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Article

# The art of (self)legitimization: how private museums help their founders claim legitimacy as elite actors

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## Abstract

This article explores private art museums' role for elite legitimization processes. Based on interviews with founders, directors, and curators of Germany-based private museums, I explore the discourses participants invoke to legitimize museum founders as actors in the artworld and as elites generally. I draw out a two-pronged legitimization strategy. First, respondents posit private museums' increasingly important role for today's art ecosystem, implying logics of discursive innovation and organizational flexibility vis-à-vis public museums. Second, interviewees construct intra-group status hierarchies via notions of the autonomous and ethical collector-founder versus other ostentatious private collectors and unethical wealth elites more widely. Together, these narratives effectively conflate seemingly opposite discourses of private entrepreneurialism and authenticity, allowing interviewees to signal legitimacy for founders over both public and other private actors. This elite legitimization work is performed by both founders and those institutionally connected to them, showing how legitimization can be a complex and institutionally mediated process.

**Key words:** art; elites; inequality; legitimization; private museums

## 1. Introduction

The question of how elites—that is, those with disproportionate access or control over economic, social, and cultural resources (Khan 2012a)—manage to simultaneously set themselves apart from the rest of society while also achieving legitimacy *as elites* has been a continuous topic in sociology. With wealth concentration and inequality sharpening (Piketty 2014; Savage 2021), and the public eye directed more critically at the super-rich, the

pressure on contemporary elites to legitimize their assets and privilege becomes particularly pronounced (McClean et al. 2021). Yet, while social science research on elites is generally expanding (Cousin et al. 2018; Savage and Williams 2018; Khan 2012a; Savage and Hjellbrekke 2021), much of its focus has been on the economic parameters that underpin wealth and income inequality, rather than exploring the social processes and cultural discourses that enable elites to gain, justify, and thus reproduce status and power (Khan and Jerolmack 2013; Lamont et al. 2014; Hecht 2022). This article seeks to speak to this latter concern by exploring the kinds of discursive frames constructed by elite actors, as well as by those institutionally connected to them through employment, to make sense of and legitimize their social positions in an unequal world. To that end, I turn to the field of art and, more specifically, towards a rather recent and to date understudied organizational form which increasingly shapes the ways in which art is consumed and exhibited today: the private art museum.

In the 21st century, private art museums have become increasingly prevalent in the art world. While private museums as institutional forms are all but new,<sup>1</sup> the commercial art market knowledge company *Larry's List* (2015) documents that the trend among private art collectors to establish their own museums has picked up significantly since the 2000s with over 300 private art museums opening across the Americas, Asia, Africa, Europe, the Middle East, and Australia. A recent study by Velthuis et al. (2023) further estimates that an additional 116 institutions have opened since 2015, bringing today's total number of private art museums to 447. Typically founded and managed by private individuals, these museums can take varied form, ranging from the private residences of art collectors, which are only accessible by appointment, to fully professionalized institutions with multiple thousands of yearly visitors and potentially significant consequences for processes of taste-making, arts canonization, and consecration (Brown 2019; Walker 2019; Queminn 2020).

This global, renewed trend towards private museums is highly contentious. They are, on one hand, appreciated as generous philanthropic undertakings built by their founders to share their love for art with wider society. While state support for contemporary art has decreased in Europe (Anheier 2006) and remains limited across the Americas, Asia, or Africa (Kiowski 2017; Durand 2018; Dieckvoss 2020), private museums and their founders are said to play crucial roles in providing public access to art. On the other hand, critics on both the scholarly and practitioner side worry that private museums claim neo-aristocratic positions and merely serve a small, rich elite to turn economic capital into cultural capital. As simultaneous representations and drivers of inequality, such institutions would help their founders outbid public museums with their resources and art market connections (Queminn 2020), inscribe private interests into art discourse (Foster 2015; Brown 2019) and ultimately reify their elite position beyond democratic accountability (Duncan 1995). These worries pose themselves with particular urgency given the increasing accumulation and unequal distribution of wealth around the globe, the growing number of the super-rich, and a general trend towards privatization—economic developments that are understood to underpin both the expanding financial power of individual art collectors and the rise in private museums itself (Gnyp 2015; Walker 2019; Velthuis et al. 2023). In view of these debates, how do museum-founders, their directors, and curators make sense of private museums' arguably

1 Before public museums emerged in the 19th century (Bennett, 1995), private museums presented the most prevalent museum format, particularly during the Gilded Age.

increasingly powerful organizational position in the arts? And what can these discourses tell us about the ways in which today's elites might use their engagement in the arts as sites of (self)legitimization?

Taking the private museum phenomenon as an analytical starting point to address these questions, I draw from 24 interviews with founders, directors, and curators of Germany-based private museums which I conducted in 2021–2022. Germany presents an especially pertinent site of study because it exhibits one of the highest levels of wealth concentration among Western capitalist countries (Waitkus and Wallaschek 2022) and it houses the highest absolute number of private museums in the world (Velthuis et al. 2023), while also having a strong tradition of public arts funding. Against this backdrop, I am interested in the frames of meaning-making and (self)representation invoked by respondents to legitimize private museums as organizational forms as well as, implicitly or directly, museum founders as agents in the artworld and as wealthy elites more generally. I thus approach private museums as discursive and organizational platforms through which different narratives and logics of elite justification may be channelled.

The article starts by outlining the key debates around elite legitimization and its relationship to the arts, cultural philanthropy, and private art museums specifically. I then discuss my data and methods before zooming into the representational strategies developed by my interviewees with regards to private museums and their founders. I map two key narratives of elite (self)legitimization. First, participants stress the importance of private museums and their founders for today's art ecosystem, describing them as innovative and efficient cultural agents compared with public museums which are in turn criticized as slow-moving, overly bureaucratic, hermetically sealed, and themselves constrained by commodifying logics. Secondly, respondents construct intra-group status hierarchies via the image of the authentic, publicly minded, and ethical founder-collector who ought to be distinguished from more money-driven, ostentatious, and ultimately unethical private elite actors—both in the artworld and beyond.

The article makes visible how my respondents carefully blur the line between, and effectively collapse, the boundaries between seemingly conflicting discourses of a market-based private entrepreneurialism and artistic authenticity. I argue that this *two-pronged legitimization strategy* allows my respondents to signal justification and status for private museums and their founders over both public as well as other private elite actors. Further, my analysis reveals that this discursive legitimization work is not only undertaken by museum founders, that is, by the rich themselves, but also, yet with some ambivalence, by those organizationally connected to them, that is, curators and directors. This illustrates how private museums as increasingly influential organizations in today's artworld offer their founders not only productive discursive sites but also useful institutional and social networks to be harnessed for legitimizing purposes.

