

POLYPHONIC LIBRARY

VOLUME II

PRIVATE FUTURES

Governance as Practice for
Collections and Heirs

DSLcollection

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POLYPHONIC LIBRARY

VOLUME I

The Discipline of Refusal

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The Polyphonic Architecture: Conducting Meaning with AI

This volume is the operational layer of the polyphonic library. Where Volume I set the constitutional terms, Volume II enters the room where decisions are actually taken: at kitchen tables, in storage spaces, in the quiet negotiations that decide whether a collection survives the generation that built it.

VOLUME II · PREFACE

From Constitution to Practice

If Volume I set out the constitution under which culture now operates, Volume II moves into the room where decisions are actually taken: at kitchen tables, in storage spaces, and in the quiet negotiations that decide whether a collection survives the generation that built it. It speaks primarily in the Strategist and Critic voices, with the Philosopher keeping the frame and the Historian insisting that governance is part of a much longer story than any single founder's life.

The thesis is simple and unforgiving: fewer than one in five significant private collections survives intact beyond the founder's lifetime, and this is not bad luck but the predictable consequence of undeclared goals and absent design. Endurance is not an outcome. It is a design task.

This volume offers a vocabulary, a set of instruments — the bonsai discipline, the Lampedusa Test, governance work, resonance as criterion — and a series of concrete episodes in which those instruments were tested under pressure. DSLcollection appears here not as exemplary success but as a working blueprint: what we got right, what we got wrong, and what it cost to learn the difference.

INTONATION

Speaking Where Silence Usually Begins

The art world does not lack discourse. Museums, markets, biennials, and platforms generate endless commentary. Yet when attention turns to private collections — their governance, their durability, their fate when founders age or heirs hesitate — the conversation often stops.

Decisions that determine a collection's survival are usually taken behind closed doors. Private collections are treated as private lives rather than as cultural actors, even though their choices shape what is preserved, circulated, and remembered. For many collectors, this silence is not theoretical. It is lived.

This text steps into that gap. It is not a manual or a doctrine. It is a working blueprint, unfinished by design and open to disagreement. It is written from storage spaces and studios, from fairs and kitchen tables, after decades of collecting and with the rare experience of already watching our children reinterpret what we built.

Not every collection is meant to endure. Some are autobiographical forms whose true completion is dispersal. The claim here is narrower: those which aspire to endure must recognise endurance as a design task. That task cannot be postponed to the last chapter. By the time the last chapter writes itself, governance has already arrived too late.

FOUNDATIONAL TERMS

The Vocabulary This Blueprint Requires

In private collections, imprecise language is not harmless. Vagueness merely postpones conflict. When pressure arrives — succession negotiations, valuation disputes, disagreements between heirs — undefined words force power to stand in for deliberation. Whoever holds the legal or financial instrument also holds the argument, because no other argument was built.

Bonsai institution — Deliberate constraint as founding discipline.
Instruments: ceiling, editorial line, annual turnover, transparency. A method, not an identity.

Editorial line — Stated, debatable principles governing decisions. For DSLcollection: Chinese contemporary art, roughly 1997–2012. A thesis, not a preference.

The Three Ds — Death, Divorce, Debts. Treated as design constraints, not surprises; the statistically routine vectors that dissolve ungoverned collections.

Governance work — What a work does to the framework, not only to the wall. A work that forces the collection to change how it decides what belongs.

Transmission — The passing of intelligence, method, and authority across generations, not merely the transfer of objects.

Polyphonic architecture — Multiple institutional voices functioning as governance structure rather than communication strategy.

Archipelago — A network of small autonomous institutions connected by shared principles, enabling scale without consolidation.

Resonance — The conversion of ideas into altered practice, rather than attention or visibility.

The Interval — The dangerous period between one authority ending and another becoming legitimate.

The Lampedusa Threshold — The test distinguishing structural reform from facade change: does this alteration redistribute decision-making power, or only the language describing it?

Constitutive acts — Decisions that cannot be delegated: acquisition, deaccession, editorial line, contextualisation, selection of key advisers.

