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# The global rise of private art museums a literature review

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## ABSTRACT

In this state-of-the-art article, we review studies of the highly controversial, global rise of private art museums as a new organizational form within art fields. Given that current studies are scattered across different disciplines like sociology, museum studies, economics and anthropology, a systematic engagement with theoretical and methodological issues is difficult. This paper compiles and discusses these studies, identifying key themes, controversies as well as areas of consensus. We organize our review according to eight key themes: 1. (non)-existent definitions of private museums; 2. their historical roots; 3. geographical dimensions; 4. the life course of private museums; 5. their relation to public museums; 6. the involvement of the government; 7. private museums as actors in the art field, and 8. the implications for the (re)production of social inequalities. We conclude by reflecting on the most significant gaps in the literature and formulate a research agenda that can guide us to a more systematic inquiry of the private museum phenomenon.

## 1. Introduction

Since 2000, over 300 private art museums have been established worldwide, in which art collectors open their collections to the public (Larry's [List, 2015](#)). This development is highly controversial. On one hand, they have been seen as generous philanthropic gestures of collectors to 'share' their 'passion' for art with society. These gestures are seen as timely given decreasing government subsidies to cultural institutions in Europe ([Anheier, 2006](#)) and limited public support for the arts in regions like South-East Asia, Africa or Latin America ([Bouchara & Woo, 2015](#); [Dieckvoss, 2020](#); [Esquivel Durand, 2018](#); [Kiowski, 2017](#)).

On the other hand, critics argue that private museums are neo-aristocratic institutions and pivotal in translating sharply rising economic inequality into cultural inequality. With their frequently vast resources, private museums easily outcompete public museums on the art market and would increasingly determine how the canon is shaped. As art historian [Graw \(2009\)](#) puts it, we have moved from Harrison and Cynthia White's dealer-critic model, where recognition and reputation are created by 'independent', 'scholarly' actors such as critics and curators ([Moulin, 1994](#); [White & White, 1965](#)) to a dealer-collector model, where private actors increasingly determine what gets valued and on which terms ([Brown, 2019](#)). According to these critics, private museums reflect the taste and interests of the super-rich instead of those of the public ([Foster, 2015](#)). As such, they fortify the social position of their founders, releasing them from the rest of society.

While private museums thus present sites of urgent debates around global wealth distribution, social inequality and cultural policy, little empirical research on their rise exists to back up these strong normative positions. Key aspects of their emergence,

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institutionalization and impact are underexplored, and existing studies frequently disagree on these impacts. Moreover, what has been published is scattered across different disciplines like sociology, museum studies, economics and anthropology, making a systematic engagement with theoretical and methodological issues difficult. While we approach the study of private museums primarily from a sociological perspective ourselves, in this article, we compile and review existent studies from various disciplinary realms, and identify key themes, controversies as well as areas of consensus amongst them.

We organize our review of the state of the art according to eight key themes: 1. (non)-existent definitions of private museums; 2. their historical roots; 3. geographical dimensions; 4. the life course of private museums; 5. their relation to public museums; 6. the involvement of the government; 7. private museums as actors in the art field, and 8. the implications for the (re)production of social inequalities. We conclude by reflecting on the most significant gaps in the literature and formulate a research agenda that can guide us to more systematic inquiry of the phenomenon.

### 1.1. Definitional issues

Establishing a clear definition of the term “private museum” has proven challenging both within academia and the art field itself. Within the arts, the very definition of a museum – whether public or private – is contested, as the ongoing, lengthy negotiations of the official definition of the International Council of Museums (ICOM) demonstrate (Brown, 2020; Singer, 2019). It should therefore not be a surprise that an explicit definition of private museums as a distinct organizational form has not yet become institutionalized amongst key organizations in the field.

Some attempts at establishing a definition can however be identified. The European Group on Museum Statistics (EGMUS, 2022) considers the privateness of different aspects of museums individually, such as the ownership of a museum, collection ownership and management. The Global Private Museum Network (2020) defines a private museum in more detail as a “contemporary art museum owned by an individual, family or corporation that receives no or little public funding, makes its collection physically available to the public on an ongoing basis and/or regularly stages curated exhibitions of contemporary art”. However, this definition has neither received much reception across other key organizations in the museum sector nor in academic debates (see Esquivel Durand, 2018 for an exception). These definitional issues bear real-life consequences for cultural policy and museum management. For instance, public benefit in particular has been the key criterion of an IRS investigation into the tax-exempt status of a number of private US institutions with limited accessibility to the public (Honig, 2016; Voon, 2016). Here, public benefit implicitly functions as an attribute distinguishing private museums from private collections.

Within academia, explicit, rigorous definitions of private museums have likewise been scarce. Instead, in many studies the topic of the inquiry is delineated by presenting a limited number of (historical or contemporary) cases. Various strands of scholarship – respectively focusing on art collectors, cultural management or hybridization – do however put forward implicit conceptualizations of private museums. The first body of work uses the figure of the art collector as the identifying criterion, and main axis of investigation into private museums ((Adam, 2021); Bechtler & Imhof, 2018; Brown, 2019; Codignola, 2016; Coman & Casey, 2021; Barros de Castro, 2018; Duncan, 1995; Franklin & Papastergiadis, 2017; Gnyp, 2015; Higonnet, 2003, 2007; (Kalb Cosmo, 2020); Quemini, 2020; Walker, 2019; Zorloni & Resch, 2016).<sup>1</sup> The focus on private collectors is also reflected in alternative framings of private museums, such as “collector museum” (Moustaira, 2015; Walker, 2019), “collection museum” (Coman & Casey, 2021; Higonnet, 2007; Moustaira, 2015; Walker, 2019), “donor museum” (Duncan, 1995), or “house museum” (Pachucki, 2012; Walker, 2019). Left mostly unconsidered in this strand of literature are other features, such as accessibility, legal form, public benefit, professional standards or even finances, resulting in a diverse set of institutions – ranging from art-collectors’ private residences accessible only by appointment to fully professionalized institutions with hundreds of thousands of annual visitors – being grouped together. We interpret the strong focus on the figure of the art collector as the distinguishing feature of private museums as a sign of the growing influence of collectors on processes of arts evaluation and legitimation.

