy, inequality and private power. Research on the arts has explored the structural need for external funding and the tension between economic dependence and cultural autonomy, while institutional critique has examined the political and reputational relationships connecting cultural institutions to powerful economic actors. At the same time, theories of commons, care, reciprocity and redistribution provide conceptual tools for imagining different forms of resource organisation. What is less frequently addressed is the connection between these two questions: if philanthropic relationships can generate forms of dependency that compromise cultural autonomy, how might cultural resources themselves be organised differently without assuming that external funding can simply be eliminated?

This is where the thesis situates its contribution. Rather than focusing exclusively on the ethics or intentions of individual donors, it shifts attention towards the organisation and governance of resources. The aim is not to propose a universal replacement for philanthropy, but to explore which principles might allow cultural support to operate without reproducing the same power relations that can undermine autonomy. Through the case of Owneh, the thesis considers collective governance, care, reciprocity and redistribution as possible principles for rethinking the donor-recipient relationship. Its contribution therefore lies in connecting the critique of philanthropic power with a practical and conceptual exploration of how cultural resources might instead be shared, governed and circulated.

Chapter 1 – Understanding philanthropy

Philanthropy appears as a complex and multi-faced phenomenon that extends across economic, social, and cultural spheres. Any discussion of its practice and impact within the art world must begin with an understanding of the phenomenon as a whole, taking into consideration different motives and implications. Understanding philanthropy means questioning not only what it is, but also who truly benefits from it, and through which mechanisms and conditions.

1.1 Definitions and conceptual framework

A compelling definition of the concept of philanthropy is given by the Association of Fundraising Professionals (AFP)²: in their *Donor Bill of Rights* the AFP defines philanthropy as the act of giving “based on voluntary action for the common good,” rooted in a long-standing tradition of donating and sharing as essential to the quality of social life. This definition emphasises the ethical intentions, the voluntarism and the orientation toward collective benefits as core elements of the philanthropic practice.

Other scholars have tried to conceptualise philanthropy by highlighting its internal tensions and multiple function. Peter Frumkin, in *Strategic Giving: The Art and Science of Philanthropy* (2006), describes philanthropy as a “potent vehicle through which public needs are met” while simultaneously framing it as “an instrument for the expression of private beliefs and commitments” (2006, p. ix). This dual character captures a central tension within philanthropy: the coexistence of collective objectives and private motivations, public benefit and individual agency.

² AFP is an international organisation dedicated to promoting ethical fundraising and professional standards within the nonprofit sector.

Robert L. Payton, together with Micheal Moody, similarly emphasises the difficulty of providing a narrow or unified definition of philanthropy. In *Understanding Philanthropy*, they argue that “philanthropy is voluntary action for the public good” (2008, p. 44). Philanthropy, they suggest, functions as an “umbrella” or “circus tent” concept, encompassing a wide range of practises. These include voluntary giving (such as donations of money or property), voluntary service (the contribution of time and skills), and voluntary association, understood as the organised activity without which most philanthropic giving and service would be ineffective or even impossible. This definition at its core emphasises that philanthropy requires more than just intent; it must involve voluntary action for the public benefit. According to Payton and Moody, this usually takes two forms: relieving individual suffering (such as meeting basic needs for strangers) or improving the broader quality of life within society. Both objectives highlight what the authors consider the most defining feature of philanthropy: its moral dimension.

From a more explicitly economic perspective, philanthropy is similarly approached as a set of heterogeneous activities rather than a unified phenomenon. Scharf and Tonin (2018), in their analysis of the economics of philanthropy, conceptualise it as a series of actions, including charitable giving, fundraising, and volunteering. This approach further reinforces the idea of philanthropy as a multi-faced and practical field, shaped by both moral and economic considerations.

The etymology of the term additionally supports the moral and altruistic roots of the practice. Derived from the Greek *philanthrōpía*, meaning “love of humankind,” philanthropy is historically associated with an altruistic orientation toward others. As Francesca Sawaya (2008) observes, philanthropy is often perceived as a selfless expression of goodwill. Yet she also argues that its historical and structural connection to powerful elite structures complicates this narrative. Because philanthropic action is

completely voluntary and discretionary, it remains a matter of private choice regarding how and for whom the resources are used. This places philanthropy in an ambiguous position between pure altruism and the exercise of power.

Taken together, these definitions illustrate the inherently multidisciplinary nature of philanthropy, which operates across multiple spheres, such as the social, the moral and the economic one. Philanthropy emerges at the intersection of ethical values, material resources, and collective needs. Additionally, it is possible to identify some of its main and recurring characteristics: it's consistently framed as a voluntary action, it is oriented toward the public or common good, even when driven by private motivations; and it manifests through various forms, from financial gifts to volunteerism. At the same time, some tensions emerge when analysing its definition, which makes it necessary to move beyond the conceptual framework and to consider the actors and the motivations that define philanthropic practises.

1.2 Who and why: actors and motivations in contemporary philanthropy

To fully understand philanthropy and its implications it's important to move beyond definitions and examine the actors involved and the motives that drive their giving, situating them within a broader historical and evolutionary perspective that traces the transformation of philanthropy from a solely Western phenomenon to a global and more complex one.

1.2.1 From Western philanthropy to global giving and “philanthrocapitalism”

As previously mentioned, the concept of philanthropy finds its earliest formulation in ancient Greece, where it was understood as a fundamental human virtue. As Dermange (2025) recalls, Stoic philosophers such as Plutarch considered philanthropy as one of the core virtues of civilisation, alongside *praotēs* (gentleness) and *epieikeia* (equity).

Collectively, these virtues were regarded as constitutive of humanity, anchoring social existence in a moral commitment towards others. This classical perspective remains relevant today; as Dermange suggests, modern philanthropists are frequently motivated by a need to prove that material success is paired with moral integrity. This reveals a persistent connection between the act of giving and the pursuit of social validation of the donor.

With the rise of Christianity, the classical concept of philanthropy was gradually reshaped by the theological notion of charity. According to Dermange, charity was turned into a strategic tool for the Church and other institutions to exert power. By administering resources and distinguishing between the “deserving” and “undeserving” poor — or the “good poor” (p. 43) — these institutions reinforced social hierarchies rather than dismantling them. This historical moment highlights a tension that remains central to modern philanthropy and that will be analysed in the following chapter: the thin line between genuine altruism and the exercise of institutional control.

Similarly, Payton and Moody (2008), argue that understanding modern Western philanthropy requires looking at its dual roots. The first strand is found in ancient Middle Eastern religious traditions, which emphasised individual acts of mercy toward those in immediate need. The second strand comes from classical Greece and Rome, where philanthropy was viewed as a civic practice designed to enhance collective life. In this classical tradition, giving was closely linked to the *polis* (the city-state), public responsibility, and civic virtue. Here, philanthropy was not just a response to suffering, but a deliberate way to shape and improve the social order.

The transition to modern philanthropy occurred between the late Middle Ages and the early modern period. During this time, as Payton and Moody explain, rapid urbanisation and rising poverty exposed the limits of traditional and informal giving. A

key moment was England's 1601 Statute of Charitable Uses, which moved philanthropy away from simple individual charity toward a more organised legal system. By introducing charitable trusts and permanent endowments, this law made giving more systematic and lasting, eventually forming the basis for the modern nonprofit sector.

However, the real turning point occurred in the United States during the nineteenth century with the emergence of "scientific philanthropy." This new movement moved away from impulsive giving, favouring evidence, strategic planning, and professional expertise to address social issues. Industrial titans like Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller institutionalised this approach through large private foundations. By hiring specialised staff and adopting research-driven methods, they transformed philanthropy into a structured, professional field.

Andrew Carnegie, in particular, articulated the moral foundation of this new model in his influential book *The Gospel of Wealth* (1889). In this text, still considered a cornerstone of modern philanthropy, Carnegie argued that the accumulation of wealth carried with it a social obligation. The wealthy, he stated, should regard themselves not as owners but as trustees of surplus resources, responsible for redistributing them in ways that would ultimately reconcile "the problem of the rich and the poor" and promote social harmony. Importantly, Carnegie rejected indiscriminate charity and identified specific institutional fields that he considered to be the most legitimate domains of philanthropy: universities, public libraries, museums and galleries, hospitals and research laboratories, public parks, cultural and educational buildings, and other infrastructures capable of fostering long-term social advancement. Public libraries, in particular, were for Carnegie among the most useful gifts a benefactor could offer a community, provided that the municipality committed to maintaining them. Philanthropy, in this view, was not merely

about generosity or personal compassion but a moral duty tied to leadership, civic responsibility and also investment.

From the late twentieth century onwards, philanthropy entered a further phase of transformation. As Ferris (2021) notes, the past twenty-five years have been characterised by a renewed aspiration for measurable impact and systemic change. Around the turn of the twenty-first century, what was termed “New Philanthropy” emerged, driven by new wealth generated in the technology and finance sectors, new giving vehicles, and new strategies that conceptualised giving as an investment rather than simply an act of charity. In the past decades, philanthropy has become larger, faster, more global, and increasingly complex. Importantly, donors now position themselves as active agents of social innovation rather than passive benefactors.

This shift has also been accompanied by increased public visibility, a trend best exemplified by the Giving Pledge. Launched in 2010 by Bill and Melinda Gates alongside Warren Buffett, the initiative consists of a global movement where ultra-high-net-worth individuals publicly commit to donating the majority of their wealth (Cagney & Ross, 2013). While rooted in the U.S., the campaign has expanded internationally, encouraging the global elite to adopt similar goals. A key feature of the Pledge is its flexibility, allowing signatories to distribute funds either during their lifetime or as a bequest. Furthermore, the commitment is moral rather than legal; it relies on reputational accountability rather than contractual obligations. By making large-scale giving socially prestigious, the Pledge reinforces the cultural norm that extraordinary wealth carries an equivalent social responsibility.

The Giving Pledge aligns with the concept of “philanthrocapitalism,” a term popularised by Matthew Bishop and Michael Green (2008, in Cagney & Ross, 2013). This model suggests that entrepreneurial skills and market-based strategies can be

leveraged to tackle global challenges like poverty and climate change. As governments face increasing fiscal constraints, wealthy entrepreneurs have positioned themselves as a new “leadership force,” using private capital to drive systemic change. A trend epitomised, again, by Bill Gates: through the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, philanthropic resources are deployed strategically alongside governments and NGOs. However, this philanthrocapitalist model has faced significant scrutiny. As it will be developed in the following chapter, critics, such as Duvoux (2025), Spanu (2025) or McGoey (2015), question its democratic legitimacy, arguing that it concentrates power in the hands of unelected individuals and risks aligning public priorities with private interests.

In summary, the evolution of philanthropy, from classical virtue to Christian charity, from civic infrastructure to scientific foundations, and from institutional grant-making to global philanthrocapitalism, reflects a steady process of rationalisation and professionalisation. What began as a personal moral duty has transformed into a highly structured and institutionalised field, defined by regulatory frameworks and specialised actors. This historical development has paved the way for a diverse range of philanthropic entities, each operating under different organisational logics. To understand contemporary philanthropy, it is therefore essential to examine who these actors are and how they function within this complex landscape.

1.2.2 The actors involved

Frumkin (2006) provides a comprehensive overview of the actors and mechanisms involved in philanthropic giving, talking about donors, intermediaries, and recipients. As he explains, donations may originate both from living and deceased individuals, as well as from business corporations. Additionally, according to him, philanthropic transfers can occur either directly between donors and recipient organisations or through institutional

intermediaries, that often serve functions such as identifying eligible beneficiaries, reducing transaction costs, and, in some cases, shielding donors from public visibility.

Starting with an analysis of the figure of the donor and its role, Cluff and Guillet de Monthoux (2010) address a fundamental question: who are the major donors? Their initial approach to answer this question considers the global distribution of wealth as a key factor in identifying potential donors. While this assumption may appear logic and intuitive, the authors argue that the relation between wealth and philanthropy is far more complex than this.

To explore this complexity, they draw on the CAF World Giving Index (WGI), a tool developed by the Charities Aid Foundation (CAF)³. In their 2010 analysis, one of the most striking findings is that high-income countries do not necessarily rank highest in terms of generosity. To investigate this further, the authors compare the list of the most generous countries in the WGI with rankings of the world's wealthiest nations, being wealth assessed through the distribution of High-Net-Worth Individuals (HNWIs) and Ultra-High-Net-Worth Individuals (UHNWIs)⁴. While some countries, such as the United States and the United Kingdom, appear prominently in both wealth and generosity rankings, suggesting that wealth can support philanthropic capacity, the study reveals a more unexpected and significant correlation: that between giving and happiness. The World Giving Index includes measures of life satisfaction, and Cluff and Guillet de

³ CAF is an international charitable organisation based in the United Kingdom. It works to promote effective philanthropy by supporting individual donors, corporations, foundations, governments, and nonprofit organisations. One of its most influential initiatives, the World Giving Index, is a global study designed to measure levels of generosity across countries. The Index does not focus exclusively on monetary donations, but also considers other forms of prosocial behaviour, such as volunteering time and helping strangers in need. By doing so, it tries to offer a broad understanding of charitable behaviour across more than 100 countries and over time.

⁴ As Hayes (2025) defines it, a High-Net-Worth Individual is someone with liquid assets of at least \$1 million, excluding primary residence property. This category includes subgroups such as Very-HNWIs, with assets between \$1 million and \$5 million, and Ultra-High-Net-Worth Individuals, whose net worth exceeds \$30 million.

Monthoux find that the relationship between happiness and charitable giving is stronger than that between wealth and giving. This suggests that subjective well-being may play a more decisive role in motivating philanthropic behaviour than financial capacity alone. This pattern is further confirmed by more recent data. The 2025 edition of the World Giving Index, now renamed the World Giving Report, highlights what can be describes as a paradox: “countries with higher levels of income tend to be less generous.”⁵

Understanding who the major donors are and their role therefore means also examining why such individuals choose to give. And although a more detailed discussion of the donor’s motives will be developed in the following sections, an initial overview of the donor typologies can be useful to show how values, social positions, or beliefs, shape the philanthropic practice beyond the economics motives. It is precisely this complexity that Cluff and Guillet de Monthoux tried to capture in their analysis of the donors. Drawing on a 2010 study conducted by Barclays Wealth, the authors identify a set of donor typologies based on beliefs, motivations, and demographic characteristics. The study examined approximately 500 high-net-worth individuals in the United Kingdom and the United States, offering insight into how different profiles of wealth holders engage with philanthropy. While these six categories are not exhaustive, they provide a useful analytical framework for understanding the diversity of donor behaviour.

The first group, often described as privileged youth, consists primarily of younger individuals who have inherited wealth. Their philanthropic engagement is typically motivated by a desire to be actively involved and socially responsible. Many in this group view charitable giving as a way to address feelings of moral obligation associated with

⁵ On average, indeed, individuals in high-income countries donate only 0.7% of their annual income, less than half of the 1.45% donated by individuals in low-income countries. This trend is underscored by the fact that three G7 members (France, Germany, and Japan) rank among the least generous countries globally. Japan represents an extreme case, with only 16% of the population engaging in charitable acts and an average donation amounting to just 0.16% of income: nearly eighteen times less than the proportion given in Nigeria, the most generous country in the ranking.

their privileged lifestyles. They tend to support global and humanitarian causes. A second category is represented by eco-oriented donors, who are generally younger and, more frequently than other groups, female. These individuals have usually accumulated their wealth independently and are strongly motivated by environmental concerns. The third group, referred to as altruistic entrepreneurs, includes middle-aged, self-made business owners who are motivated by a sense of moral or religious duty to give back to society. Their philanthropic engagement is characterised by relatively low demands on recipient organisations and limited interest in public recognition. These donors often contribute both financially and through personal involvement, supporting a wide range of causes such as education, social welfare, and environmental initiatives, and frequently act as fundraisers within their communities. In contrast, the typology of the reactive donors tend to be high-earning executives, predominantly male, whose giving is influenced primarily by social expectations and peer pressure. Their engagement with charitable causes is generally limited in terms of time and personal involvement. They are more likely to support health-related and medical charities and often value public acknowledgment of their contributions. Another group, known as cultured inheritors, typically consists of older individuals approaching retirement, many of whom have inherited wealth and are focused on questions of legacy. Motivated by personal values and moral beliefs, they are often actively involved in volunteering and fundraising, and tend to support local community initiatives, cultural institutions, and the arts. Finally, professional philanthropists are generally older donors who have accumulated significant wealth over their lifetimes. Their giving is often shaped by religious or political motivations, and they tend to approach philanthropy in a highly strategic and outcome-oriented manner. These donors are demanding in their relationships with charities and expect clear evidence of impact, particularly when making large-scale donations. They commonly support

education and religious institutions and are less inclined to fund global or environmental causes.

Alongside these possible different typologies, what can be stated with certainty about donors is that their role within philanthropic relations has become increasingly defined and structured. Donors, and in particular fundraising professionals, have increasingly started to protect their own interests and position (Frumkin, 2006). This is specifically reflected in the *Donor's Bill of Rights*, which codifies a set of expectations governing transparency, accountability, and respect. According to these principles, donors have the right to be informed about an organisation's mission, governance structure, and financial health, as well as about how donated resources will be used and whether they are being deployed effectively. Donors are also entitled to "receive appropriate acknowledgement and recognition", assurance that their contributions will be used for their intended purposes, and the respectful handling of personal information. Moreover, they retain the right to ask questions and to receive clear and truthful responses when making philanthropic decisions.

Besides individual philanthropists, corporate actors can also play a significant role in contemporary philanthropy when talking about donors. Corporations may engage in philanthropy in order "assist the communities in which the company operates and reach, directly or indirectly, the costumers that rely on their products." (Frumkin, 2006, p. 62). This form of engagement is commonly known as the concept of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), which refers to the voluntary commitment of companies to contribute to social welfare beyond their core profit-making activities. Specifically, as Jacquemet (2025) explains, CSR encompasses a range of practices through which corporations integrate social, ethical, and environmental concerns into their business operations and relationships with stakeholders.

Moving forward from donors to the intermediaries and recipients of philanthropic funding, it is important to recognise that philanthropic resources are rarely transferred through a single, uniform, channel. As previously noted, the diversification of these intermediaries reflects the increasing professionalisation of the field; giving has moved away from informal donations toward more structured and strategic resource distribution. As a result, intermediary organisations have become central actors in shaping how philanthropic funds are allocated, with foundations standing out as the most prominent. As Frumkin (2006) suggests, foundations indeed represent one of the most influential mechanisms for channeling private resources toward public purposes.