Considering today's increasing concentration and unequal distribution of private wealth alongside wider privatization trends, my analysis critically unpacks the wider discursive and institutional repertoires through which private elites' influence over both public responsibilities and private resources becomes justified. Specifically, I show how, in the strive for legitimacy, today's privileged are able to treat the public and the private spheres as contingent, interlinked sites which can be effectively pitted against or blurred with one another, and the privatization of art reflects a particularly well-suited platform in this context. The article thus contributes to a critical sociology of private arts institutions, especially private

museums, and their social implications inasmuch as it speaks to the wider concern of how contemporary elites signal legitimacy for their status and (cultural) power in an era of inequality.

## 2. Elite legitimization, arts philanthropy, and the role of private museums

At a time of escalating wealth inequality, critical scholarship on elite formation and reproduction is particularly needed (Cousin et al. 2018; Savage and Hjellbrekke 2021). While elite studies have been a long-standing concern in economic research, the topic has increasingly received attention by sociologists, including notable studies on income inequality (Hecht 2022), elite differentiation and intergenerational mobility (Toft 2018), elite occupations (Friedman et al. 2015), schooling (Khan 2012b; Taylor 2021), elite culture and consumption (Sherman 2018; Lena 2019; Mears 2020; Friedman and Reeves 2020), and philanthropy (Monier 2018; Glucksberg and Russel-Prywata 2020). This expanding body of literature is generally motivated by Lamont et al.'s (2014) diagnosis that while economics research has furthered our understanding of how today's rich have incrementally widened their share of income and wealth, little attention has been paid to the social and cultural processes that underpin and legitimate economic concentration at the top.

In view of these debates, this article is most notably concerned with processes of elite legitimization; that is, the social dynamics and cultural discourses that enable elites to 'lay claim to legitimacy, which they need to function effectively within the field of power' (McClean et al. 2012: 18). I here understand the process of (self)legitimization as oscillating between an intentional representational strategy that elites deploy to seek external validation (Suchman 1995) and a rather unwitting part of wider meaning-making processes imbued with personal narratives, attitudes, and beliefs (McClean et al. 2012). Such an angle is, for example, adopted by Sherman (2018) in her study of wealthy New Yorkers in which she examines how they reflect on their consumption practices to maintain a sense of legitimacy as rich people. Calling attention to the importance of 'meanings and morality of elites' lifestyle choices, particularly from the perspective of the wealthy themselves', Sherman (2018: 411–412) finds that her participants construct symbolic boundaries between themselves and the excessive 'bad rich' by narrating their own consumption choices as reasonably middle-class and thus justifiable. Sherman (2018: 415) concludes that '[t]o understand elites' perspectives on their own consumption, and thus on their own entitlements generally, contributes to our understanding of the perpetuation and cultural legitimization of economic inequality'.

My article is significantly guided by this concern. It, however, moves beyond a focus on elites' everyday consumption and instead zooms in on elite philanthropical engagements which, following McClean et al. (2021: 14), establish a particularly 'fecund terrain' for studying elites' legitimization strategies: '[t]he ultimate purpose of elite philanthropy, whether by design or systemic response to structural conditions, is to legitimate and make palatable the extreme inequalities generated by the forward march of global capitalism'. Indeed, in view of today's levels of economic inequality and wealth concentration (Savage 2021), expanding privatization processes, and an increasingly mediatized limelight on the super-rich (Gaztambide-Fernández 2009; Khan 2012a; Kantola and Kuusela 2019), it is not sufficient for private elites to simply seek distinction from other private elites, but they must demonstrate their value over public authorities as well (i.e. by staking out responsibilities of public

art provision). Yet not much is known about the specific discursive repertoires and institutional contexts that, either strategically or tacitly, are deployed to signal elite legitimacy both within and through philanthropic settings. My article addresses this precise issue by focusing on private art museums and uncovering their role for elite legitimation strategies. I thereby hope to offer further empirical and theoretical insights into how both private wealth and private control over public services and goods might be made palatable at a time of increasing inequality (McGoey 2012; Reich 2018; Glucksberg and Russell-Prywata 2020; Mclean et al. 2021).

The field of art certainly constitutes a prime site through which to investigate the relationship between philanthropy and elite-making. While arts production and consumption have always been arenas of capital accumulation, social distinction, and symbolic power (Bourdieu 1985, 1993), and have therefore been embedded in the formation and reproduction of privilege, it seems that art collecting as both an economic and cultural activity has gained particular traction among today's elites (Gnyp 2015; Banks 2017). Crucially, as shown by Wohl's (2020: 230–231) research with collectors in New York, art collecting enables high-net-worth individuals 'to craft themselves as moral and deserving consumers by drawing symbolic boundaries between themselves and those whom they perceive as consuming excessively and with feelings of entitlement.' Beyond merely purchasing artworks for their own consumption, an increasing number of contemporary collectors has gone yet a step further and founded their own art museums, making their collections available to the wider public. Although sociologists of art have long traced how private art collectors influence the organization of artworlds (Gnyp 2015), impact on processes of arts evaluation (Velthuis 2005), and derive status from their collection practices (Yogev 2010; Wohl 2020), specific literature on private museums and their founders has so far been scant (Kolbe et al. 2022). Yet, increasingly, they come to play a formative role in the workings of public arts provision which makes them a central organizational site for studying the ways in which cultural philanthropy and elite legitimization processes interlink. To use Brown's (2019: 12) words, '[q]uestions associated with the powers attaching to philanthropy come to the fore with greater force in the context of private museums'.

While some see private museums as innovative, independent, and essential sites of public arts provision generously gifted by their founders (Frey and Meier 2002; Adam 2021), others caution that

for all the focus on individual collector's claims of giving back to society and making private collections publicly available, 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 (Walker 2019: 1).

Indeed, using their support for (public arts) provision to carve out powerful positions in society has been a well-documented elite concern (DiMaggio 1982; Accominotti et al. 2018; Lena 2019). This does not necessarily mean that all elite cultural entrepreneurship is solely or primarily a self-serving endeavor. For instance, a growing strand of research on Black art collectors and museum patrons in the USA and the UK shows how such forms of art patronage may be centrally motivated by the desire to address racial inequality both within in the art field and in society at large (Fleming and Roses 2007; Banks 2017; Meghji 2019). Yet,

Banks (2022) also notes that even such critically minded sponsorship may have reproductive effects, too. For example, reflecting on privatization processes in the UK art scene, Kolbe (2022: 265) suggests that wealthy individual or cooperate donors may gain social status by associating themselves with significant and well-visited institutions, basically seeking legitimacy via the 'buy-in of the public'. Private museums as increasingly important players in the arts might then be an extension of precisely this logic.

