POLYPHONIC LIBRARY

VOLUME I

THE DISCIPLINE OF REFUSAL

Culture, Institutions, and Code in the Age of AI

DSLcollection

Sylvain Lévy & Dominique Lévy · Paris, 2026

POLYPHONIC LIBRARY

VOLUME I

The Discipline of Refusal

VOLUME II

Private Futures: Governance as Practice

VOLUME III

The Uncertainty Principle: Essays on Transmission

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The Polyphonic Architecture: Conducting Meaning with AI

Culture Survives Through Transmission: A Polyphonic Library is a single constitutional argument articulated across four volumes. Each volume foregrounds a different register — institutional, operational, epistemic, methodological — while the same Central Compass and the same core question run through all four: what, specifically, will you refuse to delegate, dilute, or scale?

VOLUME I · PREFACE

What This Volume Does

This first volume is the constitutional layer of the polyphonic library. It defines the problem that runs through all four volumes: how culture survives through transmission when institutions are overloaded, private futures are fragile, and AI has become part of the operating system of culture rather than an external tool.

It speaks mainly in the Strategist and Philosopher voices, with the Critic and Historian always present beneath the surface. Its task is not to solve every operational question, but to set the terms in which honest solutions must be sought: scale versus coherence, facade versus structural change, engagement versus resonance, human voice versus algorithmic governance.

DSLcollection appears here as a laboratory rather than as a narrative. The institutional arguments are tested against the specific experience of a small, deliberately constrained collection of Chinese contemporary art, governed under pressure in the two decades that led up to the current AI-mediated moment.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

DSLcollection is a private collection of Chinese contemporary art produced between 1997 and 2012: approximately 350 works, no permanent building, no ticketed visitors, governed since its founding by deliberate constraint rather than by ambition for scale. It is the laboratory in which the arguments of this book were tested.

I began collecting art forty years ago. The arguments here are not positions adopted after research, but conclusions forced by experience: by the sight of collections dissolving at auction, by the difficulty of explaining to a successor not just what the collection contains but why, by the specific disorientation of realising that an AI system could generate a convincing critical paragraph about a work I had acquired under conditions no system will ever be able to reconstruct.

This book was not planned as a book. It grew from governance questions that Dominique and I have been living with for nearly twenty years, questions that became more urgent, not less, as DSLcollection matured, as our children Karen and Raphaël joined its governance, and as the field quietly transformed around us.

There is a transition this text embodies more than it announces: from collector — decisions under uncertainty about what is worth keeping — to institution-builder — designing the conditions under which those decisions can be repeated, tested, and transmitted — to constitutional thinker — asking what must not be delegated if any governance is to remain honest.

This book was written using the method it proposes. Drafts were produced in the first person, with full biographical weight, then tested against each of the four polyphonic voices using AI as an instrument rather than as the originator of thought. The Central Compass made final determinations at each stage. That voice is mine; the accountability is mine; the errors of judgement, of emphasis, of confidence misplaced are mine.

Paris, 2026

INTONATION

The First Note

Before an ensemble plays, there is a moment of tuning. Each instrument finds its pitch. The process is public, unglamorous, and indispensable. Intonation is not performance; it is preparation: the act of bringing plural voices into a shared frame before the score begins.

This book brings together three registers that rarely occupy the same page: institutional analysis, governance theory, and a practice of writing that treats plurality as method rather than problem. Coherence, in each register, must be made and remade through decisions, structures, and the willingness to sign.

I have been collecting art for four decades. For nearly two of them, I have been building a specific kind of institution: small by design, constrained by conviction, increasingly aware that the choices made at the edges of a collection reveal its true character more faithfully than its centre.

Accountability is what links institutions, collections, and voice. A museum that cannot say no to a donor has lost its authority in all but name; a collection that cannot explain its limits to its own successors has already begun its dispersal; a writer who cannot say "I stand behind this" in an age when generative systems offer the comfort of plausible deniability has ceded the most important thing writing can do: carry a specific intelligence from one moment to the next.

Culture survives through transmission. The four voices that run through this book — Critic, Strategist, Philosopher, Historian, governed by a Central Compass — are defined formally elsewhere; what matters here is that they are present. The Critic has been asked to identify weakness before strength; the Strategist has compressed where the Philosopher wished to expand; the Historian has insisted on context when the present moment pressed for urgency. A Central Compass has made final determinations and signed.

INTRODUCTION

When Scale Stops Protecting

The argument this book makes is that the answer has nothing to do with scale and everything to do with governance.