The second strand of literature focuses on economic and management aspects of museums (or cultural organizations more generally). This body of work understands private museums<sup>2</sup> as being independent from the state in terms of operation and governance (Amenta, 2010; Camarero et al., 2018; Clarke, 1991), ownership (Bertacchini et al., 2018; Camarero et al., 2021; Paül i Agustí, 2013) and/or funding (Camarero et al., 2011; Esquivel Durand, 2018; Vicente et al., 2012), generally using a 50 percent threshold. Museums are thus also considered private if they are owned, operated or financed by NGOs/QUANGOs, businesses, corporations, religious institutions, or foundations not run by art collectors.

The third strand thematizes the hybrid nature of museums (and other cultural organizations) and the blurred boundaries between public and private domains. Taking into account issues like building ownership, the entity responsible for operations, governing authority and collection ownership, Schuster (1998) argues, for instance, that between a quarter and a third of US museums are public-private hybrids. Other studies focus on the proportion of public to private funding (Frey & Meier, 2002, 2006) or build a composite index based on several factors, among them building ownership, management model, and collection ownership (Riis-Ulldemolins, 2015).

<sup>1</sup> This understanding corresponds to the definition proposed by the collector-focused art-market knowledge company Larry’s List (2015) of a private museum as based on a contemporary art collection of a living individual – but not corporate – art collector who also owns and operates the museum; yet such references to Larry’s List rarely include explicit usages of the proposed definition.

<sup>2</sup> This stream is not limited to contemporary art museums, but also includes museums focusing on antiquities, archeology, classical art, (natural/local) history, science, technology, ethnography or folk culture.

Those three strands all focus on specific aspects of museums but disregard many others. A clear, all-encompassing definition of private museums is rarely presented in these studies. We presume that this is the result of the sheer variety of organizational characteristics (e.g. the absence or presence of a permanent collection, educational programs or temporary exhibitions) which are encountered in this field. Their respective embeddedness in different local legal and economic infrastructures creates further variation. Moreover, private museum owners frequently keeping the organizational structure, financial model and collection holdings of their institutions hidden from the public eye. While mindful of these challenges, we nonetheless think that a clearer definition of private museums is crucial for both future research and policymaking. Now, the absence of such an explicit definition potentially leads to conceptual confusion as well as a grouping together of highly heterogeneous organizations. In the final section of this article, we therefore propose a new definition by identifying what private museums, as a new organizational form, have in common.

### 1.2. Private museums versus public museums

As discussed above, several studies define private museums among others by their difference from public institutions. Typically, a public museum would be founded, housed and financed by municipal, state or national government bodies; frequently these bodies are also involved in their governance, making sure that public interests are served. In contrast, a private museum is neither governed nor financed by the state and is therefore not expected to represent public interests (Duncan, 1995; McClellan, 2003). A considerable strand of literature has set out to explore the different characteristics, functions and relationships between public and private institutions, looking particularly at differences in museum management, visitor relations and museums' wider role for arts provision and education.

But how private museums differ from public ones is contested. Some contrast the supposed organizational inertia of public museums, which is frequently criticized, to the managerial freedom and budgetary flexibility of private museums, arguably allowing them to be more fast-paced, innovative and open to taking creative risks (Brown 2020; Esquivel 2018; Frey & Meier 2002; Gnyp 2015; Kiowski 2017). The literature is further divided on whether private museums outperform public institutions when it comes to audience relationships. Based on a case study of the Beyeler museum, Frey and Meier (2002, 2006) hypothesize that private museums focus more attention on visitor amenities as the lack or limited nature of state subsidies incentivizes their boards to generate more revenue on their own. The question whether the management of private museums has indeed internalized a higher customer orientation has been investigated, producing varying results. Based on curators surveys, Camarero et al. (2011) find no difference between private and public museums in (reported) eagerness to understand visitor needs and to base museum strategy goals on these. Camarero et al. (2018) find however that curators of private museums perceive themselves as having established stronger ties with audiences.

Indeed, private museums are found to have higher accessibility, visibility and better visitor amenities (Amenta, 2010; Bertacchini et al., 2018) and make more use of technologies related to visitor experience (Camarero et al., 2011; Vicente et al., 2012). Yet, while private museums seem to emphasize visitor experience, they seem less eager to devote resources to less visible aspects of their museums, such as collection database software or conservation efforts (Camarero et al., 2011; De Nigris, 2018; Vicente et al., 2012) which might affect long-term sustainability. It is also important to note that in many aspects of visitor orientation, publicly funded museums with financial autonomy perform as well as private ones (Bertacchini et al., 2018; Camarero et al., 2018), with both private and so-called "arms-length" institutions outperforming "line-departments" directly embedded in the bureaucracy of cultural ministries.

Again other studies focus on museum programming, claiming that private museums' cultural offer tends to be more market-oriented (Frey & Meier, 2002). Stressing the spectacular buildings of star architects (Sklair, 2005; Frey & Meier, 2002; Zennaro, 2017), these studies also tend to highlight museums' recreational and entertaining rather than their curatorial or conservation function ((McPherson, 2006)). They relate the rise of private museums to the trend towards superficial spectacles, fast-paced entertainment and blockbuster exhibitions (Quemin, 2020; (Zhang & Courty, 2020)). While many museum founders commend these aspects as signs of their institutions' speed and flexibility compared to public ones (Bechtler & Imhof, 2018), they can also be associated "with market decisions rather than long-term processes" (Brown, 2019:12). As Brown (2019:12) states:

"[w]hile the curators and trustees of public museums make choices about the development of their collections via extensive committee deliberation, private museums can develop swiftly according to the changing desires and interests of the individuals who own them. The latter is not necessarily a problem, but it does raise the question of how collections are shaped over the long-term and how they are intended to address the interests of diverse publics across generations."

Not all studies agree, however, on the limited public benefits of private museums. Largely independent from public cultural policies and funding bodies, private museums may be freer to create exhibitions and events outside of narrow public policy focus or even governmental control and censorship. Some studies argue indeed that they can showcase broader discussions around contemporary art (Larry's List, 2015), by including for instance disruptive works or museum designs that challenge the traditional, canon-centred 'highbrow' cultural experience (Franklin, 2017). Moreover, exactly because they are not – like their public counterparts – accountable to wider public interests, private museums can be more radical and experimental than public institutions, having the chance to "look at the otherwise overlooked, explore unique, even idiosyncratic paths" (Bechtler & Imhof, 2018:15; (Adam, 2021)).