Philanthropic foundations are defined by Anheier and Daly (2007) as institutions primarily engaged in supporting charitable activities, research, education, culture and the arts and health care. Their function is to “allocate, on a voluntary basis, resources for public benefit and status.” (ibid, p. 3). What distinguishes these organisations from direct individual giving is their highly institutionalised and legally regulated nature, because unlike informal gifts, foundations are formal entities with established governance structures and long-term strategies for managing and investing capital.

When examining their governance structures and operational models, it becomes clear that foundations are not a monolithic group; rather, they can be classified according to different typologies. Jung et al. (2018) offer a comprehensive overview of the academic literature on this topic, starting from Ylvisaker’s (1978) influential U.S.-based classification. Ylvisaker identifies five main types of foundations: company-sponsored, independent, operating, community, and public foundations. However, it is important to note that under U.S. law, the first three are legally categorised as private foundations, while public foundations are treated as public charities due to their broader donor base

and lighter regulatory requirements.⁶ Outside the United States, these categories are often less clear-cut. Although terms such as “private” and “public” common in academic and policy discourse, their practical meaning varies across national contexts. For example, the European Foundation Centre proposed an alternative classification, distinguishing between independent, corporate, government-linked, and community or fundraising foundations. Nevertheless, Anheier and Daly (2007) argue that instead of relying on rigid formal typologies, foundations should be examined in relation to the specific institutional and cultural frameworks in which they operate.

Although foundations are the most visible intermediaries in the field, they do not work in isolation. Their ultimate role is to channel resources toward a diverse range of recipients, translating funding into concrete social or humanitarian action. The methods these recipients use — and even the terminology used to describe them — reflect the distinct legal and social environments of their respective countries.

In the United States, for example, philanthropic recipients are predominantly defined as tax-exempt organisations. As highlighted by Frumkin (2006), nearly all philanthropic capital in the U.S. flows toward entities that hold formal tax-exempt status. These organisations are legally constituted as nonprofits, meaning that they are prohibited from distributing profits to private individuals and are required to reinvest any surplus revenues in pursuit of publicly declared charitable purposes.

Consequently, “Nonprofit Organisation” (NPO) has become the standard umbrella term, encompassing a vast range of registered entities in fields such as education, healthcare, and the arts. Payton and Moody (2008) note that the term

⁶ The distinction between private foundations and public charities in the U.S. is primarily based on the source of their funding. Private foundations typically receive their endowment from a single individual, family, or corporation, whereas public charities must demonstrate broad public support.

“nonprofit” gained prominence partly due to its value-neutral connotation, which avoids the moral or religious weight often associated with “charity” or “philanthropy”.

When moving beyond the United States, however, terminology and classifications become more fragmented. Globally, the term NGO often serves as a broad category for both transnational and domestic actors operating outside the state and the market. Non-Governmental Organisation (NGOs) are, indeed, typically professionalized, structured entities that operate independently from the state, even when they collaborate with public institutions or receive government funding.

Alongside NGOs, the concept of Civil Society Organisation (CSO) has gained increasing prominence. CSOs represent a broader and more heterogeneous category than either nonprofits or NGOs, including not only formally registered organisations but also grassroots groups, community-based initiatives, cultural collectives, and other forms of organised civic engagement. (Cagney & Ross, 2013). In this sense, the term “civil society” refers to the social arena that exists outside the family, the state, and the market, where collective interests are pursued.

Ultimately, understanding recipients of philanthropic funding requires sensitivity to context, as these terminological differences reflect deeper power dynamics between donors and intermediaries. Analysing these actors as part of a 'philanthropic infrastructure' reveals how resources circulate and how priorities are set. This framework is particularly relevant for examining cultural and artistic initiatives, which often operate at the intersection of formal nonprofit structures and more fluid forms of civil society organisation.

1.2.3 Why people donate: motivations and functions of philanthropy

Before analysing the relationship between philanthropy and the artistic and cultural world, it is necessary to examine more closely the reasons why individuals and organisations decide to donate. As briefly mentioned earlier, wealth alone is neither a sufficient nor a decisive factor in explaining philanthropic behaviour. While access to financial resources enables giving, it does not explain why donors choose to give, to whom, and for what purposes. Philanthropy is instead driven by a complex set of motivations that combine moral sentiments, psychological rewards, social dynamics, and broader views about the role of private action in addressing public needs.

The analysis of donor motivations necessarily begins with an examination of altruism. According to the definition given by Oxford Dictionary, altruism is the “disinterested or selfless concern for the well-being of others, especially as a principle of action.” In philanthropy, as highlighted by Ben-Ner and Hu (2018) altruistic motivations have always been regarded as central, driving donors to support causes based on moral norms like solidarity and compassion. However, altruism is not always a purely positive force; even if it’s associated with positive outcomes, it can produce unintended and counterproductive effects. Ben-Ner and Hu, in particular, argue that altruistic sentiments are often selective, as donors tend to favour those who are socially or culturally familiar over distant beneficiaries. This selectivity explains why resources often concentrate on visible causes while neglecting others with comparable needs. Furthermore, they distinguish between ‘pure’ altruism and ‘impure’ (or self-serving) altruism, where giving provides the donor with emotional satisfaction or social recognition. These self-serving motivations can lead to an oversupply of funding for high-profile causes, suggesting that while altruism is morally valued, it does not always result in socially optimal outcomes.

A related and highly influential line of scholarship has focused on the emotional and psychological benefits that donors derive from the act of giving itself. This perspective is commonly referred to as the “warm glow” theory of giving. Initially developed by Andreoni (1989, in Tieffenbach, 2025) the theory was proposed to explain why individuals continue to donate even in situations where their individual contribution has little or no measurable impact on overall outcomes, and where standard economic models would therefore predict free-riding behaviour. According to the warm glow framework, donors may derive utility not only from the benefits that their donations generate for recipients, but also from the act of giving as such. Giving can produce positive emotional states, such as satisfaction, pride, or a sense of moral worth, which provide an immediate and personal reward to the donor. Empirical research has shown that warm glow effects are widespread and observable across different contexts. Donors tend to give more when they can directly choose how to allocate their contributions, when recipients are identifiable rather than anonymous, and when giving is socially visible or emotionally salient. Furthermore, neuroeconomic studies suggest that charitable giving activates reward-related neural circuits, reinforcing the idea that giving can function as a source of intrinsic gratification.

Despite its influence, the warm glow theory has faced significant conceptual critiques. Most notably, Jon Elster (2016, in Tieffenbach, 2025), argues that the warm glow cannot coherently function as the primary motivation for giving. According to Elster, the positive self-image associated with giving can only arise as a by-product of a genuine intent to help others. An individual who donates solely in order to feel good about themselves would undermine the very conditions required to experience moral satisfaction. In this view, self-approval requires the belief that the action is inherently valuable, not just a source of pleasure. Consequently, philanthropy is best understood as

a hybrid practice, where concern for the self and concern for others coexist and reinforce each other.

This focus on internal motivations is further supported by research focused on individual psychological traits. In particular, a study by Andreoni et al. (2018) points to empathy as a key predictor of charitable giving. Empathy, the capacity to emotionally relate to the experiences of others, significantly increases the likelihood of donation, supporting the idea that emotional connection plays a central role in helping behaviours. Interestingly, their findings challenge the idea that giving is purely impulsive. Instead, philanthropy appears to be a reflective act; it is negatively associated with impulsiveness, especially when resources are scarce, implying that it is shaped by deliberate moral concern rather than simple spontaneity.

Taken together, these perspectives reveal philanthropic giving as a complex motivational space in which altruism, emotional rewards, and individual psychological dispositions interact. This multidimensional understanding is further schematised by Frumkin's framework on the purposes and functions of philanthropy. Frumkin (2006) argues that philanthropy cannot be reduced to a single function, but instead serves multiple public and private purposes simultaneously.

He particularly identifies four core public functions of philanthropy. First, philanthropy often acts as an agent of social and political change. By deploying private resources toward public ends, donors can challenge existing arrangements and pursue reform without the constraints of electoral or market pressures. But this freedom, as critics have long noted, may reflect the priorities of donors rather than those of affected communities. Second, philanthropy drives innovation by funding experimental ideas that state bureaucracies might find too risky. A third function of philanthropy consists of the pursuit of equity through limited redistribution. Many donors, especially smaller ones,

use philanthropy to reduce disparities by supporting organisations that provide services to disadvantaged populations. Fourth, philanthropy affirms pluralism by allowing multiple visions of the public good to coexist. Because philanthropic decisions are decentralised and driven by diverse actors, they enable a wide range of causes, approaches, and values to find expression in public life.

Beyond these public functions, Frumkin introduces what he regards as a crucial but under-appreciated fifth function of philanthropy: its private, expressive, and consumptive dimension. Giving does not only aim at producing external social benefits; it also serves the psychological, moral, and identity-related needs of donors. Through philanthropy, individuals translate values into action, express commitments, and derive satisfaction. These personal returns are not merely by-products of giving but form part of its core rationale, as he states: “Often the personal values and motives of the donors are strong enough to leave a clear imprint on the cause or issue that the donors selects.” (2006, p. 21). Frumkin argues that neglecting this donor-centred perspective leads to an incomplete and unrealistic understanding of philanthropy, since the willingness to give depends in part on the rewards, symbolic, emotional, and moral, that donors experience.

While Frumkin’s framework clarifies the public and private purposes of philanthropy at a systemic level, other research has focused on classifying donors according to their predominant motivational orientations. One of the most significant studies in this area is the typology by Prince and File (1994, in Pecoraro, 2023c), which identifies seven distinct groups that illustrate the diverse motivations of high-capacity donors.

The first group, the Devout, view giving primarily as a moral or religious obligation. For them, philanthropy is an expression of faith or ethical duty rather than civic strategy or personal interest, and they typically do not seek public recognition. The

Communitarian donors, by contrast, are motivated by a strong sense of civic responsibility and local engagement; they believe that private initiatives can effectively address community needs and often seek involvement in governance or decision-making processes. The Dynasts are driven by family tradition, conceiving philanthropy as an inherited responsibility and a means of building intergenerational legacy. The Socialites understand giving as embedded in social life: philanthropy becomes intertwined with networking, public events, and social recognition. For them, participation and visibility are integral components of the experience of giving. A different orientation characterises the Investors, who approach philanthropy through a strategic and outcome-oriented lens. They evaluate donations in terms of efficiency, impact, governance quality, and sometimes fiscal advantages, adopting a “win-win” logic in which social benefit and private rationality coexist. The Altruists correspond more closely to a type of disinterested generosity, acting primarily out of empathy and moral concern, often without seeking recognition or involvement. Finally, the Repayers are motivated by gratitude: having personally benefited from an institution or service, they give in return, transforming personal experience into financial support.

Although these categories are ideal types and often overlap in practice, they demonstrate, again, that philanthropic behaviour cannot be reduced to a single explanatory variable. Moral duty, social norms, identity, strategic calculation, gratitude, pleasure, and community attachment may coexist within the same donor. In conclusion, by situating altruism, warm glow, individual psychological traits, and donor typologies within this broader framework, philanthropy emerges as a hybrid practice, situated at the intersection of altruistic concern, expressive self-identity, social expectation, and instrumental reasoning. Giving seems shaped by the interaction between public needs and private motivations, and understanding the reasons behind it is therefore essential not only

for explaining the persistence of philanthropic action, but also for critically assessing its limitations, power dynamics, and potential distortions, issues that will be examined more closely in the following chapter.

1.3 Philanthropy and the arts: how the relationship works

Building on the definitions, actors, and motivations discussed in the previous sections, it is now possible to turn to a specific field in which philanthropic action has historically played a central role: the artistic and cultural sector. The relationship between philanthropy and the arts offers a particularly revealing lens through which to observe how philanthropic resources are mobilised, intermediated, and translated into concrete forms of public value.

First, it's important to state that artistic and cultural production has long depended on various forms support, ranging from public and state funding to private ones. More specifically, private support for the arts is known with the concept of patronage. Walter (2015) defines patronage as quantifiable financial resources, such as money or liquid and semi-liquid assets, provided to nonprofit or hybrid arts organisations to support artistic or administrative functions. Patronage encompasses a wide range of sources, including individual donors, families and family foundations, corporate contributions, and sponsorships, and it represents a major share of revenues for many arts organisations.

As Pecoraro (2023d) explains, private support for artistic and cultural production has deep historical roots and has taken many different forms. The origins of cultural philanthropy can be traced back to late medieval and early Renaissance Italy, when artistic production developed alongside the economic and political growth of urban centres. In that context, private individuals, religious institutions, guilds, and civic authorities played a central role in financing artistic projects. Support for the arts was not limited to a single model: patronage relationships between artists and powerful families

coexisted with collective fundraising efforts for major public works. Wealthy elites often commissioned artworks to express prestige, devotion, or political authority. At the same time, large cultural projects, such as the construction of cathedrals, were financed through widespread community participation, voluntary labour, and small donations. These early forms of support already combined private interest and collective benefit. Giving was linked to reputation, social status, religious belief, and civic identity. From this historical perspective, cultural philanthropy does not appear as a recent invention, but as a practice that has adapted to changing institutional settings. What has changed over time is not the existence of private support itself, but the way it is organised. Informal patronage relationships have gradually been replaced by more structured nonprofit organisations, clearer governance systems, fiscal incentives, and professional fundraising practices. Modern fundraising in the arts can therefore be understood as the institutionalisation and professionalisation of long-standing traditions of cultural support.

However, understanding why philanthropy remains still central to the arts today requires recognising that this reliance on support is partly structural and rooted in the intrinsic economic, social, and symbolic characteristics of cultural goods.

1.3.1 Why the arts cannot rely on markets and the state alone

Artistic and cultural production occupies a distinctive position in the economic and social systems, as cultural goods possess characteristics that make them structurally different from standard market commodities. These features help explain why the arts have historically required forms of support that go beyond market exchange.

A first defining characteristic of cultural goods lies in their status as merit goods (Borowiecki et al. 2023), having an inherent social value, which exists regardless of an individual's ability to pay. Access to the arts is widely viewed as a public benefit, fostering educational, symbolic, and civic growth that transcends private consumption.

However, the rationale for external support becomes clearer when examined through the lens of economic theory and, in particular, the concept of market failure. This occurs when the market fails to allocate resources efficiently, often due to externalities, defined as situations in which the actions of one party impose costs or confer benefits on others without appropriate compensation (Gruber, 2016). In the case of the arts, these externalities are positive and are extremely significant: cultural activities strengthen social cohesion, foster education, collective memory, and community identity. As Borowiecki et al. (2013) note, many of these external benefits function as public goods: they are subject to joint consumption and are not easily excludable. The preservation of cultural heritage and its diffusion can be indeed enjoyed by many simultaneously, without diminishing their availability, and without the possibility of excluding non-payers from benefiting.

Because the market cannot easily capture these broad social benefits through the direct revenues generated by cultural production itself, such as ticket sales, artistic organisations often lack sufficient economic incentives and resources to operate at socially desirable levels. Consequently, cultural production is frequently under-provided by the market, not due to a lack of inherent value, but because that value cannot be fully internalised through prices. At the same time, however, critical scholarship, with Hardt and Negri (2009) for example, has pointed out that many cultural externalities are not entirely outside market dynamics. The social and symbolic value generated by artistic and cultural activity can often be indirectly appropriated through processes such as tourism development, urban regeneration, city branding, and real estate valorisation. In this sense, while cultural institutions may struggle to internalise the value they produce, other economic actors can nonetheless extract profit from it. But within this framework, public support for the arts can be understood as a response to a structural market failure. Through

subsidies, grants, and other forms of public funding, governments intervene to bridge the gap between the private returns generated by cultural activities and their broader social benefits.

Public intervention in the arts, however, does not take a single or uniform form. Bell & Oakley (2014) highlight that different nations adopt distinct models of cultural policy, reflecting broader welfare-state traditions and state-market relations. In some contexts, the state assumes a direct role as a primary funder and provider of cultural production, while in others it acts more indirectly, creating conditions that encourage private support. The United States is, for example, often described as an example of a “facilitator state” in the cultural field. In this model, the government, rather than providing extensive direct funding for the arts, it encourages private giving through tax deductions, matching grants, and other fiscal mechanisms. Furthermore, despite the central role of public intervention, government support cannot sufficiently sustain artistic and cultural production over the long term. Even in countries with high cultural spending, public resources are often limited by budgetary constraints and shifting political priorities (Bandle & Castello, 2025).

This structural funding gap, where the market fails and the state is limited, defines the cultural sector. Neither mechanism alone can ensure the long-term sustainability of artistic organisations. It’s within this context that philanthropy emerges as a vital complementary mechanism. Patronage and private contributions allow organisations to sustain activities whose social value exceeds their market price, ensuring that the arts remain accessible to the public.

1.3.2 How cultural organisations survive: nonprofit structures and fundraising

Building on this framework, it is necessary to shift from the macro-conditions justifying artistic support to the practical mechanisms that mobilise it. In contemporary systems, the reliance on private funding is no longer merely informal: it is embedded in the organisational structures of cultural institutions.

As Hansmann and DiMaggio (1986) noted, the live performing arts, such as theatre, opera, orchestral music, and ballet, are today predominantly produced by nonprofit organisations. This dominance is not a historical accident, but the result of a cost structure that makes profit-oriented provision difficult. Artistic production is characterised by high fixed costs and relatively low marginal costs. The expenses associated with rehearsals, artistic labour, venues, and production design are largely incurred regardless of audience size, while the cost of admitting an additional spectator to a performance is comparatively small. At the same time, demand for many forms of high-culture live performance is limited, even in large urban centres, and the number of performances over which costs can be spread is often restricted. As a result, ticket revenues alone are typically insufficient to cover total production costs. In many cases, there exists no ticket price at which an organisation could fully recover its costs without significantly reducing access or demand.

Within this context, donations and other forms of contributed income play a central role in sustaining nonprofit artistic organisations, becoming a substantial share of their total revenues. And the nonprofit constraint, that prohibits the distribution of surplus to owners or shareholders, serves a vital function: it assures donors that their contributions will be reinvested solely in the organisation's mission rather than appropriated for private gain.