Saks Fifth Avenue and the Louvre seem to inhabit different worlds. One sells luxury, the other safeguards culture; one is a private enterprise, the other a public monument. Yet both faced the same crisis in 2025: not of relevance but of internal coherence.

At Saks, store closures and the abrupt termination of longtime employees revealed that brand recognition no longer guarantees operational stability. At the Louvre, wildcat strikes by attendants and security staff exposed a sharper fault line: the institution had scaled to nearly ten million visitors annually, yet the people responsible for making those visits possible could no longer recognise their own labour in the museum's public image.

Both institutions remained powerful symbols. Inside, the mechanisms that once translated visibility into institutional health had broken down.

The museum's crisis is not only institutional. It reflects a broader migration of power from the visible to the ambient — from coercive decree to environmental optimisation that no previous generation of museum directors had to confront directly. When a recommendation engine trains you to love lighter things until depth feels inconvenient, the structural question facing every cultural institution becomes

sharper: against what, exactly, is the museum claiming to hold ground?

Three Arguments

— The institutional argument. The museum of the 21st century faces a crisis not of relevance but of internal coherence; scale, past a threshold, corrodes rather than protects; the path forward is not more growth with better management, but the courage to define, publicly and precisely, what the institution will not do.

— The governance argument. Fewer than one in five significant private collections survives intact beyond the founder's lifetime; the bonsai institution responds with deliberate constraint — ceiling, editorial line, annual turnover, transparency — and a discipline of deciding under genuine uncertainty.

— The voice argument. AI has exposed that voice was never natural; it was always constructed; the difference now is that we must construct it consciously or cede it entirely. Polyphonic architecture proposes a method in which multiple internal voices are orchestrated under a single accountable compass.

> *Between these arguments runs a simple operational question: what, specifically, will you refuse to delegate, dilute, or scale? The answer is your governance.*

INTERLUDE I

Sapiens 3.0: The Third Rewriting

Before asking how institutions transmit culture, we must ask what kind of being transmission is trying to reach.

Homo sapiens has been rewritten before. Writing extended memory beyond the body and made the past retrievable, then challengeable, producing a new subject capable of accumulating knowledge across generations and arguing with predecessors long dead. Print and institutional architecture made individuals simultaneously legible to power and capable of organising against it.

We are living through a third rewriting. This one operates at a different depth. Sapiens 3.0 is not being remade by new tools for recording or transmitting thought; it is being remade by systems that intervene inside the conditions under which thought forms, shaping what presents itself as desirable, what registers as real, what dissolves from attention before it has been given a name.

The previous rewrites produced new capacities. This one may be producing a new kind of incapacity, one that feels like freedom because it arrives as personalisation, convenience, the quiet sensation of being understood.

> *The telescreen no longer stares; it whispers. And what it whispers is not commands but preferences: your preferences, reflected back with such precision that the question of whether they were yours to begin with becomes difficult to answer.*

The most visible symptom in cultural institutions is the redesigned exhibition path: walls scaled for vertical photographs, corridors lit for ten-second videos, labels shortened to the character limit of a caption. These are architectural statements about what kind of attention the institution now designs for. The works remain; the conditions that once allowed slow, uncertain, transformative encounters with them are quietly removed in the name of accessibility, and the institution congratulates itself for broadening its reach.

What is at stake is whether the kind of attention that makes cultural transmission possible — slow, uncertain, willing to be changed by what it encounters — remains available as a human capacity at all. The recommendation engine does not ask you to betray what you love; it trains you to love lighter things until depth itself starts to feel inconvenient, not through prohibition but through the gradual reconfiguration of what the environment rewards.

Every institution that publishes on platforms, seeks algorithmic visibility, and designs communication for scroll speed is participating in this rewriting even when it tries to resist. The question is no longer whether to operate inside this infrastructure, but whether the operation is conscious, governed, and clear about what it is protecting. That clarity is what distinguishes the institution that uses platforms

from the institution that is used by them.

CHAPTER ONE

The Museum of the 21st Century

Scale, Mission, and the Architecture of Refusal

When scale stops protecting, mission must become the load-bearing wall.

The museum has become the most overloaded figure in the cultural field: archive and agora, sanctuary and social hub, research lab and entertainment venue, engine of tourism and anchor of local memory. Its buildings are monumental, its operating margins thin, its publics plural and often incompatible. The question is not whether museums remain necessary — they do — but whether the twentieth-century museum form can survive its current workload without hollowing out its core.