The question about difference is not just a descriptive one but comes with prescriptions: it is in the interest of private museums to show that they are different from public ones if they want to endure. According to Walker (2019:12), private museums "need to rise to the challenge and offer a different experience to that of public museums if they are to continue to attract audiences and remain relevant in the long-term". Indeed, how public and private museums differ is intricately related to their respective roles within art fields. On one hand, scholars argue that private museums are valuable additions or complements to public museums, or can be substitutes in case public museums are absent (Esquivel Durand, 2018:246; also Bechtler & Imhof, 2018). Especially in contexts in which public arts

support is limited or diminishing, this form of philanthropy might be a way of supporting and even democratizing art (Codignola, 2016; Esquivel Durand, 2018; (Kalb Cosmo, 2020); Song, 2008). Indeed, focusing on the Mexican situation, Esquivel Durand (2018:245) holds that “the public may perceive a private museum as a public cultural good regardless of its private funding or operation”.

Those who comprehend public and private museums as complementary tend to see possibilities for collaborations, for instance via practices of borrowing and lending artworks (Larry’s List, 2015; Crawford, 2016). According to Dercon (2018), cooperation between private collectors and public museums is fundamental to museums’ institutional survival, both public and privately funded. The case of the Museum of Old and New Art (MONA) in Tasmania, which combined its collection with those of local public museums, exemplifies new kinds of exchanges between public and private (Franklin, 2017; Franklin & Papastergiadis, 2017; Walker, 2015). Furthermore, museum founders, such as those of Jumex in Mexico, can comprehend associations with public museums as beneficial “not only for importing or exporting exhibitions but also for building rapport with other museum committees and influential professionals in the field” (Esquivel Durand, 2018:255).

By contrast, while private museum founders tend to argue that their institutions would complement rather than compete with public museums (Gnyp, 2015:157), public institutions’ leadership can be more critical of private initiatives, noting their “[l]ack of obligations for continuity, education and commitment to artistic careers” (ibid.:171). Scholars have moreover cautioned that private museums risk undermining public art institutions and arts provision, ultimately prioritizing private objectives over public interests. For example, Walker argues (2019) that by establishing their own institutions, wealthy collectors, who used to support public museums, now redirect their means towards their own, private ends. Relatedly, private institutions would compete with – and possibly outbid – public museums for significant works of art (Codignola, 2016; (Fetter, 2016)6), audiences ((Adam, 2021) Frey & Meier, 2006; Kalb Cosmo, 2021; Larry’s List, 2015; Walker, 2019), public and private sponsoring (Frey & Meier, 2006; Franklin, 2017), donors relationships (Camarero et al., 2018) and artistic talent (Esquivel Durand, 2018).

### 1.3. Historical relations

Debates around private museums and their relationship to public institutions are far from new, as historical studies of the former have demonstrated: leaving aside the royal collections out of which many of the first art museums developed in the 18th and 19th century (McClellan, 2003), several authors (Kalb Cosmo, 2020; Walker, 2019; Zorloni & Resch, 2016; Brown 2019) have noted that the current boom in private museums shows parallels to an earlier wave of museum foundings in the US American gilded age of the late 19th and early 20th century. At the time, apart from museums founded by groups of philanthropists (Borgmann, 2004; DiMaggio, 1982), a substantive number were founded by individual collectors, such as the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, the Barnes Foundation and the Frick collection (Adam, 2004; Duncan, 1995; Higonnet, 2003; Walker, 2019).

While comparisons between this past museum-building moment and today’s private museum boom require more nuanced explorations, e.g. regarding their architecture, collection or governance, existing studies suggest that just like in the new millennium, massive wealth accumulation and its unequal distribution contributed to the phenomenon. This accumulation enabled philanthropists to buy art in large quantities and, in the absence of government support for the arts, open their collections to the public. Higonnet (2003) points out that their founders promised the entire US American public access to art, tapping into an ideology of equal opportunity which allegedly distinguished the United States from Europe.

Simultaneously, however, the museum architecture hardly supported those democratic ideals, as it was more geared towards impressing the public than including it (McClellan, 2003); indeed, these museums were also directed at gaining status for their founders, as DiMaggio (1982) has pointed out in his classical study of the Boston Brahmins. This status could only materialize because the wider public believed in the legitimacy of these new cultural institutions (DiMaggio, 1982; Lena, 2019). Apart from status, Higonnet (2003) also points at their self-serving nature: private museums can be seen as self-portraits of or monuments for their founders, aimed at saving their names from oblivion (Duncan, 1995; Higonnet, 2007). In her monograph on private museums, Walker (2019) confirms that they have been successful in doing so: while the business enterprises of philanthropists like Frick have long been forgotten, their names are remembered through their museums. Private museums founded during the gilded age cannot be reduced to status or vanity projects, however. They also contributed to the institutionalization of the non-profit foundation as an organizational form and to its subsequent professionalization. For instance, many of them hired professional curators to take care of collections and exhibitions and were keen to develop a scientific methodology for museum management. As part of this process, the cultural hierarchy between low and high art was established; for instance, through the elimination of reproductions from the exhibition spaces (Borgmann, 2004; DiMaggio, 1982).

Apart from striking parallels between the late 19th century and the current private museum boom, key differences exist as well. Walker (2019), for example, has pointed out that many of the earlier private museums only opened to the public after their founders had died, while currently collectors seek to make their collections accessible during their lifetime. It would, moreover, be too simplistic to see the history of private museums as divided up into an US American era during the gilded age, and a global era in the new millennium. First of all, several studies document that many private museums were established well after the gilded age throughout the course of the 20th century. Secondly, although US American private museums may constitute the largest group of predecessors to the current boom, they are surely not the only ones. Some private museums were also established in the late 19th in Europe (Walker, 2019); in fact, several US American museum founders had toured to museums in Europe in the late 19th century to find inspiration (Borgmann, 2004; Walker, 2019). Likewise, in China private museums existed as early as the beginning of the 20th century, although not specifically directed at modern and contemporary art (Lu, 2014; Song, 2008); and the late 1940s saw two business men opening private art museums in Brazil, which would become key drivers for the country’s art scene (Brandellero, 2015; Barros De Castro, 2018).

They were inspired by the New York Museum of Modern Art and assisted by Nelson Rockefeller (Brandellero, 2015; Lima, 2010).

#### 1.4. Geographical dimensions

Beyond private museums' historical relations, scholarship has frequently and explicitly addressed geographical dimensions. These studies suggest that the rise of private art museums has to some extent been a global phenomenon, taking place almost simultaneously in South-East Asia (Bouchara & Woo, 2015; De Nigris, 2018; Kiowski, 2017; Zennaro, 2017), Europe, the Middle East (Sindelar, 2019), North America and Latin America (Barros de Castro, 2018; Esquivel Durand, 2018) and, to a lesser extent, Africa (Brown, 2019; Dieckvoss, 2020).