Against this controversial backdrop, it is beyond the scope of this article to settle whether private museums overall contribute to the public good or whether they first and foremost reinscribe inequality. Rather, I take private art museums as suitable empirical platforms through which to unpack how elites may ground strategies of (self)legitimization in their philanthropic activities with art. Finding out how museum founders, directors, and curators make sense of private museums' situatedness in the artworld, how they narrate their founders' position within this context, and how they reflect on the private museum trend amidst wider debates around wealth can generate significance insights for both current scholarship on arts philanthropy and critical elite studies more broadly.

### 3. Data and methods

Despite the growing importance of private museums for today's artworld, literature on this phenomenon has so far been scarce, scattered across various social science and humanities disciplines, and lacking in methodological variety and empirical robustness (Kolbe et al. 2022). Notably, the existent literature tends to focus on singular museum case studies and often settles for a normative stance on the subject without much systematic empirical grounding [see Velthuis et al. (2023) for an exception]. To some extent, this dearth in scholarship is not surprising. First, the absolute number of private museums, while rising, is still limited and information about them not always easily accessible. Second, as private (elite) actors, it can be hard to gather data about museums or their founders directly, beyond highly edited articles in art magazines or on museum websites. However, developing a keener understanding of how museum founders, directors, and curators approach the collection and exhibition of art, how they make sense of private museums and their founders as agents in the artworld, and how they reflect on the social role of philanthropy and wealth more widely can offer a fruitful basis to explore more systematically the ways in which privatization in the arts, elite culture, and legitimization processes interact.

Germany presents a particularly insightful context for engaging with these issues. Despite its relatively strong public funding base for culture, Germany is home to 60 private museums, hosting the highest absolute number of such institutions worldwide, followed by the USA (59) and South Korea (50), which may reflect the strong tradition of art collection in the country (Velthuis et al. 2023). Further, through tax benefits for charitable foundations, also in the context of inheritance, Germany's public authorities even incentivize art collectors to share their collections with the wider society (Hemels 2017), thus implicitly encouraging privatization. Germany is also one of the richest countries in the world with yet increasing levels of wealth concentration (Waitkus and Wallaschek 2023), while also exhibiting one of the highest levels of wealth inequality within the European Union. With the richest 10 per cent holding more than half of the country's wealth while the poorer half of the population only owns 1.3 per cent (Grabka and Halbmeier 2019), Germany follows the global trend towards wealth being concentrated in the hands of just a few, as opposed to

the many—from both an inter-country and intra-country perspective. Overall, the increasing privatization of Germany's museum scene in an era of unequal wealth concentration makes it a suitable empirical setting in which to examine how legitimizing narratives around private wealth and influence are constructed.

Specifically, this article draws from 24 semi-structured interviews with founders, directors, and curators of Germany-based private museums which I conducted between January 2021 and March 2022. The interviews themselves lasted between 45 and 75 min, seven were conducted in person, while the rest took place online, mostly due to Covid-19 regulations. While most interviews were recorded and then transcribed, five participants opted for the option not to be recorded. In these cases, I took notes during the conversation which also included some ad verbum citations (I usually asked respondents to hold their thought for a minute when I wanted to take down a longer comment or conversational snippet word-by-word).

The process of participant recruitment was challenging. I originally approached 47 institutions via email after consulting the [Larry's List \(2015\)](#)<sup>2</sup> database followed by a deeper web search.<sup>3</sup> Around a third of the institutions contacted did not reply at all, even after various rounds of follow-up invitations, and a small number first expressed interest in the study but then reversed that decision before the interview could take place. However, by casting a rather wide net of interview invitations and following up with people repeatedly, I ultimately managed to recruit a sufficient number of interviewees. It is also noteworthy that those, who eventually agreed to be interviewed, were rather enthusiastic in their responses, many stating that they would welcome more research on private museums. My sample selection may hence be biased towards those founders and museum employees who see themselves as having a rather strong responsibility towards the public, not only in terms of arts provision but also in terms of education and research. In this connection, they may also be particularly prone to seeing their research participation as a helpful platform to signal their legitimacy as publicly engaged private actors.

My final sample consisted of 13 founders and 11 directors and/or curators of 20 private museums. All sampled museums focused either on modern and/or contemporary visual art (including photography and video art) but varied considerably in size, ranging from the private residencies of individual collectors to larger, professionalized institutions with large exhibition spaces and thousands of artworks in their collection. The founders of the institutions in my sample also differ in terms of artworld reputation, with the founders of eight sampled museums having been featured, sometimes for multiple years, in the reputable

- 2 [Larry's \(2015\)](#) List provides one of the most comprehensive reports of private art museums worldwide and thus offered a helpful starting point for researching this often-times obscure and volatile cultural landscape. A new edition of the report has recently been published based on an updated database on private art museums built by [Velthuis et al. \(2023\)](#).
- 3 I carried out this interview series within the context of a wider research project on private museums conducted by [Velthuis et al. \(2023\)](#) at the University of Amsterdam. As part of this project, we expanded on the original Larry's List report to establish an up-to-date database on private art museums globally. To that end, we conducted a deeper web search, combining information drawn from other private museum and art collector lists (such as the BMW Art Guide by Independent Collectors) and art-related media outlets, such as Artforum, Artnews, or The Art Newspaper. See [Velthuis et al. \(2023\)](#) for more details on the methodology behind the database. Currently, it includes 60 Germany-based private museums; however, as I conducted the interviews for this article alongside our research for the database, I was only aware of 47 museums at the time, all of which I contacted.



ARTnews Top 200 Collectors list, while others flying more under the international artworld radar. I do not have detailed data on the economic portfolio of the museums' individual founders and only found some vague estimations of their wealth in a couple of cases. Yet, the considerable costs involved when opening and running a private museum imply that overall, they are relatively well-resourced and wealthy, yet arguably not comparable to the likes of collector-founders Arnaud Pinault or Eli Broad who have already appeared multiple times on the Forbes Billionaires list. The industry backgrounds of the sampled museums' founders lie mainly in the information, communication, and media technology sectors, in real estate, financial services, and manufacturing services, while a few amassed their wealth predominantly through inheritance.