1. When scale stops protecting

For decades, scale was treated as protection: bigger collections, larger buildings, higher visitor numbers, broader programmatic footprints were assumed to increase resilience. That assumption now fails; beyond a point, scale actively undermines the alignment between mission, governance, and operational speed — the three elements whose desynchronisation produces institutions incapable of integrating feedback, adapting in time, or protecting their own workers from

exhaustion.

2. Finance as structured dependence

Museum finance is a map of dependence. Each revenue stream — public subsidy, philanthropy, corporate sponsorship, ticketing, retail, hospitality — carries a different vulnerability and a different form of pressure on programming. The COVID-19 crisis made this visible: across the US museum sector, operating income fell by around 40%; one third of institutions feared permanent closure.

Scale and revenue diversification became existential buffers, but only for those who had already achieved them. The exportable museum — the institution that licenses its name to new cities at hundreds of millions of euros — was the most candid response: prestige is transferable by definition; ecosystem is not. Over time, these pressures generate mission drift: museums founded to serve local communities design primarily for international visitors; institutions built to take curatorial risks become risk-averse; directors spend more time managing stakeholders than shaping intellectual direction.

3. From accumulation to argument

The historical ideal tended toward accumulation: more objects, more departments, more categories. An alternative is to treat collections as arguments rather than inventories; what matters is less how much is owned than how clearly a collection articulates relationships, hypotheses, and questions across time.

An argument, unlike an inventory, requires a position. The position need not be correct — the most honest collections hold open the possibility of being wrong — but it must be held, tested against every acquisition, and capable of generating refusals. An inventory grows by inclusion; an argument grows by pressure. The difference is the difference between a will and a constitution.

What makes an argument transmissible is that it can be understood, contested, and continued by someone who did not originate it. An inventory passes through time as a catalogue — accessible, classifiable, eventually searchable — but the intelligence that produced it dies with the collector or disperses with the institution. An argument survives as a set of constraints that remain active.

The cost of running a collection as argument rather than inventory is real: it requires refusing works that are excellent but incoherent with the position; it requires holding a position long enough to be contested rather than updating it to avoid criticism; it requires building governance that maintains the argument's pressure rather than relaxing it as the collection matures. None of this is comfortable. It is the precise discomfort that transmission requires.

4. What directors must decide

— Define publicly what the institution will not do; refusal is now as strategically important as any new programme.

— Match financial complexity with governance clarity; refuse funding that quietly distorts mission before it arrives, not after it has shaped programming.

— Formalise internal polyphony; map the institution's voices — scholar, educator, community advocate, commercial operator — and assign each a defined role in constitutive decisions.

— Treat digital work as constitutional; invest in data, metadata, and accessible knowledge as a precondition for relevance in an AI-mediated public sphere.

> *The museum of the 21st century will be defined not only by what it shows, but by what it refuses to become.*

INTERLUDE II

The Lampedusa Threshold

> *"Se vogliamo che tutto rimanga com'è, bisogna che tutto cambi." — Tancredi's sentence in Il Gattopardo does not describe the world; it reveals its operating system: the management of change, its orchestration, its domestication.*

Facade change alters what is visible — language, imagery, leadership titles, programme names — while leaving untouched the mechanisms of validation, the circuits of recognition, and the governance structures that determine who decides what. Structural change touches those mechanisms directly, with consequences for who holds authority and under what conditions.

A museum launches AI-assisted labels; every work gets an accessible summary; reading levels are calibrated; languages multiply; visitor surveys improve; the board is satisfied. But the governance structure that determines what is acquired, what is shown, and whose knowledge counts remains unchanged. The change is real and perfectly designed to leave everything that matters intact.

Contrast this with an institution that restructures its acquisitions committee to include community members with decision-making authority, not advisory roles; slower, less photogenic, generating internal friction, producing over time a collection whose argument looks different from what any single founding perspective would have

produced. That is structural change; it costs something. Facade change rarely does.

> *The real question is not whether everything must change for everything to remain the same; it is whether we still have the courage to identify what, within our systems, should not remain the same.*

INTERLUDE III

The Artist

The governance architecture this book proposes holds four voices. None of them is the one who made the work.

In 2004, a large painting entered DSLcollection from a studio on the edge of Beijing, in a winter that smelled of coal and cold concrete. It was not abstract in any tradition I could cite, not figurative in any familiar school. It had been made by laying down and removing material over months: each layer refusing simply to cover what was underneath, each removal refusing simply to reveal what had been there before. What remained was a surface that held both operations simultaneously, without resolving them into a legible third thing.