From an economic perspective, donations also function as a form of voluntary price discrimination. Instead of raising admission prices to levels that would exclude much of the public, institutions invite patrons who place a higher value on the experience to contribute beyond the ticket price. While vulnerable to free-riding, this allows organisations to capture the audience's willingness to pay while maintaining public accessibility. These financial dynamics reflect what Mason (1984, in Pecoraro, 2023d) defines as a “dual internal system,” a structural characteristic that clearly distinguishes nonprofit arts organisations from for-profit enterprises. While commercial firms operate through a single mechanism, where those who consume a service are also those who pay for it, nonprofit organisations typically separate service provision from resource acquisition. In the cultural sector, artistic goods and services are often offered at subsidised prices, or even free of charge, in order to ensure accessibility and fulfil a public mission. However, the revenues generated (through ticket sales or merchandising, for example) are usually insufficient to cover the full costs of production. To bridge this gap, arts organisations rely on external actors, such as individual donors, foundations, corporations, and public agencies, who provide financial support without necessarily being direct users of the cultural services offered. As a result, earned income constitutes only a portion of total revenues, making fundraising a structurally indispensable activity for organisational sustainability.

This separation between those who consume and those who finance the arts introduces significant strategic challenges. Donors are not always members of the audience and cannot directly assess the quality or success of artistic outcomes through market signals, such as price or sales figures (Normann, 1986, in Pecoraro, 2023d). At the same time, the priorities of the resource development system may not align perfectly with those of artistic production. Financial pressures may intensify precisely when public

funding is reduced or private giving declines; communication strategies may need to address different and sometimes conflicting audiences; and the competencies required for artistic leadership often differ substantially from those needed for effective fundraising.

In this light, it is crucial to distinguish between fundraising and philanthropy. As Worth (2016, in Pecoraro, 2023b) argues, fundraising refers to the set of techniques, plans, programs, and tactical actions designed to persuade individuals and organisations to make financial contributions. It is inherently instrumental and often short-term oriented, focused on achieving specific financial targets. Philanthropy, by contrast, constitutes a broader cultural attitude that gives meaning and coherence to fundraising activities. It reflects long-term values, visions of public good, and commitments to building stable social relationships and institutional infrastructures. From this perspective, philanthropy is not simply about securing resources, but about fostering durable relationships between arts organisations and their supporters. It involves engaging donors, audiences, and communities around a shared mission and translating private generosity into sustained public value. Fundraising, when detached from this broader philanthropic orientation, risks becoming transactional and short-sighted. Conversely, a strong culture of philanthropy allows fundraising to function as an extension of the organisation's mission rather than as a purely financial necessity.

The growing need for capital has led many arts institutions to professionalise their development functions, since, in contemporary cultural systems, the challenge faced by arts institutions is not only the availability of private support, but also the organisational capacity to attract, manage, and sustain diverse sources of contributed income over time. However, building an internal culture of philanthropy remains challenging. As Pecoraro (2023d) explains “arts organisations operate in an increasingly complex and multifaceted environment,” (p. 3), shaped by both internal and external pressures. These include

declining public funding, intensified competition for private resources across the nonprofit sector, the growing concentration of wealth among a limited number of major donors and corporations, and the persistent tension between supporting artistic experimentation and responding to audience expectations. In this context, reliance on private contributions is not a stable condition but a dynamic and uncertain process, one that requires continuous strategic effort and organisational adaptation.

1.3.3 Individual, foundation and corporate philanthropy in the arts

As anticipated, the principal actors in philanthropy can be broadly distinguished into individuals, foundations and corporates. All these sources can also be applied when talking about philanthropy for the arts.

As analysed by Pecoraro et al. (2023c), among these figures, individual donors have historically represented one of the most significant pillars of cultural philanthropy, particularly in the United States, where private arts giving has long compensated for comparatively limited public funding. Philanthropists and major donors are individuals who make substantial financial or in-kind contributions to cultural institutions. These gifts may include cash donations, endowments, artworks, or other strategic assets. What qualifies as a “major” donation varies depending on the size and scope of the institution, yet such contributions typically imply long-term financial commitments and a high degree of relational engagement. As Pecoraro et al. (2023c) note, major donors are especially valuable not only because of the size of their gifts, but also because they often provide flexible funding, unrestricted by rigid guidelines or committee processes, and may act as connectors to wider corporate or social networks. Motivations for individual giving are rarely reducible to economic return. Instead, they often combine cultural commitment, identity construction, social recognition, and reputational visibility. One of the highest forms of recognitions and donation acknowledgement are the naming benefits,

which means dedicating a gallery, a rehearsal room, or even an entire building to a benefactor.

From a managerial perspective, Walter (2015) highlights an important evolution in how individual donors are cultivated. The traditional “pyramid” model of fundraising conceptualised donors along a progressive ladder: many small contributors at the base and a few major patrons at the top, with the strategic objective of moving individuals upward toward higher levels of giving. More recently, however, this linear approach has been challenged by more dynamic models of engagement. The so-called “vortex model”, developed by Dixon and Keyes (in Walter, 2015) reframes donor relationships as fluid and multidirectional, allowing individuals to enter and move across different levels of engagement throughout their lifecycle. Rather than focusing exclusively on increasing gift size, this model prioritises the donor's influence and lifelong engagement. Here, fundraising shifts to a continuous process of co-producing cultural value.

If individual donors represent the most visible face of arts philanthropy, foundations constitute its oldest institutionalised form: as DiMaggio (1986) observes, they were the first structured source of revenue for nonprofit arts organisations. Foundations can take different organisational forms (Walter, 2015): independent (often established by individuals or families), corporate foundations, and community foundations, each operating under specific regulatory and fiscal frameworks. Unlike individual donors, foundations rarely provide unrestricted support without clearly defined objectives. Securing foundation funding therefore requires a careful alignment between the organisation's strategic goals and the foundation's funding priorities. This process involves identifying appropriate grant-makers (federal, state, local, private), analysing eligibility requirements, and complying with formal deadlines and reporting obligations.

In this sense, foundation fundraising is more bureaucratically structured and programmatically oriented than major-donor cultivation.

Corporate support represents a distinct, though increasingly central, component of arts funding. As Pecoraro and Noltemy (2023a) explain, corporate philanthropy is generally defined as a voluntary, non-reciprocal transfer of corporate resources, cash or in-kind, to charitable entities. However, in the arts, a crucial distinction exists between philanthropic giving and sponsorship. While the former is altruistic, sponsorship provides financial backing in return for visibility, such as logo placement. However, for tax purposes, this must be treated as a formal acknowledgment rather than an advertisement. By avoiding direct commercial promotion, the arts organisation ensures the funding is not taxed as business income, protecting its financial integrity.

Motivations for corporate engagement in the arts are more complex and often more strategic than those of individual donors, because it involves multiple actors that are embedded in broader organisational objectives. These may include branding and marketing considerations, corporate social responsibility agendas, competitive positioning, or stakeholder relations. O'Hagan and Harvey (in Walter, 2015) identify at least four partially overlapping motivational models for corporate arts sponsorship: neoclassical or productivity motives, centred on brand enhancement, visibility, and integrated marketing strategies; ethical or altruistic motives, linked to corporate citizenship and social responsibility; political or competitive motives, whereby firms mirror the giving patterns of peer organisations within their sector or geographic sphere; stakeholder motives, associated with improving local amenities, attracting skilled labour, and contributing to the cultural vitality of communities in which the corporation operates.

Importantly, corporate support can generate reputational spillovers for cultural institutions. Endorsement by a prestigious company may signal artistic legitimacy and

financial reliability, thereby attracting further private or public funding. In this sense, corporate sponsors do not merely provide financial resources; they can act as reputational catalysts within a broader funding environment. At the same time, corporate philanthropy is intrinsically goal-oriented. Unlike individual patrons motivated primarily by cultural ideals or personal identification with the arts, corporations align their giving with strategic priorities. For this reason, cultivating corporate support requires understanding the internal structure of the firm's giving programme and positioning the cultural organisation as a partner capable of advancing corporate objectives while preserving artistic integrity.

Chapter 2 – The ambivalences of arts philanthropy

While philanthropy plays a fundamental role in sustaining cultural institutions, its growing importance has also generated new ethical debates, due to its ambivalences and issues.

Before examining the specific controversies surrounding philanthropy, it is useful to analyse this ethical dimension that underlies many of these debates. Defining ethics itself is not straightforward. As noted by Lister (2013), ethical reflection has historically oscillated between universal moral principles and more individual interpretations of right and wrong, influenced by personal beliefs, cultural traditions, or religious values. In a practical sense, drawing from Micheal Josephson's (1991, in Lister, 2013) definition, ethics can be understood as a code of conduct grounded in moral duties and obligations, guiding individuals and institutions in distinguishing between right and wrong and in acting accordingly. Over the past decades, ethical considerations have increasingly moved from abstract philosophical discussions to applied debates within fields such as business, healthcare, and public administration, where institutions must regularly confront complex moral decisions.

These ethical considerations are particularly relevant in the context of philanthropy. Organisations operating in the nonprofit and cultural sectors are generally mission-driven and oriented toward the production of social value rather than economic profit. Their legitimacy depends largely on public trust and on the perception that their actions align with the values they promote. As a result, the ethical implications of accepting philanthropic donations have become an important topic of discussion. More specifically, when charitable donations originate from sources associated with controversial or harmful activities, they are sometimes described as forms of "toxic philanthropy" (Merritt, 2019).

This expression refers to situations in which philanthropic contributions, despite their charitable purpose, are linked to wealth generated through practices that raise serious ethical concerns. But toxic philanthropy should not be understood merely as the result of unethical donors, but as a phenomenon rooted in broader debates about the limits and contradictions of philanthropy itself. For this reason, the chapter begins by examining the main structural critiques of contemporary philanthropy, including questions of wealth accumulation, power, and democratic accountability. It then turns to the cultural sector, analysing how these tensions take on a distinctive form within artistic institutions through the concepts of cultural autonomy, artwashing, and institutional critique.

In recent years, these issues have become increasingly visible through a series of high-profile controversies involving museums and cultural organisations. Public campaigns against sponsorships from fossil fuel companies, pharmaceutical dynasties, and other controversial donors have challenged the assumption that philanthropic contributions can be evaluated independently of the activities through which wealth was accumulated. Such controversies have forced cultural institutions to confront difficult questions: who decides when legally obtained wealth crosses a moral line? By accepting donations generated through controversial business practices, are artistic institutions redistributing private wealth for public benefit, or are they providing reputational cover for problematic behaviour?

As Merritt (2019) observes, these debates have prompted many cultural actors to adopt a more critical approach to fundraising, paying greater attention to the origins of donations rather than treating all philanthropic support as inherently beneficial. This shift has been particularly evident in the museum sector, where concerns over donor legitimacy have led some institutions to refuse sponsorships, review existing partnerships, and develop formal ethical guidelines governing fundraising practices.

2.1 Structural tensions in philanthropy

As discussed in the previous chapter, philanthropy is generally associated with generosity and public benefit. But it's important to note that it has also long been the subject of critical debate. Scholars from different disciplines have questioned not only the origins of philanthropic wealth, but also the forms of power and influence that philanthropy enables. These critiques suggest that philanthropy cannot be understood simply as a mechanism for redistributing private resources to public causes. Rather, it is embedded within broader social, economic, and political structures that shape both the production of wealth and its redistribution. For analytical purposes, the following discussion focuses on two major strands of criticism: first, debates concerning inequality and the origins of philanthropic wealth; and second, questions surrounding power, democracy, and influence.

2.1.1 Philanthropy, inequality and the origins of wealth

One of the most central critiques of philanthropy focuses on its origin and on the relationship between charitable giving and the unequal distribution of wealth. While philanthropy is praised for addressing unmet social problems, scholars question whether it can truly counteract inequality when it relies on the same economic structures that produce it. This paradox shifts the debate, questioning no longer what philanthropy does but under what circumstances philanthropic wealth is accumulated. Ultimately, it examines the relationship between charity and justice, the legitimacy of extreme wealth concentration, and whether philanthropy simply mitigates social problems while leaving their root causes untouched. These concerns, though prominent in today's debates on philanthrocapitalism, belong to a long-standing tradition of critique.

As early as the eighteenth century, as discussed by Lechterman (2022), Mary Wollstonecraft criticised private giving as “the most specious system of slavery,” arguing

that philanthropy often softens the effects of unjust laws and political institutions rather than challenging the structures that produce inequality. A century later, Oscar Wilde warned that private giving “creates a multitude of sins,” suggesting that private charity does more harm than good. Instead of solving the real problems, donating money humiliates the people who receive it and hides the unfair system that made them poor in the first place. In the twentieth century, Martin Luther King Jr. acknowledged philanthropy as commendable, yet ultimately insufficient, noting that true compassion requires restructuring the social and political systems that generate poverty and oppression. According to Lechterman (2022), these critiques share a common thread: private wealth, even when directed toward public benefit, can reinforce existing hierarchies, concentrate power, and shape social outcomes according to donors’ priorities.

These concerns continued to emerge in modern forms of large-scale philanthropy. As Phillips-Fein (2018) argues, figures such as Andrew Carnegie already framed philanthropy as a way to reconcile vast personal fortunes with social responsibility. However, she believes this model also contributed to legitimising economic inequality, presenting the concentration of wealth as both inevitable and socially beneficial, as long as it was partially redistributed through charitable giving. She writes: “More questionable is whether he was able, in any meaningful way, to resolve the divisions in society he observed. The model of philanthropy that he embodied was founded, after all, on those same divisions”.

In this sense, philanthropy has historically functioned not only as a response to inequality, but also as a practice that can justify and stabilise it. This ambivalence is further developed in Linsey McGoey’s (2015) analysis of Andrew Carnegie, which shows how narratives of philanthropy as generosity often coexisted with severe social and labour conflicts. While Carnegie is widely known for his major charitable contributions,

including the creation of public libraries and support for educational initiatives, McGoe (2015) stresses that his philanthropic legacy cannot be understood separately from the harsh working conditions and labour struggles linked to his industrial activities. Shortly after publishing his influential essay *The Gospel of Wealth* (1889), Carnegie was involved in the Homestead strike of 1892, one of the most violent industrial disputes in US history. During the conflict, workers at the Homestead steel plant protested against major wage cuts, which led to a violent confrontation involving private security forces and the intervention of state militia. Several people were killed, and the strike eventually ended in the defeat of the workers. As McGoe (2015) highlights, this case reveals a clear gap between Carnegie's image as a philanthropist and the coercive conditions that made his wealth possible.

At the time, reactions to figures like Carnegie were deeply divided. Although his philanthropy was praised in some contexts, it also generated strong distrust among workers, writers, and social critics. Literary and satirical works, such as Robert Tressell's *The Ragged-Trousered Philanthropists* (1914, in McGoe, 2015), presented philanthropy as a way of normalising inequality rather than reducing it. Similarly, thinkers such as William Jewett Tucker and Ralph Waldo Emerson (McGoe, 2015) criticised charitable giving for replacing structural change with moral gestures, arguing that it risks reinforcing relations of dependence instead of addressing their root causes.

Such perspectives are not limited to the historical case of Carnegie, but become crucial also to examine contemporary debates on philanthropy. As Phillips-Fein (2018) further argues, similar dynamics persists today: "For them, too, [contemporary philanthropists] a basic acceptance, even a promotion, of inequality seems written into their ideas about giving their money away. Their generosity mirrors the divisions they have benefited from and helped to create".

Even McGoe (2015) extends this line of critique to present-day philanthropy. She suggests that contemporary philanthropic success stories often rely on a similar separation between the social benefits of giving and the economic and political conditions through which wealth is generated. She illustrates, in particular, the case of Microsoft and Bill Gates. Gates accumulated his fortune through the rapid expansion of Microsoft, a company whose business practices have been subject to repeated legal and political scrutiny, including antitrust cases in the United States and Europe. While the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation has become one of the most influential philanthropic actors globally, McGoe highlights how this form of philanthropy raises broader questions about the relationship between private wealth, market power, and public authority. She quotes Mitch Kapor, Gates' rival and fellow billionaire:

It's incontestable that under Gates's leadership Microsoft exercised its monopoly power to unfairly stifle competition. This was the main finding of fact in the US Department of Justice anti-trust case against Microsoft. The resulting Gates fortune, the majority of which is now being distributed by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, was accumulated in some measure through ill-gotten means.

While the examples of Carnegie and Gates focus on individual philanthropists, other scholars argue that the issue extends beyond specific personalities. Rather than examining only the conduct of individual donors, they draw attention to the broader historical and structural processes through which philanthropic wealth is accumulated. Spanu (2025), in particular, highlights how many philanthropic fortunes are rooted in systems of colonialism, resource extraction, and exploitative labour practices. The wealth that underpins numerous major foundations was often generated through industries such as manufacturing, mining, and fossil fuels, sectors that historically relied on the

exploitation of both natural resources and marginalised populations and that contributed to the reproduction of global inequalities (Piketty, 2014, cited in Spanu, 2025).

This historical dimension is visible in several prominent philanthropic institutions. For instance, Spanu mentions that the Rhodes Trust, which funds the Rhodes Scholarships at the University of Oxford, has been widely scrutinised for its colonial origins. The fortune behind the Trust derives from the activities of Cecil Rhodes, a central figure in British colonial expansion in southern Africa, whose operations were based on the dispossession of Indigenous populations and exploitative labor systems. Although the Trust has more recently supported initiatives aimed at promoting inclusion and social justice, critics question whether such efforts can meaningfully address or redress the structural injustices embedded in its origins.

Analogous tensions can be observed in other major philanthropic organisations, such as the Rockefeller Foundation, whose wealth was initially generated through the oil industry, historically associated with both environmental degradation and labor exploitation, yet which now plays a role in supporting environmental initiatives (Duvoux & Levèfre, 2023, in Spanu, 2025).

Building on these historical and contemporary critiques, a further question emerges concerning the relationship between philanthropy and inequality. If philanthropy is commonly presented as a mechanism for addressing social problems and redistributing opportunities, how can we explain the fact that its expansion has often coincided with increasing concentrations of wealth? This apparent contradiction has led scholars to examine whether philanthropy merely responds to inequality or whether it may also contribute to reproducing some of the conditions that sustain it.

To address this question, it is useful to return to McGoey (2015), who argues that despite the rapid growth of philanthropic foundations in recent decades, increasing levels

of charitable giving in the United States have not been accompanied by a reduction in wealth concentration. On the contrary, philanthropy and inequality have often expanded simultaneously. McGoeey identifies several reasons for this apparent paradox.

First, charitable donations often benefit from significant tax advantages, reducing the amount of revenue available to governments. From this perspective, resources that might otherwise be collected through taxation and redistributed through welfare programmes, public healthcare, or education are instead directed according to the preferences of private donors.