These definitions are not safeguards against change. They are joints that allow movement without collapse. A framework that cannot name its own limits becomes ideology. One that can, becomes transmissible.

PART ONE

Why Govern?

CHAPTER ONE

Governance as Practice

A collection becomes an institution the moment it can explain, without delay or decoration, why it holds what it holds and refuses what it refuses, in the room where those decisions actually cost something.

Governance is not an annual report. It is a habit of mind. It takes place when someone says yes or no and the collection becomes imperceptibly more or less itself. Identity rarely collapses in a single decision; it drifts, consolidating quietly through repeated concessions.

1. The Refusal Decision

A sponsor offers funding aligned with the programme but misaligned with the institution's values. The ungoverned response is to rationalise acceptance. The governed response is to decline because coherence, once fractured, costs more to rebuild than to defend.

2. The Deaccession Decision

A work once central no longer advances the collection's argument. The ungoverned response is to keep it and adjust the narrative. The governed response is to release it publicly and without embarrassment. A collection that cannot let go is not curating; it is storing.

3. The Platform Decision

Algorithms reward spectacle over depth. The ungoverned response is submission: programming shaped by metrics rather than conviction. The governed response is navigation: knowing the system well enough to move through it without being absorbed.

None of these decisions is exceptional. They recur monthly, sometimes weekly, in any collection that operates publicly. The collection is always choosing. The only question is whether the choice is deliberate.

What links the three decision types is a single underlying principle: governance is what happens when a collection is forced to make its implicit logic explicit under conditions where that explicitness costs something. Every institution that has never been forced to make that statement under genuine pressure has not yet been tested. It has only been comfortable.

KAREN'S NOTE

Governance sounds abstract until you refuse money you need. In 2021, we declined a partnership that would have funded our entire digital programme for two years. The sponsor asked only for a limited editorial voice – nothing overt. We said no. The refusal forced us to articulate, under financial pressure, what the digital programme was actually for. Governance is not protection. It is diagnosis. I should add: I was the one most reluctant. My father was more certain than I was. Governance does not always move from founder to successor. Sometimes the older intelligence holds the line while the younger one is still weighing.

CHAPTER TWO

The Bonsai Discipline

In bonsai, constraint is not imposed on art. It is the art.

Beauty emerges from the tension between growth and intervention. The master studies the tree for years before making the first decisive cut. Each adjustment makes visible a logic that began underground. What endures is not the gesture but the discipline behind it.

In the spring of 2008, Dominique and I visited the classical gardens of Suzhou. The oldest trees were shaped by generations of gardeners, each inheriting the work of the one before. The gardener told me the hardest skill was not knowing what to add, but knowing what the tree no longer needed. I recognised our collection in that image — not as it was, but as what it could become.

Four Instruments

1. The Ceiling

A fixed maximum number of works. For DSLcollection: approximately 350. At that number, every acquisition becomes a forced choice: something must be considered for departure before something new can arrive. This converts the collection from warehouse into essay — an argument that must continuously justify itself rather than simply expanding to accommodate new evidence.

2. The Editorial Line

Stated, debatable scope that functions as thesis rather than vague preference. For DSLcollection: Chinese contemporary art, roughly 1997–2012. The line can be tested, contested, and revised — but only explicitly, never through quiet expansion.

3. Annual Turnover

A deliberate rate of rotation — for us, roughly 10 percent per year — obliging each work to re-earn its place in relation to the argument the collection makes now, not the argument it made when the work was acquired.

4. Transparency

Recorded rationales for acquisitions and deaccessions, legible enough that successors can reconstruct the intelligence behind decisions, not merely the decisions themselves.

From the outside, this looks like modesty. From the inside, it is the work. Constraint forces choice; choice reveals character; character, documented, becomes the inheritance.

DOMINIQUE'S NOTE

The bonsai metaphor can make constraint sound serene. In practice, choosing constraint under market pressure is not serene. In 2011, when three major galleries were offering us works by artists we genuinely admired, at prices reflecting a window we knew would close, we said no because the ceiling held. The gardener in Suzhou has already made peace with the cut. We were still arguing.

