

# PRIVATE FUTURES

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*The Collector's Last Decision*

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*"Endurance is not an outcome.  
It is a design task."*

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with Karen Lévy and Raphaël Lévy*

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# Intonation

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Every book has a first note — a sound that establishes the key before the argument begins. This one is not a claim but a position: that private collections are cultural actors whose decisions about governance, succession, and transmission matter beyond the walls that hold their works.

This book grew from a governing conviction — that what a collection decides about its own future is as consequential as what it decides about its acquisitions. The two are, in fact, the same decision at different timescales.

Three voices move through these pages. The first is mine — a collector's voice, formed by forty years of looking and twenty years of governing under self-imposed constraint. The second is Dominique's — not quieter but differently positioned: present in every judgment, every refusal, every moment where we disagreed and the disagreement produced clarity. The third is Karen's. She writes her own chapter — not a daughter's note appended to a father's text, but a co-author's argument. If transmission is this

book's subject, the book should demonstrate it.

And Raphaël. He appears here too — not as a theorist of what we built, but as a witness to what it costs and what it promises from a position still in formation. His voice is the youngest in the book and, in some ways, the most honest, because it has not yet had time to become doctrine.

Four limits should be named at the outset. First, the voice is engaged — written from inside a practice, not from a neutral position. Second, not every claim carries equal weight: episodes rest on lived memory; frameworks are analytical constructions, more provisional than they may appear in print. Third, the conceptual vocabulary was built by the same intelligence that now uses it — a structural circularity any reader who finds the framework self-confirming is invited to interrupt. Fourth, this text was written in Paris and built around a collection encountered from outside the culture it holds. This is a working score, not a concluded argument.

# Opening: Speaking Where Silence Usually Begins

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The art world never lacks discourse. Museums, markets, biennials, 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, nor a doctrine. It is a working blueprint – unfinished by design, open to disagreement. We write 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.

Those which aspire to endure must recognise endurance as a design task. That sentence is this book's thesis. Everything that follows is an attempt to show what designing for endurance actually requires – and what it honestly cannot achieve.

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### How a Collection Becomes a Practice

Our story begins in China in the mid-2000s. After a family visit to Shanghai, Dominique and I founded the DSLcollection in 2005, focused on Chinese contemporary art. Like many collections, it began with curiosity and urgency – a desire to understand a culture in rapid transformation.

Over time, Karen and Raphaël joined us, each bringing distinct sensibilities and questions. Through Aika, the consulting initiative that grew from the collection, we encountered other collectors and institutions facing similar crossroads. Some collaborations succeeded. Others failed: a partner institution that wanted the works but not the editorial principles; a digital project that moved faster than its governance

could sustain. Failure clarified what was at stake.

From the outside, the DSLcollection appears modest: roughly 350 works, one geography, one period, governed by self-imposed limits. From the inside, those limits became the work itself. The collection became a testing ground – limited in size, open in reach.

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### When Collections End by Default

Fewer than one in five significant private collections survives intact beyond the founder's lifetime. Collections do not disappear because of bad luck or cultural irrelevance. They disappear because they encounter forces that are predictable, structural, and rarely designed for.

These forces are commonly summarised as Death, Divorce, and Debts – the Three Ds. When any one arrives without a governance framework in place, the auction house becomes the final curator and the dispersal catalogue the collection's last publication – not a record of what was built, but an inventory of what was never secured.

The digital age has added a fourth vector: Dissolution – the slow disaggregation of a

collection's coherence through platform logic, algorithmic curation, and the conversion of editorial intelligence into content. Unlike *Death or Divorce*, *Dissolution* arrives without announcement.

Not every collection is meant to survive. For collections that are autobiographical, dispersal is not failure but fulfilment — a staged gifting, a choreographed auction, an atlas published instead of a constitution. The claim here is not that all collections should endure, but that those which aspire to endure must recognise endurance as a design task.

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### The Vocabulary This Blueprint Requires

In private collections, imprecise language is not harmless. Vagueness merely postpones conflict. When pressure arrives, undefined language forces power to replace deliberation. What follows is a minimum conceptual vocabulary this blueprint requires in order to be tested, challenged, and refused.

Bonsai Institution: Deliberate constraint as founding discipline. Core instruments: ceiling, editorial line, annual turnover. A method, not an

identity.

Editorial Line: Stated, debatable principles governing decisions. For the DSLcollection: Chinese contemporary art, roughly 1997–2012.

The Three Ds: Death, Divorce, Debts. Treated as design constraints, not surprises.

Governance Work: An artwork's capacity to reshape how the institution 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 that distinguishes 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, advisory selection.

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

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# WHY GOVERN?

*Governance is the design of endurance under pressure.*

## Chapter 1

# Governance as Practice

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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. Not in a mission statement, but in real time, when money is on the table and reputation is in play.

Governance is not an annual report. It is a habit of mind. It takes place in the room where 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.

### Three Recurring Decisions

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.

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 accumulating. An institution that cannot let go is not governing; it is deferring.

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.

**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.*

*What I did not expect was the second effect. The refusal forced us to articulate – to ourselves, 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, from experience to youth. Sometimes the older intelligence holds the line while the younger one is still weighing.*

## Chapter 2

# The Bonsai Discipline

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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 — choosing what to encourage, what to remove, how to train the roots so that the visible form expresses a logic that began underground. What endures is not the gesture, but the discipline behind it.

This logic runs against the dominant instinct of the art world. Expansion is treated as health. Scale as seriousness. What you see on the wall — which works are placed in dialogue, which absences are legible, which historical argument emerges from the ensemble — is a direct trace of governance decisions, not merely taste.

The Gardens of Suzhou

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. A single Podocarpus had been tended by at least eight successive custodians — each honouring the previous shaping while adding a measured inflection. The tree was not a monument to any single vision. It was a palimpsest of decisions, layered so carefully they read as one.

The gardener I spoke with said something I have never forgotten: 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.

### The Four Constraints

**The Ceiling.** A fixed maximum number of works — approximately 350 for the DSLcollection. The ceiling turns the collection from accumulation into argument. Every new acquisition must justify itself not in isolation but against the whole. A collection without a ceiling is a library. A collection with one is an essay.

