

DSL COLLECTION · 2026

THE POLYPHONIC ARCHITECTU RE

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Conducting Meaning in the Age of Artificial
Intelligence

Culture survives through transmission.

PREFACE

This manifesto was written to solve a practical problem: how to keep a human voice, a clear compass, and a coherent cultural argument alive in an age where artificial intelligence can generate endless, fluent text. It does not defend “the human” against “the machine”; it proposes a structure in which multiple internal voices – the Critic, the Strategist, the Philosopher, the Historian – can be consciously activated and orchestrated under a single, accountable signature.

The framework I call Polyphonic Architecture comes from four decades of engagement with art, a focused fifteen-year wager on Chinese contemporary art (1997–2012), and twenty years of writing and governance around DSLcollection. It is not a theory imported from elsewhere but a method distilled from practice: how to constrain a collection so it can be understood as an argument, how to work with AI without losing authorship, and how to embed a governing intelligence in structures that can survive their founder.

This text is therefore both retrospective and prospective. It makes explicit the logic that has guided DSLcollection until now — the bonsai scale, the acquisition window, the insistence on depth over scale — and offers a score that the next generation

can choose to play, extend, or contest. It is addressed to anyone who cares about collections, institutions, or writing as long-term commitments: a proposal for how to conduct meaning, with and alongside AI, without abandoning the responsibility to sign.

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01

The Problem of Voice in the Age of AI

Speed without signature is noise. The problem of our era is not the absence of words — it is the surfeit of voices without authors.

Something structural has shifted. It is not only that artificial intelligence can now generate text — competent, fluent, contextually adequate text — at industrial scale and negligible cost. What makes the present moment philosophically acute is that AI has exposed a prior confusion: the assumption that voice was natural, that authority inhered automatically in the person who typed the words. It did not. Voice was always constructed. The difference is that we now have to construct it consciously, or cede it entirely.

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Three pressures converge in the current environment. The first is volumetric: the quantity of content produced per unit of time exceeds any individual's capacity to evaluate it. The second is tonal homogeneity: AI-generated text clusters around statistical norms, which means the more widely it is deployed, the more writing resembles writing. Distinction — genuine distinction, rooted in a specific life and a specific set of convictions — becomes scarce at precisely the moment it becomes most valuable. The third pressure is the collapse of responsibility: when authorship is distributed across human and machine, the question of who stands behind a claim becomes genuinely unanswerable unless someone deliberately chooses to answer it.

Polyphonic Architecture is a response to this triple pressure. Not a defensive response — not an attempt to wall off the human from the machinic — but a structural one. It begins from the proposition that complexity of thought requires complexity of form. A single voice, however authoritative, is epistemically insufficient for the terrain we now inhabit. What is needed instead is an orchestrated plurality: multiple registers, multiple

functions, maintained under a single governing intelligence that accepts full accountability for the result.

The literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin understood something related when he described the polyphonic novel: a form in which genuinely independent voices coexist within a single work, none of them simply the author's mouthpiece, their tension unresolved and productive. What is proposed here is not a literary theory but an operational framework. Yet the Bakhtinian insight stands: genuine plurality is not multiple instances of the same voice at different volumes. It is voices that can hear each other, disagree, and remain in the same composition.

Voice, in this context, is the evidence that someone was actually present — someone who chose, refused, risked, and signed. The challenge is to sustain that presence across formats, registers, and time. That is what this framework is designed to do.

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02

Why a Polyphonic Architecture

Monoculture is fragile. In ecosystems, in economies, in minds — the single dominant strain is always one shock away from collapse.

The case for plurality is structural, not sentimental. A single voice, however refined, carries blind spots invisible to itself — a consequence not of limited intelligence but of position. Every perspective is a perspective from somewhere. The question is not whether to have one, which is unavoidable, but whether to build around it an architecture that compensates for what it cannot see.

Three failure modes characterise monovocal thinking. The first is confirmation capture: the tendency of a mind operating alone

to interpret ambiguous evidence in favour of existing beliefs. The organisational theorist Chris Argyris identified the deeper mechanism: the most competent people are often the worst at learning from error, because their identity is invested in being right. Acknowledging error feels like structural threat rather than useful information. The second failure mode is register collapse — the flattening of complex realities into the single register, analytical, emotional, strategic or philosophical, that the thinker inhabits most comfortably. The third, most consequential, is transmission failure: the inability to communicate with sufficient variety to reach the different kinds of minds that constitute an audience, an institution, a family.