Second, much philanthropic giving does not directly reach those most affected by economic inequality. According to the 2012 Giving USA study, only 7 per cent of charitable donations in the United States were allocated to programmes classified as serving a broad “public-society benefit”, while a much larger share supported religious, educational, and cultural institutions. This pattern is particularly visible in the arts sector. A report by the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy found that 55 per cent of foundation arts grants were awarded to organisations with budgets exceeding \$5 million, despite such institutions representing less than 2 per cent of all arts and culture nonprofits in the country. Moreover, these organisations primarily serve white and upper-income audiences. Rather than redistributing resources toward underserved communities, philanthropic funding may therefore reinforce existing inequalities within the cultural sector itself.

Finally, McGoeey argues that philanthropy can also function as a mechanism for preserving rather than redistributing wealth. Tax incentives, charitable foundations, and philanthropic partnerships may allow wealthy individuals and corporations to maintain substantial control over their assets while simultaneously enhancing their public legitimacy. In some cases, philanthropic initiatives also create opportunities for

corporations to expand into new markets, particularly through partnerships with large foundations. As a result, charitable giving may generate not only social benefits but also economic and political advantages for donors, further concentrating influence within a relatively small group of powerful actors.

Synthesizing these critiques allows for a fundamental re-evaluation of philanthropy, shifting the focus from the immediate benefits it generates to its relationship with broader socioeconomic structures. Within this critical framework, Lechterman (2022) introduces the notion of “palliative philanthropy” to describe forms of giving that alleviate the symptoms of social injustice without addressing its systemic causes. Drawing an analogy with medical palliative care, he argues that philanthropy provides immediate relief, while leaving the structural mechanisms of inequality largely unchanged and while actually making inequality more manageable for society without ever challenging the conditions that sustain it.

2.1.2 Power, democracy and influence

Building on the argument that philanthropic institutions are embedded in — and sustained by — broader socioeconomic inequalities, a critical consequence emerges. This dynamic generates profound tensions around power, democracy, and influence, which manifest starting from the prior accumulation of wealth.

As Duvoux and Lefèvre (2025) emphasise, the capacity to give is a direct function of economic power. Consequently, elite actors possess a disproportionate, unelected influence over which social problems are prioritised and funded. Today, this distortion is further amplified by rising wealth concentration and the rise of “mega-donors” (p. 732). High-profile phenomena like the already mentioned Gates Foundation or the Giving Pledge epitomise this new “gilded age” of large-scale philanthropy. When a small, unaccountable elite intervenes decisively in critical sectors like education, public health,

and climate policy, it risks circumventing public deliberation and excluding affected communities from democratic decision-making (Duvoux, 2025; Lechterman, 2022). While some scholars argue that private giving encourages policy experimentation and a diversity of social initiatives, critical literature counters that this framework ultimately allows private preferences to override public needs.

This tension is rooted in the very mechanism of philanthropy. Because it relies on the voluntary allocation of private resources, it grants wealthy donors the capacity to shape social priorities and collective outcomes. As Frumkin (2006) observes, politically motivated giving extends the boundaries of philanthropy “from the modest enactment of donors’ interests to the reshaping of large numbers of people’s lives” (p. 14). Consequently, philanthropic action ceases to be a simple mechanism for resource distribution. Instead, it functions as an arena where private capital is used to influence public agendas, raising crucial questions regarding democratic legitimacy and accountability.

Beyond these structural tensions, the specific practices of contemporary philanthropy face severe ethical scrutiny. As Gasman (2002) notes, philanthropy has long been viewed with suspicion due to the hidden motives behind charitable giving. Large donations are rarely driven by pure altruism; they often serve to enhance reputation, strengthen social status, or protect specific economic interests. McGoey (2012) similarly argues that few acts of giving are entirely free of ulterior motives. Moreover, while traditional philanthropists were expected to hide their self-interest, contemporary actors often openly celebrate the combination of altruism and economic gain. Bill Gates explicitly illustrated this shift in his 2008 *Time* piece on “creative capitalism” (cited in McGoey, 2012):

Naturally, if companies are going to get more involved, they need to earn some kind of return. This is the heart of creative capitalism. It's not just about doing more corporate philanthropy or asking companies to be more virtuous. It's about giving them a real incentive to apply their expertise in new ways, making it possible to earn a return while serving the public who have been left out.

Ultimately, these dynamics suggest that contemporary philanthropy cannot be understood merely as a voluntary form of wealth redistribution. Instead, it must be analysed as a mechanism through which new forms of private power are exercised and legitimised within the public sphere, with significant implications for democratic quality and the very definition of the public interest.

2.2 The specificity of toxic philanthropy in the arts: from cultural autonomy to artwashing

The relationship between philanthropy and cultural institutions has generated an extensive body of literature that goes beyond the economic dimension of charitable giving. While philanthropy provides essential financial support to museums, it also raises broader questions about institutional autonomy, power and legitimacy. This section reviews the main theoretical perspectives that frame these debates. It first examines the concept of cultural autonomy and the tensions created by private funding, before discussing how philanthropy can generate symbolic benefits for donors through processes of artwashing. Finally, it introduces the tradition of institutional critique, which situates these issues within the broader political and economic structures that shape museums and the contemporary art world.

2.2.1 Cultural autonomy between public mission and market logics

One of the central tensions that emerges when philanthropy enters the cultural sector concerns the principle of cultural autonomy. As museums and cultural institutions increasingly rely on external funding to sustain their infrastructures, they face a structural contradiction: they must secure private resources while simultaneously claiming independence from market criteria (Abbing, 2008).

To understand this tension, it is useful to draw on Pierre Bourdieu's theory of the cultural field. Historically, museums have been understood as part of a relatively autonomous sphere, governed by its own principles of artistic quality and public mission rather than external economic interests (Kann-Rasmussen & Rasmussen, 2021). Although this autonomy has never been absolute, it is today under unprecedented pressure. As commercial logic penetrates the cultural field, the threat is not simply that private actors provide financial support; rather, as Bourdieu warned, the danger is that external economic priorities gradually become the criteria through which cultural organisations define success and institutional choices (Bourdieu, 2003, in Kann-Rasmussen & Rasmussen, 2021).

This perspective helps explain why private philanthropy raises concerns that go beyond financial dependence. As discussed in the previous section, donors do not simply provide resources: they also exercise influence through their capacity to decide which institutions, projects and artistic practices deserve support. As Abbing (2008) argues, donations are necessarily selective and therefore necessarily "paternalistic" (p.188). By choosing where resources are allocated, donors inevitably participate in shaping the production, circulation and public reception of culture.

The issue is not necessarily direct interference or explicit control. Rather, influence operates through the structural dependence that cultural institutions develop on

private resources. Abbing argues that autonomy should not be understood as an absolute condition but as a matter of degree. Financial support can expand institutional possibilities while simultaneously introducing expectations, constraints or symbolic obligations. As a result, cultural institutions continuously negotiate the tension between their public mission and the interests of those who provide the resources that sustain them.

Hans Haacke describes this process as a form of self-censorship. Reflecting on the growing role of corporate sponsorship in museums, he argues that direct interference is actually quite rare because “everybody has sufficiently internalised the rules of the game” (Haacke, in Alberro, 2016). Museum professionals often know in advance which projects are likely to be welcomed by sponsors and which might put financial support at risk. As a result, institutions may avoid controversial exhibitions or politically sensitive topics without anyone explicitly asking them to do so. As Haacke writes, “a tone is set that ever so subtly and effectively suggests not to venture into troublesome areas... The fear of losing a donor is effective enough” (Haacke, 1980).

The problem, then, is not simply whether donors influence individual exhibitions. Rather, it is that long-term financial dependence can gradually shape the way cultural institutions define their priorities, select their programmes and understand their public role. In this context, cultural autonomy is not suddenly lost but progressively negotiated and, in some cases, quietly reduced. This matters because the autonomy of cultural institutions has long been considered essential for preserving art’s critical and public role. As Adorno argues, “art becomes social by its opposition to society, and it occupies this position only as autonomous art” (Adorno, 1970/1997, in Paddison, 2017). From this perspective, the ability of museums to challenge dominant narratives or address controversial issues depends, at least in part, on their capacity to remain independent from the interests that finance them.

2.2.2 Artwashing and the conversion of economic capital into social prestige

If the previous section examined how private funding can influence the autonomy of cultural institutions from within, the next step is to consider how the same relationship can also benefit donors themselves. Beyond supporting cultural activities, philanthropy can become a powerful tool for building legitimacy, enhancing public image and reshaping corporate or individual reputations.

As discussed previously, philanthropy is never entirely detached from questions of power, recognition and strategic interest. Authors such as McGoe, Lechterman and Duvoux have shown that philanthropic giving often produces benefits for donors alongside its declared public purpose. When philanthropy enters the cultural sector, however, these dynamics become particularly significant because of the exceptional social status traditionally attributed to art.

As Abbing (2008) argues, art occupies a unique position within society. Unlike most economic activities, it is commonly associated with higher values such as creativity, public benefit, education and cultural heritage rather than with commercial exchange. Although artworks circulate within markets and are bought and sold, the cultural field continues to present itself as distinct from the logic of commerce. This symbolic separation gives art a particular social prestige that extends beyond its economic value.

Bourdieu's theory of the cultural field helps explain why this prestige is so valuable. Rather than existing only in economic terms, capital can take cultural, social, and symbolic forms, which can be converted into one another under specific conditions (Bourdieu, 1986). Applying this framework, Abbing (2008) argues that cultural philanthropy functions not merely as support for the arts, but as a strategic investment in reputation. Because art enjoys high social esteem, donations are never neutral: they produce significant symbolic benefits, such as visibility, distinction, and legitimacy.

Through this process, corporate and individual donors successfully convert their economic capital into symbolic capital, associating themselves with institutions that possess public trust and authority.

These dynamics become particularly relevant when donors are corporations or individuals whose economic activities generate social or environmental controversy. In these cases, cultural philanthropy shifts from an act of public generosity to a strategy for rehabilitating legitimacy. Within this context, the concept of artwashing has emerged. The term refers to the strategic use of art, museums, and cultural sponsorship to sanitise the public image of controversial actors, effectively diverting attention from harmful business practices, environmental damage, or political violations. Rather than simply redistributing wealth, philanthropy here becomes a sophisticated mechanism for accumulating symbolic legitimacy.

One of the earliest analyses of this phenomenon is offered by Chin-Tao Wu (2002) in *Privatising Culture*. Examining the growing ties between multinational corporations and major museums in Britain and the United States since the 1980s, Wu argues that corporate sponsorship is far from disinterested patronage. Instead, businesses have transitioned from occasional donors to active participants in the production and presentation of contemporary art. According to Wu, this shift is driven by the fact that cultural institutions possess a level of prestige and public authority that corporations cannot generate through conventional advertising. By exploiting “the social status that cultural institutions enjoy in our society” (p. 2), businesses convert economic resources into cultural capital, transforming museums into powerful instruments of corporate image-making and public relations.

This focus on how external actors exploit museums is further deepened by the tradition of Institutional Critique, particularly through the work of Andrea Fraser (2005).

Fraser develops this argument by questioning the common assumption that museums are merely passive victims of external economic interests. Instead, she argues that cultural institutions actively participate in producing and legitimising the very systems of wealth and power that sustain them. As Fraser famously states, “it is not a question of being against the institution: we are the institution” (p. 105). In other words, museums cannot be separated from the political and economic structures surrounding them because they are fundamentally constituted by them. Their exhibitions, governance, and funding models are therefore not external additions to the institution, but structural expressions of broader relations of power.

This understanding is already evident in Fraser’s early video work *The Public Life of Art: The Museum* (1988-89), produced in collaboration with Louise Lawler. Filmed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art, the work examines the social history of the art museum by bringing into view the different actors and interests that constitute its public life, including artists, collectors, dealers, corporate sponsors, museum trustees, and visitors (Museum of Modern Art, n.d.). Significantly, corporate sponsorship is addressed alongside the museum’s other social and institutional relations rather than being presented as an external intervention into an otherwise autonomous cultural space. Fraser thus shifts attention from the museum as a self-contained institution to the network of economic and social relations through which it operates.

This approach becomes particularly explicit in 2016 in *Museums, Money, and Politics* (2018), a conceptual artwork and artist book that takes the form of an extensive research and investigative project. Examining the intersection between electoral politics and private non-profit arts institutions in the United States, Fraser documents the reported donations to election campaigns made by members of the administrative boards of more than 125 art museums across all fifty states during the 2016 electoral cycle (Kadist, n.d.).

The work emerged in the context of an election characterised by intense political polarisation and attacks against vulnerable groups, the media, and the so-called cultural elite, as well as calls to restrict civil rights and liberties. Against this background, Fraser investigates the relationship between the political and cultural spheres by tracing the financial activities of those who occupy positions of power within art institutions.

The scale and format of the work are central to its institutional critique. Extending to approximately 900 pages, the book is organised alphabetically according to the names of individual donors, resembling a telephone directory rather than a conventional art-historical or political publication. Fraser thereby transforms financial information into a material representation of the networks connecting political donations, cultural philanthropy, and museum governance. The project documents the contributions of museum trustees to electoral campaigns and places this information within the broader context of the concentration of political campaign financing: more than half of the funds raised for the 2016 presidential and congressional elections came from a relatively small number of individuals, some of whom also supported cultural institutions and served on their administrative boards. Rather than presenting these connections through a conventional narrative, Fraser constructs a database through which their scale and recurrence can be observed (Kadist, n.d.).

So following Fraser's perspective, private philanthropy is not an external force corrupting an otherwise autonomous space; rather, it is a core institutional condition under which contemporary museums operate. Consequently, the ethical questions surrounding sponsorship cannot be reduced to the motives of individual donors. Instead, they concern the wider structures that allow private wealth to shape public culture, determining which forms of knowledge, artistic production, and cultural memory receive visibility.

More recent scholarship has expanded this systemic critique by showing how these institutional networks connect to global systems of political, colonial, and environmental power. Françoise Vergès (2024) situates these dynamics within the longer history of colonialism and racial capitalism. She argues that museums cannot be understood as neutral public spaces because they have historically participated in the production of colonial knowledge and continue to reproduce existing relations of power. According to Vergès, cultural institutions often celebrate universal values such as education, diversity and public service while remaining financially and institutionally connected to economic systems built upon colonial extraction, exploitation and inequality. In this context, philanthropy risks functioning not as a form of repair but as a mechanism through which these histories are obscured. The prestige of the museum helps sanitise the origins of private wealth, allowing structures of domination to appear compatible with cultural responsibility.

A similar argument is developed by Evans, who focuses specifically on the relationship between museums and the fossil fuel industry. Evans (2015) argues that corporate sponsorship should be understood as a communication strategy rather than simply an act of generosity. Companies such as BP and Shell, whose cases will be analysed later, have invested heavily in cultural partnerships because museums provide a level of public trust, credibility and emotional attachment that conventional advertising cannot achieve. By associating themselves with internationally respected cultural institutions, fossil fuel companies are able to present themselves as responsible corporate citizens while diverting public attention from their contribution to environmental degradation and the climate crisis. Sponsorship therefore functions less as support for culture than as a means of protecting corporate reputation and maintaining what Evans describes as a “social licence to operate.”

Seen from this perspective, artwashing is not simply about improving public image. It is a process through which economic power is translated into symbolic legitimacy by drawing on the cultural authority of museums and the social value traditionally attached to art. Precisely because museums are widely perceived as institutions acting in the public interest, they offer corporations and wealthy individuals a particularly effective means of transforming contested wealth into public credibility. Art therefore becomes not only an object of patronage but also a resource through which legitimacy itself is produced.

2.3 Toxic philanthropy in practice

The theoretical ideas discussed so far are not just abstract concepts. They appear clearly in real controversies that have shaped the debate on museum ethics from the 1970s to today. The following four case studies show how museums deal with private power, highlighting the loss of cultural autonomy and the rise of artwashing. The Hans Haacke controversy shows how institutional censorship and self-censorship limit artistic freedom to protect private wealth. The Sackler case explores the ethics of taking philanthropic donations linked to severe social harm. The BP story examines how corporate sponsorship helps fossil fuel companies gain environmental legitimacy. Finally, the Warren B. Kanders affair shifts the focus to museum governance, questioning the influence of trustees who profit from the arms industry. Together, these cases show how museums become battlegrounds over symbolic power, revealing what happens when economic wealth is converted into cultural prestige.

2.3.1 The Haacke case: censorship and cultural autonomy

One of the earliest and most significant examples of the tension between artistic freedom and institutional authority is the cancellation of Hans Haacke's solo exhibition at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in 1971. Today regarded as a foundational episode in

the development of institutional critique, the case demonstrates that cultural autonomy is constrained not only by explicit acts of censorship, but also by the market logics and structural dependencies that govern cultural institutions.

By the late 1960s, Haacke had expanded his artistic practice beyond the investigation of physical and biological systems to examine social systems, applying the same analytical methods to the political and economic structures surrounding the art world (Alberro, 2016). For his Guggenheim exhibition, he conceived three projects addressing these interconnected dynamics. While the works dealing with physical and biological processes raised no objections, the museum became increasingly concerned with the pieces examining social and economic relations.

The most controversial work, *Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, A Real-Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971*, mapped large-scale Manhattan real estate holdings. To expose these networks, Haacke assembled 142 photographs of building facades and vacant lots, alongside maps and six detailed charts compiled entirely from public records at the New York County Clerk's office (Haacke, 1971c). One system documented a vast network of slum residential properties (predominantly in Harlem and the Lower East Side) controlled by Harry Shapolsky and his associates. Operating through roughly seventy dummy corporations that frequently traded and mortgaged properties among themselves, the group used these self-dealing tactics to secure tax advantages while obscuring actual ownership. Shapolsky himself was a notorious figure, previously convicted of bribing building inspectors and exploiting low-income tenants, particularly Puerto Rican migrants (Haacke, 1971c). The second system examined extensive real estate interests, primarily commercial, held by two business partners. Instead of expressing explicit political judgments, the installation simply assembled unedited facts to reveal the complex financial speculation behind these structures. As

Haacke stressed, the works contained “no evaluative comment” (Haacke, 1971a). Their critical power came entirely from gathering public data, leaving viewers to draw their own conclusions about the social impact. Alongside this project, Haacke planned an interactive survey asking visitors anonymous questions about socio-political issues, such as racial integration, freedom of expression, and the relationship between business interests and the public good. The responses were to be tabulated and displayed daily, transforming the museum audience into an active subject of critical reflection. As he described, “the three pieces in question are examples of the ‘real-time systems’ which have constituted my work for many years” (Haacke, 1971a, p. 43).