RAPHAËL'S NOTE

One summer I read through the acquisition rationales – the internal ones, not the public texts. I realised how many works I thought I "knew" had been contested at the moment of acquisition. The collection I recognised on the wall was the resolved version. The governed version – the one worth inheriting – was the version in which the argument was still open.

What the Bonsai Cannot Hold

- Scale. Some arguments require accumulation that a ceiling forbids. A collection attempting to document the full range of a national tradition cannot function as an essay. It must function as an archive, and the archive has different imperatives.
- Disorder. Coherence pursued too rigidly becomes an immune system against the disruption a collection needs. A framework not genuinely unsettled in several years is not stable; it is closed.
- Opacity. Transparency has legitimate limits, particularly where artists need to withhold meaning from premature fixity. Some

decisions are made ahead of the language available to describe them. The bonsai discipline should accommodate that lag.

The point is not that every collector should become a bonsai gardener. It is that every collector should design deliberately for whichever outcome they truly intend. The failure this volume documents is not the choice of dispersal. It is the failure to choose.

CHAPTER THREE

The Lampedusa Test

"If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change." – Tancredi, in Il Gattopardo

The Lampedusa Threshold is the point at which change stops being structural and becomes facade. Private collections cross this threshold constantly. The family constitution is drafted by expensive lawyers. The advisory board is appointed with ceremony. The founder announces a new era of shared governance. And yet the acquisition logic remains unchanged; the next generation has a title but not a vote.

Facade vs Structural Change

- Facade change produces documents.
- Structural change produces altered behaviour in high-stakes situations.

The test is what happens when the founder and the heir disagree. Who decides? If the answer is always "the founder," the reform was decorative.

Five Diagnostic Questions

- Name one governance reform you have introduced. Could it override the founder? If not, it is advisory. Name it accurately.

- Does this reform redistribute who can say no? A reform that leaves the right of refusal unchanged has left governance unchanged.
- Is there a documented case in which this reform has already produced a decision the founder would not have made alone? If not, it remains hypothetical.
- Would this reform survive the founder's death without renegotiation?
- Does the next generation have standing to invoke this reform against the founder's expressed preference?

Structural Change in Practice

In DSLcollection, structural change began in 2019 when we formalised Karen's veto right on deaccession decisions. Not an advisory role. A veto. Used once, in the first two years, not to block a deaccession but to slow it — requiring a three-month deliberation that produced a different outcome.

What structural change feels like from the inside is worth naming, because the feeling is easy to misread. It does not feel like liberation. It feels like friction — slow, slightly expensive, generating conversations no one involved would have chosen to have at that moment. Harmony, in a governance context, is often the sign that the mechanism has not been reached.

The discomfort is not a side effect of structural change. It is the evidence of it. An institution that has introduced structural reform and feels entirely comfortable should apply the Lampedusa Test to itself.

If reading this book produces only the satisfaction of recognition without any decision that is genuinely harder to make, then it has crossed its own Lampedusa threshold.

CHAPTER FOUR

Governance Work

A work does governance work when it reshapes how an institution decides what belongs. It does not simply illustrate the editorial line; it bends it.

Most works in any collection are illustrative. They exemplify the argument, earn their place, and leave the structure intact. Works that do governance work are rarer and more uncomfortable. Their function is to reveal that the framework was incomplete — not wrong, but unfinished.

A practical test: ask of any candidate work, if we acquire this, what becomes more difficult to justify in what we already hold? If the honest answer is "nothing," the work is probably illustrative. If the answer produces genuine discomfort, the work is probably doing governance work. The discomfort is the signal.

Practice Notes — Governance, Constraint, Lampedusa

- What does your collection's ceiling currently signal — not what it intends, but what it actually signals when a compelling work arrives

and must be refused?

- Can you state your editorial line in one sentence that someone outside your institution could challenge?
- Name a governance reform from the past five years. Has it produced an outcome the founder disliked and could not override?
- What is the last work you acquired that made something already in the collection harder to justify?
- In your collection, who can say no to the founder, formally and on the record? The distribution of refusal is the distribution of governance.