The Editorial Line. Stated principles, public enough to be challenged. We collect Chinese contemporary art produced between 1997 and 2012. This is a thesis: that this compressed historical window produced a concentration of artistic intelligence unlikely to recur in the same form. A private editorial line is taste. A published one is a position.

The Annual Turnover. Approximately ten per cent of the collection turns over each year. This is not portfolio management – it is pruning. When, between 2011 and 2013, we turned over twelve works whose market value had strengthened but whose generative capacity within the collection's argument had been spent, the historical argument of the 1997–2012 window sharpened.

The Transparency Commitment. Every acquisition and deaccession is recorded with its rationale. Transparency is the price of credibility for a private collection whose authority rests on curatorial judgment rather than public mandate.

### What the Bonsai Cannot Hold

The bonsai metaphor is powerful – and therefore dangerous. Three conditions resist its logic. Scale:

some arguments require accumulation that a ceiling forbids. Disorder: coherence pursued too rigidly becomes an immune system against precisely the disruption a collection needs. Opacity: transparency has legitimate limits – an artist may need to withhold meaning.

Finally: the bonsai discipline is not for every collector. Those for whom collecting is primarily autobiographical should be free to design a beautiful dispersal accordingly. This book is a case for the deliberate design of whatever outcome you actually intend.

#### 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 that reflected a window we knew would close, we said no – because the ceiling held.*

*The bonsai gardener in the metaphor has already resolved the inner conflict. We had not. The discipline is hard in a way the metaphor doesn't fully capture.*

**RAPHAËL'S NOTE**

*I spent a summer reading through the acquisition rationales – not the press releases, but the internal documents, the ones that record the doubt alongside the decision. I discovered that many of the works I thought I knew had been contested at the moment of acquisition. The collection I thought I knew was the resolved version. The governed version – the one worth inheriting – was the one in which the argument was still open.*

### Chapter 3

# The Lampedusa Test

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In Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa's novel *The Leopard*, Prince Salina's nephew Tancredi delivers a line that has outlasted both the novel and its era: "If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change." The reform is real in language, theatrical in structure, and conservative in effect.

The Lampedusa threshold is the point at which change stops being structural and becomes facade. It is the moment when an institution produces all the signals of transformation without altering the mechanism that produced the original problem.

Private collections cross this threshold constantly. The family constitution is drafted by expensive lawyers. The advisory board is appointed with appropriate ceremony. The founder announces a new era of shared governance. And then: the acquisition logic remains unchanged. The next generation has a title but not a vote. The language

has changed. The power has not.

### 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 governance reform was decorative.

The most dangerous version of facade change is the AI strategy: algorithms deployed for cataloguing and valuation, the language of technological transformation adopted wholesale, while acquisition and deaccession decisions remain entirely at the founder's discretion. The AI tools have entered the vocabulary. They have not entered the mechanism.

### Five Diagnostic Questions

First: if the founder disagreed with the outcome this reform would produce, could the reform override them? If no, the reform is advisory. Second: does this reform redistribute who can say no? A reform that leaves the right of refusal unchanged has left governance unchanged. Third: is there a documented case in which this reform

has already produced a decision the founder would not have made alone? Fourth: would this reform survive the founder's death without renegotiation? Fifth: does the next generation have standing to invoke this reform against the founder's expressed preference?

### Structural Change in Practice

In the DSLcollection, structural change began in 2019 when we formalised Karen's veto right on deaccession decisions. Not an advisory role. A veto. We used this power once in the first two years – not to block a decision but to slow it, requiring a three-month deliberation that produced a different outcome than the original one. That delay changed the result. It was not comfortable.

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*The Lampedusa threshold should be applied not only to governance reforms but to every claim this book makes. If reading these pages produces only the satisfaction of recognition – without producing a single decision that is genuinely harder to make – then the book has crossed its own threshold.*

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**WHAT THIS CHAPTER LETS YOU TEST****– The Lampedusa Test**

1. Name one governance reform you have introduced. Could it override the founder?

*If the honest answer is no, the reform is advisory. It may still be useful – but name it accurately.*

2. Who in your collection currently has the right to say no – formally, on the record – to a founder decision?

*If the answer is no one, the institution has not yet been governed. It has been led.*

3. Has any reform you've introduced already produced a decision the founder found genuinely uncomfortable?

*Structural change is identifiable precisely by its discomfort. If no reform has yet produced discomfort, it has not yet done its work.*

## Chapter 4

# Governance Work

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A work does governance work when it reshapes how an institution decides what belongs. It does not illustrate the editorial line. It bends it. The collection is forced to renegotiate its own criteria of coherence — not as an abstract exercise, but as a practical consequence of the work's presence.

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.

The concept carries an inherent risk of circularity: the founder identifies governance works using criteria the founder developed. This is why the Artist Advisory is not an optional refinement but a structural necessity — an external practitioner chosen for willingness to challenge the editorial line rather than validate it. When no one disagrees, consensus should be read not as

confirmation but as a warning.

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 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, not a symptom of doubt.

## PRACTICE NOTES

## Governance, Constraint, and the Lampedusa Test

*These questions are designed to be run on your own institution – or on this book’s claims about yours. Take them as diagnostic conversations, not compliance checklists.*

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1. What does your collection’s ceiling currently signal?

*Not what it intends to signal – what it actually signals when a compelling work arrives and must be refused. If you have no ceiling, what does the absence signal?*

2. Can you state your editorial line in one sentence that someone outside your institution could challenge?

*A line that cannot be challenged is not an editorial position. It is a preference dressed in institutional language.*

3. Name a governance reform you have introduced in the past five years. Apply the Lampedusa test: has it yet produced an outcome the founder disliked and could not override?