Although Haacke tried to compromise — replacing individual names with initials while keeping corporate data and property addresses public — the Guggenheim cancelled the exhibition just four weeks before it was set to open (Burnham, 1971). In a letter to the artist, museum director Thomas Messer argued that the project went beyond the museum’s core mission. Citing the Foundation’s charter, Messer insisted that the Guggenheim’s goals were strictly “aesthetic and educational objectives that are self-sufficient and without ulterior motive” (Burnham, 1971). Therefore, the museum could not endorse work that used “political means to achieve political ends” (ibid.). While Messer also raised the threat of libel lawsuits from the real estate firms involved, his deeper objection was ideological: he believed museums should stay detached from real-world politics and operate solely through “symbolic expression” and “indirection.” The controversy, however, quickly spread beyond the cancelled show.

As Burnham (1971) observed at the time, Haacke was not making false accusations or pushing political propaganda. He was simply organising public information in a way that made real economic power visible. Similarly, Howard Wise (in Burnham, 1971) noted that the project fit right into a long artistic tradition: revealing the

hidden structures of daily life rather than promoting a specific agenda. Haacke directly called out the political and financial motives behind the cancellation. Dismissing Messer's legal defence as a mere "smoke screen" (Haacke, 1971b), Haacke argued that demanding "metaphoric language" and "symbolic indirection" was just a way to lift art into an ideal world, cutting its ties to reality. In practice, Messer's push for "aesthetic neutrality" served to protect the very wealth supporting the art world: "In Mr. Messer's view, the accumulation of large capital should remain shrouded under a veil of mystery so that it will not become subject to public scrutiny" (Haacke, 1971b). By suppressing records of real estate holdings and visitor demographics, the museum actively protected "the interests of those who might profit from the museum public's lack of awareness of its own role in society" (ibid.).

This incident reveals how relying on corporate and private capital creates an insidious form of self-control. As Haacke pointed out and as it was stated before, direct censorship is rarely necessary because institutional leaders have already "internalised the rules of the game" (Haacke, in Alberro, 2016), steering clear of sensitive topics out of fear of losing funding. But when this self-censorship fails, institutional power steps in directly: not only was Haacke's show cancelled, but Edward Fry, the museum curator who publicly stood up for the artist, was fired.

Viewed through the lens of cultural autonomy, the Guggenheim case demonstrates that limits on artistic freedom are often embedded within the very economic dependencies that sustain cultural institutions. By invoking aesthetic neutrality, the museum established the boundaries of acceptable artistic inquiry, effectively excluding any critique that threatened real economic power. Ultimately, the episode illustrates how cultural autonomy is quietly eroded when institutions prioritise financial alliances over their public, critical mission.

2.3.2 The Sackler case: opioids and artwashing

The controversy surrounding the Sackler family represents one of the most significant examples of the ethical dilemmas in contemporary cultural philanthropy. More than any recent case, it illustrates how private donations become objects of public contestation when the wealth financing cultural institutions is tied to widespread social harm. Practically, the Sackler case embodies the dynamics discussed in the previous sections: the conversion of economic capital into symbolic legitimacy, the practice of artwashing, and the role of institutional critique in challenging the relationship between museums and private wealth.

The Sackler family built its reputation as one of the world's leading philanthropic patrons of art and culture. Over several decades, family members donated hundreds of millions of dollars to museums, universities and cultural institutions across the United States and Europe. Their name became attached to prominent galleries and museum wings, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, the British Museum, the Louvre and Harvard University, among many others. Through these donations, the Sacklers acquired an extraordinary degree of cultural visibility and prestige, becoming widely recognised as benefactors of the arts (Moynihan, 2017).

At the same time, however, another source of the family's wealth was attracting increasing scrutiny. Members of the Raymond and Mortimer Sackler branches owned Purdue Pharma, the pharmaceutical company that developed and aggressively marketed the opioid painkiller OxyContin. Introduced in 1996, OxyContin was promoted as an effective long-term treatment for chronic pain while its addictive potential was consistently downplayed. Purdue invested heavily in marketing campaigns directed at physicians, encouraged widespread prescribing, and repeatedly claimed that the risk of

addiction was very low despite growing evidence to the contrary (Chow, 2019). These practices contributed to the dramatic expansion of opioid prescriptions in the United States and played a central role in what later became the opioid epidemic. In 2007 Purdue Pharma pleaded guilty to federal criminal charges for misleading regulators, doctors and patients about the risks associated with OxyContin, and in 2020 the company again pleaded guilty to criminal charges before entering bankruptcy proceedings as part of a multibillion-dollar legal settlement (Chow, 2019; Hoffman, 2021).

As public awareness of the opioid crisis increased, attention gradually shifted from Purdue Pharma itself to the family's extensive philanthropic activities. Critics argued that the prestige associated with museums and universities helped distance the Sackler name from the human consequences of the company's business practices. A decisive turning point came through the actions of artist Nan Goldin. As she writes in her statement, in "Uses of Power", Artforum (2018), Goldin had herself developed an addiction to OxyContin after being prescribed the drug following surgery and publicly described her recovery as the experience that transformed her understanding of the opioid crisis. In 2017 she founded P.A.I.N. (Prescription Addiction Intervention Now), an activist collective whose objective was to hold the Sackler family publicly accountable by targeting the cultural institutions that continued to celebrate their philanthropy (Goldin, 2018). Rather than focusing exclusively on legal responsibility, PAIN argued that museums had become central to the production of the Sacklers' public reputation. As Goldin wrote in her manifesto, the family had "washed their blood money through the halls of museums and universities around the world" (Goldin, 2018). The group's demands were two: that museums stop accepting Sackler donations and that the family contribute substantially to addiction treatment and education programmes.

PAIN deliberately adopted museums as sites of political intervention. Drawing upon strategies associated with institutional critique, the collective organised highly visible performances inside major cultural institutions, seeking to expose the relationship between philanthropic prestige and the opioid epidemic. One of the earliest and most influential actions took place in March 2018 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Around one hundred protesters gathered inside the museum's Sackler Wing, where the Temple of Dendur is displayed, carrying banners reading "Shame on Sackler", staging a collective "die-in", and throwing empty prescription bottles labelled with the Sackler name into the reflecting pool surrounding the monument. Participants also chanted "Sacklers lie, people die" while calling on the family to finance addiction treatment programmes rather than museum galleries (Sutton, 2018).

The campaign rapidly expanded beyond New York. Similar demonstrations took place at the Guggenheim Museum, the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, the Louvre in Paris and Harvard University, among others. These actions received widespread media attention and generated growing public debate concerning the ethical responsibilities of museums when accepting donations from controversial benefactors. This sustained pressure produced tangible institutional consequences. In 2019, the Metropolitan Museum announced it would no longer accept donations from members of the Sackler family associated with Purdue Pharma, acknowledging that the opioid crisis constituted an exceptional circumstance requiring a departure from normal fundraising practices (Harris, 2019). Other institutions followed a similar path. The Tate, the Guggenheim, and the American Museum of Natural History also refused future Sackler funding, while institutions including the Louvre, the British Museum, the National Gallery, and the National Portrait Gallery removed the Sackler name from their walls (Thorpe & Walters, 2022).

Beyond these immediate outcomes, the Sackler controversy fundamentally altered the broader debate surrounding museum philanthropy. Rather than treating sponsorship as a politically neutral source of financial support, the case demonstrated that museum legitimacy can be directly compromised by the origins of philanthropic wealth. Ultimately, the campaign confirmed the theoretical perspectives discussed earlier in this chapter: it illustrated Bourdieu's argument that economic capital can be converted into symbolic capital through cultural patronage; it provided a concrete case of artwashing as described by Wu; and it reflected the core concern of institutional critique, proving that museums are deeply embedded within wider political and economic systems rather than standing outside them.

2.3.3 The BP case: fossil fuels and social license

Another key case study in debates on cultural autonomy and artwashing is the long-standing partnership between BP (British Petroleum) and the Tate Museum, which highlights the close link between cultural sponsorship, the fossil fuel industry, and symbolic legitimacy. This controversy goes beyond the simple ethics of accepting corporate money. Instead, it raises broader questions about how museums can actively legitimise industries that drive environmental degradation and climate change.

As Mel Evans (2015) argues, oil companies engage in cultural sponsorship not merely as an act of corporate philanthropy, but as a strategy for strengthening what has been described as their "social licence to operate" (p. 76). It means that by partnering with respected institutions, these corporations present themselves as socially responsible actors, effectively diverting attention from the environmental damage of their operations. In this sense, museums become more than beneficiaries of financial support: they function as sites of symbolic production where corporate legitimacy, prestige, and public trust are

actively constructed. Cultural sponsorship seems to operate as a strategy that normalises the presence of fossil fuel companies within civil society.

The partnership between BP and Tate exemplifies this dynamic. Beginning in 1990, BP sponsored the Tate network (including Tate Britain, Tate Modern, Tate Liverpool, and Tate St Ives) for twenty six years. Public scrutiny of this relationship intensified dramatically following the Deepwater Horizon disaster in the Gulf of Mexico in April 2010, the largest marine oil spill in history. On 20 April 2010, an explosion on BP's offshore drilling rig killed eleven workers and injured seventeen before the platform sank two days later, triggering an uncontrolled release of oil from the Macondo well. The leak continued for eighty-seven days, releasing an estimated 4.9 million barrels of crude oil into the Gulf of Mexico and contaminating approximately 1,100 miles of coastline. Beyond its devastating ecological consequences, including widespread damage to marine ecosystems, birds, sea turtles, and marine mammals, the disaster severely affected regional fisheries, tourism, and coastal communities, while exposing systemic failures in corporate safety practices and regulatory oversight (Pallardy, n.d.).

Against this backdrop, BP's continued sponsorship of Tate increasingly appeared to critics not as a neutral act of corporate philanthropy, but as an attempt to repair the company's public image through its association with one of Britain's most prestigious cultural institutions. Strikingly, while the environmental catastrophe was still unfolding, in June 2010, Tate hosted a celebration marking the twentieth anniversary of BP's sponsorship. It was during that event that the activist collective Liberate Tate staged *License to Spill*, a performance in which participants poured molasses across the gallery floor to evoke an oil spill, as explained by Mel Evans herself, that was part of the collective.

This intervention marked the beginning of a sustained campaign that transformed the museum into a prominent site of climate activism. In the years that followed, Liberate Tate organised a series of artistic interventions, including *The Gift* (2012), in which a 16,5 metre wind turbine blade was deposited in the Turbine Hall as a proposed donation to the museum's collection; *Floe Piece* (2012), which brought a block of Arctic ice into Tate Modern to melt within the gallery space; and *All Rise* (2013), a week-long performance featuring whispered testimonies from the Deepwater Horizon trial (Dawson, 2024).

As Ashley Dawson (2024) observes, these actions were not conventional political demonstrations, but carefully conceived works of performance art that appropriated the museum's own aesthetic language. By recreating the visual vocabulary of environmental contamination inside the galleries, the interventions established a direct symbolic connection between BP's corporate presence and the ecological consequences of its extractive activities. Rather than protesting from outside, activists intervened within the museum's symbolic space, exposing the contradiction between Tate's claims of cultural neutrality and its financial reliance on fossil fuel capital.

For Dawson, such sponsorships constitute a form of greenwashing, whereby a small fraction of extractive wealth is redirected toward cultural philanthropy in order to secure social legitimacy and maintain political influence. Museum sponsorship thus becomes one element within a broader strategy through which fossil capital preserves its authority, alongside lobbying, political donations, and other mechanisms of public influence.

In March 2016, Tate announced that its partnership with BP would end after twenty-six years. Although BP attributed the decision to the “extremely challenging business environment” (Khomami, 2016), activists interpreted it as the culmination of years of sustained public pressure. Significantly, figures released following a Freedom of

Information tribunal revealed that BP had contributed approximately 3.8 million pounds to Tate over a seventeen year period: an average of around 224,000 pounds annually (Khomami, 2016). The relatively modest scale of this funding challenged the argument that the sponsorship was financially indispensable and instead underscored its symbolic value for both the corporation and the institution. The BP-Tate case therefore illustrates how cultural sponsorship can function less as economic necessity than as a mechanism of reputational management.

2.3.4 The Kanders case: weaponry and museum governance

The case of Warren B. Kanders represents a different but closely related form of controversy, one that shifts attention from external sponsorship to internal museum governance. Unlike the Sackler family or BP, whose relationships with museums were primarily based on philanthropic donations and corporate sponsorship, Kanders occupied a position of institutional authority as vice chairman of the board of the Whitney Museum of American Art.

Kanders joined the museum's board in 2006, served on its executive committee for seven years, and donated over 10 million dollars. He and his wife, Allison, who co-chaired the museum's painting and sculpture committee, were important figures in the Whitney community and owned works by famous contemporary artists like Jeff Koons and Ed Ruscha. However, Kanders was also the owner and CEO of Safariland, a Florida-based company that manufactures military and police equipment. The company's products included bulletproof vests, bomb-defusing robots, and, most controversially, tear gas (Pogrebin & Harris, 2019).

Public scrutiny on him intensified in late 2018 after a report published by art blog *Hyperallergic* detailed that the tear-gas canisters manufactured by Safariland had been used by U.S. Customs and Border Protection agents against asylum seekers, including

children, at the U.S.-Mexico border. These revelations triggered a sustained campaign by artists, museum staff and activist groups, who argued that the Whitney's commitment to progressive values was fundamentally incompatible with the presence of a board member whose wealth derived from products associated with state violence (Frieze News Desk, 2019; Delistraty, 2019).

The controversy rapidly expanded beyond questions of funding to become a broader debate about the ethics of museum governance. On 5 April 2019, more than 120 artists, critics, scholars and academics published the open letter *Kanders Must Go*, which was later joined by numerous curators and artists, including several participants in the 2019 Whitney Biennial. The letter argued that institutions such as the Whitney present themselves as spaces devoted to “education, creativity, and dissent beyond the dictates of the market,” yet have historically remained intertwined with structures of “settler colonialism, white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, and capitalism” (*Kanders Must Go*, 2019). It further claimed that museums provide “cover” for wealthy trustees, allowing them to convert fortunes derived from industries associated with “war, state violence, displacement, land theft, mass incarceration, and climate disaster” into cultural legitimacy. Rather than portraying Kanders as an isolated case, the letter explicitly situated the controversy within broader patterns of “toxic philanthropy”. Such patterns, they stated, affect museum boards and other public institutions, linking the campaign to parallel movements against the Sackler family and to longstanding traditions of institutional critique in the arts. These concerns echoed those expressed months earlier by more than one hundred Whitney staff members, who wrote that learning of Kanders' connection to Safariland had made them “feel sick to our stomachs” and “unsafe,” particularly because many identified personally with the communities affected by the company's products.

As the campaign intensified, artists participating in the 2019 Whitney Biennial, including Michael Rakowitz and eight other exhibiting artists, either withdrew or threatened to withdraw their work in protest. After months of demonstrations organised by the activist collective Decolonize This Place, Kanders resigned from the museum's board in July 2019, stating that the campaign against him had begun to threaten the institution itself (Frieze News Desk, 2019; Delistraty, 2019).

Ultimately, the Kanders controversy exposed the structural dependence of American museums on wealthy trustees and the governance model underpinning this relationship. In the United States, where public funding for museums is comparatively limited, trustees frequently provide a substantial share of institutional budgets. At the Whitney, board contributions accounted for approximately 10-12 per cent of the museum's annual operating budget, while at institutions such as the Museum of Modern Art and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art trustees contributed as much as 20-30 per cent of annual operating costs (Pogrebin et al., 2019). Board membership therefore functions not only as a philanthropic commitment but also as a mechanism through which wealthy individuals gain prestige, influence, privileged access to artists and curators, and an active role in institutional decision-making.

By questioning this model, the Whitney protests challenged the very criteria through which board members acquire authority. As Delistraty (2019) argues, the campaign targeted Kanders not as an isolated bad actor, but because his position made visible a systemic issue. Following his resignation, museum directors expressed widespread concern that similar campaigns could target trustees connected to other controversial sectors, such as fossil fuels, pharmaceuticals, or technology. In response to this institutional crisis, cultural leaders like Darren Walker, president of the Ford Foundation, argued that museums must redefine trusteeship beyond financial wealth

(Pogrebin et al., 2019). Redefining these roles means developing governance principles aligned with the institutions' public missions, recognising expertise and community representation alongside economic capital.

Taken together, starting from Haacke's cancellation in 1971 and arriving to modern controversies surrounding the Sacklers, BP and Kanders, it is possible to notice an ongoing and deep problem in the art world. In every instance, museums relied on money tied to harmful industries, from slum housing and pharmaceuticals to fossil fuels and weapons. To protect these funding sources, institutions surrendered their autonomy, turning into shields for corporates and privates reputations. By placing financial security above their public mission, museums created a structural crisis that goes far deep.

Chapter 3 – Rethinking cultural support: Owneh and collective resource governance

The previous chapters have examined philanthropy as one of the dominant mechanisms through which contemporary art is financed, highlighting both its historical development and its structural contradictions. The previous chapter, in particular, showed that philanthropy is not simply a financial mechanism, but also a relationship of power that can shape cultural priorities, influence institutional governance, and affect the autonomy of artistic production. The cases of Hans Haacke, the Sackler family, BP, and Warren Kanders illustrated how these dynamics can take different forms, from explicit forms of artwashing to more structural forms of dependency. This raises a question that the critique alone cannot answer: how could a system of support for artistic production be organised in ways that strengthen, rather than compromise, cultural autonomy?

This chapter explores this question through the Palestinian initiative Owneh. Owneh is not considered here as a ready-made alternative to philanthropy, nor as a model that can be universally applied. Rather, it is used as a lens through which to explore what happens when cultural organisations begin to question not only individual donors, but the structures and relationships through which resources are provided, managed, and distributed. The Palestinian context is particularly revealing in this regard. While the cases discussed in the previous chapter largely concerned Western cultural institutions operating within relatively stable economic and institutional systems, Palestinian cultural organisations have developed within a context of prolonged political violence, occupation, and strong dependence on foreign aid. Here, questions of funding and autonomy are therefore particularly closely intertwined.

More than proposing a different source of funding, Owneh represents an attempt to rethink cultural sustainability through collective responsibility, mutual aid, and

political autonomy. Its significance lies not only in the resources it mobilises, but in the relationships it seeks to establish around them: who provides resources, who controls them, how they circulate, and who decides how they are used. The chapter therefore first situates Owneh within the Palestinian cultural sector and the wider donor economy, before examining the initiative through an interview with Fida Touma. It then analyses its three main tools, the Aid Watch, the Solidarity Fund, and the Basket of Resources, and considers what they reveal about collective governance, care, reciprocity, and redistribution. Finally, the chapter examines the limits of Owneh as an alternative, asking to what extent such practices can challenge existing structures of dependency without reproducing them.