Several perspectives on this global rise can be distinguished. First of all, a body of work has noticed that private museums are strikingly isomorphic with regards to their collection holdings, the central role of their founders and their architecture. Dercon (2018) and Gnyp (2015), for example, document a trend towards 'cloned' private museums that exhibit the same international superstar artists across the world. Similarly, as Frey and Meier (2002) highlight in their study of the Beyeler Foundation, private museums tend to combine collections with specific, often eye-catching architectural undertakings to attract the public and tourists, frequently collaborating with globally renowned architects. Analyzing private art museums in Shanghai, Zennaro (2017:65) has characterized this phenomenon as 'aesthetic isomorphism', denoting a focus on

"the museum's visual finish as an attempt to gain external validation or legitimacy in the global field of art museums and art districts. In other words, in order to look like legitimate art museums these emerging organizations in Shanghai rely on existing museums' 'myths', which in this case pertain to the sphere of aesthetic symbols."

But because local resources in supporting these Shanghai museums and expertise in running them are absent, their organizational efficiency (e.g. when it comes to storing and displaying art) is hampered (Zennaro, 2017).

Implicitly or explicitly, these studies assume that a global art field is in the making in which private museums as an organizational form diffuse. Buchholz (2016) as well as Velthuis and Curioni (2015) note that such transnational diffusion processes, which shape the production and exhibition of contemporary art today, would still usually take place from the center of the global field (which continues to be Western Europe and the United States) to other peripheral regions, where private museums were developed at a later stage (see also Kuipers, 2011; Velthuis & Brandellero, 2018). While certainly more global in geographical reach nowadays, the private museum trend could thus be seen as reflecting processes of expansion and connection between highly privileged social groups. Borea (2016) notes that these groups are, in Latin America, of European descent, lending a neo-colonial dimension to the private museum boom.

A second strand of studies challenges these one-sided diffusion processes by highlighting how private museums, especially those located in countries beyond Western Europe and the US, may challenge and redefine longstanding Eurocentric notions of both the museum as such and of contemporary art more widely (e.g. Dieckvoss, 2020 on MACAAL in Morocco; Esquivel Durand, 2018 on the Museum Jumex in Mexico; Franklin, 2017 on MONA in Tasmania; Siegel Correa, 2020 and Barros de Castro, 2018 on Inhotim in Brazil). Connected therewith, scholars have specifically pointed to the impact of private museums located in countries with no or little direct public arts subsidies (e.g. Dieckvoss, 2020 on Morocco; Sindelar, 2019 on the Gulf States, De Nigris, 2018; Zennaro, 2017 on China) or in countries where the government has been involved in cultural censorship or in deploying art for nationalistic agendas (e.g. Ho, 2018 in China; Milam, 2013 and Kharchenkova et al., 2015 in Russia). In short, these studies emphasize that private museums are invariably embedded in localised cultural environments, which shape their specific organizational forms and meanings.

Thirdly, several studies have stressed the importance of private museums for both the development of specific local art scenes (Dieckvoss, 2020) and for connecting these to the global field (Esquivel Durand, 2018; see also Barros de Castro, 2018; Rosa, 2021; and Siegel Correa, 2020 on private museums in Brazil). They show how private museums need to find a balance between local and global roles: how to make sure that they are at once looked upon as legitimate within the global art field, while at the same time ensuring that they are satisfying needs in local (e.g. national) fields. This is critical as today's museum geography is "not only polycentric as a practice, but also demands a polyphonic discourse" (Belting et al., 2013:184). In other words, these studies dispute the notion of a Europe- and US-dominated, monocentric global art field by situating the rise of private museums in a local or regional context. Rather than the extension of traditional center-periphery dynamics, these studies suggest a decentering of today's contemporary art field.

#### 1.5. The life course of private museums: institutionalization and sustainability

Although not necessarily using the concept itself, institutionalization processes are discussed in various studies of private museums. Focusing on the micro-level, studies either analyze the transformation of a person's private art collection into a private museum or consider the long-run sustainability of private museums, particularly beyond the death of their founders.

No single study has mapped the trajectory comprehensively and explicitly, but several phases in this institutionalization process can be identified. The starting phase usually involves a person or a couple putting together an art collection, which is initially displayed in their private home for personal consumption. This collection then grows to an extent that it can no longer be displayed in its entirety in this home (Adam, 2021; Gnyp, 2015; Rosa, 2021). Moreover, collectors usually realize in this phase that the collection may be of public value and consider conserving the collection and making it accessible to the public. To that end, collectors deliberate several options, including lending or donating (parts of) the collection to a public museum or, indeed, founding their own museum. The latter goal may at first be realized in the intermediate organizational form of the house museum, discussed at length by Walker (2019): a venue where the collectors themselves live but the public can enter to see the collection, albeit sometimes only upon invitation, and only for a select group of people belonging to the collector's wider network (see also Gnyp, 2015).

Once the collector decides to found a fully fledged museum, a legal form needs to be selected in the establishment phase. This phase has raised considerable attention in the arts management literature. Depending on the jurisdiction, this legal form can be a foundation, a charitable trust, an association or a non-profit private corporation (Rosa, 2021; Yermack, 2017; Zorloni & Resch, 2016). Frey and Meier (2002) argue that the legal form which gets selected depends on the various financial and non-financial benefits the specific structure offers. Among others, these include tax benefits, eligibility for direct government subsidies, the level of control which they grant the museum's founders or the safeguards they offer for the museum's continuity. In many cases the collections, and in some cases also the museums themselves have remained entirely privately owned by the collector without a legal structure of its own. In most countries this means, however, that tax benefits are forgone (Zorloni, 2016) and that continuity is at risk once the founders die.

After the museum has been established, a consolidation phase follows in which safeguards are developed to make sure that it keeps operating in the ways envisaged by the founder with respect to e.g. its mission, building, collection display, and governance. As Coman and Casey (2021:132) argue on the basis of a case study of the Freer Gallery of Art in Washington DC, "the founder's aesthetic identity" will have a "continuing impact (...) on the evolution of the organizational identity of the museum". However, the well-publicized legal battle won in 2004 by the Barnes Foundation, which had long wanted to move to a new building in spite of the foundation's by-laws stipulating that no aspect of the museum building and displays could ever be changed, suggest that such safeguards may never provide absolute certainty (Adam, 2021; Walker, 2019).