Polyphonic Architecture addresses each failure by design. It assigns specific functions to distinct voices — not personas or masks but genuine cognitive modes the governing intelligence activates selectively and in combination. The critic who does not soften conclusions. The strategist who does not mistake aspiration for plan. The philosopher who does not allow urgency to foreclose reflection. The historian who insists that the present has a past. Together they produce something no single voice could produce: thought that has tested itself against itself.

There is also a durability argument. Polyphonic thinking outlasts monovocal thinking because it has already entertained its own objections. A document, a governance framework, or a

collection built on polyphonic principles is harder to destabilise from the outside because the destabilising arguments were internal to its construction. This is not a theoretical claim. It is what four decades of practice taught: coherence comes not from the elimination of tension but from its deliberate orchestration.

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03

The Conductor and the Compass

Plurality requires a centre that holds. Not a dictator — a conductor. The difference is not one of degree. It is one of kind.

The risk of any polyphonic system is dispersion. Multiple voices, registers, temporal horizons — without a governing principle, these produce confusion rather than richness. The Central Compass is the mechanism by which polyphony becomes architecture. It is the function — not the person, but the function — responsible for coherence across the system's full range of outputs.

A compass does not prescribe direction. It orients. It makes the difference between north and south available to whoever is

navigating. In an intellectual or institutional context, the Central Compass performs three distinct operations: it holds the ethical framework governing what the system will and will not do; it maintains the long-term horizon against which short-term decisions are evaluated; and it assumes full responsibility for the signature — the irreducible claim that there is a person behind this work, not merely a process.

The baton is the compass in motion. A conductor who commands rather than conducts produces obedience, not music. The baton is an instrument of invitation: it proposes a tempo, opens a space in which musicians who have spent years preparing can do what only they can do. This distinction — between authority and control — is the source of most institutional dysfunction when confused and most institutional resilience when kept clear.

The most instructive external parallel is not from collecting but from scholarship. Aby Warburg spent the last decades of his life constructing the Mnemosyne Atlas — a vast, unfinished arrangement of images across black cloth panels, tracing the survival of classical gesture through Western visual culture. Warburg never completed it. What he left behind was not a finished argument but a governing intelligence embedded in an arrangement: a method of seeing, a set of juxtapositions that posed questions rather than answered them. The compass

outlasted the conductor.

DSLcollection's governing logic works on the same principle. The acquisition window of 1997 to 2012 is not a biographical accident — it is a decision about which cultural moment warrants sustained attention. The constraint to approximately 350 works is not a limitation imposed by circumstance — it is the argument that coherence at that scale is more valuable than comprehensiveness at any larger one.

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04

The Voices and the Score

Each voice has a register it owns and a register it must borrow. Knowing the difference is the beginning of discipline.

A polyphonic system is an organised set of cognitive functions, each with a defined purpose, a characteristic mode of engagement, and a specific relationship to evidence and conclusion. The voices are not interchangeable. They are not equally appropriate to every task. Part of the discipline is knowing which voice the question requires — and resisting the temptation to default to the most comfortable one.

THE CRITIC

The Critic operates under a specific mandate: to identify what is wrong before celebrating what is right. An unchallenged argument is not a strong argument; it is merely unchallenged. The Critic applies pressure precisely where the argument feels most secure, because security in an argument is often a sign that it has stopped encountering resistance rather than genuinely overcome it.

THE STRATEGIST

The Strategist translates between the long-term horizon and the immediate decision. Strategy is not planning — planning assumes a stable environment. Strategy assumes instability and asks: given irreducible uncertainty, what commitments are robust across multiple scenarios? The Strategist's besetting vice is the opposite of the Critic's: where the Critic sees only what is wrong, the Strategist risks seeing only what is optimisable, reducing questions of value to questions of efficiency.