3.1 The Owneh case

The Palestinian cultural sector offers a particularly revealing context in which to rethink the relationship between funding and cultural autonomy. Decades of political instability, a condition of statelessness, occupation, and limited public support have made many cultural organisations heavily dependent on international donors for their economic survival. It is precisely within this context of structural dependency that the Owneh Initiative emerged. Rather than simply seeking alternative sources of funding, Owneh proposes a different understanding of cultural sustainability, based on collective responsibility, mutual aid, and political autonomy. This means rethinking not only where cultural organisations obtain resources, but also how those resources circulate and who has the power to decide how they are used.

3.1.1 The Palestinian cultural context between foreign aid and donor economy

To understand the emergence of initiatives such as Owneh, it is first necessary to examine the historical and political conditions that produced this great dependency on external funding. The centrality of international aid in Palestinian cultural life is closely connected

to the transformations that followed the Oslo Accords of 1993 and the establishment of the Palestinian Authority (PA) in 1994 (Aldovisi, 2026; Anani, 2024). The Oslo Accords were a series of agreements signed between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), intended to establish a process of mutual recognition and gradual self-government in the occupied Palestinian territories. The long-term objective was the one of achieving a negotiated peace and the creation of a Palestinian state. Although they generated expectations of political autonomy, the following decades did not lead to full sovereignty. Instead, the Palestinian Authority became primarily an administrative body governing parts of the West Bank under conditions of continued Israeli occupation (Asi, 2022).

One of the major consequences of the accords was the expansion of international aid. Since the 1990s, Palestine has received tens of billions of dollars from foreign governments, multilateral organisations, and international foundations. These resources were directed towards rebuilding infrastructure, supporting public institutions, strengthening civil society, and developing sectors such as education, healthcare, and culture. As Aldovisi (2026) observes, after Oslo, “Palestinian people built roads, hospitals, political parties, new cultural institutions”. International funding therefore played an important role in supporting the creation of cultural institutions that had previously been limited by decades of occupation and the lack of a sovereign state.

However, as Anani (2024) observes, this influx of resources also transformed the organisational structure of Palestinian society. The emergence of what has been described as a “donor economy” created a system in which many organisations became increasingly dependent on international grants and the priorities established by external funders. Anani referred to this process as the “NGO-isation” of Palestinian civil society. It does not only refer to the growth of NGOs, but also to a broader change in which grassroots forms of

organisation were gradually replaced by professionalised structures that depended on external funding. Although NGOs provided essential services and opportunities, this model also affected their relationship with local communities, as organisations increasingly had to adapt their activities to donor priorities and funding requirements. As Aldovisi (2026) notes, many grassroots organisations became dependent on international grants, while trade unions and popular movements were increasingly marginalised. In this sense, Anani argues that Palestinian cultural life was gradually “domesticated by foreign funding”: instead of maintaining a critical role connected to resistance and collective mobilisation, cultural institutions often became focused on survival within the limits defined by donors. Crucially, this structural reliance highlights a fundamental contradiction within the international aid regime in Palestine. As Asi (2022) argues, humanitarian and cultural aid has done little to counter the root conditions, being Israel’s occupation and blockade, that make foreign aid necessary in the first place.

To understand why this transformation was particularly significant in the cultural field, it is necessary to briefly consider the historical relationship between Palestinian art, political struggle, and forms of self-organisation. According to Bashir Makhoul (cited in Baravalle, 2026), the history of contemporary Palestinian art is inextricably bound to the Nakba, the forced expulsion of over 700,000 Palestinians in 1948, and to the subsequent Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip in 1967. Rather than following a single path, Palestinian art developed in different contexts, influenced by the specific political and material conditions of Gaza, the West Bank, and the territories within the 1948 Israeli borders.

In Gaza, artists faced total blockade and systematic military destruction, ranging from the bombing of the Al-Meshal Foundation in 2018 to the destruction of the Eltiqa gallery in 2024. Established in 2004, the Al-Meshal Cultural Centre was one of Gaza’s

major cultural facilities, hosting theatres, exhibition spaces, a library, cultural associations, musical performances, and educational activities, including dance and theatre programmes for children (Yaghi, 2018). Eltiqa, by contrast, emerged as an initiative of young visual artists in Gaza, established in 2002 to foster the local contemporary art scene through art education, workshops, collective exhibitions, and opportunities for artistic production and exchange (A. M. Qattan Foundation, n.d.).

Meanwhile, Palestinian artists within the 1948 borders experienced discrimination but continued to develop a politically engaged artistic scene. In the West Bank, as Baravalle (2026) outlines, artistic production transitioned through three key phases: a first phase of nation-building under the PLO, the Palestine Liberation Organisation (1960s–1987); a second phase during the First Intifada (1987–1993), characterized by grassroots experimentation and “aesthetic resistance” (Makhoul, in Baravalle, 2026, p. 258) using raw materials from the land; and a third, post-Oslo phase marked by the rapid proliferation of cultural NGOs in Ramallah.

These transformations did not simply reshape the economic structure of Palestinian civil society: they also profoundly altered the development of the contemporary Palestinian cultural field. As discussed in chapter two, cultural autonomy depends on the ability of institutions to define their own priorities, values, and narratives independently of external political or economic interests. In Palestine, however, this autonomy has historically been conditioned by military occupation, and also by the ways in which culture has been financed. While major institutions such as the Khalil Sakakini Cultural Centre, RIWAQ, the A.M. Qattan Foundation, and the Palestinian Museum provided unprecedented cultural infrastructure, they also embodied a structural shift. The grassroots “aesthetic resistance” of the First Intifada was gradually replaced by a professionalized, grant-dependent “donor economy.”

In particular, the relationship between Palestinian cultural institutions and international donors became increasingly complex from the 2000s onwards, when several funding agencies introduced explicit political conditions into their support mechanisms. The United States, through USAID (United States Agency for International Development), required organisations receiving funds to sign anti-terrorism clauses, while European funding schemes progressively introduced restrictions that affected the language and political framework of funded projects. These conditions reportedly discouraged the use of terms such as “Nakba”, “colonialism”, “apartheid”, and “right of return”, and favoured initiatives framed around dialogue, coexistence, and peace-building, rather than projects addressing the structural realities of occupation and dispossession. Although these policies were not applied uniformly across all donors or organisations, they contributed to a broader perception among Palestinian cultural actors that funding mechanisms were increasingly connected to political expectations regarding what could be publicly expressed (Anani, 2024).

A turning point came in 2019, when several Palestinian cultural organisations began refusing European funding rather than accepting new contractual conditions that they considered a limitation to their political autonomy. This decision created tensions within Palestinian civil society: some organisations rejected conditional funding entirely, others continued to accept it due to economic necessity, while many found themselves negotiating between political principles and the need for financial survival (Aldovisi, 2026).

The situation intensified after October 7, 2023, when several governments suspended, reviewed, or restricted funding to Palestinian organisations. Only two days after the outbreak of the war, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen announced that European assistance to Palestinians would be reviewed and that additional

contractual conditions aimed at countering “incitement to hatred” would be introduced into funded projects (Aldovisi, 2026). Similar measures rapidly followed elsewhere. Switzerland suspended funding to eleven Palestinian human rights organisations, the United Kingdom significantly reduced cultural programmes, and the Open Society Foundations froze or delayed several grants on political grounds (Aldovisi, 2026). For many cultural practitioners, these decisions confirmed a long-standing concern: that international aid could function not only as a form of support, but also as a mechanism of political pressure.

This perception was articulated particularly clearly in a collective statement issued in October 2023 by numerous Palestinian civil society organisations. Among them there was Rawa, a Palestinian community philanthropy fund founded in 2018 to support grassroots initiatives through participatory and locally controlled resource distribution (Rawa Fund, n.d.-a). Rejecting the dominant development paradigm, Rawa argued that the international aid system had become “another tool in the toolbox of colonial hegemony”, functioning not as a neutral instrument of humanitarian support but as a mechanism that reinforced dependency while preserving the political structures established after Oslo. According to the statement, the language of development and aid had increasingly replaced the pursuit of liberation with forms of political subordination, discouraging collective resistance and fragmenting Palestinian civil society. Rather than limiting its critique to donor conditionalities, the statement also proposed an alternative vision. It called for Palestinian organisations to progressively disengage from structurally dependent aid systems, strengthen grassroots solidarity networks, mobilise local resources, and rebuild community infrastructures based on volunteerism, reciprocity and mutual support. Relationships with international actors, it argued, should be grounded in

equality rather than dependency, allowing Palestinian organisations to determine their own priorities instead of adapting them to external political agendas (Rawa Fund, n.d.-b).

This debate connects directly to the core concept of cultural autonomy discussed in chapter two. As established, true autonomy requires institutions to define their own mission and values without external control. In Palestine, financial dependency acts as a subtle tool of governance: it shapes what cultural organisations can produce and the political boundaries within which they are permitted to exist. At the same time, the Palestinian context makes a complete rejection of external funding extremely difficult. As the following interview with Fida Tuma shows, cultural organisations often depend on international resources simply to maintain their activities. The real challenge, therefore, is not simply to reject donor money, but to invent new institutional models capable of balancing financial survival with political independence.

It is within this context of increasing tensions that Owneh emerged. Rather than representing a simple rejection of philanthropy, the initiative proposes a radical rethinking of how resources can circulate within the cultural field: from dependency towards solidarity, from donor-driven models towards collective self-organisation.

3.1.2 The Owneh Initiative: a conversation with Fida Tuma

The name Owneh, which in Arabic means “mutual aid”, reflects the initiative’s underlying philosophy. Rather than replacing one donor with another, Owneh aims to reduce structural dependence on external funding through collective solidarity and self-organisation.

The initiative emerged from the systemic problems created by the post-Oslo aid framework and the increasing political conditions attached to foreign funding. Established after October 7, 2023, in the context of the war on Gaza and the suspension or revision of several international funding schemes, the Owneh Initiative was founded

as a coalition of 30 Palestinian civil society organisations. Its main objective is to strengthen Palestinian organisations' ability to operate independently from external political pressures and to reclaim greater cultural and political autonomy (The Owneh Initiative, 2024b).

However, the motivations behind Owneh become clearer when considering the experience of the organisations involved in its creation. In an interview conducted for this research, Fida Touma, Director of the A.M. Qattan Foundation and a member of Owneh, explained that Palestinian cultural organisations had already begun questioning their relationship with international donors before October 7, 2023. Given the structural scarcity of domestic public funding, where resources provided by the Ministry of Culture remain insufficient to sustain the country's vibrant cultural ecosystem, institutions have historically relied on European governments and the European Union for operational support (Touma, personal interview, 2026).

According to Touma, concerns about the political conditions attached to international funding reached a major turning point in 2020. That year, new provisions were introduced into European Union grant agreements requiring Palestinian organisations to explicitly acknowledge the EU's designation of certain Palestinian political organisations as terrorist organisations. As stated by her, this change raised significant political and ethical concerns among a number of Palestinian civil society and cultural organisations, as accepting these terms was perceived as incompatible with their institutional and political positions. As a result, some organisations chose to reject the grants and subsequently stopped applying for EU-linked funding altogether (Touma, personal interview, 2026).

Even if the debate around funding did not begin with the war in Gaza, October 7, however, marked a further shift. According to Touma, the question was no longer limited

to specific contractual clauses. Some organisations began to question whether they could continue accepting funding from governments or institutions whose political positions they considered complicit in the violence in Gaza. The decision to refuse funding consequently became not only a question of contractual autonomy, but also one of political and ethical responsibility (Touma, personal interview, 2026).

This shift is important for understanding the specific nature of Owneh. Its emergence was not simply a response to the presence of restrictive clauses in funding agreements, but to a broader questioning of the political relationships embedded in international funding itself. At the same time, refusing donor funding could create serious financial risks for organisations that had depended on international grants for years. Owneh therefore emerged from a double need: to take a political and ethical position towards problematic funding relationships while also addressing the practical consequences of refusing them. As Touma indeed explained, the purpose of Owneh was not simply “to boycott” or “make a stand”, but to ask a more practical question: “how do you think of alternatives?” (Touma, personal interview, 2026). This distinction is central to understanding the initiative. Additionally, Owneh does not propose a complete separation from philanthropy or external funding. Indeed, Touma considers such a separation unrealistic in the current Palestinian context, where international resources remain necessary for the survival of many cultural and civil society organisations. Rather, the initiative seeks to create alternative forms of collective support that can give organisations greater freedom to negotiate, refuse, or reconsider their relationships with external donors.

A significant aspect of the initiative is its strong connection to the cultural sector: more than 60% of its current signatories are arts and cultural organisations. Its founding members include important actors within Palestinian cultural and civil society, such as

the already mentioned A.M. Qattan Foundation, the Khalil Sakakini Cultural Center, the Popular Art Centre, the Rawa Fund, the Dalia Association, the Social and Economic Policies Monitor (Al Marsad), Al-Mada Association for Arts-Based Community Development, and the Inash Alusra Association (The Owneh Initiative, 2024a). The A.M. Qattan Foundation is somewhat distinctive within this network, as a large private Palestinian foundation with substantial institutional and financial resources. Most of Owneh's members are instead NGOs, associations, and grassroots organisations working within Palestinian civil society.

Owneh also operates internationally through partnerships such as the Palestinian Arts and Culture Solidarity Collective (PACSOC). This volunteer-based network brings together cultural activists, artists, scholars, and arts professionals from different countries, supporting the initiative through resource mobilisation, knowledge exchange, and solidarity actions. The structure of Owneh is therefore based on a shift from individual institutional dependence towards collective forms of resource circulation. Rather than asking how an organisation can find a new donor to replace an existing one, the initiative explores how resources can be shared, redistributed, and collectively managed within and beyond the Palestinian cultural sector.

This is particularly relevant to the question of cultural autonomy developed in chapter two. If financial dependence can limit institutional autonomy by encouraging organisations to adapt their priorities, language, and activities to the expectations of funders, increasing autonomy also requires reconsidering the structures through which resources are accessed and distributed. Owneh therefore shifts the question: from how can cultural institutions become independent from donors? to how can they develop different relationships to resources, funding, and collective support? This makes the initiative a particularly relevant case through which to explore whether forms of

philanthropy, or alternatives to philanthropy itself, can emerge beyond the conventional donor-recipient relationship.

3.2 The three tools

To transform its political critique into concrete practice, the Owneeh Initiative is organised around three main tools: the Aid Watch, the Solidarity Fund and the Basket of Resources (The Owneeh Initiative, 2024c). Although they address different aspects of donor dependency, they are based on a common principle: strengthening the capacity of cultural and civil society organisations to collectively manage resources and make decisions about their use. The three tools can therefore be understood as three different responses to the vulnerabilities created by the donor economy. The Aid Watch addresses the lack of transparency surrounding foreign aid and the political conditions attached to it; the Solidarity Fund responds to the financial risks that organisations face when refusing or withdrawing from conditional funding; while the Basket of Resources addresses their material dependence on resources that individual organisations may not be able to provide independently. The three instruments do not constitute three separate initiatives, but interconnected attempts to rethink how resources circulate, how organisations support one another, and who has the power to determine their use.

It is important to stress, however, that these tools should not be understood as fully established mechanisms. As Fida Touma emphasised during the interview, Owneeh is still in a learning and experimental phase, and the development of all three tools remains a work in progress. Their structures, governance mechanisms, and practical functioning are still being tested and negotiated by the participating organisations. Rather than presenting a finished alternative to the donor model, Owneeh can therefore be understood as an ongoing attempt to develop and learn from alternative forms of collective support.

This collective and horizontal approach is also reflected in Owneh's governance structure. Rather than functioning as a centralised organisation, the initiative operates through a participatory structure led by a Steering Committee composed of its founding organisations. Each of the three tools is developed through dedicated working groups, while participating organisations meet collectively to discuss and make decisions concerning the initiative. As Touma explained, however, this governance structure is itself understood as provisional: the founding organisations are aware of the need to eventually broaden participation and transfer decision-making to a more representative structure (Touma, personal interview, 2026). The question of how collective governance can avoid reproducing hierarchical structures is therefore not external to Owneh's model, but remains one of the challenges the initiative is currently negotiating.

3.2.1 Aid Watch

The first tool, the Aid Watch, aims to monitor the origins, conditions, and political implications of foreign funding in Palestine. Its purpose is to make visible how international aid enters Palestinian civil society, where resources are directed, and what political or institutional conditions may accompany them. In this sense, Aid Watch responds to one of the central problems identified by Owneh: the lack of transparency surrounding the political structures and expectations embedded in foreign funding. Rather than placing the burden of accountability exclusively on recipient organisations, the initiative seeks to make donors and their funding practices themselves visible and open to scrutiny.

Aid Watch is not, however, an entirely new initiative. As Fida Touma explained in the interview, a project with the same name had already existed in Palestine, initiated by the Dalia Association and its founding director, with the aim of collecting and analysing information on the funding entering Palestine and its distribution. The initiative had

remained inactive for approximately a decade, partly because of difficulties in securing funding. Owneh therefore decided to revive it, while reconsidering how it could operate within the current political context. The original materials and rights to the project were recovered, and the initiative is currently working on developing a new editorial approach and assembling an editorial team (Touma, personal interview, 2026).

This makes Aid Watch different from the other two tools, as it is still at an early stage of development. As Touma emphasised, Owneh is still “in the process” of determining how the platform should function in practice. The group is currently discussing its editorial structure, methodology, and the type of information that should be published. The difficulty of establishing such a platform also reveals some of the contradictions that Owneh itself must navigate. According to Touma, the initiative anticipates possible criticism and even legal pressure from Palestinian authorities or other actors, making the question of how information is presented particularly sensitive (Touma, personal interview, 2026).

For this reason, the members of Owneh are carefully considering the language and editorial position of Aid Watch. Touma personally advocates for an approach based on documented and researched information rather than moral judgement or political preaching. As she explained, the objective should be to provide people with sufficient information to “get their own decisions, based on the facts” (Touma, personal interview, 2026). This approach is significant in relation to Owneh’s broader understanding of autonomy. Cultural autonomy, in this case, does not simply mean replacing one dominant political position with another. It also involves creating conditions in which organisations and individuals can access information, evaluate funding relationships, and make their own decisions about them.

The history of Aid Watch also points to a broader contradiction within the aid system itself. The previous initiative reportedly became inactive partly because it was unable to secure funding, despite its purpose being precisely to examine the structures through which funding enters Palestinian civil society. Owneh now faces a similar challenge: according to Touma, it is unlikely that conventional donors would support the development of a platform explicitly scrutinising international aid, meaning that the initiative may have to rely on individual contributions or on resources generated internally through the Solidarity Fund (Touma, personal interview, 2026). The question of who funds the watchdog therefore becomes part of the problem it seeks to investigate.