The next, sustainability phase of the institutionalization process starts when the museum's founder dies (assuming that they have not lost interest during their lifetime, ran out of funds or were forced to close the museum for other reasons). The future and sustainability of private museums through time is frequently debated vis-à-vis the existence of state-operated institutions (Brown, 2020; De Nigris, 2018; Dercon, 2018). Walker (2019) notes that the main risks in the long-term institutionalization of private museums are the availability of funds and the willingness of the founder's heirs to keep the museum open. To secure the long-term accessibility of the collections, some founders make arrangements during their lifetime to secure long-term support from governments (see De Nigris, 2018), transforming the museum into a public body or gifting the museum and or/its collection to a public museum or to the government (Coman & Casey, 2021; Walker, 2019; Adam 2021).

In practice, private museums are frequently transformed into hybrid institutions (De Nigris, 2018; Kalb Cosmo, 2020; Rijs-Ulldemolins, 2015; Schuster, 1998) or public-private partnership (Walker, 2019). In these cases, the collection continues for instance to be owned by the founder, who lends it out on a long-term basis to a purposefully founded public museum. The latter's building and staff are then financially supported by the government (see Brown, 2019 on Zeitz MOCAA in South Africa; Frey & Meier, 2002 on Fondation Beyeler in Switzerland; Walker, 2019 on Museum Brandhorst in Germany). Other options for ensuring museums' futures which have been documented in the literature include support from third party individuals and foundations (Walker, 2019; Kiowski, 2017). The possibility of private museums operating within a limited time frame (such as the lifetime of the founder) and not necessarily being kept for longevity is brought up by some scholars as well (Kalb Cosmo, 2020; Walker, 2019).

Apart from the micro-level of individual trajectories of collections, institutionalization has also been discussed on the meso-level of the organizational form itself. These studies ask to what extent and why private museums have been established as a stable, viable organizational form within art fields. Zorloni and Resch (2016), for instance, hypothesize that bottlenecks in public museums are one of the factors contributing to the rise of private museums, since this renders donating works to public museums a risky option for art collectors: they fear that the donated works will end up in storage and will not be visible to the public. As already outlined earlier in the paper, other explanations for the institutionalization of the private museum as an organizational form relate to global wealth creation (Gnyp, 2015), which has increased the pool of art collectors with sufficient means to found new museums. However, systematic evidence supporting these claims is so far conspicuously absent.

One specific way in which institutionalization on the meso-level has been approached is by scrutinizing the popularity of private museums as organizational forms across different countries or regions, either synchronically or diachronically. For example, based on the Larry's List collector's database, Zorloni and Resch (2016) find that the number of private museums in the United States is relatively small, taking into account the country's large art market and high number of art collectors, while the opposite holds for Germany, which has many private museums compared to its small art market. Although not focusing strictly on private museums, Lena (2019) provides one of the most comprehensive analytical frameworks for understanding these institutionalization processes by pointing at a range of enabling opportunity structures. These structures include (government) regulations, financial resources, and economic, political and technological changes. Other studies have attributed variations between the number of private museums per country among others to the absence or presence of tax incentives (Schuster, 1986; Walker, 2019; Bechtler & Imhof, 2018), the worsening financial position of public museums (which according to Walker, 2019 has been a reason for German collectors to found museums of their own); or changes in legal frameworks (Ho, 2019) which have provided more security for private art collections in China (Kiowski, 2017; Lu, 2014).

### 1.6. The role of the government

Although, at first sight, private museums seem to operate without the government's interference and usually receive little or no direct government subsidies (Clarke, 1991), several studies demonstrate that their proliferation cannot be analyzed disjunct from the government's role. On one hand, it is argued that the relative absence of government support for the arts has motivated private collectors to set up museums in countries as diverse as China (Song, 2008), South Korea (Bouchara & Woo, 2015), Morocco (Dieckvoss, 2020), Russia (Milam, 2013), and Mexico (Esquivel Durand, 2018). Moreover, in countries which do have a tradition of government support for the arts, declining support levels in an era of cutbacks in government expenditure has had a negative impact on public museum finances (Stylianou-Lambert et al., 2014). According to some studies, this has in turn rendered public museums less

attractive to engage with for private collectors and motivated the latter to set up museums of their own (Walker 2019:146 on Germany).

On the other hand, several reasons have been identified for governments to encourage private museums, including education, entertainment, the local enhancement of art fields (Zorloni & Resch, 2016), arts-led urban regeneration (Franklin & Papastergiadis, 2017 on the Museum of Old and New Art in Hobart, Tasmania) or economic development (Kiowski, 2017; Zennaro, 2017 for Shanghai; Rosa, 2021 for Usina de Arte in Brazil;). In order to do so, governments have provided several forms of indirect aid to private museums (Schuster, 1986). The most well-documented of these are tax policies which exempt founders from e.g. capital gains taxes, estate and gift taxes, wealth taxes or which allow them to deduct charitable contributions to the museums from income taxes (Schuster, 1985); see also Frey & Meier 2002; Clarke, 1991). In Shanghai, where several high-profile private museums have been established in the West Bund cultural corridor during the last decade, the government has exempted collectors from paying various taxes on foreign acquisitions of art works and allows them to store art tax-free in a designated warehouse (Kiowski, 2017). Kalb Cosmo (2020) and Walker (2019) argue that tax incentives for donating works to public museums are relatively modest in a country like Germany, while incentives for founding private museums are more generous. Ironically the result of government support for private collections can be that even less funding is available for public museums, as Walker's (2019) discussion of Museum Brandhorst in Germany demonstrates.

Another important incentive from the government is the free provision of real estate or land (Frey & Meier, 2002; Tek, 2013). More generally, governments can support private museums by creating or at least fostering cultural districts which provide hospitable environments for them, as the 798 Art Zone in Beijing or the West Bund cultural corridor in Shanghai exemplify (Currier, 2018; Kiowski, 2017). Some studies, by contrast, show that governments may also be an obstacle for private museums. For instance, in China, private museums frequently close after a few years of opening, in part because reliable legal frameworks are lacking or lagging behind (Zhang and Gao, 2013; Zennaro, 2017; Liu Shuyan, 2011; Zhang, 2017). As Kiowski (2017:56) argues, "[t]he 'legal uncertainty of private museums in China poses a threat to many new museums while simultaneously allowing for unconventional developments'".