*If the answer is no, the reform has not yet been tested. It remains aspirational.*

4. What is the last work you acquired that made something already in the collection harder to justify?

*If you cannot name one, the collection may be congratulating itself rather than governing itself.*

5. In your collection, who can say no to the founder — formally, on the record, with institutional standing?

*The distribution of refusal is the distribution of governance. A framework that concentrates the right of refusal in a single person is not a governance framework. It is a monarchy.*

6. What would the auction catalogue say you failed to design for?

*Imagine the catalogue text for your collection's dispersal sale. The gap between that story and the one you intend is the governance deficit.*

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PART TWO

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# PRACTICE AND CHARACTER

*Governance is institutional self-formation – and institutional self-corn*

## Chapter 5

# Episodes in Value

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## 2009: The Video That Interrogated the Collection

In 2009, 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. The piece ran in long, unhurried cycles. Its sound was sparse. Its power lay 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 prevailing medium of the Chinese contemporary market. The acquisition introduced a more 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.

## 2015: The Photographs That Revealed a Fault Line

In 2015, we acquired a series of large-format digitally manipulated portraits — faces reconstructed through facial-recognition logic: intimate, algorithmic, subtly estranged. Together with an earlier installation addressing state surveillance, the encounter exposed a fault line: we had been treating surveillance as a political subject when it was in fact a condition — a logic already structuring the image from within.

## 2017: The Removal That Created More Than It Displaced

In 2017, we deaccessioned a painting by a well-known artist whose market position had strengthened significantly since our acquisition. Internally, it no longer generated friction. We filled that opening with a work engaging calligraphic tradition through computational mark-making. The most important removals are not failures of judgment, but recognitions that a work's generative capacity has been spent within a given configuration.

## Deciding Under Uncertainty

Three principles have emerged. First: name what you do not know. Second: hold the compass, not the position — the editorial line indicates direction without specifying every step. Third: document the refusals. What a collection refuses to acquire tells its story as much as what it acquires.

#### DOMINIQUE'S NOTE

*The 2009 video acquisition was not unanimously welcomed. I supported it immediately. Sylvain hesitated for weeks — not about the work's quality, but about what its inclusion would demand of the collection's existing logic.*

*My support was a structural judgment, not aesthetic enthusiasm. I have learned to read Sylvain's hesitation — when it takes that particular form, focused on what a work would demand of what we already hold — as a diagnostic instrument. Not always. But often enough.*

## Chapter 6

# What We Got Wrong — And What It Built

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A chapter of testimony. The failures here are not illustrative of governance principles violated — they are the source of the governance principles now in place.

### The Accumulation Mistake

In the early years, I mistook scale for depth. 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. Without a fixed limit, every acquisition was its own justification. Once the ceiling was installed, the quality of individual 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. Our governance instruments disciplined objects, but not access. The correction came from outside – from a curatorial partner in Chongqing who suggested 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 the idioms our networks privileged. Governance can feel rigorous while simply mirroring the biases of those who designed it. That may be the most uncomfortable sentence in this book.*

*I want to add: I knew this earlier than I said it. The gap between knowing and saying is itself a governance failure – one that belongs to me, not to the instruments.*

### 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, and increasingly deaf to what lay outside its frame.

Visitors praised its rigour. We experienced it as suffocation. The corrective — a work acquired in 2018, so formally foreign to everything surrounding it that it broke several adjacencies we had relied on for years — was exactly what the governance framework was supposed to produce and exactly what we had been preventing it from producing.

### The Consultation Gap

In every decision described above, the artists whose work we held were never consulted. They appeared as subjects, never as agents. When we decided in 2017 to deaccession a work that had been central to our collection for eight years, the artist who made it learned of the decision after the fact. The interpretive authority of a collector over a purchased work is real and legitimate. What it is not is complete.

The Artist Advisory, introduced in 2020, was designed as a corrective — but it gives practitioners a structural voice in editorial decisions without giving individual artists a formal role in decisions about their own work. This is an unresolved problem. Naming it precisely — rather than absorbing it into the comfortable language of

“dialogue“ – is the minimum the failure demands.

#### RAPHAËL'S NOTE

*I have attended studio visits since I was a teenager. What I remember most is the moment near the end when the artist would ask, carefully, what we intended to do with a piece. There was always a pause in my father's answer – not an evasion, but a genuine effort to explain editorial logic in a way that respected the artist's stake in it.*

*What I understood only later is that the explanation, however careful, was given after the decision was already made. The artist was being informed, not consulted. The distinction is one I think we still haven't fully resolved.*

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## Chapter 7

# Six Decisions in Institutional Character

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A collection does not acquire only works. It acquires habits — of speed, of refusal, of explanation, of revision. Six decisions shaped the DSLcollection's character.

Character formed: Restraint

Spring 2012. A Beijing gallerist offered us a complete studio output. The DSLcollection held 343 works. We declined. The ceiling was not a preference — it was a boundary. Private collections die of obesity more often than starvation.

Character formed: Legibility

For more than a decade, the editorial line existed as shared intuition. Then a major museum proposed a joint exhibition and the negotiation stalled — two teams unable to cite anything

beyond private conviction. Within six months, we published the editorial line as a formal governance document. Not marketing copy. A constitution.

Character formed: Revisability

Autumn 2014. A video installation came available without warning – private sale, forty-eight hours to commit. What appeared impulsive was the activation of prior deliberation. The annual turnover exists precisely as an error-correction protocol embedded in governance.

Character formed: Native Fluency

When we began building the VR museum in 2015, we abandoned the question of how to replicate the physical experience in virtual space. The productive question was its inverse: what can the digital do that the physical cannot?

Character formed: Reciprocity

In 2016, we lent a major video installation to the Centre Pompidou. Institutional context transformed its legibility in ways we had never activated. Large institutions give works scale. Private collections give works decade-long attention uninterrupted by programming cycles.

Character formed: Plurality

A collection cannot be transmitted if it is treated as property. Transmission requires authorship to become shareable — legible enough to be inherited, open enough to be revised.

## Chapter 8

# Three Institutional Ecologies

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Every institution is a wager on what kind of knowledge matters most. No single institutional form is sufficient, and the bonsai institution is intelligible only in relation to what it is not.

## The Mega-Museum: Knowledge Through Accumulation

The mega-museum operates through scale. Its achievement is comprehensiveness. Its risk is institutional mass: the tendency of large organisations to generate their own gravitational field, bending every decision toward self-perpetuation. In ecological terms, the bonsai institution is a parasite — an organism that depends on a larger host while contributing something the host cannot produce on its own. That debt must be acknowledged, and it must be paid through lending, scholarship, and open metadata.

