

An Exploration of Kabo's Private Art Collection in the Public Sphere

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Abstract

This paper observes the evolution of a private art collection in the public sphere. In recent decades, the role of private collectors in shaping contemporary art discourse has expanded significantly, particularly through active engagement in commissioning, curating, and lending practices. As a starting point of this research, I will discuss Australian collector Konfir Kabo and his collection as a study of an activated art collection. Kabo's collecting practices have evolved into an active collaboration with artists, curators, and institutions, supporting emerging and mid-career talents.

Keywords: Private collector; art collection; collaboration

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1.0 Introduction

As the art collection manager of the Kabo Collection, this paper provides a chronological insight into the establishment of the Kabo Collection, parallel to a timeline of creative projects and exhibitions. The aim is to examine how Konfir Kabo's private art collection has been actively mobilised within the public sphere, demonstrating how contemporary private collecting can operate as a collaborative, exhibition-driven, and publicly engaged practice rather than a model of passive ownership.

Konfir Kabo's approach to his art collection is informed by engagement, in contrast to conventional models of private collecting, which often emphasise exclusivity and preservation. His collecting practice challenges the boundaries between private ownership and public access. From its inception, the Kabo Collection has functioned as a dynamic and publicly engaged platform activated through exhibitions, curatorial partnerships, artist commissions, and loans. Significant works in the Kabo Collection have been exhibited and re-exhibited, often exposing works of under-represented artists to diverse audiences and establishing further creative opportunities. Through key exhibitions such as *SHOUT!*, *#Perempuan*, and *Ebb and Flow*, and participation in major public programmes and festivals, including the Biennale of Sydney, Indian Ocean Craft Triennale, and Mapping Melbourne, the collection has gained visibility and relevance across local and international contexts.

Konfir Kabo is a lawyer and a businessman based in Melbourne, Australia. He opened his own practice in 2001 and has businesses in property and investment. Born in Makassar, Indonesia, he migrated to Australia in 1988. His art collecting journey began in 2011 when

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he purchased his first artwork by Indonesian artist Maria Indriasari, *I am big, you are small*, 2009 from *Closing the Gap: Indonesian Contemporary Art* exhibition at MiFA Gallery, Melbourne. This experience was the beginning of his burgeoning art collection and establishing relationships with gallery directors, curators and artists. He cemented his journey of art collecting and philanthropy by forming Project Eleven with his wife Monica Lim to support contemporary Indonesian art projects with a particular focus on new commissions and cross-cultural projects (Jovicic, 2022). In his Art Collector profile, Duro Jovicic describes Kabo as a conduit between Indonesian artists, budding collectors, and the public – bringing cultural awareness closer to the surface (2022).

2.0 Literature review

2.1 Berg's findings on art collectors' motivations

In her study *Private Art Collectors' Motivations to Donate, Deposit, or Lend Out Artworks in Norway*, Berg (2024) conducted qualitative interviews with twelve Norwegian private art collectors to examine their motivations for donating, depositing, or lending artworks to public institutions. Berg identifies several key motivations that underpin collectors' decisions to activate their collections beyond private ownership.

One significant motivation is the desire to see artworks displayed and publicly enjoyed. Collectors reported emotional satisfaction and pride in encountering their works within exhibition contexts, often describing the experience as personally rewarding or enjoyable. Public display also functions as a subtle affirmation of the collector's contribution to the cultural field.

A second motivation relates to public access and the democratisation of art. Many collectors expressed the view that artworks should not remain hidden in private storage but should be accessible to broader audiences. This belief was frequently framed as a moral or cultural responsibility, particularly in relation to making under-represented artists and artworks visible.

Berg also identifies educational and cultural motivations among collectors. Some participants demonstrated a strong commitment to particular artists, artistic practices, or cultural narratives and viewed lending or donating artworks as a means of educating the public. Through these actions, collectors sought to document, preserve, and promote lesser-known or culturally significant works.

In addition to these value-driven motivations, practical and economic considerations—especially relating to storage—played an important role. Collectors noted that storing large or extensive collections can be costly and logistically complex. Lending or donating artworks offered relief from these challenges while ensuring that works were professionally maintained.

Finally, Berg highlights a sense of social responsibility and commitment to artist support. Collectors often positioned themselves as patrons of contemporary artists, particularly living Norwegian artists, and viewed lending and donation as ways to enhance artists' local and international visibility. In this context, collectors perceived their actions as complementing or compensating for limitations within public institutions, especially in the promotion of national art beyond domestic contexts.