PART TWO

Episodes in Value

CHAPTER FIVE

Episodes in Value

*Governance is not a general theory. It is a pattern visible
across specific, situated decisions.*

2009 — The Video That Interrogated the Collection

We acquired a multi-screen video installation by a Chengdu-based artist documenting the demolition of a neighbourhood where her family had lived for three generations. Long, unhurried cycles; sparse sound; power in proximity: hands packing bowls, a corridor emptied of furniture, a window becoming dust.

At the time, our collection was dominated by large-scale painting. The video introduced an uncomfortable question: was our emphasis on painting a deliberate editorial position, or the unexamined inheritance of a market logic we had absorbed by proximity? The answer was unsettling. We had not chosen painting with the rigour we believed. We had followed its gravitational pull. The video did governance work.

2015 — The Photographs That Revealed a Fault Line

We acquired a series of large-format digitally manipulated portraits. Together with an earlier installation addressing state surveillance, the works exposed a fault line. We had been treating surveillance as a subject. It was, in fact, a condition: a logic already structuring the image from within.

2017 — The Removal That Created More Than It Displaced

We deaccessioned a painting by a well-known artist whose market position had strengthened significantly since acquisition. Internally, it no longer generated friction. The most important removals are not failures of judgement but recognitions that a work's generative capacity has been spent within a given configuration. Governance is not only acquisition; it is pruning.

Three Principles of Deciding Under Uncertainty

1. Name what you do not know.

A rationale that acknowledges its own incompleteness is more transmissible than one that claims certainty it did not have.

2. Hold the compass, not the position.

Values stable; specific bets revisable. A collection that cannot revise a specific position without feeling it has abandoned its identity has confused the instrument with the goal.

3. Document the refusals.

A refusal ledger is not an archival nicety. It is an epistemological instrument. A collection's acquisitions reveal its theory of value in its most confident register. Its refusals reveal the same theory under stress: what it was tempted by, what gave it pause, and why, finally, it drew back. That record of temptation and withdrawal is the most honest account a collection can give of what it actually believes.

Most collections do not keep this record. The refusals disappear — no press release, no catalogue entry, no governance file. What survives is the curated version: a sequence of confident affirmations. The governed version is less flattering and more true.

DOMINIQUE'S NOTE

The 2009 video was not unanimously welcomed. I supported it immediately. Sylvain hesitated — not about the work's quality, but about what its inclusion would demand of the existing logic. My support was structural, not only aesthetic. Over time, I have learned to read his hesitation — when it takes that particular form — as a governance barometer. Not always. But often enough.

CHAPTER SIX

What We Got Wrong and What It Built

*The failures here are not illustrations of principles violated.
They are the source of the principles now in place.*

The Accumulation Mistake

Between 2005 and 2009, the collection grew in every direction. By 2010, perhaps sixty works could no longer be defended – not because they were bad, but because their presence answered no question the collection was asking. Once the ceiling was installed, the quality of decisions improved immediately.

The Geographic Blind Spot

For five years, we were culpably slow to look beyond the Beijing–Shanghai axis. We saw what our access permitted and mistook it for the field. The correction came from a curatorial partner in Chongqing who told us, calmly, that we had confused familiarity with quality. She was right.

DOMINIQUE'S NOTE

The blind spot was not only geographic. We were late in recognising women artists whose work did not speak in the idioms our networks privileged. Governance can feel rigorous while mirroring the biases of those who designed it. I knew this earlier than I said it. The gap between knowing and saying is itself a governance failure – one that belongs to me.

The Coherence Trap

Between 2013 and 2017, the collection became too coherent. Every work spoke so fluently to its neighbours that the ensemble hardened into a closed argument: graceful, self-reinforcing, increasingly deaf to what lay outside its frame. Coherence, unmanaged, had become a defence against surprise. That realisation led directly to the concept of governance work.