### 1.7. Private museums as players in the art field

The government is only one actor which private museums engage with; they also need to position themselves within local and global art fields (Bourdieu, 1993), joining ranks with among others galleries, art advisers, art collectors, curators, artists, art fairs, biennales, and auction houses. Scholars of private museums have hence set out to study their role and position in the art field, asking especially how the rise of private museums influences processes of field competition, legitimation and taste-making.

One strand of scholarship is particularly concerned with the interaction between private museums and other agents in the arts. These studies reveal how private museums' relationships with other field actors are often based on reciprocity and involve different forms of value-exchanges, such as financial or informal investing (Gnyp, 2015; Queminn, 2020), exchange of knowledge and experiences (Esquivel Durand, 2018; Gnyp, 2015), the establishment of trust (Codignola, 2016) or the gaining of recognition (Esquivel Durand, 2018; Gnyp, 2015). For instance, in the French market, Queminn argues that galleries, collectors and public museums can increase their visibility and power when associated with private institutions (2020). Borea (2016) similarly demonstrates how curators in the Peruvian art market can expand their visibility globally when they work for a private museum. In addition, Esquivel Durand (2018) shows how partnerships between Jumex in Mexico and other museums around the world favors both sides. Through loans and joint curatorial programs "artworks increase their circulation and visibility, which benefits both artists and the collection" (Esquivel Durand, 2018:255).

Through such varied interactions with other actors in the arts, museum founders can connect their institutions to more established field structures, transforming their economic capital into symbolic capital, status and legitimacy vis-à-vis both public institutions and other private collectors (Borea, 2016; Brown, 2019; Brown, 2020; De Nigris, 2018; Gnyp, 2015; Kiowski, 2017). Private museums also help their founders enhance their individual position in the art market, allowing them, for instance, to get preferred access to artworks from galleries (Adam, 2021; Gnyp, 2015), to expand their visibility internationally (Codignola, 2016; Esquivel Durand, 2018) as well as the economic value of their collections (Fetter, 2015). Regarding the latter, Brown (2019:15) argues that private museums constitute "spaces in which collectors display their acquisitions, give the works 'museum endorsement', and thereby establish the works' market value for later onward sale".

A significant concern of some scholars related to the private museums' embeddedness in the art field is thus the growing influence of private collectors on taste legitimation and canonisation processes. Scholars suggest that collectors, while having previously followed the artistic agendas of dealers and critics, have become influential taste-making authorities themselves (Esquivel Durand, 2018; Thornton, 2008). For instance, Gnyp (2015) argues that private collectors as gatekeepers can support marginalized artists in gaining visibility and in constructing their artistic identity. Codignola (2016) states that "large-size art collectors" would have an even broader impact on the arts field, which she refers to as the "Pinault effect" (after the French luxury tycoon and mega art collector François Pinault); these collectors,

"act as opinion leaders and influence other collectors' consumer choices; counsel and influence museums' boards; act as art critics or curators when managing their collections and exhibitions; act as patrons when donating artworks or sustaining artists; contribute to the diffusion of art knowledge and culture when opening private museums to the public; and participate in the economics of the art market when selling their artworks" (ibid.:10).

In the case of Inhotim in Brazil, Correa (2020:230) argues that already legitimised and well-established artists can have the opportunity of gaining a permanent place to exhibit their "powerful productions", boosting their existing recognition. Looking at the Chinese art scene, De Nigris (2018:215) moreover points to the historical importance of private art museums in supporting young



contemporary artists and fostering the formation of artistic circles.

Other scholars question the independent taste of private museum founders, emphasizing instead how they are influenced by other actors in the field, such as curators and gallerists (Borea, 2016; Coman & Casey, 2020; Esquivel Durand, 2018; Gomes de Oliveira 2017; Rosa, 2021). Critic and art historian Isabelle Graw therefore claims that we have moved from White and White's (1965) dealer-critic system to a dealer-collector system (Graw, 2009). Other actors whose role in the establishment of private museums is discussed include artists, architects, directors, and other art professionals (Frey & Meier, 2006; Kiowski, 2017; de Castro, 2018).

Even more radically, again other scholars argue that private museum founders act as taste followers rather than taste makers. Dercon (2018), for instance, suggests that most private contemporary art museums would behave as clones, collecting and exhibiting whatever the market values most. Brown (2019:6) argues likewise that private museum owners adhere to market logics, which "results in collectors reinforcing the reputation of the same group of artists and/or promoting a particular style of work". While this may be an attractive group for an artist to be part of, because of the symbolic and economic benefits involved, Brown (2019:15) cautions that risks are entangled:

"Becoming part of a privately funded museum collection is not a guarantee of long-term public accessibility or of participation in an enduring narrative of art history. Instead, works can drift into and out of a private museum, be used to promote a collector's personal agenda, and then be dispensed from both."

### 1.8. Private art museums as philanthropic projects

As the preceding sections highlighted, private museums have come to play an increasingly formative role in the organization and workings of public arts provision. As such, they present a key opportunity for studying the role and organization of cultural philanthropy and for examining the wider social, economic, and political effects it might entail, specifically with regards to wider processes of elite making (Maclean et al., 2021; Anheier, 2006; Giridharadas, 2018; Graw, 2009; Witkowski & Bauerkämper, 2016).<sup>3</sup> These concerns bear particular urgency in view of steeper wealth inequality around the world and the increasing number of the super-rich globally – economic developments which are seen to underwrite both the growing financial strength of individual art collectors as well as the rise of private museums (Gnyp, 2015; Walker, 2019).

Existent literature has therefore debated whether private museums are useful platforms for harnessing individual wealth for public purposes, or whether they ultimately serve as vectors for elite reproduction, relegating economic as well as cultural power increasingly into the hands of a few (Bechtler & Imhof, 2016; Brown, 2019, 2020; Walker, 2019). As some of this research shows, the founders of private museums themselves tend to invoke narratives of sharing their 'intrinsic passion for art' with the public and of 'giving back to society' (Bechtler & Imhof, 2016; BMW Art Guide, 2016a, 2016b; Durón, 2020; Larry's List, 2016). However, as Walker (2019:1) cautions:

"the terms philanthropy, public access and museum can often be used loosely. At other times they are used opportunistically, as justification for the influence that their immense wealth and works of art can exert within the public sphere and elite museum circles."