I did not know what to call it. I acquired it anyway.

The Critic had nothing to press against; the Strategist had no forecast to run; the Philosopher could not name the assumption; the Historian had no arc to place it in. What was operating was something prior to governance: a form of attention the artist had demanded of the surface, which the surface now demanded of anyone who stood before it.

Every work in DSLcollection was made under conditions I did not govern and cannot fully reconstruct. The artist knows something the institution cannot know: what it costs to make the decision the work required — not financial or reputational cost, but the specific intellectual and material cost of refusing resolution when available

formal languages want to resolve.

> *Governance exists to protect that refusal, not to reproduce it. A collection that forgets this difference has stopped transmitting culture and started transmitting itself.*

CHAPTER FOUR

Three Ecologies of Culture

Mega-museum, Pop-up, Bonsai Institution

No single institutional form is sufficient; each depends on the others' survival.

— The mega-museum — knowledge through accumulation. Its achievement is comprehensiveness; its risk is institutional mass: the gravitational field that bends every decision toward self-perpetuation.

— The pop-up — reach without accumulation. Its achievement is scale of encounter; its risk is disposability: nothing accumulates, each iteration is expendable, the logic is extractive.

— The bonsai institution — coherence with deliberate limits. Its achievement is precision; its risk is insularity: when every acquisition is measured against internal logic, the collection can become a hall of mirrors.

These forms do not rank; they constitute an ecology. The mega-museum legitimises fields that smaller collections curate intensively; the bonsai institution preserves forms of attention mass institutions struggle to maintain; the pop-up draws audiences into initial encounters that the other forms deepen. Remove any one and the ecology becomes less capable of producing the full range of cultural effects that transmission requires.

> *Private collections that lend major works, publish research, and make catalogues accessible are not performing generosity; they are servicing a debt. The public museum made the private collector's authority possible; the least a collector owes is legibility.*

CHAPTER FIVE

Technology as Constitution

Platforms, Governance, and the Non-delegable Line

Platforms are not neutral channels; they are constitutional documents written in code.

Every technology that becomes infrastructure becomes, in time, constitutional: it embeds rules, priorities, and distributions of power. When a museum publishes on such platforms, it tacitly accepts the platform's constitution unless it has its own architecture strong enough to resist.

1. What algorithmic governance does to cultural value

Algorithms curate. They favour what resembles what has already performed well, promote content likely to retain attention, and learn from aggregate behaviour at scale. Over time, the visible becomes more visible; the obscure remains obscure. Statistical ancestry becomes social fate: models no longer describe cultural value; they help produce it.

2. Resonance as the honest counter-metric

Engagement measures the friction of a transaction, not the depth of an encounter. Resonance is what culture tries to produce: the capacity of a work, an institution, or an argument to alter how someone sees — not

immediately or measurably at exposure, but durably as the encounter continues to generate meaning.

The deeper problem is not that engagement is the wrong metric — it is that engagement metrics become, over time, the institution's primary shared language. No one decides to let metrics govern programming. Programming drifts toward what metrics can measure, and the drift is invisible because it is incremental and individually rational at every step.

The counter-practice is to maintain, alongside quantitative dashboards, a qualitative record of resonance events: works that generated correspondence long after they were shown; exhibitions discussed in contexts the institution did not engineer; loans requested by institutions that encountered the collection in a catalogue, not at an opening. These are not metrics; they are evidence. Evidence can be contested and interpreted; a metric, once embedded in a reporting cycle, tends to govern without being interrogated.

3. The non-delegable line

Convenience and cost press constantly toward automation. The governing distinction is simple: if a decision changes the identity of the institution or collection — what it is, what it stands for, what it chooses to remember — it must not be delegated. If a decision affects only how known content is accessed, delegation may be acceptable under oversight.

> *That line is constitutional; remove it and you have not streamlined governance, you have abandoned it. To enter the digital field without governance is not openness; it is abdication.*

CHAPTER SIX

AI and Cultural Authority

Biographical Knowledge, Procedural Mimicry, and the Signature

Artificial intelligence does not erase authority; it reveals where authority truly sits.

AI does not create the crisis of cultural authority; it reveals a crisis that already existed by making visible how much authority was procedural rather than biographical.

Procedural authority derives from role, credential, or proximity to legitimate institutions; it is, in principle, replicable. An AI trained on decades of criticism can mimic its conventions convincingly.