Of the founders I interviewed 11 were men and 2 women, whereas the trend was reversed for the directors and curators with 8 respondents identifying as female and 3 as male. Except one, all interviewees were white, and the majority lived, at least partly, in Germany. While representative data on the gendered and ethnic stratification within the private museum sector, both in Germany and internationally, are thus far missing, the social pattern of my sample corresponds to the overall trend that private museums are (still) founded primarily by male, middle-aged collectors predominantly based in the Global North (Braden 2016; Velthuis et al. 2023). Though certainly also influenced by the pandemic, which *inter alia* meant the temporary full or partial closure of museums, I take the relatively limited sample, the difficulty of access and participant recruitment and the comparatively rather long span of fieldwork as reflecting some of the methodological challenges involved when studying elite social groups, especially in the private sphere (Khan 2012b; Cousin et al. 2018; Hecht 2022).

Being interested in the kinds of meaning-making frames articulated by my participants to signal legitimization for private museums, I follow Lamont and Swidler's (2014: 157) approach to interviewing as a useful method 'to collect data not only, or primarily, about behavior, but also about representations, classification systems, boundary work, identity, imagined realities and cultural ideals'. I usually started the interview by asking respondents to give a brief overview of their own professional trajectory and of the institutions they founded or worked for. I then zoomed into more specific questions about the collection and the museum, the founders' relationship to other collectors, artists, public and private art institutions, and respondents' view on the role of private museums and private wealth in the contemporary artworld to explore the 'imagined meanings of their activities, their self-concepts, their fantasies about themselves (and about others)' (Lamont and Swidler 2014: 159). When it comes to elite research specifically, such interview-based accounts can help 'reveal performative cultures among elites: representations, motivations and justifications' (Cousin et al. 2018: 238)—and, as such, generate important data to assess the discursive repertoires elites develop in signalling legitimacy.

After transcribing the interviews, I coded them to draw out the most prominent legitimizing themes put forward by my participants. I hereby followed an inductive approach to let my respondents account for themselves, paying particular attention to similarities and differences in their legitimization strategies vis-à-vis public actors and other private elites as well as between founders and employees. Given the deeply embedded nature of my field site—both the number of participants and the number of private museums in Germany are relatively small—I decided to use pseudonyms for all interviewees and to not provide details about the name or location of their respective institutions to maintain anonymity (Yogev 2010; Wohl 2020).

## 4. Private museums as sites of elite legitimization

### 4.1 Private museums as key pillars in the arts ecosystem

The first narrative of legitimization relates to how my interviewees position private museums as important structures in the art ecosystem. In so doing, they rehearse wider market-oriented discourses around private philanthropy which highlight the former as a more efficient, innovative, and socially responsible alternative to public or state provisions.

As interviewee Lena put it, who works as a managing curator at a considerable private collection opened by a reputable collector (who has already been featured by Artnews' collectors list) who gained their fortunes mainly in the real estate business: 'We do vital work, completely vital work for contemporary art'. Prior to our interview, Lena had given me a quick tour through their collection, which is usually only accessible by appointment, explaining how the exhibited pieces presented cutting-edge positions which would be 'hard to find in bigger, more cumbersome [public] museum spaces'. Unsurprisingly, across the board, my respondents most prominently presented private museums as more flexible and innovative counterweights to public institutions which they frequently evaluated as slow-moving, excessively bureaucratic, and hermetically sealed. For example, Sarah, a curator at a mid-sized, rather well-known private museum similarly opened by an Artnews-featured collector, points to the highly embedded institutional nature of public museums which would leave them at a disadvantage when it comes to creative decision-making and exhibition design:

They [private museums] don't have people to answer to, like you know, those public institutions have funding boards, and they're so convoluted, you know, as far as who's calling a shot and who's giving money etcetera. So, if you're privately funding your own place then for sure you have more, I would think you have a far more expedited system of putting an exhibition on.

The narrative of the overly regulated, convoluted, and ultimately untransparent public sector versus the more open and flexible private sphere is also mirrored by Manfred. Himself a founder of a small museum focused primarily on photography and only employing one permanent employee, he especially praises the lean structures of private museums which, according to him, would allow them to impact on art discourses in more innovative ways. Before our interview, he walked me through his small collection space and showed me some recently acquired photographs from a 'basically forgotten archive' which he now sought to exhibit to bring them back into public discussion. When I asked him whether he believed that private museums would generally play an important role in shaping today's artworld, he nods eagerly.

Manfred: Oh yes, absolutely. Especially in comparison to public ones.

Me: In what ways?

Manfred: Well, I think they are really important for the exhibition of art but also for discourse and research. I believe that private museums are much more flexible, more agile boats, that can actually make decisions on a short-term basis. Look, we make exhibitions with catalogues, the whole lot, with an accompanying program. That is, as museum-like as possible. But we are doing that in like six or eight months. [...] This is usually impossible for a [public] museum. They have to plan two, three years in advance. [...] They also put on more exhibitions for which they've to assemble lots of loaned works. This is a laborious task.

Me: So what would you say are the consequences of this, of private museums acting faster and more flexible than public ones?

Manfred: I think especially regarding discourse. I have the feeling that [public] museums are increasingly under pressure to show already-established positions. To crank up the visitor numbers and secure budgets... yes, we, I mean the people, want popular names, so that we agree to finance that stuff [...] But the actual responsibility of museums is to show underexposed, unknown things that might even be stored in one of their own depots—so, one talks often about art corpses here [*Kunstleichen*], which in many museums are just laying around. And those won't be shown because the knowledge and interest is getting less because of this pressure that 'everything has to be popular'. [...] Therefore, I think that private museums are playing a decisive role to show young positions or old, less known positions, depending on the direction of the respective collection, to support, to show and to carry them into discourse.

This narrative of shaping art discourse in innovative ways, while public museums would be inertial and increasingly adhering to popular pressures, was indeed put forward by most interviewees, especially by those who founded or worked for smaller or mid-sized private museums, such as inter alia director Ella and curator Paul. Ella, for instance, held that especially private museums that follow specific and perhaps 'a rather personal' aesthetic focus would be able 'to represent works and artists that might not yet have been in the public spotlight as much' and Paul maintained that

these types of museums fill niches that public institutions cannot fill [...] Public institutions need to adapt to the demand, they've the pressure to score high visitor numbers because they have an educational mission. But we don't have that, so for us, it doesn't matter whether five or 80 people come per day. We can take more risks.