Considering all this, the Aid Watch does more than provide information about foreign funding. It introduces a reversal of the conventional accountability relationship between donor and recipient. Instead of Palestinian organisations being primarily required to demonstrate their legitimacy, transparency, and compliance to external funders, the donors themselves become objects of scrutiny. At the same time, the difficulties surrounding the creation of Aid Watch demonstrate that establishing such a reversal is not straightforward: even an initiative designed to challenge the structures of the donor economy remains embedded, at least temporarily, within the same economic and political environment it seeks to transform.

3.2.2 Solidarity Fund

The second tool, the Solidarity Fund, responds to one of the most immediate consequences of refusing or withdrawing from problematic funding: the financial gap that may follow. It is designed to support Palestinian organisations that choose to move away from donor relationships they consider politically or ethically unacceptable. More specifically, the Fund is intended to assist organisations whose funding has been suspended or cancelled by foreign donors, as well as organisations that voluntarily return

funding because they no longer consider the relationship compatible with their political or ethical principles (The Owneh Initiative, 2024c).

The Fund is therefore not conceived primarily as a mechanism for financing new projects or expanding organisational activities. Rather, its purpose is to provide temporary and unrestricted support that allows organisations to maintain their basic operations while reconsidering their financial models. This distinction emerged particularly clearly from the conversation with Fida Touma. She explained that an organisation which decides to terminate an existing relationship with a donor may suddenly find itself facing a financial “gap”: existing agreements have to be dissolved, funding returned, and projects stopped, while salaries and other organisational costs still need to be covered. The purpose of the Solidarity Fund is precisely to provide a period of stability in which organisations can “steady themselves” and have the “breathing time” necessary to rethink how they operate (Touma, personal interview, 2026).

The Fund is consequently conceived as temporary rather than substitutive. Support is intended to be provided only once, rather than creating a new long-term dependency on Owneh itself. The underlying principle is that Owneh should provide organisations with the time and financial space necessary to reorganise, rather than becoming another permanent source of institutional funding. As Touma explained, “an organisation shouldn’t be dependent on Owneh on the long run” (Touma, personal interview, 2026).

The Fund is financed through a combination of internal contributions and solidarity-based fundraising. During its pilot phase, some of the organisations participating in Owneh contributed their own resources, including the A.M. Qattan Foundation and the Rawa Fund. Additional resources were raised through a collaboration with the Palestinian Arts and Culture Solidarity Collective (PACSOC), which organised

fundraising activities in Europe and transferred the proceeds to Owneh. The resources collected were subsequently housed within the Dalia Association, one of Owneh's member organisations, whose existing mandate and infrastructure allow it to manage and process community funds (Touma, personal interview, 2026).

At the time of the interview, the Fund had collected approximately US \$100,000. Although this represents a significant collective effort, Touma stressed that the amount remains small in relation to the needs of the Palestinian cultural sector, particularly when compared with the approximately US \$350,000 available through the Ministry of Culture's cultural fund each year (Touma, personal interview, 2026).

The process of distributing these resources is itself part of Owneh's attempt to develop a different model of funding. At the time of the interview, the first organisations to receive support had only recently been selected, meaning that the Solidarity Fund remains explicitly a pilot and a "work in progress" (Touma, personal interview, 2026). The first challenge was therefore not only to raise money, but also to establish the governance mechanisms through which it could be accessed and distributed in a way that was relatively open, transparent, and trustworthy. This process required Owneh to reconsider the conventional logic of grant-making. Rather than reproducing the standard donor-recipient relationship, in which organisations submit detailed project proposals, define measurable outputs, and subsequently report against predetermined indicators, Owneh sought to establish a relationship based primarily on trust. As Touma explained, "it's not about approval for the money, it's about trust. We trust you to use it as you imagine" (Touma, personal interview, 2026). The first funding round was therefore deliberately limited: they did not issue a fully public call, but circulated the announcement among organisations that had already signed its statement. This allowed the members to test the mechanism before defining more permanent criteria and procedures.

The application process was consequently designed to remain as light as possible. Organisations were asked to provide a short cover letter explaining their situation, rather than a detailed project proposal, together with financial information from the previous year and an account of how the support would be used. Some degree of financial reporting remains necessary because the resources are legally administered through Dalia, which is required to ensure a certain level of financial transparency. However, Touma stressed that Owneh does not intend to reproduce the extensive reporting requirements and performance indicators characteristic of conventional donor funding (Touma, personal interview, 2026). The aim is instead to develop what she described as a “lightweight agreement” and “lightweight reporting” system, capable of maintaining accountability without turning the recipient organisation into an object of continuous monitoring.

This attempt to balance trust and accountability is particularly significant for the broader question of autonomy. Owneh cannot simply eliminate all forms of evaluation or governance: resources still have to be raised, administered, and distributed according to collectively agreed criteria. What changes is the relationship through which these processes take place. Rather than defining the recipient primarily through its capacity to satisfy an external funder’s requirements, the Solidarity Fund attempts to recognise organisations as autonomous actors whose knowledge of their own needs should guide the use of resources. At the same time, the Fund establishes clear political boundaries concerning participation. Organisations receiving support must have endorsed Owneh’s principles and statements and must not remain engaged with donors considered incompatible with those principles. They must also demonstrate an actual financial need resulting from their decision to disengage from such relationships (Touma, personal interview, 2026). The Fund therefore does not function as an unconditional pool of money

available to all cultural organisations, but as a mechanism tied to a shared political and ethical framework.

The Solidarity Fund thus represents one of the clearest examples of how Owneh attempts to translate its critique of donor dependency into an alternative institutional practice. Its objective is not to create a financially self-sufficient system capable of replacing international philanthropy altogether. Rather, it seeks to create a temporary collective safety net through which organisations can afford to refuse, renegotiate, or reconsider external funding relationships without immediately jeopardising their survival. In this sense, the Fund does not eliminate dependency so much as create a greater capacity to act within and against it. This is precisely what makes it relevant to the question of cultural autonomy: autonomy is approached not as complete financial independence, but as the ability to make institutional decisions without those decisions being dictated by the immediate threat of financial collapse.

3.2.3 Basket of Resources

The third tool, the Basket of Resources, addresses donor dependency from a different angle. Rather than providing financial support, it seeks to reduce the material costs of cultural production by facilitating the sharing of non-financial resources among participating organisations. These may include spaces, equipment, facilities, professional skills, knowledge, and human resources, which can be made available to other cultural workers, researchers, artists, and activists (Baravalle, 2026; The Owneh Initiative, 2024c). In this sense, the Basket responds to a more practical dimension of dependency: organisations may rely on external grants not only to finance programmes, but also to access the basic resources required to carry out their activities.

The mechanism is deliberately simple. As Touma explained, Owneh currently uses a shared Google Sheet through which participating organisations indicate what resources they are able and willing to share. These can range from physical facilities to professional services: an organisation might, for example, make a room or theatre available, while another might offer editing, translation, recruitment, or other forms of professional expertise. Organisations can then contact each other directly to arrange access to these resources (Touma, personal interview, 2026). The system therefore does not require a central body to allocate every resource. Instead, it creates visibility around what already exists within the network and enables organisations to connect directly.

This model is already functioning beyond the digital list itself. Touma described how organisations frequently approach the A.M. Qattan Foundation to request access to its facilities, including rooms and a theatre, which can be made available free of charge. Rather than requiring organisations to go through a centralised distribution mechanism, the resource is shared directly between institutions. The Basket therefore operates less as a conventional service platform than as a mechanism for making existing resources within the cultural ecosystem collectively accessible (Touma, personal interview, 2026).

At the same time, the Palestinian context places important limits on how far such resource sharing can extend. Physical resources cannot always circulate easily between cities because of restrictions on movement and the presence of checkpoints. As Touma explained, the model is therefore particularly effective at the level of individual cities, while organisations from different locations can participate more easily when the resource being shared is not tied to a physical presence. Professional services such as translation or editing, for example, can be offered remotely and therefore circulate across geographical boundaries (Touma, personal interview, 2026). The Basket is consequently

shaped not only by organisational willingness to share, but also by the material and political infrastructures within which Palestinian cultural organisations operate.

This geographical dimension also distinguishes the Basket from a purely digital resource-sharing platform. Although Owneh initially considered developing an app or a more centralised system, the current approach has remained deliberately lightweight. According to Touma, the existing shared document is already effective enough to connect organisations, making a more complex technological infrastructure unnecessary at this stage. The emphasis is therefore placed on relationships and accessibility rather than on building a new intermediary structure (Touma, personal interview, 2026).

This aspect is particularly relevant to the broader logic of Owneh. While the Solidarity Fund attempts to create temporary financial space for organisations that refuse problematic funding, the Basket of Resources seeks to make organisations less individually dependent on purchasing resources through external funding in the first place. It therefore shifts attention from the question of how much money an organisation needs to the question of what resources already exist within the cultural community and how they can be shared. The underlying principle is that cultural sustainability can be strengthened not only through greater financial capacity, but also through collective access to existing infrastructures, knowledge, skills, and spaces. As Touma noted, this aspect of the model could potentially be transferred to other contexts, although its organisation would necessarily depend on the political, economic, social, and geographical conditions of each community (Touma, personal interview, 2026).

The Basket of Resources therefore completes the three-part logic of Owneh. While Aid Watch makes funding structures and their political implications visible, and the Solidarity Fund addresses the financial risks associated with refusing problematic funding, the Basket tackles the material dependence that underlies the need for external

resources. Together, the three tools move beyond a simple rejection of donor philanthropy and towards a broader reorganisation of how cultural resources are accessed, shared, and governed.

3.3 What does Owneh teach us? Rethinking cultural support through commons, care and redistribution

3.3.1 From donor-recipient relations to collective resource governance

Owneh can be read not simply as an alternative funding mechanism, but as an attempt to rethink the way resources are governed within the art world. This distinction is important because the problem addressed by Owneh is not limited to the question of who provides financial resources. Rather, it concerns who has the authority to decide how resources circulate, who can access them, and according to whose interests they are allocated. From this perspective, the organisational structure developed by Owneh can be analysed through the literature on the commons, particularly through Elinor Ostrom (2015) work on self-governance, the commons-based transition proposed by Bauwens, Kostakis, and Pazaitis (2019) and Massimiliano Mollona's (2021) conception of art/commons.

Ostrom's work is particularly useful because it challenges the assumption that resources must necessarily be governed either through centralised state institutions or through private ownership and market mechanisms. In *Governing the Commons*, Ostrom (2015) observes that "neither the state nor the market is uniformly successful in enabling individuals to sustain long-term, productive use of natural resource systems" (p. 1). Her argument is based on a large body of empirical research showing that communities can develop institutions to manage shared resources without relying exclusively on either of these two forms of organisation. Rather than treating state control and privatisation as the only available alternatives, Ostrom examines how users themselves can develop rules and institutions for managing resources collectively.

This argument is relevant to Owneh, although its application needs to be made carefully. Ostrom's empirical research primarily concerns common-pool natural resources, such as forests, fisheries and irrigation systems, rather than financial or cultural resources. Owneh therefore cannot simply be classified as an example of a common-pool resource. What can instead be transferred from Ostrom's analysis is the question of governance: who makes the rules, who participates in decisions, and how collective institutions enable users to organise resources themselves. This is particularly important in relation to philanthropy because conventional donor-recipient relationships often concentrate decision-making power in the hands of those who control financial resources. Owneh attempts to alter this relationship by creating structures in which cultural organisations themselves participate in deciding how collective resources are managed.

This aspect of Ostrom's work becomes particularly relevant when considering her critique of the assumption that the constraints surrounding collective action are fixed. Rather than asking only why communities fail to manage resources collectively, she proposes to examine "how to enhance the capabilities of those involved to change the constraining rules of the game to lead to outcomes other than remorseless tragedies" (Ostrom, 2015, p. 7). The expression "rules of the game" is especially useful for interpreting Owneh. The initiative does not simply seek to obtain money from a different source while leaving the underlying relationship between funder and recipient unchanged. Instead, it experiments with changing the rules through which resources are accessed and governed. The Steering Committee, collective meetings, the Solidarity Fund and the Basket of Resources can all be understood in this sense: they are organisational mechanisms through which participating organisations attempt to establish different rules for the distribution and use of resources.

Ostrom's emphasis on self-governance also helps explain why the organisational structure of Ownah matters as much as the resources themselves. Collective resource management cannot depend only on the existence of a shared pool, because it requires procedures through which participants can negotiate competing needs, establish responsibilities and decide how resources should be used. This is particularly relevant to the Solidarity Fund. The Fund does not simply redistribute money from one institution to another. Its significance lies in the fact that the participating organisations collectively determine the conditions under which the resource is accessed, while attempting to avoid the detailed project-based requirements normally associated with conventional funding. Similarly, the Basket of Resources makes existing spaces, equipment, knowledge and skills available through relationships between organisations rather than requiring each institution to obtain them independently through external funding. In both cases, the emphasis moves from the possession of resources to the capacity to organise access to them collectively.

This shift can be further developed through Bauwens, Kostakis and Pazaitis's (2019) understanding of the commons and peer-to-peer production. For these authors, a commons is not simply a resource that is collectively owned. Drawing on David Bollier, they define it as "a shared resource, co-governed by its user community according to the rules and norms of that community" (Bollier, in Bauwens et al., 2019, p. 3). Governance is therefore central to the definition. The existence of a shared resource is not sufficient: what matters is the relationship between the resource and the community that uses and governs it. This is particularly relevant to Ownah, where the central innovation is not the creation of a new source of money, but the attempt to establish collective mechanisms through which financial and material resources can be shared.

Bauwens et al. also describe peer-to-peer production primarily as a mode of relationship. P2P systems allow people to connect and collaborate around the creation and maintenance of shared resources, rather than organising production exclusively through hierarchical command or market exchange. As the authors put it, “P2P is therefore primarily a mode of relationship” (2019, p. 2). This perspective is useful because it prevents the analysis of Ownah from becoming too focused on its individual tools. The Solidarity Fund and Basket of Resources are important because they provide money and material support, but more importantly because they establish different relationships between cultural organisations and the resources on which they depend. In this way, the organisational form of support becomes as important as its financial content.

The idea of pooling is particularly relevant to the Basket of Resources and the Solidarity Fund. Bauwens et al. identify pooling as a central characteristic of commons-based production, arguing that “we need pooling wherever it is possible” (2019, p. 68). Pooling changes the relationship between individual actors and resources: instead of each organisation attempting to secure its own resources independently, existing capacities can be made available to a wider community. This is precisely what happens through the Basket of Resources, where spaces, equipment, expertise and other forms of support can circulate between participating organisations. The same principle operates financially through the Solidarity Fund, although in a different form. Resources that might otherwise remain controlled by individual organisations are brought together into a fund that can be accessed according to collectively established criteria.

This also allows Ownah to be read alongside Bauwens et al.’s distinction between extractive and generative models. In an extractive model, value is taken from communities without being sufficiently reinvested in the conditions that produce it. A generative model, by contrast, creates value with communities and reinvests resources

into the wider system of which they are part. This distinction is useful for thinking about philanthropy because conventional funding can be organised around the priorities of the resource provider: organisations formulate projects, identify funders and adapt their activities to available funding opportunities. Owneh attempts to reverse this direction of dependency by pooling resources around the needs and priorities identified collectively by participating organisations. The aim is therefore not simply to attract more funding, but to retain greater collective control over how resources are used.

At the same time, Bauwens et al. explicitly warn against understanding peer production and the commons as existing completely outside capitalism. Peer production, they argue, remains “a prototype of a new mode of production, rather than a full mode of production today” (2019, p. 5). Commons-based initiatives can therefore remain dependent on conventional capital and may even be incorporated into existing economic structures. This qualification is important for Owneh. The initiative does not operate in a space free from philanthropy or external resources; indeed, some of its resources originate within the existing cultural funding system. What changes is the way in which those resources are pooled and governed. This makes Owneh less a complete replacement for philanthropy than an attempt to introduce different principles of collective resource governance within a system that remains partially dependent on conventional funding.

Mollona’s (2021) concept of art/commons makes this theoretical discussion more directly relevant to artistic production. While Ostrom provides a theory of collective resource governance and Bauwens et al. extend the concept of the commons to peer production, Mollona asks what happens when the commons is considered specifically in relation to art and cultural production. He describes commoning as involving “the pooling and sharing of resources for the reproduction of life in common” (2021, p. 6). This formulation is important because it shifts attention from the production of individual

artistic outputs towards the social and material conditions that make cultural production possible. Art is not treated as an isolated activity that simply requires financial investment, but it is embedded in relationships, institutions, knowledge, labour and resources that must themselves be sustained.

For Mollona, commons have three interconnected dimensions: they involve a pool of resources, a community of people connected through reciprocal relationships, and collective practices directed towards the reproduction of that community. A resource therefore becomes a common not simply because it is shared, but because sharing is connected to a community and to practices through which that community reproduces itself. This provides a particularly useful way of interpreting Owneh. The Solidarity Fund and Basket of Resources constitute pools of financial and material resources; the participating cultural organisations form the community through which these resources circulate; and the practical activities of mutual support help sustain the organisational conditions necessary for cultural production. Owneh can therefore be understood as experimenting with all three dimensions, even if it does not fully realise them or operate independently from conventional funding structures.

Mollona's understanding of the commons also places strong emphasis on movement and circulation. He describes commons as "worlds in movement"(2021, p. 9): they are not static collections of resources, but communities that continuously produce, share and transform the conditions of their collective life. This is particularly relevant to the Basket of Resources, where the value of a space, skill or piece of equipment lies partly in its capacity to circulate between organisations. The resource is not just transferred once from a provider to a recipient: it can become part of an ongoing network of relations. This differs from a conventional funding transaction, in which money is transferred from a

donor to an organisation for a defined project and the relationship is often structured around reporting, evaluation and the completion of that project.

Mollona's analysis is also particularly useful because he does not understand commons as spaces completely outside existing institutions. On the contrary, similarly to Bauwens et al., he argues that "commons cannot exist in isolation from capitalism" (Stavrides, 2016, in Mollona, 2021, p.10). Communities can create spaces of self-organisation and autonomy within systems that continue to be structured by markets, states and private ownership. He consequently describes commons as "enclosures which remain open" (2021, p. 11): spaces that establish a degree of collective control without pretending that they have escaped the structures surrounding them. This formulation closely reflects the position of Owneh. The initiative does not abolish philanthropy, nor can it immediately eliminate the external funding on which Palestinian cultural organisations continue to depend. Instead, it creates a space in which organisations can collectively experiment with different relationships to resources while remaining within a wider funding system.