## The Pop-Up Experience Venue: Reach Without Accumulation

The pop-up operates through spectacle. Its achievement is reach. Its risk is disposability – nothing accumulates. Yet the pop-up has identified something the traditional museum has been slow to acknowledge: audiences crave immersion, and immersion is not inherently debased. The bonsai institution must reckon with the fact that precision is also exclusion.

## The Bonsai Institution: Coherence and Its Discontents

The bonsai institution's most distinctive achievement is not coherence but legibility: a visitor can hold the whole in mind. This is the condition under which a collection can function as an argument rather than an inventory. Its obligations within the larger ecology: lend generously, publish scholarship, open metadata. These obligations are not altruistic. They are ecological – the cost of membership in a system the bonsai institution depends on but could not sustain alone.

## PRACTICE NOTES

## Episodes, Failures, and Institutional Character

*These questions are drawn from the episodes in Part Two. They are most useful when answered with access to your collection's actual acquisition and deaccession records – not from memory, but from documents.*

1. Name the last work that made you revise the terms of your editorial argument, not just add to it.

*If you cannot name one from the past three years, the collection may have stopped interrogating itself.*

2. Where is your geographic or relational blind spot?

*What are the cities, networks, communities, or cultural registers your current relationships do not reach? Name them explicitly.*

3. Has your collection entered a coherence trap?

*The signal is often external praise for “rigour” arriving at exactly the moment internal tension disappears.*

4. When did you last deaccession a work, and was the artist who made it informed before or after the decision?

*The distinction between informing and consulting is the Consultation Gap. It cannot be closed by good intentions – only by a formal protocol.*

5. Which of the six character decisions in Chapter 7 has your collection made, and which are still

pending?

*Restraint, Legibility, Revisability, Native Fluency, Reciprocity, Plurality. A collection that has made none of these explicit is governed by habit, not argument.*

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INTERLUDE

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# INHERITING THE ARGUMENT

*A chapter by Karen Lévy*

I am writing this in a room surrounded by works I did not choose. That sentence is not a complaint. It is the starting condition of everything I want to say.

When my father agreed that I should write this chapter – not contribute notes to his chapter, but write a sustained argument of my own – I spent several weeks uncertain what I actually thought. I started by reading back through every note I had contributed to previous DSLcollection publications. I counted twenty-three separate notes across four documents. They were smart, I thought. They were also all reactive. Every single one was a response to something my father had written. I had never initiated a position. That recognition was uncomfortable in the specific way that useful recognitions usually are.

### What It Feels Like From the Inside

Inheriting an argument is different from inheriting a collection. A collection is a set of objects with legal title. An argument is a way of looking that has been practised, refined, and documented over decades. You can be given the objects. The way of looking has to be earned separately, and the earning process has no fixed endpoint.

In my case, earning began in China. I first travelled to Beijing with my parents at eleven, too young to understand the specific historical argument being made but old enough to absorb something of the attention that produced it. By the time I was formally involved in governance decisions, I had spent nearly a decade building a relationship with the collection that was not inherited – it was accumulated.

### The 2024 Acquisition

In late 2023, I encountered a body of work by an artist working at the intersection of traditional dyeing techniques and digital pattern generation – concerned with the relationship between craft memory and algorithmic replication, between a body's knowledge and a machine's accuracy.

I argued for it. My father said no – not definitively, but substantively. He felt the work extended beyond the collection's temporal argument in a way that would require renegotiating the editorial line. I did not accept the no. We spent three months in deliberation. I produced a written argument – not a brief, but a sustained analytical case for why this work was not an extension of the editorial line but a test of

whether the editorial line was still asking the right questions. My father produced a written response. We brought it to an advisory session.

The acquisition was approved. My father changed his position. He said, afterwards, that my argument had made him see something he had not previously seen — not in the work, but in the collection's own evolving logic. The editorial line had not moved. But the argument it was making had deepened.

What I learned: transmission is not the moment when authority passes. It is the moment when the successor makes a decision that the predecessor could not have made alone, and the predecessor recognises it as correct.

### What I Am Actually Inheriting

I am inheriting a set of constraints. A vocabulary. A set of relationships — with artists, with institutions, with ideas — that took twenty years to build. But what I am most meaningfully inheriting is a model of attention. A way of looking that is willing to stay with uncertainty, that treats the moment of not-knowing as productive rather than as a problem to be resolved as quickly as

possible.

Transmission is also passing on the permission to argue. The permission to disagree seriously and to press the disagreement until it produces something neither party could have reached alone. That permission is not given once. It is renewed in each significant decision. The collection is alive as long as that renewal is possible.

#### DOMINIQUE'S NOTE

*I read Karen's chapter three times before responding. The first time, as her mother. The second time, as a co-founder of the collection. The third time, as someone who has governed alongside Sylvain for long enough to know exactly what it costs him to acknowledge that another person's argument changed his mind.*

*That cost – the willingness to be changed – is what transmission requires from the predecessor, not only from the successor. Inheritance is not transfer. It is a process of mutual recognition that must be actively chosen, on both sides, in each generation.*

**RAPHAËL'S NOTE**

*I am younger than Karen by four years, and at a different stage of this. I have not yet had a 2024 acquisition moment – a decision that was mine in the way hers was hers. I am still building the relationship with the collection that Karen describes.*

*What I can say, reading her chapter, is that the permission to argue is not abstract for me. It is something I have watched her earn. And watching that earn has been its own kind of education.*

PART THREE

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# TECHNOLOGY AS GOVERNANCE

*Technology is not an add-on. It is a constitution.*

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## Chapter 9

# Resonance as Governance Criterion

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Every institution eventually needs a way of knowing whether its decisions are working. For most cultural institutions, this question is answered by visibility metrics. Visibility is not the same as impact.

Resonance is the long after-effect of an encounter – identifiable not at the moment of exposure but in the altered behaviour that follows, months or years later. It is the deposit left by an encounter that was sufficiently demanding and committed to a position that it could not be absorbed without friction.

### Four Resonance Indicators

Repeat return: curators and scholars who return to works they have already seen are being pulled back by something unresolved. Single visits are

encounters. Multiple visits are the beginning of resonance.