Contrasting more critical views about the arguably increasing symbolic powers of private museums (Gnyp 2015; Brown 2019; Quemini 2020), my interviewees here invoke themes like innovation, creative reappraisal, risk-taking, and young artist support to evaluate private museums' influential discursive role as a counterbalance to the much heavier, concentrated, and somewhat closed public museum sector that would too often succumb to 'this pressure that "everything has to be popular"'. More institutional oversight and regulation are here implied as a hinderance to discursive novelty and private museums' non-accountability inferred as the key vector to aesthetic autonomy, which would allow museum founders to take on 'the actual responsibility of museums' of showing the underexposed, the niched, and the new.

Yet, both Paul and Ella also uttered words of caution, especially against 'fancier, trendier collections', so Ella, which would more clearly symbolize an increasingly financialized, wealth-dominated artworld—the cliché of 'rich collectors renovating big urban industrial complexes to flaunt their trendy but sort of mainstream art', as Paul described it. Curator Sarah, however, who has already been introduced above, took issue with such 'cliché criticisms'. She instead argued that it would be important

to get the message across that those private institutions are actually fantastic and important in this whole ecosystem because they can act completely autonomously and not have to do things. In fact, [public] museums can be way more highbrow, hierarchical and elitist because there's a board and they determine what can and can't enter the collection.

While Sarah's description of public arts institutions as 'more highbrow, hierarchical and elitist' might certainly be well-founded, it is remarkable that she invokes an argument of equality as another legitimizing factor for private museums—especially considering that the museum she worked for is indeed located in a reworked industrial building in one of Germany's urban centres, is only accessible 2–4 days per week or via appointment, and at a ticket price of up to 20 Euros. However, rather than reflecting on the limited accessibility of such very well-resourced private museums, Sarah focuses on the exclusionary nature of public museum boards and seems to interpret private museum founders' creative autonomy as an equalizing, not a stratifying, force in the artworld. As such, she reinscribes a wider, neo-liberal discourse around private philanthropy which tends to focus on the redistributive aspects of elite philanthropical activities, rather than foregrounding a contextualizing analysis of the economic conditions which produce widely divergent levels of private resources in the first place (Glucksberg and Russell-Prywata 2020).

In this way, private museums and their founders are presented as legitimate agents in the arts as they tread the line between stressing the accumulation of symbolic power, which they see private art institutions increasingly harbouring, and simultaneously underscoring the counter-hegemonic nature of their aesthetic profiles. Legitimacy is thus signalled via two entangled logics attached to arts philanthropy, private entrepreneurialism, and museums specifically: more efficiency and more (creative) autonomy. That is, my interviewees overall put forward a rather classical self-entrepreneurial rhetoric, even though with some ambivalence, which affirms elite philanthropical engagements as a better-suited, developmental, and indeed transformational force compared with a rather stagnant public sector (McGoe 2012; Reich 2018; Mclean et al. 2021). In parallel, however, my respondents also seem to work against the potential criticism of private museums as sites of heavy commercialization or arts commodification and even assign an almost avant-gardist role at least to some private museums. They thereby affirm the established view that artistic value and legitimacy is sought to be disinterested and cannot be reducible to monetary value—yet you need money and private agility to be able to afford disinterestedness (Bourdieu 1985).

Further, while my interviewees are mostly keen to present private museums and their founders as autonomous cultural actors that push the art discourse and patronage forward, it is instead the public institutions which are said to adhere to commodifying logics, having to orient their artistic programme around market demands, audience preferences, and public funding boards. It is moreover noteworthy that these claims to legitimacy are not only put forth by museum founders themselves but equally clearly by museum employees. Indeed, most curators and directors in my sample appear to justify the relevance of private museums from the perspectives of their specific institutional affiliation and organizational position. For instance, as most clearly reflected Sarah's interview snippet cited above, curators/directors tend to defend their institution against (potential) criticism, thus working at least implicitly as legitimizing spokespersons for their museums' founders as well.

Yet, whereas the positive evaluation of private museums' entrepreneurial efficiency and innovation presents a common thread across my interview sample, several respondents from both the founders and the curator/director group also identified some general risks involved in the increasing privatization of arts, such as an overly dominant elite control over what art the public gets to consume. However, according to Simon, who hosts a small but well-reputed contemporary art collection in his private residency, these issues would ultimately

be proffered by a more and more withdrawing state, leaving private art collectors with the responsibility of supporting arts production and exhibition:

Public spending for arts is being rolled back more and more and much is simply left to the private. And then it's also understandable if people like Eli Broad or whoever also follow their own tastes and their own agenda. [...] And that of course happens where the state retreats and only takes on a conservatory role [...]. Of course, that's a phenomenon which you can also view critically. Yet, naturally, there's always been patronage. Always support via courts, via kings. Now, it's the money royalty, if you wanna use that term, and they also do meaningful, purposeful things. Including the accessibility of art.

Postulating that 'much is simply left to the private', Simon implies that today's wealth elites would therefore have to step up and assume an important role for the accessibility of art. While he recognizes that this may entail risks—for instance, the fact that private collectors might imprint their tastes, personal agendas, and even business interests onto their engagement with art—Simon justifies these consequences by arguing that overall, wealthy individuals would 'do meaningful, purposeful things' for society.

By this logic, the private sphere becomes commended not only as a site of creative innovation but of civic, moral responsibility, filling in where the state is retreating. Legitimacy is here claimed via the notion of the publicly engaged, ultimately ethical elite actor who would have to take on increasingly powerful positions within larger society not merely because they want to but because they must. This discourse again mirrors some of the wider literature on elite philanthropy that shows how 'the emergence of a neo-liberal "common sense"' (McClean et al. 2012) allows the private sector to be framed as making up for an inefficient state. Underpinned by the belief that 'private enrichment purportedly advances the public good', such logics would make 'increased wealth concentration [...] to be commended rather than questioned' (McGoey 2012: 197), rendering palatable private elites' increasingly powerful role in various domains of social and cultural life.

Circling back to private museums specifically, this section traced how my interviewees develop legitimizing narratives for the increasingly significant position of both museums and their founders within the artworld precisely through putting forward their institutional agility, discursive novelty, and social-entrepreneurial responsibility in contrast to public museums. However, this narrative only presents one half of the discursive coin: as I will show in the following, my respondents not only sought to claim legitimacy for private museums and their founders vis-à-vis the public sector but also vis-à-vis other private elite actors.