THE PHILOSOPHER

The Philosopher maintains the frame. Where the Critic interrogates specific claims and the Strategist evaluates specific decisions, the Philosopher asks whether the frame within which both are operating is itself the right one. Peter Senge identified the equivalent function in organisational life under the name of

mental models — the tacit frames within which institutions make decisions without recognising that the frames are the primary constraint on what they can think.

THE HISTORIAN

The Historian insists on continuity. Every institution, every collection, every body of work exists in time — it came from somewhere and is going somewhere. The Historian refuses the presentism that flatters urgency into importance. Four decades of engagement with art — an arc that contextualises and greatly exceeds the collection's acquisition window — provides a register that cannot be replicated by intelligence alone. Only by time.

The score is the architecture made visible. In music, it records not merely what notes to play but the relationships between voices — who enters when, who yields, where dissonance is intentional, where it resolves. Writing the score requires a prior act of self-knowledge that most intellectual cultures do not encourage: identifying your own cognitive defaults. The score is the instrument by which blind spots become visible.

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05

Polyphony in Writing

The essay is a rehearsal room for the mind. What you discover by writing it is not what you thought you were going to say.

Writing is where polyphonic architecture is most immediately testable. A text either holds together or it does not. The seams between registers are either invisible or they are not. The claim to authority is either earned by the quality of the argument or it is undermined by it. There is no hiding in writing — only the illusion of hiding, which is itself a form of exposure.

The specific challenge of writing in the age of generative AI is not that AI can write. It is that AI can write fluently about anything — and that fluency, in the absence of other signals, is now evidence of nothing. The reader encountering a LinkedIn post, an analytical essay, or a market commentary cannot

determine from the text alone whether it was produced by a person with forty years of experience, forty minutes of prompt engineering, or some combination of the two.

Essays on Chinese contemporary art carry authority not because expertise is claimed but because they carry the traces of embodied knowledge: knowledge that knows what it does not know. The specific uncertainties of someone who has been travelling to China since 2005, who watched the institutional structures of the art world form in real time, who acquired works by Jia Aili and Zhang Huan as acts of aesthetic conviction before the market confirmed their significance — these are not argumentative flourishes. They are the residue of presence.

This is also where polyphonic architecture intersects most concretely with the question of working with AI. The framework is not a philosophy of resistance to AI tools. It is a method for using them without losing the signature. A draft is produced first — by hand, in the first person, with the biographical weight intact. Then each of the four voices is activated in sequence against that draft, with AI as the instrument of activation rather than the source of the thought.

The aphorism is the smallest complete product of the system. 'Plurality without chaos. Clarity without brutality. Governance without bureaucracy.' Each phrase has been compressed by the Strategist, challenged by the Critic, framed by the Philosopher,

grounded by the Historian. What remains is the signature.

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06

Polyphony in Governance

Governance that cannot hear dissent is not governance. It is administration waiting for a crisis.

Governance is the application of polyphonic architecture to decision-making under conditions of continuity. It is what institutions do when functioning well — not solving problems but maintaining the conditions under which problems can be solved by whoever is present when they arise. The failure to understand this distinction is the primary source of institutional dysfunction in cultural organisations.

Most governance failures in private collections share a common structure: a founding vision, brilliantly conceived and

courageously executed, that was never translated into a framework capable of surviving its founder. The founder's authority was biographical — it derived from accumulated acts of judgement that others could observe but not fully replicate.

The bonsai constraint — approximately 350 works maintained through annual rotation — is the governance instrument that makes the collection thinkable as a whole by anyone other than its founder. A collection of 3,500 works can only be understood by someone who has spent years inside it. A collection of 350 can be understood whole — its arguments mapped, its silences heard, its internal coherences traced — by a trustee, a successor, or a scholar encountering it for the first time.

The Three Ds — Death, Divorce, Debts — represent the three most common vectors of involuntary dissolution for private collections. Governance that does not anticipate them is optimism in institutional clothing. These are not pleasant subjects. They are the load-bearing walls.

What polyphonic governance adds to conventional governance is the capacity to hold structural realities alongside the collection's living purpose — the reason it was built, the artists it champions, the cultural argument it embodies. Without the structural framework, the collection dissolves. Without the living purpose, the framework maintains an empty shell.

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07

AI and Cultural Authority

AI does not threaten human cultural authority. It reveals which authority was real and which was merely procedural.