2.2 Larry's List – a collector's profile

Complementing Berg's findings, *Larry's List: The Next Gen Art Collectors* (2021) provides a global profile of over 150 international collectors under the age of forty, many of whom are actively shaping the contemporary art ecosystem. Rather than ranking collectors, the report offers a cross-sectional analysis of collector personas, motivations, digital engagement, and cultural contributions.

The report identifies digital collecting behaviour as a defining characteristic of next generation collectors. These collectors are more likely to research, discover, and acquire artworks through online platforms and mobile technologies, prioritising independent exploration over traditional institutional gatekeepers. They also demonstrate a strong interest in emerging artists.

Another key finding relates to values driven and socially conscious collecting. Millennial and Generation Z collectors often align their collecting practices with personal identity, inclusivity, emotional resonance, and social justice concerns. Transparency and personal relationships with artists are highly valued, shaping both acquisition and engagement strategies.

Additionally, *Larry's List* highlights growing levels of institutional support among younger collectors. A significant proportion already contribute financially to museums and cultural organisations, with many expressing an intention to increase this support in the future.

Both Berg's study and Larry's List report show that collectors share a commitment to making art accessible and supporting artists, but they emphasise different motivations. While Berg's Norwegian collectors highlight cultural duty, education, and practical concerns, next-generation collectors focus more on digital engagement, identity, and social impact. Together, they demonstrate how collectors, across generations, play a vital role in shaping cultural participation beyond public institutions.

3.0 Methodology

This research draws on my direct participation in and sustained observation of Konfir Kabo's collecting practice. Over several years, I have worked closely with Kabo on exhibitions, artist commissions, and collection loans through which I have observed firsthand the collection's evolution and activation in public contexts. My proximity to the process has provided unique insight into the motivations, strategies, and collaborations underpinning Kabo's collecting approach. Rather than relying solely on secondary sources or interviews, this paper draws on experiential knowledge and reflective observation, offering a perspective shaped by active involvement.

4.0 Findings

4.1 Establishing a collection through exhibitions

Almost as soon as Kabo began his collection, he supported projects by commissioning and acquiring works directly from artists for exhibition purposes. This section of the paper will illustrate these exhibitions from 2014 to 2023, which were spearheaded by proposals from independent curators and galleries. The initial exhibition Kabo supported in this manner was *SHOUT! Indonesian Contemporary Art*, held in Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Roma (MACRO) in Rome, Italy, 27 September – 9 November 2014 (Figs. 1 & 2). The exhibition was curated by Bryan Collie of MiFA Gallery, Melbourne, and independent curator Santy Saptari, promoting works from ten Indonesian artists in the international sphere. The exhibiting artists included Aditya Novali, Andita Purnama, Angki Purbandono, Bestrizal Besta, Erika Ernawan, Gatot Pudiarto, Gusmen Heriadi, I Gusti Ngurah Udiantara (Tantin), Maria Indriasari, Sigit Santoso, and Yudi Sulisty. Engaging an Australian-based team and transporting Indonesian-based artworks to Rome, Italy, was both a logistical and financial feat. This acquisition of works benefited the quality and breadth of Kabo's collection. It became a sustainable solution to expensive shipment rates to and from Indonesia, alleviating the challenge for the galleries and the artists.



Fig. 1 Installation view of Shout! 2014
(Source: photograph by Aditya Novali)



Fig. 2 Installation view of Shout! 2014
(Source: photograph by Aditya Novali)

Kabo's ongoing support of exhibitions is reflected in his collaborations with private and public galleries, alongside festivals such as Multicultural Arts Victoria's Mapping Melbourne programme. As part of the Mapping Melbourne 2015: Independent Asian Contemporary Arts programme, a second edition of *SHOUT! Indonesian Contemporary Art* (Figs. 3 & 4) was again included, curated by Bryan Collie and Santy Saptari. The exhibition was held from 2 to 22 December 2015 at Meat Market Stables, University of Melbourne, Melbourne. Artists Andita Purnana, Erika Ernawan, Gusmen Heriadi, Maria Indriasari, and Sigit Santoso, from the original group of *Shout! 2014*, were invited to submit new works, with the addition of Afdhal Ari Arafat, Dedy Sufriadi, Erwin Windu Pranata, Lingga Ami, Maharani Mancanagara, Mulyana Mogus, Octora Chan, Patriot Mukmin, Tamara Pertamina (Tamarra), Tisna Sanjaya, and Zico Albaiquni.