#### 4.2 Private museums as platforms for intra-elite hierarchies

Indeed, my respondents drew strong intra-group distinctions between private museum founders, other private collectors, and wider wealth elites. Specifically, this section demonstrates how private museums help founders distinguish themselves as public-facing, sophisticated collectors, who would not be driven by the economic possibilities of art collecting or fast-paced market trends but merely by their passion to share and shape art. This narrative of the authentic, 'good' collector furthermore extends into my interviewees' judgment of wealth more generally: both founders and curators/directors were generally keen to stress that their museums were either funded via ethically accumulated resources or would be proof of their founders' ethical usage of money, thus setting them apart from other, ostentatious, and ultimately unethical elite actors—both in and beyond the arts.

Notably, my respondents largely subscribed to a classical Bourdieusian paradigm (1984) when talking about art collecting practices, aiming to represent themselves or the museum founders they worked for as authentic cultural agents equipped with more refined tastes and higher levels of cultural capital than their financially motivated counterparts. Founder Tillman, for instance, who shows his rather niche collection of new realist positions in a small museum space attached to his private home, draws a clear distinction between his approach to art collecting and what he describes as a more commercialized, trend-adhering approach:

Oftentimes I feel people make more random decisions, like is that piece going to fit in my giant living room or whatever. Or does this also come in blue or yellow, you know? I mean, I guess there's just so many different levels of collectors. But I'm probably not the best person to comment because I avoid the fairs... I just sort of see on the periphery what's going on within these circles and I keep my distance to, you know, all these trends [...] what's hot, and I've never really been part of any of these movements, luckily. I'm more careful in what I like and buy. Like, my museum is not like a trendy museum. I'm more concerned with supporting the kinds of art and artists that really make sense in the context of my collection, you know, discursively.

Tillman describes himself as neither too interested in the current market trends—in 'what's hot'—nor in the VIP side of the artworld. He thereby draws a clear distinction between himself, a more authentic collector, and those who would make 'random decisions' or merely appreciate art for its social cachet.

Likewise, Peter, who leads a mid-sized museum collection started by his father based in a smaller German city, seeks to set him and his family apart from such collectors who mainly seek vanity and status via their engagement with art.

Peter: We've in a way a form of modesty which, I believe, suits us quite well. One does not have to always add something to everything [...] or be the loudest in the jungle. Art collections can be such flashy vanity projects sometimes. Instead, I believe, we simply want to gain attention via our varied, exciting, and different projects and we're not those who say: 'oh, we need this piece now because everyone wants it now or whatever', I don't know. We prefer to collaborate with other institutions or something if it makes sense for us and our work, if it's exciting, not because it's en vogue right now [...].

Me: How does your approach to art collecting relate to your motivation to open your collection at all?

Peter: Yes, because art is always there to communicate with others. Art does not exist, so that I can look at it by myself [...] Opening the museum, there were no economic reasons behind this, zero. So there was no rational thinking there, but really only emotion.

By foregrounding a sense of modesty and passion, Peter distinguishes his museum and himself in both artistic and moral terms from other collections that he judges as overly pretentious. Like Tillman, he articulates frames of disinterestedness as they relate to the assessment of artistic value, his practices of art collecting, and his wider position in the artworld.

Legitimacy is here signalled precisely by rejecting both money and popularity as key motivators for engaging with art. That is, by delegitimizing the trend- and market-oriented parts of the artworld, Tillman and Peter in turn seek (self)legitimization via notions of artistic autonomy and, I suggest, even morality. Indeed, their discursive strategy corresponds to Sherman's (2018: 412) study of rich New Yorkers who, as she finds, also draw intra-elite

demarcations between ‘legitimate and illegitimate privilege’ by presenting their own consumption choices as reasonably mundane while rejecting the ‘ostentation and excess’ of other wealthy people as ‘morally suspect and thus associated with illegitimate privilege’. Performing similar boundary-work within the field of art, Peter and Tillman rehearse a classical ‘pure aesthetic’ discourse which claims to be ‘the only way of recognizing the work of art for what it is, i.e. autonomous, *selbständig*’ (Bourdieu 1985: 6; emphasis in the original) rather than assessing it from a perspective of financial or social gain.

This ‘arts for arts’ sake’ paradigm is thus mobilized to seek status for the authentic, and therefore legitimate founder-collector over other, excessively commercial, and thus illegitimate collectors. These sentiments reflect a common theme across all interviews. For instance, all respondents—whether they were connected to niche or highly established collections—vocally rejected the image of what Moulin (1987: 91) calls the ‘Prestige Buyers’, the kind of art collectors who seek recognition via their ‘ostentatious expenditure’. This is especially noteworthy because several respondents indeed listed some of the more popular institutions in my sample as precisely those ‘flashy vanity projects’ from which they sought artistic and moral distance. Yet, without exception, all founders I spoke to claimed for themselves notions of ‘discoverers and promoters’ (Moulin 1987: 91) of art, seeking status and legitimacy by declaring that they had indeed carefully and selectively built their collections and would reject—at least by their own account—an overly money-driven, trendy approach to art.

The founders in my sample were moreover keen to stress that other important agents in the artworld would generally be aware of their collections’ quality, telling me, for instance, about loan requests from world-leading museums both in Germany and abroad. I suggest that they thereby hoped to present themselves as what Benzecry (2015: 781; also 2011) calls ‘connoisseurs’; that is, as authentic, knowing players in the arts who ‘produce an experience of tastes in interaction with other individuals and objects, and, in turn, stabilize the self and the object in question’. I argue that this discursive stabilization is ultimately aimed at legitimating both private museums and their founders as important actors in the field. Indeed, following Wohl’s (2020: 217) research on collectors in New York, creating an image of authenticity helps collectors expand their status in the artworld. As Wohl (2020: 217) argues, it is precisely by positioning ‘themselves as authentic’ that collectors perform what she calls ‘aesthetic confidence’; that is, demonstrating ‘their willingness to select cultural products based on their independent and superior taste’ rather than simply following trends.

Furthermore, I again found that the museum curators and directors I interviewed also undertook considerable legitimation work for their institutions’ founders. For example, they often went to great lengths to emphasize founders’ deep embeddedness in the wider artworld, their dedication to young artist patronage, long-lasting friendships with artists, efforts to collaborate with research institutions, or their stellar international status as reputable elite collectors (i.e. by referring to their Artnews features). In this vein, many curators/directors also highlighted founders’ in-depth knowledge of their own collections or the various times at which they themselves had designed exhibition spaces or taken on curatorial functions. This is certainly something I experienced first-hand during my in-person interviews, when I was frequently given a tour through the museum either by founders themselves or their staff, who then consistently pointed out how the founder had actively been involved in the development of the museum and/or of the specific exhibition we were seeing.

