

Algorithms and Heirs

Two Forces Reshaping Art's Institutional Future

How algorithmic curation systems are mediating taste, and how private collectors are building institutions that outperform the public museum model — and why both raise the same question about the transmission of curatorial judgment.

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TWO PARTS · FIVE INSTITUTIONAL MODELS · ONE THESIS

Culture survives through transmission.

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PREAMBLE

The art market is being reshaped by two concurrent forces that can be set in productive tension: algorithmic curation systems that increasingly mediate taste, and private collectors who are building institutions that outperform the public museum model.

Both raise the same core question — what happens to curatorial judgment when the original source of authority (human taste, founder vision) is replaced or removed?

When an algorithm replaces a founder's taste, it optimises for engagement. When a collector dies without governance infrastructure, cultural assets enter a zone of institutional uncertainty where 61% of heirs are unprepared.

AI and Algorithmic Curation Inside the Art Market's Walls

Culture survives through transmission.

The Auction House as Test Case

Christie's and the AI Threshold

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The integration of AI into the art market is no longer speculative.

Christie's held the first-ever auction dedicated solely to AI-generated art in February 2025 — "Augmented Intelligence" featured 34 lots spanning five decades and realised \$728,784, exceeding its \$600,000 estimate with an 88% sell-through rate. Cryptocurrency was accepted for most lots.

The demographic signal was striking: 37% of registrants were entirely new to Christie's, and 48% of bidders were Millennials or Gen Z.

The top lot, Refik Anadol's *Machine Hallucinations — ISS Dreams — A* (2021, generated from 1.2 million ISS photographs), sold for \$277,200. Nicole Sales Giles, Christie's VP and Director of Digital Art Sales, framed the sale as redefining "the role of human intervention in fine art within the AI era."

Over 6,500 artists signed an open letter demanding cancellation, with key signatories including Karla Ortiz and Kelly McKernan. Ortiz called the sale a normalisation of "what I consider theft." Michigan concept artist Reid Southen reported his income had been "slashed in half" over two years due to AI.

The critical counter-voice came from Barry Threw, executive director of Gray Area in San Francisco: "Given the lack of sufficient public funding for the arts... artists are right to be concerned," but "the history of art is a history of technology development, and we desperately need artists to engage."

Months earlier, Sotheby's sold an Ai-Da Robot portrait of Alan Turing for \$1,084,800 (October 2024), obliterating its \$120,000–\$180,000 estimate across 27 bids — the first humanoid-robot artwork sold at a major auction. Meanwhile, Botto, an autonomous AI artist governed by a 15,000-member DAO, has generated \$4 million in cumulative sales with a 100% sell-through rate across roughly 140 artworks since 2021.

The Recommendation Engine as De Facto Curator

Culture survives through transmission.

The deeper structural shift is not in AI-generated art but in AI-mediated taste.

Artsy's Art Genome Project — modelled explicitly on Pandora's Music Genome Project and operational since 2012 — classifies artworks across over 1,000 "genes" (characteristics scored 0–100 by art historians), covering more than one million artworks by 100,000+ artists across 2,500 partner galleries. Its recommendation engine uses genetic similarity algorithms and collaborative filtering to surface works to collectors.

An ACM FAccT paper (2024) critiqued the system as "decontextualising art history," creating "an invisible history as perceived by the algorithm" through a flat network "devoid of contexts."

Laura Herman, a curator and Oxford PhD researcher, ran a revealing experiment called "The Algorithmic Pedestal," comparing Instagram's algorithmic curation with human artist curation of Metropolitan Museum images. Instagram's algorithm was biased toward faces; the human artist consistently preferred abstract imagery. Herman warns of a "Boring Apocalypse" scenario: "algorithms curating algorithmic art — with humans as passive consumers."

The Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University tested this directly in its exhibition "Act As If You Are a Curator," giving ChatGPT curatorial control over 21 works. The AI made surprising formal connections but also produced hallucinations — incorrect accession numbers, misidentified media. It gravitated toward safe themes (utopia, dystopia, dreams) rather than challenging ones.

This is the "algorithmic succession" problem in its purest form: when a recommendation engine — optimised for engagement and statistical likelihood rather than risk-taking, idiosyncratic judgment — becomes the de facto taste-maker for a collector or platform, it replaces the very thing that made great collections great.

As the *Frieze* analysis of a Rutgers/Facebook AI experiment concluded, the algorithm "produced what a second-rate, market-conforming artist would make" — identifying an "algorithmic bias against imagination at work, and against serious engagement." The *durum* of a collection — its hardness, its resistance to smoothing — is precisely what algorithms erode.