Biographical authority derives from something irreplicable: a specific intellectual and experiential trajectory that produces situated knowledge. A collector who acquired Chinese contemporary art in 1997 — before the market and canonical judgements existed — possesses knowledge no system trained only on subsequent records can reproduce; those decisions are inscribed in the collection.

For institutions, epistemic exhaustion produces something more specific and more dangerous than individual paralysis: indistinction. An institution that cannot maintain the perceptible difference between its authoritative knowledge and the well-produced content of any

sophisticated operator has not merely lost credibility; it has lost its function. It becomes a distribution point for content it did not originate, surrounded by the prestige of a history it can no longer reproduce.

The signature is not a denial of AI involvement; it is a claim that a specific human intelligence was present at every consequential juncture and will stand accountable. The temptation, when AI produces fluent text quickly, is to reduce the compass role to approval: read the output, find it adequate, and sign; over time, that erosion is how authority hollows out.

> *The test for AI in cultural institutions is not technical quality but whether human authority remains genuinely active at every consequential juncture.*

CHAPTER SEVEN

DSLcollection as Laboratory

Three Instruments, One Argument

A laboratory is useful not because it produces answers but because it makes questions precise enough to test.

In 1997, Chinese contemporary art was not a market category, not a canonical field, and not the subject of significant Western institutional attention. Dominique and I began acquiring works not because an index told us to but because we were convinced something was happening in studios across China that the art world had not yet accounted for — and that the window in which that moment could be encountered on its own terms would not stay open indefinitely.

Ceiling and bonsai discipline

Approximately 350 works, with annual rotation, forcing every new acquisition to justify itself against the whole. This converted the collection from inventory into argument.

Acquisition window 1997–2012

A statement that this period constitutes a closed historical argument, not a continuously updated survey. The silence about what came after is a position, not an omission.

VR Museum — The Governance of Space Made Visible

The decision to present DSLcollection without architecture forced a confrontation this book has been circling: every display is a governance decision. A physical museum embeds its decisions — about proximity, sequence, arrival, scale — in load-bearing walls; those decisions become invisible because they become structural. By removing the walls, the VR museum made the decisions themselves the content.

Shown at the Oscar Niemeyer Museum in Curitiba, the National Museum of Colombia, and the Museum of Tolerance in Moscow, it was received differently in each context — which was the point: the same argument producing different meaning depending on who brings what to the encounter. That is not ambiguity; it is what resonance looks like from the inside.

The involvement of Karen and Raphaël in governance is the experiment this laboratory has been building toward. The founding hypothesis, acquisition logic, and governance framework were never ends in themselves; they were instruments of transmission. Whether they work depends on whether the next generation can engage with them as living intelligence rather than inherited constraint.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Future of Cultural Stewardship

Interval, Transmission, and the Score That Must Be Played

Stewardship is not preservation; preservation is for archives. Stewardship is the decision, made continuously, to keep something alive.

Continuity of purpose now requires explicit articulation. The implicit understanding that sustained a collection through its founding decades — shared sensibility, intuitive knowledge of what was being built and why — is not automatically transmissible; it must be made explicit in documents, frameworks, and sustained conversations across generations.

There is always an interval: the period after the founder's biographical authority has withdrawn and before the successor's has accumulated. During that interval, the collection is most vulnerable not to external shocks but to quiet erosion of the founding argument.

Warburg's library survived not because successors matched his brilliance but because his organising intelligence was embedded in structure. The goal here is analogous: not replication of judgements, which is impossible, but preservation of the conditions under which comparable judgements can be made.

Polyphonic architecture is one answer to that problem: a score that future practitioners can play differently, provided they understand why the constraints exist and have earned the right to know when to break them.

> *Fidelity, in times of acceleration, is not a posture; it is a set of refusals. The collector who refuses to delegate the acquisition decision to an index; the director who refuses to substitute engagement data for curatorial intelligence; the heir who refuses to inherit the works without inheriting the argument — these are not acts of conservation. They are acts of constitution, made under pressure, in the knowledge that nothing guarantees their success.*

What dissolves when transmission fails is rarely the object. The objects go to auction, to storage, to another collection. What dissolves is the argument the objects were making: the hypothesis about a period, a practice, a possibility, that only held together as long as someone understood why these works and not others, why this sequence and not another, why this ceiling and not an expansion. When that understanding goes, what remains is inventory. Inventory has value. It is not the same thing.

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