As Braden (2016: 1486) argues, this kind of field-specific ‘recognition’ that the curators/directors thereby assigned to founders ‘services as validation of cultural competence and taste, and therefore strengthens a collector’s ability to appropriate an art collection’s status value’. We can thus observe again how private museums offer not just useful discursive sites but also institutional and social platforms through which their founders can outsource some of their (self)legitimation work to their employees. Taken together, my interviews therefore document how private museums allow collector-founders to be presented as fully embedded, creatively engaged, and most importantly authentic elite actors, strengthening them as ‘effective agents’ in the struggle over legitimacy in the art field compared with other private collectors (see Bourdieu 1993).

Interestingly, this discursive distinction between the authentic, ‘good’ collector versus the ostentatious, ‘bad’ collector also manifests in a more abstract way across my interviews, notably extending into a moral distinction between the ‘good’ versus the ‘bad’ wealth elite more widely. Generally, my interviewees were aware that they either belonged to or worked for a relatively privileged group with far-reaching financial resources. In view of wider critical debates around economic inequality going on both in and outside of the artworld, respondents were hence keen to make sense of museum founders’ advantageous social and financial positions. Here, it was striking to me that most of my interviewees, whether founders or museum employees, tended to describe the economic resources that financed their affiliated institutions as products of ‘ethical’ wealth accumulation, while simultaneously indicating other origins of wealth as dubious.

One of the most arresting themes across my data was a narrative of entrepreneurial authenticity that my respondents attached to founders’ economic successes, contrasting the origins of their wealth with money from illicit or exploitative origins. For instance, as curator Linda put it, who works for a museum mainly funded via its founder’s manufacturing company,

Linda: There’s so much dirty money in the arts, like, SO MUCH money. And you not always know the origins of that, or you kind of know, but not really, so there’s lots of grounds for speculation. [. . .] there got to be some dirty money, basically, that’s for sure.

Me: What do you perceive as dirty money? Where does that kind of money come from?

Linda: Well, hard to tell. But for me, it got something to do with how people got their money, like illegal stuff. But there’s also so much opaque money going on, all these mega-rich people, oligarchs basically, where it’s just hard to tell where all that money comes from. And that’s really bad, obviously. But then other people have just really worked their way up and are successful at what they’re doing.

Me: How would you evaluate your workplace in this spectrum?

Linda: You know, it’s a family business. They are full-blooded entrepreneurs.

Like Linda, most founders I spoke to emphasized the narrative of self-made success, keenly expressing how they had worked their way up, building successful careers or their own mid-sized family enterprises [*Mittelstandsunternehmen*]. These accounts reveal the combination of what Khan and Jerolmack (2013: 18) call ‘meritocratic principles’ to justify wealth and privilege and a declaration of relative modesty vis-à-vis the ‘mega-rich’. At a time in which elites are a frequent topic of the public conversation, these ‘verbalized values of hard work and meritocracy matter to the new elite; they are particularly important as a kind of



“rhetorical cover” of inherited advantages within a world that is more open yet more inequitable’ (Khan and Jerolmack 2013: 18). Such a strategy of elite legitimization seems to fall on rather fruitful grounds in Germany: for example, as Waitkus and Wallaschek’s (2022) study of elite representations in the German press shows, the wealthiest German business families tend to be favourably framed as important entrepreneurs or investors, and their wealth linked more to the country’s economic growth than to economic inequality. Mirroring this wider discourse, my interviewees signalled legitimacy for museum founders not only as authentic, moral collectors but indeed also as authentic, moral entrepreneurs.

The robustness of this narrative was somewhat challenged, however, when the topic of conversation switched from modes of wealth accumulation to the origins of wealth, especially considering a couple of highly mediatized cases of German founder-collectors whose family inheritance is said to stem from forced labour during the Third Reich. Here, several founders I interviewed explicitly pointed out that their own financial portfolio would bear no linkages to such deeply immoral activities. What I found more remarkable though was that at least a few interviewees from both the founder and the curator/director group, despite forcefully condemning such objectionable sources of wealth accumulation, nevertheless seemed willing to ‘exonerate’ them, suggesting that—at least—this tainted money would now be put to good use by funding a museum. Perhaps predictably, this art-as-whitewashing argument was for instance implied by a curator who worked for one of these controversial museums. While they acknowledged the public allegations against their employer, in the interview, the curator was eager to stress how their founder’s passion-driven art patronage was ‘path-breaking’ and ‘absolutely important’ for today’s art scene. This again indicates how private museums can serve as productive discursive and organizational platforms for founders, especially when their wealth may be publicly contested, to convert their (allegedly) unethically sourced wealth into ethically used wealth, thereby still distinguishing themselves as ultimately moral elite agents compared with other private wealth elites with no connection to art.

This focus on art patronage as ethical and ultimately self-less wealth usage versus more self-centred, lavish elite consumption certainly reflects a widely shared narrative across the data. As curator Linda argued,

I think it’s great that people invest their money into art. And their time, too. Opening museums, you do that out of passion, not for economic reasons. In fact, to keep a museum up and running can be very very costly.

And founder Peter furthermore expressed

a great respect for everyone who’s doing something similar. [...] I mean it could also be that someone just buys a boat or so. Burns just as much money. That’s why I say, art is first of all good for society... if people do it seriously.

In this manner, respondents reinscribe the arts as a worthwhile site of elite spending from which to derive distinction and legitimacy within society more broadly (Moulin 1987; Gnyp 2015; Wohl 2020). However, my participants go beyond depictions of art as mere status symbols and additionally infer a sense of moral or public responsibility which they would fulfil by opening museums for public consumption, but only if done ‘seriously’; that is,

authentically. This section hence revealed how private museums help claim legitimacy for their founders not only as authentic players in the arts but also as authentic and ultimately ethical elite actors more broadly, setting them apart from other private elite agents.

## 5. Discussion and conclusion

The two foregoing parts made visible how private museums serve their founders as productive sites for elite (self)legitimization strategies. Specifically, the article showed how (self)legitimizing strategies of private elites can effectively straddle and tap into different discursive logics to justify their status and control over both public and other private actors. While the first narrative of legitimization mobilizes a rather typical, ‘common sense’ neoliberal paradigm, which evaluates the private sphere as more suited to address societal needs compared with the public sphere, the second narrative rehearses established discourses of authenticity to legitimize private museums and their founders against other private economic elites. Here, one could argue that the two narratives contradict each other—the one adhering to the logics of a market-based, private entrepreneurialism, the other to the discourse of disinterestedness. Putting it in Bourdieusian terms, the former marks the heteronomous pole of the artworld, whereas the latter articulates its autonomous opposite.