Valuation, Authentication, and the Data Layer

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Masterworks (NYC, founded 2017, valued at over \$1 billion) operates a proprietary "Data Engine" that evaluates approximately 15,000 artworks per year across 40+ variables — artist momentum, comparable sales, demand signals — selecting a small percentage for acquisition. It has purchased 419 artworks, sold 23 with a claimed 100% profitable exit rate, and paid out \$61 million in proceeds.

Wondeur AI tracks over 800,000 artists and claims 82% accuracy in predicting which artists will feature in major exhibitions; galleries using similar tools reportedly experienced a 29% increase in sell-through rates within two years.

In authentication, a landmark occurred in November 2024 when Germann Auction House in Zurich became the first to sell artworks authenticated solely by AI — three works verified by Art Recognition (Zurich, founded 2019), including a Marianne von Werefkin watercolour with no prior authenticity certificate that sold for CHF 15,000, nearly double its high estimate.

A competing firm, Hephaestus/ArtDiscovery (London), claims over 98.2% accuracy with its "Pictology" stylometric AI, needs only 30 training images, and became the first authentication company to back certificates with art authenticity insurance from an AA-rated insurer. No major auction house has yet adopted AI-only authentication, but the direction is clear.

KEY DATA — HISCOX ART AND AI REPORT 2024 / ART BASEL UBS 2025

40% of art collectors believe AI-generated art sales will grow.

ALGORITHMS AND HEIRS DSLcollection · 2026 **82%** want clearer distinctions between human-made and AI-generated

16% of seasoned collectors believe AI art could reach human-created price

IV Refik Anadol and the Institutional Legitimation Question

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Anadol is the test case for how institutions process AI art.

His *Unsupervised — Machine Hallucinations — MoMA* (2022) became the longest-running display in MoMA's history, attracting nearly 3 million visitors over a year. MoMA acquired the work as a gift in October 2023 — its first generative AI piece in the permanent collection, and its first tokenised artwork. The acquisition was organised by Michelle Kuo and Paola Antonelli.

Ben Davis (Artnet News) called the work "an extremely intelligent lava lamp" and warned that MoMA was "tacitly letting a new high-tech formalism through the door, one even flatter and less historical than Barr's." He argued the work "insinuates... that art history is just a bunch of random visual tics to be permuted, rather than an archive of symbol-making practices with social meanings." Jerry Saltz dismissed it as "a crowd-pleasing, like-generating mediocrity."

The Washington Post called it "an early masterpiece of AI-generated art."

Anadol has since exhibited at the Serpentine (London, 2024), Guggenheim Bilbao, Casa Batlló, The Sphere in Las Vegas (580,000 sq ft — the largest AI artwork to date), and the World Economic Forum in Davos. He plans to open *Dataland*, described as the world's first AI art museum, in spring 2026 — a 20,000 sq ft, five-gallery space in Frank Gehry's Grand LA complex, adjacent to MOCA, The Broad, and Walt Disney Concert Hall.

Institutional Resilience versus Algorithmic Homogenisation

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The Serpentine Galleries' *Future Art Ecosystems 4: Art × Public AI* report (March 2024) provides the most substantive institutional framework for these tensions. Authors Victoria Ivanova and Eva Jäger argue that "the mandate of cultural institutions is to make informed decisions that serve the public interest," and that "it is unclear whether models that are advanced by industry standards are necessarily fit for purpose for cultural organisations or artists." The report advocates "data trusts" — governance frameworks for cultural data used in AI training — and proposes "state management of computational quotas and taxes."

The NeurIPS 2024 paper "Monoculture in Matching Markets" (Kenny Peng, Cornell Tech) provides the theoretical backbone. Drawing on agricultural monoculture as metaphor, the research demonstrates that algorithmic monoculture — firms relying on a common algorithm — (1) selects less-preferred candidates when noise is well-behaved, (2) presents greater risk of systemic exclusion to more qualified applicants, and (3) disproportionately benefits applicants who submit many applications.

Applied to art: when collectors, galleries, and auction houses all feed from the same algorithmic pool, the result is not better curation but flatter, more homogeneous taste — the opposite of institutional resilience.

The *durum* of a collection — its hardness, its resistance to smoothing — is precisely what algorithms erode.

The Private Collector as Institutional Model

How private collections are outperforming public museums — and what their govern

Culture survives through transmission.

Five Models of Institutional Discipline

Culture survives through transmission.