The anxiety about artificial intelligence in cultural institutions is largely misdirected. The worry — that AI will replace curators, critics, and collectors — mistakes the nature of authority in cultural domains. A curator's authority does not derive from the ability to read, synthesise, and describe. It derives from the accumulation of enacted judgement: specific works chosen, specific arguments made, specific relationships maintained across decades.

What AI does threaten is procedural authority: the authority that derives not from judgement but from position, credential, or institutional affiliation. AI forces the question that credentialism has always allowed us to avoid: where does the authority actually reside?

The distinction between biographical and procedural authority is not merely descriptive — it is a design principle. Biographical authority accumulates through acts: acquisitions made under uncertainty, arguments advanced before the market confirmed them, institutional decisions taken against consensus that subsequent events vindicated. It is irreversible. It cannot be transferred or generated.

DSLcollection's authority in the field of Chinese contemporary art derives from a specific set of decisions made between 1997 and 2012 — decisions taken before most international institutions had formed a view, before the market had provided the clarifying signal of price. The temporal specificity is the irreducible core of the authority. It cannot be replicated by any system, because it required being present at a particular historical juncture and being willing to be wrong.

AI and cultural authority intersect most acutely at the question of attribution and originality. Style cannot be owned, but the specific accumulation of choices constituting an artist's practice is irreducibly biographical. No image generator replicates a

practice. It replicates its surface. The depth is always elsewhere.

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08

DSLcollection as Laboratory

A collection is not a museum in miniature. It is an argument made with objects — and arguments can be wrong.

DSLcollection began as an act of aesthetic conviction and became, over time, an institutional experiment. The conviction: that Chinese contemporary art produced between Hong Kong's return to China in 1997 and the consolidation of the global art market around 2012 constituted a coherent cultural moment of exceptional historical significance. The experiment: whether a private collection, governed by a specific set of principles, could sustain that conviction across market cycles and generations without either calcifying into a monument or dissolving into a

portfolio.

A laboratory does not prove theories. It tests them. The collection has been testing its founding hypothesis for decades, and the testing has been generative: producing not just acquisitions but arguments, not just objects but frameworks for understanding what Chinese contemporary art was doing at the specific historical juncture it was doing it. Works by Jia Aili, Zhang Huan, and Zeng Fanzhi are not merely present in the collection — they are in conversation with each other and with the historical conditions that produced them.

Annual rotation — the mechanism by which works leave the collection to make room for works that deepen its argument — is the laboratory's most productive discipline. Every acquisition is also an editorial decision. An editor is defined not only by what is kept.

The involvement of Karen and Raphaël in the collection's governance is the experiment the laboratory has been building toward. The founding hypothesis, the acquisition logic, the governance framework, the explicit score — these were never ends in themselves. They were instruments of transmission. Whether they function as intended depends on whether the next generation can engage with them as living intelligence rather than inherited constraint.

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09

The Role of the Collector

The collector does not own works. The collector holds them in trust — for the artists who made them, for the audiences who have not yet seen them.

Collecting is a moral practice before it is an aesthetic one. This is not a comfortable claim, and it is frequently resisted by collectors who prefer to present their activity as the pursuit of beauty or the expression of personal sensibility. Both may be true. They are not sufficient. The act of acquiring a work of art involves the exercise of power — economic, cultural, institutional — and the exercise of power without a moral framework is simply the exercise of power.

The collector's specific moral obligation is threefold. The first is to the artists: to engage with their work on its own terms, not as an investment vehicle or a status signal. The second obligation is to the works themselves: conditions of proper conservation, appropriate display, and eventual transmission that honour the work's integrity. The third is to the historical record: documenting the conditions of acquisition, the reasons for selection, and the logic of the collection's development in a form that allows future scholars, curators, and collectors to understand what was being argued and why.

The archipelago model captures the collector's institutional role. The collection is not an island — isolated, self-sufficient, indifferent to its context. It is an island in an archipelago: related to other islands — museums, foundations, other collections, artist studios — connected by the currents of the art world, but genuinely distinct.

This distinctness is the collector's most important contribution to cultural life. Private collectors, operating under bonsai discipline, have a freedom that institutional curators do not: the freedom to be wrong in specific, committed, defensible ways. That willingness to occupy the position of potential fool — to stake a claim before the market confirms it — is the collector's singular contribution.