However, rather than in tension, I propose that the two narratives stand in a complementary, re-enforcing relationship to one another. In fact, I argue that, together, they construct a two-pronged legitimization strategy through which museum founders can simultaneously be framed as independent and efficient entrepreneurs *and* as authentic, socially responsible, and ethical cultural agents. In these ways, founders can be set apart from both the inefficient public sector and from other private elites which, in turn, are invoked as ostentatious, self-centred, or immoral. As such, the interplay of the two narratives effectively recalibrates, if not collapses, the discursive boundaries between art and commerce, between public and private, showing how—for today’s privileged—these distinctions become but mere and, crucially, transgressable constructions.

These findings add to a current strand in social science research that focuses on the social processes and cultural discourses that underpin elite-making and reproduction today (Khan 2012a,b; Lamont et al. 2014; Cousin et al. 2018; Sherman 2018; Savage and Hjellbrekke 2021; Hecht 2022). Indeed, ongoing discussions around wealth distribution and privatization processes have put a new emphasis on the question of how elites gain, retain, and justify their positions and resources as elites (McGoey 2012; Reich 2018; Glucksberg and Russell-Prywata 2020; Mclean et al. 2021). As public debates seem to grow increasingly critical of the super-rich and their influence, the latter may face a heightened pressure to not only distinguish themselves from other private elite actors, but also from public authorities (e.g. by taking over important roles in public art provision). Speaking to these debates, this article drew more focused attention to the importance that private (art) philanthropy holds for the production and mobilization of elite legitimizing claims. It thereby specifically adds to an ongoing research strand that tackles the role of art as a well-suited vector for elites through which to turn economic into cultural capital and to establish themselves as valuable, legitimate social agents (DiMaggio 1982; Fleming and Roses 2007; Banks 2017; Accominotti et al. 2018; Lena 2019).

In this vein, I furthermore highlighted the institutional conditions that enable this discursive legitimization work. Notably, I find that the highlighted two-pronged legitimization

strategy is not only performed by museum founders themselves but also, albeit with some ambivalence, by museum directors and curators. That is, although this latter group is not necessarily wealthy itself, and even frequently judged the financial side of the artworld as absurd and excessive overall, most curators and directors described their own employers as merely passion-driven and even ethical, thereby rehearsing similar legitimization discourses to the founders themselves. This finding speaks to a larger discussion in organizational sociology which seeks to understand how people make moral judgements in the context of organizational life (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006; Jagd 2011; Cloutier et al. 2017). However, what has thus far remained underexplored in this body of work is the question of how these institutionally embedded evaluation practices link to wider discourses of legitimacy and thus patterns of social stratification and inequality. My analysis contributed to this concern by unpacking how private (art) organizations can establish resourceful institutional networks for their wealthy founders to be harnessed for legitimizing ends. That is, private philanthropic institutions not only allow their founders to present themselves as valuable charitable agents, but simultaneously help channel the more implicitly legitimizing narratives put forward by those working for and employed by them (who are not necessarily wealthy themselves). This article thus laid bare how elite legitimization work needs to be read as an institutionally mediated and backed process.

Overall, the arguments developed in this article also point beyond the fields of museums and arts philanthropy and bear relevance for broader discussions around privatization and elite-making more generally. Indeed, at a time at which more and more public goods, services, and infrastructures become outsourced to private hands—including sectors like education, healthcare, housing, or (inter)national security—it is important to emphasize that *the private* is by no means a unified concept, but that those who advocate for privatization do so within a context that is itself shaped by intra-group hierarchies and status differences. Developing a keener understanding of how certain elite groups gain status and influence across different societal domains and how they solidify their power over other actors thus presents a critical concern. To that end, it is important to consider the specific cultural norms, motivations, and patterns of evaluation that private elites enact and reproduce not only vis-à-vis the public sphere but also, crucially, among themselves. Here, my data revealed the ways in which discourses around private efficiency and public duty become strategically linked up, so that the public itself is inferred as a legitimizing signifier for intra-elite distinction struggles. It is precisely by invoking discourses of public responsibility and engagement that some private elites are rendered more acceptable, moral, and ultimately legitimate over others which, in turn, allows them to stake out more powerful positions across the public domain, too. In elites' pursuit of legitimacy, the article hence showed how the public and private become increasingly contingent spheres that can either be played off against or conflated with one another—whatever helps signal their value and status most compellingly.

Of course, my methods and data only enabled me to study elite legitimizing *strategies*—whether these strategies can ultimately be successful and turned into real outcomes beyond the institutional context of the museum is not certain and would require further empirical research. Moreover, the rather homogenous composition of my interview sample in terms of gender and ethnicity and the specific geographical focus of my study also mean that my findings merely capture a specific elite segment (German and/or Germany-based, predominantly male, and white). Especially considering scholarship on Black art cultural consumption and

patronage (Fleming and Roses 2007; Banks 2019a, 2019b; Meghji 2019) or on private museums located outside of a European context (Kiowski 2017; Durand 2018; Dieckvoss 2020), a more diverse sample might also have revealed a more differentiated pattern of discursive legitimation. For instance, while the founders in my sample already stress discursive novelty and emerging artist support as key pillars of their museum work, non-White and/or non-European collector-founders might more explicitly emphasize their role for promoting art beyond a rather hegemonic White, male, and Eurocentric frame.<sup>4</sup>

With private wealth concentration and privatization being clearly global phenomena, both in and beyond the artworld, more research on the similarities and variation among differently positioned elite groups, their meaning-making practices, and legitimation strategies would be welcome. I hope that this article may have provided helpful conceptual vantage points for such a research agenda by offering some general glimpses into how both private wealth and private control over public goods might be rendered palatable in era of inequality.

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4 In this connection, it would moreover be crucial to tease out both the 'conservative and subversive' (Fleming and Roses, 2007: 382) effects of private cultural entrepreneurship. For instance, Fleming and Roses' (2007) work on Black cultural capitalists in early twentieth century Boston and Banks' (2018, 2022) research into contemporary African-American museum patrons show how private elites of colour can simultaneously perform 'a form of antiracism' through their arts support and also accumulate forms of 'Black cultural capital' (Banks, 2022; see also Meghji, 2019).

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