Larry's List counted 446 privately founded contemporary art museums worldwide as of 2023, with 111 opening since 2016 alone — over 70% opened since 2000.

At the same time, public institutions are in documented crisis. The American Alliance of Museums' 2025 survey found that only 45% of US museums have matched 2019 attendance levels (down from 51% the prior year), 34% have had government grants cancelled, and for those losing federal funds, 67% report the funding has not been replaced at all. SMU DataArts calculated a 36% decline in total revenue for the US nonprofit culture sector from 2019 to 2024 (inflation-adjusted).

The Art Basel/UBS Survey of Global Collecting 2025 found that high-net-worth collectors attended an average of 7 private collection/foundation exhibitions in 2024 — matching the 7 public museum exhibitions they attended.

*This 1:1 parity is a structural inflection point:
private institutions now command equal
attention from the most economically significant
segment of the art audience.*

Glenstone — The Bonsai Institution

Founded by Mitchell and Emily Wei Rales, Glenstone holds approximately 1,300 post-WWII works across nearly 300 acres (total assets exceeding \$4.6 billion), yet caps daily visitors at roughly 600, bans phones and cameras in galleries, displays works in single-artist rooms with minimal wall text, and only collects artists with at least 15 years of exhibition history. Admission is always free.

Its 2025 reopening features Jenny Holzer, Simone Leigh, and Charles Ray — but on its own temporal rhythm, unresponsive to blockbuster cycles.

Fondation Louis Vuitton — Constraint at Scale

Bernard Arnault's Fondation Louis Vuitton (Frank Gehry building, 2014, €780 million construction) demonstrates how constraint can coexist with scale. Its collection is organised into just four thematic categories (Contemplative, Popist, Expressionist, Music & Sound), and it mounts only two major temporary exhibitions per year despite vast resources. It has drawn over 7 million visitors since opening and extends its reach through "Hors-les-murs" satellite programmes in Tokyo, Beijing, Munich, Seoul — broadening impact without diluting the core identity.

Fondation Cartier — Archive of Exhibition Making

Fondation Cartier opened a new 8,500 sqm Jean Nouvel-designed space in October 2025 at Place du Palais-Royal, becoming Paris's largest private art centre. It operates on what its curators describe as an "archive of exhibition making rather than archive of objects" — a 40-year practice of commissioning, then collecting. Its five mobile exhibition platforms (200–340 sqm each, adjustable to different heights) embody architectural flexibility in service of editorial precision.

DSLcollection — The Radical Bonsai

DSLcollection (Dominique and Sylvain Lévy, Paris, contemporary Chinese art) pushes constraint furthest: a hard cap of no more than 250 artworks at any time, with annual deaccessioning to make room for new acquisitions. It has no physical museum — exhibiting entirely through virtual reality since 2016 and the metaverse. This is the bonsai institution at its most radical: portable, digital-first, and defined entirely by editorial focus.

Zeitz MOCAA — Power and Fragility

Built around Jochen Zeitz's collection in a converted 1921 grain silo (Heatherwick Studio), Zeitz MOCAA was transformed under executive director Koyo Kouoh, who reshaped it with a Pan-African curatorial vision. Kouoh was appointed curator of the 61st Venice Biennale in December 2024 — the first African woman in the role — before her sudden death in May 2025 at age 57. The institution now faces precisely the succession question that defines private collections.

VIII The Succession Problem

The Central Governance Challenge

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The \$992 billion question hangs over the entire sector.

The Deloitte *Art & Finance Report 2025* estimates that \$992 billion in art and collectibles will change hands over the next decade as part of the broader \$31 trillion "Great Wealth Transfer." UHNWIs represent 13% of the transferring population but approximately 64% of the total value.

61% of collectors have not discussed their art collection with their heirs at all, and another 21% have only mentioned it without in-depth discussion.

Adriano Picinati di Torcello, Deloitte's 30-year veteran coordinator of the Global Art & Finance initiative, is blunt: "It's a critical issue, and if you are not well prepared, you will end up into a disaster." He describes clients with missing documentation, missing artworks, and no knowledge of what has been loaned out.

Four Transmission Models

The Barnes Foundation remains the paradigmatic cautionary tale. Albert Barnes (d. 1951) left explicit stipulations that his 4,000+ objects (now valued at an estimated \$25 billion) must remain "in exactly the places they are" at his Merion, Pennsylvania estate. By the 1990s, financial distress forced a court-approved move to downtown Philadelphia under the *cy pres* doctrine. The collection's integrity was sacrificed to institutional viability.