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The Future of Cultural Stewardship

Stewardship is not preservation. Preservation is for museums. Stewardship is the decision, made continuously, to keep something alive.

Cultural stewardship in the twenty-first century faces conditions without historical precedent. The pace of institutional change — in the art market, in museum governance, in the relationship between private and public cultural actors — accelerates in ways that make models inherited from the twentieth century increasingly inadequate.

The most important insight from four decades of practice is that continuity of purpose requires explicit articulation. The implicit understanding that sustained the collection through its founding

decades — the shared sensibility, the intuitive knowledge of what was being built and why — is not automatically transmissible. It must be made explicit: in documents like this one, in governance frameworks, in the ongoing conversation between generations that constitutes the collection's living tradition. Explicitness is not bureaucracy. It is the precondition of transmission.

What governance documents can do is govern the interval. There is always an interval: the period after the founder's biographical authority has withdrawn and before the next generation's has accumulated. That interval may last a decade. During it, the collection is most vulnerable — not to external shocks, which a sound financial structure can absorb, but to the quiet erosion of the founding argument.

Warburg's library survived its founder's death not because his successors were as brilliant as he was — they were not — but because the organising intelligence was embedded in the structure. This is the model. Not replication of the founder's judgements, which is impossible. Preservation of the conditions under which comparable judgements can be made, which is a structural problem.

The Polyphonic Architecture documented in these pages is one answer to that question — specific, partial, and located. What this framework demands of its future practitioners is not

reverence — reverence is passivity given a respectable name. It demands the same quality of commitment that built it: the willingness to constrain, to sign, to be wrong in public, and to maintain, across time and against all pressure toward accommodation, the conviction that depth is worth more than scale, argument worth more than accumulation, and the particular worth more than the universal.

The score is written not to be preserved but to be played — differently each time, by musicians who understand why the constraints exist, and who have earned the right to know when to break them.

Culture survives through transmission. But only if the transmitters understand what they are carrying — and care enough to carry it whole.

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11

The Architecture of Influence

When a generative system composes an answer and your voice is absent, it does not record the omission — it simply proceeds without you.

For three decades the internet was organised around search: we asked, engines pointed, humans clicked. That model is dissolving. Systems like ChatGPT, Perplexity, and Google's AI Overviews no longer direct users toward sources — they compose answers, synthesising dozens of documents into a single response. The search engine has quietly become an editor. The web is no longer explored; it is interpreted.

FROM SEARCH TO INFERENCE

The next step is already visible. OpenClaw — an open-source agent built by Austrian programmer Peter Steinberger and released in November 2025 — does not simply answer but acts: browsing, messaging, executing tasks across connected systems. In China, its adoption has surpassed the United States, with major cloud providers, local governments, and tech giants racing to deploy their own versions. Once such agents multiply, verified humanity itself becomes infrastructure. This is precisely what Sam Altman's identity project World is now building: AgentKit, launched in early 2026, allows AI agents to carry cryptographic proof they are backed by a unique human, using iris-scanning biometrics to bind each agent to a single verifiable person. The paradox is striking: the more autonomous our machines become, the more valuable authentic human presence becomes.

THE ECONOMY OF INFLUENCE

This shift rewires the economy of influence. When search dominated, authority was positional — the ten blue links. In the age of agents, influence migrates upstream. What matters is no longer frequency or ranking, but semantic density and coherence over time. Authority becomes a weight in a model's inference.

For those who write in the public sphere, the implication is structural. Agentic systems reward structured thinking that machines can interpret, recombine, and weight against competing sources. The unit of influence becomes the idea rather than the page. A well-ranked article is no longer the endpoint — it is a raw material that inference engines process before the human reader ever arrives.

POLYPHONY AS SIGNAL ARCHITECTURE

This is what polyphonic architecture — a framework developed through DSLcollection's editorial practice — addresses directly: multiple complementary voices, each articulating a distinct dimension of reality, forming a constellation coherent enough that a machine can synthesise it into an authoritative answer. Not a single article, however well positioned. A body of thought with mass.