In this vein, scholars question if contemporary private museums might mainly help their founders in distinction processes, thereby accumulating cultural and social capital (Borgmann, 2004; DiMaggio, 1982; Duncan, 1995; Kowiski, 2017; Lena, 2019; Maclean et al., 2021; Queminn, 2020). Also, as sites of self-glorification (Hermann, 2009), private museums would allow their founders to produce an idealized image of themselves (Duncan, 1995). In these ways, private museums might even generate prestige beyond the art field and arts elite circles (Freeland, 2012; Gnyp, 2015; Walker, 2019).

Whether museum founders are as publicly-minded as some claim has moreover been interrogated with regards to tax benefits that private museums receive as charitable organizations (Reich, 2018; Schuster, 1998; Walker, 2019; Zolberg, 2000; Zorloni, 2016). Other scholars have paid particular attention to private museums as revenue-generators as they might either extend commercial services beyond their exhibition offers (such as running cafés or bookstores) or are entangled with investments in real estate, luxury brands or urban development projects (Codignola, 2016; DeNigris, 2018; Michaud, 2020; Zarobell, 2017). Further, it is to be questioned whether the global rise of private museums is in fact really global or whether the private museum boom ultimately follows and extends established geopolitical hierarchies both within the art field as well as in the context of global wealth distribution. As Zorloni and Resch (2016:3) note, the world's "serious collectors"<sup>4</sup> are still from and/or based in Europe (38%) and North America (28% of which in turn 91% are based in the U.S.) with only 18% of collectors based in Asia, 8% in Latin America, 5% in the Middle East and Africa and 3% in Australia (see also Larry's List, 2015).

Moreover, while there is a striking gap in the literature with regards to private museums' relevance for inequalities of gender, race and ethnicity, these issues are certainly crucial considering that private museums are still founded primarily by male, middle-aged

<sup>3</sup> As the aim of this article is to compile and review already existent scholarship around private museums, it goes beyond our scope to explore theoretical arguments that the study of private museums would otherwise merit. For future research, however, it would indeed be worthwhile to further engage with the question if, to what extent and how private museums and philanthropy interlink.

<sup>4</sup> As the authors note, "this term refers to a number of criteria, which were defined in the Larry's List Report 2014. These are a focus on contemporary art and a collection of at least 100 unique artworks by relevant artists. To be considered, the collector must be still alive" (Zorloni & Resch, 2016:3).

collectors (Larry's List, 2015). In contrast, Higonnet (2010, 2007; see also Brown, 2020 on gender representation in the museum and Duncan, 1995 on gender and the museum ritual) documents how the private collection museum has, at least historically, offered women a unique mode of (public) self-expression at a time when they were largely refused entry to public life, including the art field. Similarly, Milam (2013) considers the role of female arts patrons, including those with private museums, in the Russian context. Milam identifies the philanthropic activities of such "art girls" as an elite, upper-class practice, which would "draw on historical patterns of philanthropic behavior established during the nineteenth century and used by both old and new elites to secure social status and recognition" (ibid.:399). Part of these historical patterns, Milam argues, was the ascription of women's social status via the position of their families and husbands. Contemporary female philanthropists, however, would be keen to publicly signal their independence as agents in the arts, while nonetheless relying on money from established oligarch families. Milam therefore suggests that despite female art patrons and museum founders gaining significant visibility and power in the Russian art field, "it is clear that the principal route for involvement in public life as it relates to contemporary art and museum culture is through proximity to powerful and wealthy men" (ibid.:398).

Despite such critical arguments, however, Bechtler and Imhof (2016) also show how the 'positive' and 'negative' sides of elite philanthropy via private museums do not mutually exclude each other but exist in ambivalent parallel (Diekvoss, 2020; Grijp, 2018; Walker, 2019; Xiangguang, 2008; Zorloni & Resch, 2016). In short, despite signalling the increasing power of private wealth on the arts, private museums might nonetheless be seen as generous undertakings of collectors who seek to share their otherwise private collections with a broader public (Bechtler & Imhof, 2018; Bouchara & Woo, 2015; Moulin & Vale, 1995; Zorloni & Resch 2016). Private museums might thereby unsettle social hierarchies and inequalities that have been institutionalized in public museums, both with regards to their staff as well as with respect to their average visitor ((Adam, 2021)). Indeed, private museums are lauded for reaching a wider audience beyond the arts' traditional association with highbrow elitism. Being able to offer potentially more cutting-edge and entertaining programmes, or connecting the museum with other social events like dining or shopping (van den Berg, 2017; Young, 2013), private museums might thus indeed open up cultural possibilities that widen cultural participation. In a related vein, private museums – especially those opening outside Western-Europe or North America – might moreover present opportunities to disrupt and re-assess hegemonic, western-centric canonisation processes which have so far underpinned the field of contemporary art (Bouchara & Woo, 2015; Chan, 2015; Diekvoss, 2020).

More generally, scholars argue that private museums (or art collecting in general) might help nouveaux riches and other ascending social groups integrate into established elite circles – to "become members of a cultural elite instead of just 'merchants'", as Lu (2014:205; see also De Nigris, 2018) puts it with regards to contemporary Chinese entrepreneurs turned museum founders. This argument has also been brought up in reference to gilded age philanthropists and 19th century bourgeoisie both generally (Adam, 2004; Walker, 2019) as well as in a number of case studies, such as Sir Richard Wallace (Walker, 2019), Isabella Stewart Gardner (Higonnet, 2003) and emerging Japanese industrialists amassing influence in the Meiji era (Coman & Casey, 2021). Similarly, Zennaro (2017) suggests that Chinese private museums help their founders become part of a global cultural elite, taking the Long and Yuz museums in Shanghai as examples.

## 2. Conclusion

Reflecting the remarkable increase in the number of private museums in the 21st century and the controversies they have sparked within the art field and society at large, recent academic work scrutinizes a range of aspects of this phenomenon. We see many of such studies, which we have reviewed in this article, as a first stage in a process of academic inquiry. Characteristic of these works is that they are usually based on case studies or mostly rely on anecdotal evidence, which is then used to develop a critical understanding of the issue. Moreover, notwithstanding the rather global focus of the reviewed literature, which has investigated private museums across Africa, Asia, Australia, Europe, South and North America, attention has been unequally distributed, with a relatively small number of institutions (such as the Long and the Yuz museums in China, Inhotim in Brazil, the Beyeler Foundation in Switzerland, the Louis Vuitton Foundation in France, the Broad and Glenstone in the US; Zeitz Mocaa in South Africa) attracting the lion's share of academic and media attention. Overall, while these studies have been highly effective in putting a range of issues with both academic and societal relevance on the agenda, new research is needed to address that agenda. In particular, to further establish private museums as an area of study and to solve the various disagreements which have emerged in scholarship so far, we think that the following five aspects call for particular consideration:

### 2.1. A clear definition of the research object

Our literature review demonstrated that existing conceptualizations of private art museums have either been implicit or limited to single aspects of a private art museum. An explicit definition of these institutions as a distinct organizational form is therefore missing. Given the vast empirical variety amongst these museums, scholars run the risk of having (marginally) different research objects in mind when engaging with each other's work, in particular given the cross- or interdisciplinary nature of scholarship on this topic. To develop the study of private art museums in a more systematic manner, we propose the following working definition, which builds on implicit definitions of previous scholarship, and synthesizes key characteristics identified in these studies:

An art museum established and controlled primarily by a private individual art collector, a collector family, or their descendants, which receives limited public funding, has a permanent art collection, and makes this collection accessible to the public in a physical structure on an ongoing basis.