The Broad demonstrates what deliberate succession design looks like: after Eli Broad's death in 2021, founding director Joanne Heyler (26+ years with the institution) continued leadership, supported by Edythe Broad and a \$500 million+ endowment. A \$100 million expansion broke ground in April 2025, and Heyler has begun diversifying the collection beyond the founder's emphasis, adding artists like Mickalene Thomas and Amy Sberald.

The Fisher Collection/SFMOMA 100-year renewable loan arrangement preserves family ownership while integrating with a public institution — 735 works occupy 60,000 sq ft (40%+ of SFMOMA's gallery space). The Rubell Museum embodies multigenerational family governance: every acquisition now requires unanimous approval from all three Rubells (Don, Mera, Jason), and the collection of 7,700+ works has seen only 0.4% ever deaccessioned.

The Thyssen-Bornemisza collection spans four generations — from Baron Heinrich's 1920s Old Masters through Baron Hans Heinrich's modern expansion, to a 1993 sale to Spain for \$350 million, to granddaughter Francesca Thyssen's founding of TBA21, a contemporary art foundation now showing at the Madrid museum. This is the rarest achievement: multigenerational cultural continuity through institutional metamorphosis.

VIII Family Offices and the New Advisory Category

Culture survives through transmission.

The infrastructure for collection governance is rapidly professionalising.

Deloitte's 2024 Family Office survey counts 8,030 single family offices globally (up 31% from 6,130 in 2019), projected to reach 10,720 by 2030. The average age of principals is 68 — squarely in the succession zone. Post-succession, non-family professional leadership is expected to jump from 35% to 49%.

THE ADVISORY INFRASTRUCTURE — KEY FIGURES

63% of wealth managers report demand for collection management services (up from 52% in 2023).

72% of next-generation clients want holistic advisory services linking acquisition, finance, succession, and philanthropy.

Law firm Withers appointed former Sotheby's senior figure Mari-Claudia Jiménez in 2025 to expand art advisory for UHNW clients.

Citi places art at just 1% of average family office assets — but notes its importance far exceeds its allocation.

Citi's Hannes Hofmann frames the gap: "Art is more than an investment... it's about passion, supporting artists, and beautiful things that hopefully enhance the quality of life of the family in the future." The challenge is converting that emotional attachment into institutional durability.

Taste, Transmission, and the Question of Hardness

These two research domains converge on a single editorial thesis.

The algorithmic challenge and the succession challenge are the same problem viewed from different angles: both concern the transmission of judgment. When an algorithm replaces a founder's taste, it optimises for engagement, producing what *Frieze* called "a second-rate, market-conforming" output — the monoculture problem confirmed by NeurIPS research. When a collector dies without governance infrastructure, \$992 billion in cultural assets enters a zone of institutional uncertainty.

The private collections that succeed — Glenstone's 600-visitor cap, DSLcollection's 250-artwork limit, the Rubell family's unanimity rule, Fisher's 100-year trust — share a common logic of deliberate constraint.

They are "bonsai institutions" whose competitive advantage lies precisely in what they refuse to do: scale indiscriminately, chase blockbusters, or surrender editorial control to algorithms or committees.

Their *durum* — their institutional hardness — is the quality that resists both algorithmic homogenisation and the entropy of succession. The collections that fail are those where constraint was either too rigid to adapt or too weak to survive the founder's absence.

The editorial question is whether this logic of institutional hardness can be formalised, professionalised, and transmitted — or whether it is, like the curatorial judgment AI cannot replicate, irreducibly personal.



Sylvain Lévy

Co-founder, DSLcollection — 2026

DISCLAIMER

Who writes this, and why

These texts are written by Sylvain Lévy, co-founder with Dominique Lévy of the DSLcollection, a private collection of Chinese contemporary art (1997–2012) based in Paris, and of Aika, a consulting practice that works with collectors, institutions, and cultural organisations on governance, strategy, and collection stewardship. The collection holds approximately 350 works, governed by a strict ceiling, an annual rotation of roughly ten per cent, and a published editorial line. It has no physical museum. Since 2016, it has operated primarily through virtual environments. Karen and Raphaël Lévy are engaged in the collection's governance as the second generation.

I am not a journalist, an academic, or a market analyst. I am a collector who writes. The arguments in these pages come from four decades of engagement with art and twenty years of building a specific institution under specific constraints. They carry the authority of that experience and the blind spots that come with it.

What these texts try to do

Culture survives through transmission.

dslcollection.net

Chinese Contemporary Art 1997-2012