Citation without prompting: when a collection's position appears in conversations where the collection was not named – when its argument is invoked without attribution – it has produced resonance of the highest order.

Successor re-engagement: when the next generation returns to documented governance decisions made years earlier – not to validate them but to argue with them productively – the collection has transmitted something alive.

Institutional alteration: when a lending relationship produces a change in how the receiving institution frames its own collection, the loan has produced resonance.

Engagement metrics must never enter acquisition, deaccession, or exhibition decisions. The moment a collector weighs artistic significance alongside digital performance, the algorithm has already become a curator.

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**Chapter 10**

# The Architecture of the Digital Field

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*“A platform is not a tool. It is a jurisdiction – one that imposes its laws on everyone who enters, whether or not they have consented to the regime.”*

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Every platform embeds a theory of value in its architecture. Instagram rewards visual spectacle. TikTok rewards immediacy. LinkedIn rewards professional utility. These are not neutral channels of distribution. They are value systems rendered as code.

An algorithm can measure dwell time, click-through rates, and share velocity. It cannot measure whether an encounter altered the viewer. It cannot register that a work's significance may increase precisely as engagement declines – when difficulty resists easy consumption.

A bonsai institution must govern its vocabulary as carefully as its collection. “User” becomes “visitor.” “Content” becomes “work.” “Engagement” becomes “encounter.” Language is governance at its most invisible – and therefore its most powerful.

#### KAREN'S NOTE

*Building the VR space taught me that the medium can host arguments the physical collection structurally cannot. In virtual space, I can place a work deaccessioned in 2009 beside what replaced it – making visible an editorial choice physical curation necessarily hides.*

*The digital is not an annex. It is a second nervous system for the collection. It holds the ghosts of past decisions – the deaccessioned works, the deliberations, the three-month pauses – in a form that future stewards can navigate.*

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**Chapter 11**

# Algorithms as Governance

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Every algorithm embeds a theory of value. The issue is not whether such a theory exists, but whether the institution has consciously accepted it — or let it arrive disguised as efficiency.

Five questions must be answered before deploying any algorithmic system. What does this system ingest, and whose perspectives are structurally absent? Who can override the system's outputs? Is the system optimised for what we value, or for what is measurable? How will we track long-term cumulative effects? And: if this system were removed tomorrow, would our judgment be stronger or weaker? A tool that builds human capacity is infrastructure. A tool that replaces it is dependency.

## Chapter 12

# Polyphonic Architecture

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A governed institution does not speak with a single flattened voice. It speaks with several: distinct in register, audience, and function, yet answerable to shared commitments. Coherence emerges from counterpoint rather than unison.

### The Four Communication Voices

The Institutional Voice speaks to partners, peers, and funders — formal, measured, signalling continuity through restraint. Risk: calcification. The Public Voice addresses audiences directly — accessible, willing to invite disagreement. Risk: populism. The Scholarly Voice engages the research community. Risk: insularity. The Internal Voice is institutional memory: acquisition rationales, governance decisions recorded with their doubts intact. Risk: neglect.

### The Four Cognitive Functions

The Critic asks: does this advance the argument, or confirm it? The Strategist asks: what does this do to the collection's position in ten years? The Historian asks: where have we faced this tension before? The Philosopher asks: what does this decision imply about what we value? In a small collection, these are roles the same people must move between — sometimes within a single conversation.

Polyphony requires a Central Compass: the set of non-negotiable commitments that no voice can override. Polyphony requires that disagreement remain audible. Failure lies in mistaking harmony for agreement, or silence for consensus.

## Chapter 13

# The AI Line We Will Not Cross

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Every serious institution must eventually confront a deceptively simple question: where does capability end and identity begin? The line is not drawn where capability fails. It is drawn where identity would dissolve.

### Procedural vs. Biographical Authority

Procedural authority derives from following a method correctly. It can be replicated, delegated, or automated. Biographical authority derives from having been present in a specific way — from having built a relationship with an artist over a decade, from having made and corrected consequential errors in a specific domain. It cannot be replicated or automated because it is not a method. It is the accumulated intelligence of a practised life.

### The Sycophancy Problem

AI systems are structurally predisposed to confirmation. When a founder uses AI to draft acquisition rationales, the AI will produce language that is fluent, coherent, and – with high probability – aligned with the founder’s existing convictions. It will not challenge. The erosion arrives in hundreds of small acceptances of the adequate.

### The Five Constitutive Acts

Five acts bring the institution into being. Remove any one from human judgment and what remains may still function, but it will no longer be this institution: the decision to acquire a work; the decision to deaccession a work; authorship of the editorial line; contextualisation of works; selection of the Artist Advisory.

When AI is used in proximity to any consequential decision, a documentation demand applies: what the humans thought before consulting the AI; what the AI suggested; what was adopted and what was refused. The refusals are the most important element. Over time, they become the most accurate map of the collection’s actual values.

**KAREN'S NOTE**

*The danger is not that AI will make obviously bad decisions. The danger is that it will make decisions so consistently reasonable that the muscle of human judgment atrophies.*

*For my generation, the sycophancy problem is specifically about speed. The tool will tell us quickly what a thorough analysis would take time to produce. That quickness feels like efficiency. In a governed collection, it is abdication dressed as productivity.*

**RAPHAËL'S NOTE**

*What I have learned to notice is the moment when the tool starts to feel authoritative – when its output begins to shape what I think rather than support what I'm working out. That moment is the line my father is describing, and it's harder to see in practice than the framework suggests. It doesn't arrive with a signal. It arrives as a small relief.*

**WHAT THIS CHAPTER LETS YOU TEST***– The AI Line*

1. Which of the five constitutive acts has AI assistance come closest to influencing in your collection?

*The question is not whether AI is being used. It is whether the proximity to constitutive decisions has been named as a governance boundary.*

2. When did you last complete the three-entry documentation demand for a decision made with AI assistance?

*If the refusals are not being recorded, the most accurate map of the collection's actual values is not being drawn.*

3. Run the capacity test: if the AI tools currently in use were removed tomorrow, would curatorial judgment be stronger or weaker?