A collection that cannot name its own failures with precision is not learning from them. Testimony is governance. Naming what went wrong – specifically, with dates and costs – is the minimum intelligence a founder owes the next generation.

PART THREE

Digital Field, AI, and Polyphony

CHAPTER NINE

Resonance as Governance Criterion

*Engagement measures the friction of a transaction.
Resonance measures what culture actually does.*

Attention is now the easiest thing to buy and the hardest thing to interpret. For private collections, the more honest criterion is resonance:

- Does this work continue to surface in conversations long after its exhibition?
- Does this decision continue to shape how we think about the collection years later?

- Do our heirs and advisers return to specific works not because they are market-significant but because they are conceptually inescapable?

Resonance cannot be instrumented in dashboards. But it can be named, and naming it changes how governance meetings are conducted. A board that routinely asks "what will generate resonance?" rather than "what will drive engagement?" will make different decisions under the same financial constraints.

CHAPTER TEN

The Architecture of the Digital Field

The digital field is not a neutral extension of the collection. It is a regime of governance in its own right.

1. Digital is Constitutional

Decisions about what to photograph, how to index, which metadata to maintain, and what to allow AI systems to ingest are constitutional decisions. They determine what the collection will be known for, long after its physical configuration changes.

2. Platform Logic Is a Fourth D

Alongside Death, Divorce, and Debts, there is now Dissolution: the slow disaggregation of coherence through platform logic. Each concession — a caption shortened for shareability, a sequence disrupted for algorithmic reach — is individually minor and collectively transformative. The collection does not change its argument; it simply makes its argument progressively harder to locate. That difficulty, over time, becomes the argument's erasure.

3. Polyphony Must Be Encoded

If the only digital trace of a collection is promotional language, algorithmic systems will read it as one more marketing voice. To survive compression into machine-generated answers, a collection needs a

digitally visible body of thinking that exhibits internal plurality:
criticism, strategy, philosophy, history.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Polyphonic Architecture in Private Futures

Polyphonic architecture is not only a writing method. It is a governance structure.

- The Critic — Structurally empowered to identify where the collection is flattering itself. Mandate: to press, not to console.
- The Strategist — Responsible for aligning short-term choices with long-term endurance, including explicit planning around the Three Ds.
- The Philosopher — Guardian of the editorial line: asks whether the frame still fits the world, or whether the world has moved.
- The Historian — Keeper of memory: insists each decision be situated in a longer arc of what the collection has done and the field has forgotten.

Overlaying this is the Compass: the function, not the person, that accepts the burden of signature. In a family setting, this compass can migrate over time, but it cannot be vacant.

The AI Line We Will Not Cross

No decision that changes the identity of the collection — what it is, what it stands for, what it chooses to remember — will be taken on the basis

of AI recommendation without explicit human deliberation and signature.

We may use AI to surface options, draft language, or visualise scenarios. We will not allow it to become the silent arbiter of what belongs and what does not. That temptation is real. Its convenience is a danger.

CODA

Private Futures as Shared Responsibility

Private collections are not private in their effects. They shape markets, canons, and, increasingly, the training data that will instruct future AI systems about what art "is."

This volume has argued for one stance: that founders, heirs, and advisers share responsibility for turning a collection from a biographical footprint into a transmissible intelligence.

What this volume has not resolved — and should not claim to resolve — is worth naming. The bonsai discipline risks calcifying into orthodoxy: a constraint chosen freely becomes, over time, inherited dogma. The Lampedusa Test can be gamed: a sophisticated institution can redesign the test itself while leaving the mechanism untouched. Polyphonic architecture can become procedural theatre: four voices assigned to four people who learn which voice the founder finds most useful, and perform accordingly. These are the failures that follow from reading this book as instruction rather than as pressure.

None of these instruments guarantees survival. They do something rarer and more honest. They make it possible, if a collection dissolves, to know why – and to have the record of having tried, specifically and on the record, to build something that could outlast the trying.

DSLcollection

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Produced in the DSLcollection design system.

All errors of judgement, emphasis, and confidence misplaced are theirs.