This definition thus excludes corporate museums, private collections which are inaccessible to the wider public, or museums with strong involvements of public or other private actors beyond the collector and their family, such as public-private partnerships or museums run by foundations governed and financed by groups of philanthropists. Further, with this definition, we primarily focus on institutions which exhibit their owner's personal contemporary art collection in a permanent fashion. The advantage of this definition is that it identifies a new organizational form which has been widely diffused within the new millennium, resulting in a reconfiguration of the art field. Moreover, because of its focus on private collectors, it thematizes urgent transformations of these collectors' wealth into cultural power, or, in other words, linkages between economic and cultural inequality. We recognize that this definition still leaves room for interpretation, for instance, when it comes to sufficient accessibility to the public, control by the founder, limited public funding, or to the question of what constitutes contemporary art itself<sup>5</sup>. Yet we see the above as issues of operationalization which should be decided upon by individual scholars according to each study's respective objectives. Moreover, we acknowledge that some private institutions, which call themselves museums, do not have a permanent collection of their own but house temporary exhibitions of artworks loaned from other collectors or public institutions. While we would label the latter private art centers rather than private museums, we are nevertheless mindful of the wide range of exhibition and collection practices that so-called private art museums may put forward.

## 2.2. Diversifying methodologies

This review article showed that case studies have so far been the dominant methodology in studying private museums. While this is an understandable choice given the specificities of each museum, and a helpful approach in exploring a new research object, this methodological predilection limits our knowledge of the phenomenon in other respects. We argue therefore for a diversification of methodological approaches. The use of quantitative methodologies would allow researchers to gain a basic understanding of, for instance, characteristics of the population of museum founders, or what type of art these museums collect and how that differs from the acquisition of and exhibitions at public museums. Other potentially fruitful methods include ethnographies which could, for instance, explore how these museums are embedded in local communities or what they mean to various stakeholders; document analysis of, for example, annual reports which many private museums are legally required to publish; or visitor studies (see [Franklin & Papatogiadis, 2017](#) for the only example).

## 2.3. Establish consensus on institutionalization and impact of private museums

This review suggested that on at least three key aspects of private museums, no consensus exists among scholars. First of all, existent scholarship exhibits a certain level of disagreement over whether the rise of private museums around the world can indeed disrupt established cultural, geographical, and social hierarchies or whether we are merely witnessing a geographical extension of already established art canons and museological norms. More systematic studies, e.g. on the nationality of artists exhibited and collected by private museums across the world (for examples of such studies focusing on other arts organizations, see [Quemin, 2006](#); [Quemin & Hest, 2015](#)), the career trajectories of private museum curators, or more detailed studies of global elite networks and diffusion processes of private museums as on organizational form, could shed more light on these disagreements. Secondly, while institutionalization processes are frequently discussed, robust insights are so far scarce (for an exception, see [Rosa, 2021](#)). On a micro-level, we could find no studies which identify characteristics of either collectors or collections which shape the decision whether to found a private museum or to donate (part of) the collections to a public museum. On a meso-level, many explanations have been suggested for the relative prevalence of private museums in e.g. Germany or South Korea, but no quantitative data have been presented to substantiate these claims. Also, probably because of the difficulty in obtaining reliable data, no good overviews exist of the legal form which private museums have taken (see [Rosa, 2021](#) for an exception). Thirdly, no consensus exists on the role of private museums in the valorization or consecration of art: are they taste makers or taste followers? Is the canon really being transformed by the rise of private museums? Statistical analysis of exhibition lists, museum collections or longitudinal studies of artist's careers could shed more light on this issue. Finally, it would fourthly be worthwhile to compare more systematically how private museums differ from public museums with regards to programming and exhibition practices, audience relations or managerial approaches. In other words, what roles do private and public museums play in today's art world and how do they relate to each other?

## 2.4. Learning from the past

Studies of the current private museum boom can build more systematically on historical studies of private museums in the past, by asking for instance how the mechanisms to convert wealth into status through art collections have changed over time; or how changes in the division between high and low art, which was in the process of being established in the 19th century but is being eroded in our own times, impact these dynamics? How is the division between high and low art intertwined with taste, class and status back then, and how does it differ from configurations today? How does the type of ritual and performances which get enacted in private museums, as museum historian [Duncan \(1995\)](#) puts it, differ nowadays from the earlier epoch? Can policy makers learn from the earlier private

<sup>5</sup> Besides private museums that show contemporary art in the more conventional sense, there is also a growing number of institutions that centre their activities around the preservation of cultural heritage. While these institutions certainly merit a closer analysis, our definition focuses on contemporary art rather than heritage museums.

museum boom, in particular when it comes to its sustainability: what happens to the museum after the founders themselves are deceased? While many private initiatives of the past have been transformed or integrated into public museums (Clarke, 1991), can we expect the same transformation to happen in the 21st century?

### 2.5. More thorough use of theory

A final characteristic of the first wave of studies of private museums is that few of them are written from a clear theoretical vantage point. Although many scholars, both those with a background in the humanities and in social science, refer to frameworks by e.g. sociologist Pierre Bourdieu or art historian Claire Bishop, or use neo-institutional concepts like isomorphism (Zennaro, 2017), new studies could use theory more thoroughly in order to identify the specific institutional mechanisms and art field dynamics proffered by private museums, and to examine their role within wider social, economic and spatial relations. More theory-led, empirical research may furthermore help delineate different disciplinary takes on private museums more clearly, while simultaneously also allowing to deliberately harness interdisciplinary approaches to make sense of this growing, global phenomenon.

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