*Infrastructure strengthens judgment. Dependency replaces it. The distinction matters for succession: dependency is not transmissible.*

## PRACTICE NOTES

## Technology, Resonance, and the Constitutive Acts

*These questions are most useful when applied to decisions already made – retrospectively – rather than to hypothetical future ones.*

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1. Name the last time your collection produced resonance rather than visibility.

*Use the four indicators: repeat return, citation without prompting, successor re-engagement, institutional alteration.*

2. Where has platform language entered your institutional vocabulary without a governance decision?

*When did “visitors” become “users”? Trace the vocabulary shift – it will locate the moment the platform’s theory of value entered the institution’s frame.*

3. Which of the five constitutive acts has AI assistance come closest to influencing in your collection?

*The question is not whether AI is being used, but where it is operating – and whether that proximity has been named as a governance boundary.*

4. Run the capacity test on any digital tool currently in use: if it were removed tomorrow, would your curatorial judgment be stronger or weaker?

*Infrastructure strengthens judgment. Dependency replaces it. The distinction matters for succession.*

**5. When did your internal voice last speak to a future steward rather than a current audience?**

*If your governance records are currently addressed to the present, reframe them toward the person who will inherit them.*

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PART FOUR

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TRANSMISSION  
AND POWER

*Everything built so far was designed to survive the founder.*

## Chapter 14

# The Interval Problem

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Governance frameworks address the steady state. They are less well designed for the interval — the period between one authority ending and another becoming fully legitimate.

During the interval, two things happen simultaneously. The informal authority structures that held everything together begin to dissolve. At the same time, the formal structures that are supposed to replace them have not yet been tested under real pressure. They exist on paper. They have not yet been inhabited.

## A Failed Succession: A Composite from Advisory Practice

Through Aika, we have been present in several succession processes that crossed into crisis. One pattern recurs. A founder — call him L — spent thirty years building a collection of genuine curatorial intelligence. He had a governance

document, an advisory board, a nominated heir. What he had not done was transmit the reasoning behind the decisions. His daughter could recite the editorial line. She could not argue it under pressure.

When L suffered a serious illness, the interval arrived without preparation. A major acquisition offer came within weeks. The daughter consulted the advisory board. The board consulted the mission statement. The mission statement did not address the specific case. The acquisition was declined – not on editorial grounds, but on grounds of institutional uncertainty. It was the wrong decision for the right reason: the governance structure had documented conclusions without documenting the intelligence that produced them.

Three years later, the editorial line had drifted in ways L, now recovered, found difficult to name precisely – because the drift had been small, repeated, undocumented. The Lampedusa threshold had been crossed not in a single decision but across thirty. The collection was still recognisable. It was no longer an argument.

## Designing for the Interval

Begin transmission early. If transmission has been underway for a decade, the interval is a transition. If it begins at the founder's departure, the interval is a crisis. Create real decisions, not consultations. Document the founder's reasoning, not just the founder's decisions. Name the interval explicitly: who has authority over what, under what conditions, with what escalation procedures.

## The Longevity Complication

Founders are living longer, remaining active longer, and retaining authority longer than the succession frameworks they put in place were designed to accommodate. The co-presence discipline — a deliberate programme of authority redistribution during the founder's active years — requires the founder to relinquish specific authorities not because they are incapable of exercising them, but because the institution's long-term health requires the successor to exercise them first.

**KAREN'S NOTE**

*The longevity question is not abstract for me. I am in my thirties. If current projections hold, I may govern this collection for fifty years. The structures we design now must endure not only one transition but two – the handover to a generation that does not yet exist. Designing for them is the most humbling aspect of the governance work I currently do.*

**RAPHAËL'S NOTE**

*The interval is not just a structural problem – it's a relational one. The documents matter less than whether the people using them trust each other enough to hold the framework when it's uncomfortable. That trust is built in the ordinary time. I am still building it.*

**WHAT THIS CHAPTER LETS YOU TEST***– The Interval*

1. Is transmission already underway, or is it still planned as a future event?

*If the successor has not yet made a real decision that the founder could not have overridden, transmission has not begun. It remains aspiration.*

2. Where does the founder's reasoning live that is not currently documented?

*This is the question that reveals what the interval will cost. The reasoning that exists only in the founder's head is exactly what the heir will most need and most lack.*

3. Does the interval currently have its own governance design – or only the steady state on either side of it?

*Most succession plans describe the endpoint. The interval itself needs its own explicit protocol.*

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**Chapter 15**

# The Costs We Must Name

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*“Every institution tells two stories: the one it curates for the public, and the one its people carry home in their bodies.”*

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## Labour: The Body Behind the Timeline

In the spring of 2018, we compressed a VR exhibition timeline from three months to six weeks. A young digital producer absorbed the compression. She worked hours that neither Dominique nor I fully registered. Two weeks after the exhibition launched to considerable praise, she resigned. The reason she gave was exhaustion. The reason she did not need to give was simpler: the urgency had been ours, and the cost had been entirely hers.

**DOMINIQUE'S NOTE**

*The policy we adopted in the aftermath – that no production timeline may be set without the explicit agreement of every person who will execute it – came from my recognition that the failure was mine before it was institutional.*

*In bonsai institutions, exploitation is more likely to be atmospheric. It lives in the space between dedication and obligation, between the founder's passion and the collaborator's fear of disappointing someone who has shown them trust. The corrective is not sentiment. It is structure.*

## Access: The Geography of Privilege

The DSLcollection's VR museum, launched in 2016 as a democratising experiment, required equipment costing several hundred euros and a computing environment that assumed both disposable income and technical literacy. Access had moved from the gallery's door to the user's bandwidth. The gatekeeping had not disappeared. It had been translated into the language of system requirements.

## The Cost of Coherence

The most difficult cost to name is the one that arises from the model's central achievement: coherence itself. The work that does not fit the editorial line is not simply declined. It becomes structurally inaudible. Articulate exclusion is more final than careless oversight. Some costs are not problems to be solved but tensions to be held without consolation.

## Chapter 16

# The Archipelago

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If the bonsai model's deepest risk is over-stability, the archipelago is a structural answer to a problem no single institution can resolve alone: the risk of mistaking self-reinforcement for rigour.