Mollona's work is particularly valuable for this thesis because he also applies the concept of the commons directly to cultural institutions. In his discussion of the AB5to6 OMONIA project (the fifth edition of the Athens Biennale), he describes an attempt to understand a biennial not simply as an exhibitionary institution, but as a cultural commons involving urban movements in processes of co-management. The project explores alternative institutional forms based on collective participation, self-determination and the use of culture as a common resource. This example demonstrates that the application of commons theory to the cultural field does not require treating art merely as another economic sector. Instead, it involves reconsidering how cultural institutions themselves are organised, who participates in their governance, and whether cultural resources can

be managed through collective rather than exclusively institutional or market-based forms.

This perspective brings the three theoretical approaches together. Ostrom helps identify the importance of self-governance and the capacity of communities to change the rules through which resources are managed. Bauwens, Kostakis and Pazaitis extend this argument by focusing on commons as shared resources governed by their users, and on pooling and mutual coordination as alternatives to purely market or hierarchical forms of organisation. Mollona brings these questions into the field of art, showing how resources, communities and practices of collective reproduction can become part of an art/commons. Read together, these approaches suggest that the relevant question is whether Owneh is changing the relationships through which the resources are governed.

Owneh should therefore not be understood as a commons in any strict or completed sense. Its resources remain partly dependent on existing funding structures, its governance is still developing, and the organisations involved retain different degrees of institutional power and capacity. Nevertheless, the initiative can be read as an experiment in commons-based resource governance within the cultural sector. Its significance lies precisely in the attempt to move beyond the donor-recipient relationship: resources are pooled rather than simply transferred, organisations participate in decisions about their allocation, and material and financial support is connected to the reproduction of a wider cultural community. Therefore Owneh experiments with changing the institutional rules, relationships and practices through which cultural resources are governed.

3.3.2 From funding to care: sustaining the conditions of cultural production

If the previous section asked who governs cultural resources, the question that follows is what those resources are intended to sustain. Owneh redefines funding not as the support of isolated, short-term projects, but as the maintenance of the infrastructure that enables

cultural production itself. This shift aligns directly with Joan Tronto's (2013) ethics of care, which challenges the tendency of market democracies to organize social life around economic productivity and efficiency while relegating care to a secondary position. Tronto contends that "the purpose of economic life is to support care, not the other way around" (2013, p. 170). Applied to Owneh, this care-oriented framework replaces a transactional funding logic — where grants demand immediate, measurable outputs like exhibitions or attendance numbers — with a model focused on sustaining the people, relationships, and organisational capacity required for cultural activity to persist.

This care-based logic becomes concrete in Owneh's Solidarity Fund. Rather than financing new artistic outputs, the Fund provides organizations with what Touma describes as "a breathing time": a crucial period to stabilize, cover salaries, navigate transitions, and rethink institutional models. Traditional donors often treat basic running costs as unnecessary expenses rather than essential work. Through Tronto's lens, however, a resource's value goes beyond its immediate output, as it also lies in the long-term stability and relationships it creates. So sustaining institutions is not a lack of productivity, it is the vital infrastructure that enables future creation. The Solidarity Fund thus operationalises care as a political practice, recognising that cultural actors need the capacity to endure, adapt, and pause.

Furthermore, applying care to philanthropy addresses a long-standing structural problem: the risk of giving becoming purely "palliative" (Lechterman, 2022). Conventional donor-recipient setups alleviate immediate material deficits while leaving intact the power asymmetries that produced those needs in the first place. Tronto's concept of "caring with" (2013, p. 22) directly intervenes in this dynamic by demanding democratic participation in determining how care is delivered. Owneh does not simply offer palliative aid: through its collective governance structure, it operationalizes "caring

with” by closing the gap between those who provide resources and those who define their purpose. Cultural organisations are no longer passive recipients of external priorities, but active agents empowered to define their own needs and allocate funds accordingly.

This reorientation also responds to a dilemma unique to the art world: how to sustain cultural production within an economic field governed by capitalist value. Dave Beech’s (2019) *Art and Postcapitalism* is key to understanding this friction. Beech highlights the historical “contradiction between value production and the production of material wealth” (p. 1), drawing on Kantian aesthetics to show that artistic labor has historically resisted being reduced to a mere remunerated, market-driven commodity. Yet, Beech cautions against romanticising art, emphasising its simultaneous “complicity with, and hostility to, capitalism” (p. 1). Owneh does not claim to exist outside these capitalist constraints, its supported organisations remain deeply embedded in market pressures. However, reading Beech alongside Tronto clarifies the power of the Solidarity Fund: since artistic work cannot be reduced to capitalist profit, its value should not be judged by immediate financial returns.

Ultimately, Owneh transforms funding from a mechanism of donor extraction into a tool for institutional care. By suspending the demand for immediate production, the “breathing time” embedded in the Solidarity Fund allows organisations to safeguard their autonomy and build long-term resilience. Owneh demonstrates that a care-oriented approach to philanthropy does not merely distribute capital more generously: it fundamentally reconfigures cultural funding to sustain the fragile living conditions under which art is made.

3.3.3 From transfer to circulation: gift, reciprocity and redistribution

If the previous sections examined who governs resources and what those resources sustain, this final step addresses how resources circulate. Conventional philanthropy operates through a linear transfer: capital moves from a donor who controls it to a recipient who consumes it. Even when intended as financial aid, this unidirectional flow preserves the underlying hierarchy. Rethinking philanthropy requires shifting from a model of one-way transfer to a model of continuous circulation, where resources generate social bonds rather than vertical dependencies.

Hyde's (2007) distinction between gifts and commodities clarifies this shift. Unlike a commodity exchange, which ends as soon as equivalent value is swapped, a gift acquires its true value through ongoing circulation. As Hyde famously states, "a gift that cannot be given away ceases to be a gift" (p. 11). Its value increases not through individual accumulation, but as it passes from party to party, creating a network of relational bonds. In Owneh, this logic operates directly through the Basket of Resources. Rather than relying exclusively on monetary grants, participating organizations share physical spaces, equipment, technical skills, and professional expertise. A venue, translation services, or curatorial advice can circulate within the network without requiring separate external funding. Reciprocity here is non-linear: an organisation receives support not by offering a direct return to the giver, but by contributing to the capacity of the broader community.

This material re-allocation aligns with Villanueva's (2018) critique of traditional philanthropy. Villanueva argues that wealth has historically been used to divide and control, and proposes a relational framework centred on connecting and belonging. He exposes how conventional funding forces organisations to evolve in response to the narrow questions donors ask, effectively granting funders the power to define which problems are legitimate. Owneh's Solidarity Fund directly disrupts this dynamic by

adopting what Villanueva terms a “living resource system.” By pooling financial resources into a shared collective asset, Owneh detaches capital from the agenda of any single donor. What is redistributed is not merely money, but the authority to define needs and decide how funds move through the network.

Together, the Solidarity Fund and the Basket of Resources address donor dependency at two complementary levels. The Solidarity Fund provides collective, equitable access to capital, while the Basket of Resources reduces the total need for external capital by activating existing assets within the community. This dual structure embodies what Touma describes as a deliberate departure from the “regular classic donor format” toward a framework built on trust. Trust is not presented as a vague moral ideal, but as a structural redistribution of responsibility: organisations gain the agency to determine what is necessary for their work rather than having their priorities dictated by donor metrics.

Ultimately, Owneh demonstrates that reducing reliance on problematic philanthropy does not require searching for better donors. Instead, it requires changing the architecture of exchange itself. By transforming financial transfers into shared pools and static assets into circulating gifts, Owneh converts philanthropy from a tool of donor control into a practice of collective autonomy.

3.3.4 The limits of the alternative

The changes proposed by Owneh should not, however, be understood as a complete alternative to philanthropy. Touma is explicit about this limitation. Given the scale of financial needs within Palestinian civil society, the difficult economic situation, and the limited role of public funding for culture, she does not consider it realistic for Owneh to replace donor relationships in the short term. Instead, she describes its role as filling specific gaps and giving organisations “a breathing time to recalibrate the way they work”

(Touma, personal interview, 2026). The aim is therefore not to remove external funding altogether, but to create moments in which organisations can reduce their dependence on problematic donors and reconsider how they operate.

This limitation is important when considering whether the Owneh model could be transferred to other contexts. Some of its practices are not specific to Palestine. Touma considers the Basket of Resources particularly transferable, since sharing spaces, skills, professional services, and other non-financial resources can be organised at the level of cities in different contexts. She also suggests that the idea of a community-managed fund could be adopted elsewhere. What cannot simply be transferred, however, is the way such a system is organised. As Touma explains, “the way you manage and how you build the trust” depends on the political, economic, and social conditions of each context (Touma, personal interview, 2026). Owneh should therefore not be treated as a ready-made model that can be reproduced elsewhere. Its more transferable contribution is the principle of collective resource management, while its concrete forms need to respond to local conditions.

This point is also important in relation to the cases discussed in chapter 2. Those cases showed how philanthropic and corporate resources can become connected to artwashing and to the loss of cultural autonomy within Western cultural institutions. Owneh emerged from a very different political and economic context, and its response to dependency cannot simply be applied to those cases as a universal solution. At the same time, the comparison highlights a common problem: the conditions attached to resources can affect the ability of cultural organisations to determine their own priorities. What differs is how this problem is produced and negotiated in each context. Owneh therefore suggests not a single alternative to the forms of dependency discussed in chapter 2, but

the need to develop resource structures according to the specific political and institutional conditions in which cultural organisations operate.

There is also a more fundamental difficulty: an initiative created to challenge existing funding relations can still reproduce some of the structures it seeks to change. Touma herself identifies this risk when she asks whether Owneh is “actually breaking from that or are we adding to that ‘toxic’ model?” She stresses that the people involved in the initiative also come from established institutions and have their own experiences and assumptions about how organisations should operate. For this reason, changing the formal structure of funding is not enough. The people managing the alternative must also remain aware of the possibility that familiar hierarchies and practices may reappear within it.

This is visible in Owneh’s own governance. At the time of the interview, decision-making was still in the hands of the founding organisations. Touma acknowledged that this should not continue indefinitely and that the founding committee would eventually need to step back as membership expands. Similarly, the Solidarity Fund was still in its pilot phase: the first grants had only recently been decided, and the procedures for governance, eligibility, reporting, and decision-making were still being developed. Owneh is therefore not a finished institutional model. It is still testing how collective governance can work in practice and what kinds of structures are needed to maintain trust without reproducing the administrative logic of conventional donors.

These limitations do not make Owneh less relevant to the question of less toxic philanthropy. On the contrary, they show why an alternative cannot be judged only by whether it successfully replaces the existing system. Owneh demonstrates that changing funding relations also requires changing the practices through which resources are governed, shared, and justified. At the same time, its experience shows that these changes

remain partial and difficult. The alternative must continually question its own structures, its own distribution of power, and its relationship to the system it is trying to transform.

Owneh can therefore be understood less as a new funding model than as an ongoing experiment in reorganising cultural resources. Its value does not lie in offering a universal solution to donor dependency, but in showing that other forms of resource governance can be attempted even within conditions that make complete independence impossible. As Touma puts it, “it’s not easy” and it may never be possible to fully break from the hierarchical donor model, but “it’s still worth a try” (Touma, personal interview, 2026). This tension is central to the broader argument of this thesis: making philanthropy less toxic does not necessarily mean finding a system that stands completely outside philanthropy or capitalism, but creating practices that continuously question who controls resources, how they are distributed, and whose needs they are made to serve.

3.4 What kind of alternative is Owneh?

Taken together, the three dimensions discussed above show that Owneh does more than propose a different way of distributing financial support. It intervenes at several levels of the relationship between cultural organisations and resources. Through collective governance, it questions who should have the authority to decide how resources are used; through the Solidarity Fund, it shifts attention from funding individual outputs to sustaining the conditions of cultural production; and through the circulation of financial and non-financial resources, it challenges the idea that support must always take the form of a transfer from a donor to a recipient. These practices suggest that reducing the toxicity of philanthropy involves not only changing who provides resources, but also changing the relationships through which those resources are governed and circulated.

At the same time, Owneh cannot be understood as a complete or self-sufficient alternative to philanthropy. Its organisations remain dependent on external resources, its

governance structures are still developing, and some of its practices are difficult to transfer outside the specific conditions in which the initiative emerged. It also remains possible for the hierarchies that Owneh seeks to challenge to reappear within its own structures. These limitations are not simply weaknesses of the initiative. They show that changing funding relations is a more complex process than replacing one source of money with another. An alternative can reproduce some of the problems of the system it seeks to change, particularly when the underlying assumptions about power, responsibility, and decision-making remain unchanged.

For this reason, Owneh is perhaps better understood as a situated and ongoing experiment than as a new funding model. Its significance does not lie in offering a universal solution to donor dependency, but in demonstrating that cultural organisations can experiment with other ways of governing, sharing, and circulating resources. The Solidarity Fund and the Basket of Resources are important not because they eliminate the need for philanthropy, but because they create forms of collective access to resources that reduce the authority normally attached to their original providers. In this sense, Owneh moves the discussion from the question of whether philanthropy is good or bad towards a more specific question: how are resources organised, who has the power to decide how they are used, and what kinds of cultural life do these arrangements make possible?

This also helps clarify what Owneh contributes to the broader question of toxic philanthropy developed throughout this thesis. The problem is not only that certain donors may have problematic political interests or attach problematic conditions to their support. It is also that the concentration of resources can give funders the power to define priorities, needs, and acceptable forms of cultural production. Owneh does not eliminate this structural problem, but it experiments with ways of reducing it through collective governance, care, reciprocity, and redistribution. Its most significant contribution may

therefore be precisely its refusal to present the alternative as complete. By remaining open to revision and self-criticism, Ownah shows that less toxic forms of cultural support depend on an ongoing effort to question not only where resources come from, but also the power relations that accompany them.

Conclusion

The questions raised by this thesis remain particularly relevant as cultural organisations continue to operate in a funding environment in which public resources are often limited, earned income cannot sustain all forms of cultural production, and private support remains an important source of resources. Philanthropy can therefore provide support that cultural organisations need. At the same time, this thesis has shown that these resources are never entirely separate from the relationships of power through which they are provided. The central issue is therefore not whether philanthropy is inherently beneficial or harmful, but how resources are organised and governed, and how this affects cultural autonomy.

The first result of the research is that philanthropy is structurally ambivalent. As discussed in Chapter 1, cultural organisations depend on a combination of public, earned and private income because of the particular economic conditions of cultural production. Philanthropy can fill gaps left by markets and public funding and make activities, programmes and institutions possible that might otherwise struggle to survive. At the same time, private giving does more than simply transfer resources. Donors decide what to support, which causes or organisations they consider valuable, and sometimes under which conditions resources are provided. The relationship between donor and recipient can therefore involve an imbalance of power, especially when cultural organisations depend on a limited number of external sources.

This tension becomes clearer when philanthropy is considered not only as an individual act of giving, but also as a form of private power. Chapter 2 showed that the problems associated with what has been described as toxic philanthropy cannot be reduced to the intentions or moral character of individual donors. The cases examined — from Hans Haacke and the Guggenheim to the Sackler family, BP and Warren Kandors

— were very different, but they all revealed ways in which economic resources can become connected to institutional priorities, reputational interests and forms of cultural influence. The issue is therefore not simply that a particular donor may have problematic interests. More broadly, the concentration of resources can give private actors greater influence over cultural institutions and the conditions in which they operate.

This also points towards a more relational understanding of cultural autonomy. Autonomy does not disappear only when a donor directly dictates what an institution can or cannot do. It can also be affected through financial dependence, institutional governance, reputational concerns, expectations about future funding, or the anticipation of possible consequences. The cases discussed in chapter 2 show that economic dependence can shape the space in which cultural institutions make decisions, even when there is no direct interference. Cultural autonomy should therefore not be understood as complete independence from external resources. It can instead be understood as the capacity to negotiate the relationships through which those resources are obtained and governed.

This leads to the question that motivates the final part of the thesis: if external resources cannot simply be eliminated, can the relationships through which they circulate be organised differently? The analysis of Owneh suggests one possible direction. Rather than proposing a complete alternative to philanthropy, Owneh experiments with different ways of organising resources and decision-making. The Aid Watch makes funding itself an object of collective scrutiny. The Solidarity Fund provides temporary support for organisations that want to refuse or reconsider problematic funding. The Basket of Resources extends the idea of support beyond money, towards the sharing of spaces, equipment, knowledge, skills and other resources. Together, these practices move away

from a simple donor–recipient relationship and towards a more collective approach to resource governance.

The theoretical discussion in chapter 3 helps make sense of this shift through the principles of commons, care, reciprocity and redistribution. These perspectives draw attention to questions that are often less visible in conventional funding relationships: who decides how resources are used, what responsibilities organisations have towards one another, and what forms of support are needed to sustain cultural production beyond individual projects. From this perspective, support is not simply a transfer from one actor to another but can become part of a collective process of sustaining the conditions in which cultural activity takes place. At the same time, Owneh should not be understood as a universal model. Its possibilities are connected to the Palestinian context from which it emerged, and the initiative itself is still developing. External funding remains necessary, while collective governance can also create new tensions and inequalities. Its value therefore lies not in offering a ready-made replacement for philanthropy, but in testing other ways of organising and circulating resources.

The contribution of this thesis lies in bringing these questions together. The analysis of philanthropy and its limits show that the problem is not only who gives resources or what motivates them to give, but also how relationships of dependence are created around those resources. The cases discussed in Chapter 2 make this visible through different forms of influence, from censorship and reputational concerns to institutional governance. The analysis of Owneh then shifts the focus from identifying these problems to exploring how the structure of the relationship itself might be changed. In this way, the thesis connects the critique of philanthropic power with a broader question of resource governance: whether cultural organisations can develop forms of support in

which resources are shared more collectively and relationships of dependence can be negotiated rather than simply accepted.

Ultimately, this does not lead to a rejection of philanthropy, nor to a single alternative model. Instead, it suggests that cultural support can be understood as a question of how resources are organised, governed and circulated. The contribution of the thesis is therefore to move the discussion beyond the search for more ethical donors and towards the conditions under which cultural organisations receive and use resources. Owneh offers one situated example of this shift. Its importance lies precisely in showing that the relationship between resources and cultural autonomy does not have to be taken as fixed, and that different forms of sharing, reciprocity and collective governance can be explored. The question, then, is not simply who should fund culture, but how cultural resources can be organised in ways that leave greater space for cultural autonomy.

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