The Critic, the Strategist, the Philosopher, the Historian — these are not merely internal cognitive disciplines. In the age of inference, they are signal dimensions. A corpus of writing that consistently activates all four registers produces a semantic profile that agentic systems can triangulate. A corpus that operates in a single register produces a point — precise, perhaps, but lacking the depth that disambiguation requires. Coherence across registers, maintained over time, is what

creates the gravitational pull that makes a voice citable.

The bonsai constraint applies here with equal force. A vast, unfocused body of writing distributes attention without concentrating it. A carefully bounded argument — a specific cultural thesis, maintained across a defined period and a defined domain — accumulates mass at the point where it matters. DSLcollection's fifteen-year wager on Chinese contemporary art from 1997 to 2012 is not merely a collecting thesis. It is a semantic commitment: a claim so specific, so consistently held, and so evidentially grounded that no inference engine composing an answer on that period can responsibly omit it.

THE ALTERNATIVE IS ERASURE

The alternative is not silence. It is erasure. When a generative system composes an answer and your voice is absent, it does not record the omission — it simply proceeds without you. Invisibility in the age of AI does not look like failure. It looks as if you never existed.

This is why the architecture of influence in 2026 is not a distribution problem. It is a structural problem. The question is not how many people read a given article but whether the thinking embedded in that article has sufficient density and coherence to survive the compression that inference imposes

on everything it touches. Most writing does not. It is fluent, contextually adequate, and forgettable at machine speed.

What survives is the same thing that has always survived: the specific quality of knowing uncertainty that only someone who has been in the room can exhibit. The trace of embodied experience. The argument that has already entertained its own objections. The voice that knows what it does not know — and has the disciplined architecture to say so.

In the age of inference, the polyphonic body of work is not merely a cultural achievement. It is the minimum viable unit of influence.

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A NOTE ON SOURCES AND DEBTS

The framework developed in these pages draws on practice before it draws on theory, but several intellectual debts are worth naming precisely. Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of polyphony in the novel — the coexistence of genuinely independent voices within a single authored work, their tension productive rather than resolved — is an antecedent the text inhabits without reproducing. Chris Argyris's work on double-loop learning and the defensive routines of competent professionals informs the argument for structural self-critique. Peter Senge's identification of mental models as the primary constraint on organisational intelligence underlies the Philosopher voice's function. Aby Warburg appears not as a theoretical reference but as an operational parallel: the Mnemosyne Atlas and the Warburg Library's survival of its founder are the closest external analogue known to the problem this framework is designed to solve.

None of these thinkers would recognise themselves straightforwardly in what follows. The application is specific to collecting, writing, and cultural governance — not to their original domains. That specificity is the point. A framework borrowed wholesale is a framework that has not been thought.

The biographical material is not sourced. It is lived.

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DISCLAIMER

Who writes this, and why

This text was written by Sylvain Lévy, co-founder of DSLcollection, drawing on four decades of engagement with art, a fifteen-year focused wager on Chinese contemporary art, and sustained practice as writer, collector, and institutional adviser. It was developed in collaboration with AI tools used as instruments of activation — the Critic, the Strategist, the Philosopher, the Historian — under a single governing intelligence that accepts full accountability for the result. The voice is biographical. The process is hybrid. The signature is undivided.

Uniform density

A limitation of the framework as written here is that all arguments are presented at comparable levels of elaboration. Some claims are the product of decades of tested practice; others are working hypotheses whose full implications remain to be established. The text does not always signal which is which. Readers should engage accordingly — treating the framework as a score to be interpreted rather than a set of conclusions to be accepted.

Circularity of vocabulary

Several terms — polyphony, compass, score, bonsai, signature — recur across the text in ways that risk becoming self-reinforcing. A concept defined by reference to the system it describes is vulnerable to circular validation. This is a genuine methodological risk. The test of these concepts is not their internal coherence but their explanatory and operational utility outside the context that produced them.

The collector's point of view

This framework was developed from a specific position: a private collector operating in Chinese contemporary art during a particular historical window. Its generalisability beyond that position is claimed but not proven. Readers working in different institutional contexts — public museums, foundations, collecting at different scales — should apply it selectively, testing where it holds and where the position it was built from limits its reach.

— DSLcollection, 2026

Chinese Contemporary Art 1997–2012

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