The archipelago is a network of small, autonomous institutions connected not by hierarchy or a central funder, but by a shared commitment to governing principles. Each node retains full editorial sovereignty. What holds the network together is not a superstructure but a shared discipline: the ceiling principle, the Lampedusa test, the commitment to documented reasoning, the refusal of engagement as a measure of curatorial value.

### Three Operational Protocols

The Visible Disagreement Protocol. When one institution lends to another, both produce their own interpretive text, displayed with equal prominence, signed with equal authority, and

archived. This converts what would otherwise remain an invisible interpretive gap into a documented, public act.

The Editorial Stress Test. Each member institution, once every two years, submits its current editorial line to one other node for a formal written challenge. The receiving institution must identify at least one acquisition the submitting institution holds that its own editorial principles would have refused – and explain why. Both responses are archived.

The Rotating Critical Presence. One practitioner from each member institution spends a minimum of two weeks annually engaged with another member's collection – not as a visitor, but as a working interlocutor with access to governance documents, acquisition rationales, and the internal voice.

### What the Archipelago Cannot Do

A network of coherent bonsai institutions is still a network built on exclusion – the same artists fall outside every editorial line, the same geographic and cultural biases reproduce across nodes. What the archipelago does is create the conditions

under which over-stability becomes recognisable from within.

#### KAREN'S NOTE

*The hardest part of building an archipelago is not the formal protocols – those are designable. The hardest part is the relational foundation: finding institutions whose commitment to their own discipline is genuine enough that their criticism of yours is worth hearing. Mutual admiration networks are easy to build. Mutual critical practice requires institutional confidence that is rare.*

#### RAPHAËL'S NOTE

*Karen and I should probably be building the relationships – with heirs and practitioners from other disciplined collections – that would make a genuine archipelago possible. That work starts now, not when the interval arrives.*

## PRACTICE NOTES

## The Interval Worksheet

*These five questions are designed to be answered together – by founder and heir, in the same room, before the interval arrives. Their value is not in the answers. It is in discovering where shared understanding ends.*

1. What authority does the heir currently hold that the founder cannot override?

*Name it specifically, not in principle. If neither party can name a concrete instance, the heir's authority is notional. The interval will expose this.*

2. If a major acquisition offer arrived tomorrow and the founder was unreachable, what would happen?

*Walk through the actual sequence. The gap between the intended sequence and the actual one is the interval's vulnerability.*

3. Where does the founder's reasoning live that is not currently documented?

*The reasoning that exists only in the founder's head is the reasoning the heir will most need and most lack. Name it. Begin documenting it now.*

4. What is the one decision the heir would make differently – and does the founder know it?

*The purpose is not to resolve the disagreement. It is to ensure the disagreement is known before it arrives in a high-stakes*

situation.

5. What would the collection need to remain itself for five years without either of you?

*If the answer requires either party's continued presence, the succession plan is not yet structural. It is personal.*

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# Conclusion: After the Founder, During the Founder

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Most founders build as if they will live forever, then panic when succession arrives unplanned. The alternative is to treat transmission as a discipline practised from the beginning. Every acquisition is also a question: will my successor understand why this belongs? Every deaccession is a demonstration: the argument can absorb loss without collapsing.

Transmission is not keeping everything. It is passing on the argument and the tools to revise it. And — as Karen has written — it is passing on the permission to argue. That permission is not given once. It is renewed in each significant decision. The collection is alive as long as that renewal is possible.

### Three Refusals

Refuse to Delegate Constitutive Acts. Never fully outsource the editorial line, acquisition and deaccession decisions to advisers, boards, platforms, or algorithms. These acts bring the institution into being. Delegating them does not create a governed collection. It creates a managed asset with a cultural vocabulary.

Refuse to Confuse Engagement with Resonance. Follower counts, impression numbers, and auction results are measures of cultural exposure. They are not measures of cultural impact. The heir who learns to read visibility metrics as success metrics will make different decisions about the collection than the one who learns to identify resonance.

Refuse Facade Change in Family Governance. A family constitution drafted but not inhabited, an advisory board appointed but not empowered – these are Lampedusa-threshold failures. The test, always, is what happens when the reform produces an outcome the founder dislikes. If the outcome can be overridden, the reform was decorative.

## The Six Surrenders

To govern a collection for transmission, the founder must surrender. Not once, but as a practice that grows more demanding as the stakes become clearer.

*Opacity* – the right to operate without explanation. The governed collection explains itself on its own terms – or accepts that others will explain it on theirs.

*Permanence* – the belief that what you acquired will remain forever. The collection that cannot deaccession becomes a museum of the founder's past enthusiasms rather than a living argument about the present.

*Finality* – the assumption that your judgment is the institution's last word. The polyphonic collection – the one that survives – is the one in which multiple editorial voices coexist.

*Foundational authority* – the idea that being first makes your decisions permanent. The founder's privilege is to set the initial constraints. The founder's discipline is to make those constraints revisable.

*Totality* – the belief that the model accounts for everything worth accounting for. Every model of governance is also a model of exclusion.

*Temporal sovereignty* – the assumption that your lifespan is the collection's natural clock. The hardest surrender is not dying. It is choosing, while fully alive, to make room.

### What Cannot Be Transmitted

This book has described what can be designed, documented, tested, and passed on. It has not named what resists all of that – and something does. The particular quality of attention that Dominique brought to a studio she had never visited before. The accumulated doubt of two decades of decisions: the weight of what was refused, and what that refusal cost. The specific form of trust that allows two people who disagree to remain in productive disagreement over years. These are transmissible only through time spent together, in the presence of the works, in the presence of the argument as it is being made – not as it has already been recorded.

### The Scripts We Refuse

The dominant script: accumulate, display, die. We refuse that script. Longevity adds a second: accumulate, display, persist. We refuse that script too. The algorithmic age introduces a third: accumulate, display, optimise. We refuse this script as well.

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*Private futures survive through transmission – of intelligence, not only of objects.*

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#### DOMINIQUE'S NOTE

*The collection was built in disagreement. Not in crisis – in productive, sustained, frequently uncomfortable disagreement between two people who saw differently and chose to remain in that difference rather than resolve it into consensus.*

*The polyphony was not a method we applied. It was the condition we were already in. You cannot design your way into genuine difference. You can only refuse to design your way out of it.*

**KAREN'S NOTE**

*What I inherited was not just an argument about Chinese contemporary art. It was a model of attention – a way of looking that resists the metric-driven gaze now governing most cultural platforms. The collection taught me that significance and visibility are different currencies, and that the market's failure to price the first does not make it less real.*

**RAPHAËL'S NOTE**

*I don't know yet what I will bring to this. I am still learning what the collection is, in the way you learn something by living alongside it rather than studying it. What I do know is that I want to be present for the decisions – the real ones, the uncomfortable ones – before the interval arrives and presence becomes both more necessary and more freighted. I am asking for those years.*

# Coda: Questions to Carry Away

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These questions are organised by role. Each is intended to be difficult, and each difficulty is diagnostic.

## For Founders

What argument is your collection making? Can you state it without reference to market value, institutional prestige, or biographical narrative? Which decisions have you never been willing to subject to a governance process – and what does that unwillingness protect? What authority have you already redistributed, and what are you still holding that should not belong to you alone?

## For Heirs

Do you know the argument your collection is making, or only the works that make it? Have you made at least one decision that the founder would not have made, and had it recognised as correct? If not, transmission has not yet begun. What relationships are you building now that will

constitute your archipelago?

### For Those Still Finding Their Role

What do you observe that those inside the governance structures cannot see clearly? Distance is not a deficit. It is a perspective. What will you need, from those who built this, in order to eventually take responsibility for it? Ask for it explicitly. Governance begins before the documents.

### For Advisers and Family Offices

Does the collection you advise have a Lampedusa-tested governance framework, or a well-drafted document that has never been tested under real pressure? Is the AI assistance being introduced confined to procedural functions, or has it begun to influence constitutive decisions? What script is the collection following – accumulate and die, accumulate and persist, or accumulate and optimise?

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*This text is a working score – not a concluded argument. It is published in the conviction that unfinished thinking, made public, serves the field better than polished silence.*

## Paris, 2026

# Working Pages for Founders, Heirs, and Advisers

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*These pages are designed to be used, not admired. Bring them to a governance conversation. Argue with them. The difficulty is the point.*

## I. The Lampedusa Audit

Apply to any governance reform before declaring it structural.

1. If the founder disagreed with the outcome this reform produces, could the reform override them?

*If no: the reform is advisory. Name it as such.*

2. Does this reform redistribute who can say no?

*Governance is the distribution of refusal. A reform that leaves the right of refusal unchanged has left governance unchanged.*

3. Has this reform already produced one decision the founder would not have made alone?

*If not, it has not yet been tested. Mark it as untested.*

4. Would this reform survive the founder's death without renegotiation?

*If it depends on the founder's continuing good will, it is a personal commitment, not an institution.*

5. Does the next generation have standing to invoke this reform against the founder's expressed preference?

*If not, the framework belongs to the founder. Not to the institution.*

## II. The Constitutive Acts Protocol

Five acts bring the institution into being. Each must remain under human biographical authority.

1. The decision to acquire a work. AI may research provenance, market comparables, exhibition history. It may not decide that a work matters because it contradicts the parameters of its training.

2. The decision to deaccession a work. Editorial logic does not align with financial logic. Only a human who inhabits the argument can make this distinction without rationalisation.

3. Authorship of the editorial line. The editorial line's authority comes from the capacity to surprise – to include what the pattern would have excluded. An algorithm cannot surprise itself.

4. Contextualisation of works. Contextualisation requires the willingness to advance claims others may dispute, and to take responsibility for those claims publicly, over time.

5. Selection of the Artist Advisory. This is judgment about persons, not profiles. It rests on years of encounters that cannot be reduced to exhibition history or market trajectory.

### III. The AI Refusal Log

For every consequential decision made with AI assistance, complete three entries. The refusals are the most important.

1. What did the humans think before consulting the AI?

*Record the initial position before any AI output is seen.  
This is the baseline against which influence is measured.*

2. What did the AI suggest?

*Record the AI output in full, not a summary. Paraphrase introduces the distortion the log is designed to prevent.*

3. What was adopted, and what was explicitly refused from the AI output?

*The refusals are the record of biographical authority exercised. That is the institution's actual values, more reliably than any mission statement.*

# Acknowledgements

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This book was shaped by more hands and voices than any single authorship can honestly claim.

Dominique, as in everything, came first. She built this collection alongside me, and her judgment – sharper than mine, more patient, less susceptible to enthusiasm – is present on every page. Her voice in this book is not a supplement to mine. It is a counterpoint that made the argument possible.

Karen brought the questions I could not have asked of myself, and the courage to ask them in her own chapter, inside her father's book. The 2024 acquisition she describes was proof that transmission had begun.

Raphaël carries the future of what we have started, in ways that are still becoming visible. His presence in this book – not yet fully inside the governance structures, not yet formed by decisions he has not yet made – is the most honest image of what transmission actually looks like in the middle of happening.

Martina Köppel-Yang and Yang Jiechang have been, since the very inception of the collection, our source of inspiration and our most trusted advisors. Their insight shaped not only what we collected but how we learned to see.

To the artists whose work we hold: your practices made this collection possible. To those whose work we released: your departures made it coherent. To those who told us we were wrong: you were the most important people in the room.

## Fewer than one in five significant

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*private collections survives intact  
beyond the founder's lifetime.*

*What disappears is not the objects.  
It is the intelligence that chose them.*

Drawing on forty years of collecting and twenty years of governing DSLcollection — a deliberately constrained private collection of Chinese contemporary art — Sylvain and Dominique Lévy develop a governance framework for collections that aspire to endure.

Polyphonic in structure, the book enacts its own argument: Karen Lévy writes her own chapter; Raphaël Lévy speaks as witness. Together they demonstrate that transmission is not the passing of objects, but the passing of the permission to argue.

- **The Bonsai Discipline**
- **The Lampedusa Test**
- **The Three Ds**
- **The Interval Problem**
- **The Archipelago**

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**Sylvain & Dominique Lévy**

*with Karen Lévy and Raphaël Lévy*

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