Fig. 3 Installation view of Shout! 2015,
Meat Market Stables, Melbourne
(Source: Multicultural Arts Victoria)



Fig. 4 Installation view of Shout! 2015,
Meat Market Stables, Melbourne
(Source: Multicultural Arts Victoria)

Majority of the works were installed at the Meat Market Stables venues whilst two large-scale works were installed in more prominent public venues. An impressive work by Patriot Mukmin, *Sacred Pancasila and White Terror*, 2015, a manually woven digital print on book paper on acrylic panels, 196 x 528 cm (Fig. 5), was installed at the Sidney Myer Asia Centre, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, from 25 November to 15 December 2015. Capsule-like inflatable sculptures by Erwin Windu Pranata and Rigour Samsa, 2015 (Fig. 6), were installed in the heart of Melbourne CBD in front of the State Library of Victoria, Melbourne, from 2 to 5 December 2015. These public installations exposed the artworks to a larger and more diverse audience beyond the traditional gallery setting.



Fig. 5 Installation view of *Sacred Pancasila and White Terror*, 2015, Sidney Myer Asia Centre, University of Melbourne
(Source: Indoartnow.com)



Fig. 6 Installation view of *Rigor Samsa*, 2015, State Library of Victoria, Melbourne
(Source: Indoartnow.com)

In 2016, *the Crossing: Beyond Baliseering* (Figs. 7 & 8) exhibition featured works by ten Balinese and Bali-based contemporary artists. This was a first for Kabo and his collection, which initially collected works from artists based in Yogyakarta and Bandung. The addition of works by Balinese-based artists expanded the scope of the Kabo collection. The Mapping Melbourne 2016 programme, which was held at Forty Five Downstairs, Melbourne, included the exhibition. It was curated by Mara Sison and Bali-based curator Army Firmansyah, who introduced Kabo to the exhibiting artists Art of Whatever (Slinat), Aswino Aji, Budi Agung Kuswara 'Kabul', Citra Sasmita, I Wayan Upadana, Kemal Ezedine, Natisa Jones, Suarimbawa Dalbo, Valasara, and Yoesoef Olla.



Fig. 7 Installation view of *Crossing: Beyond Baliseering*, Forty Five Downstairs, Melbourne
(Source: Mara Sison)



Fig. 8 Installation view of *Crossing: Beyond Baliseering*, Forty Five Downstairs, Melbourne
(Source: Mara Sison)

Another first for the collection is the *#Perempuan (Woman)* (Figs. 9 and 10) exhibition held on December 5–14, 2018 at Space 28, VCA Performing Arts, Melbourne. The exhibition featured works from 'ten emerging Indonesian artists exploring current issues surrounding women's existence, visibility, role and participation in Indonesia' (Saptari, 2018). The predominantly female exhibition includes Arum Dayu, Erwin Windu Pranata, Octora Chan, Patricia Untario, Putri Fidhini, Etza Meisyara, Ruth Marbun, Tandia Bambang Permadi, and Yaya Sung. This marked the final exhibition, which Kabo and his team organised as part of the Mapping Melbourne series. The collaboration with an institution such as Multicultural Arts Victoria significantly broadened the reach of participating artists and their works, allowing them to engage with a broader and more diverse audience.

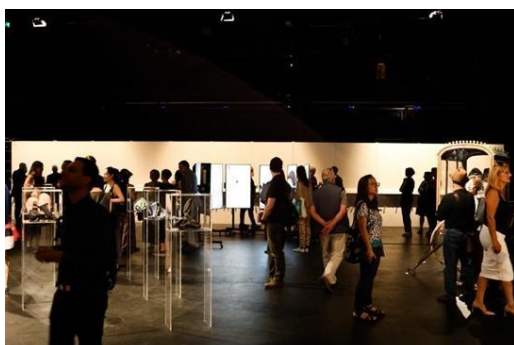


Fig. 9 Exhibition opening of *#Perempuan*, Space 28, VCA Performing Arts, Melbourne
(Source: Multicultural Arts Victoria/Wild Hardt)



Fig. 10 Ruth Marbun, *One is a million*, Space 28, VCA Performing Arts, Melbourne
(Source: Multicultural Arts Victoria/Wild Hardt)

Seven years after *Crossing: Beyond Baliseering*, Kabo commissioned another Balinese contemporary art exhibition curated by Army Firmansyah and Mara Sison. *Sekala Niskala* (Figs. 11 & 12) featured five emerging Balinese artists: Agus Saputra, Kuncir Sathya Viku, Ni Luh Pangestu, Satya Cipta, and Septa Adi. The exhibition was held in collaboration with Footscray Community Arts, Victoria, in the Roslyn Smorgon Gallery from 18 April to 5 June 2023.



Fig. 11 Installation view of *Sekala Niskala*,
Footscray Community Arts, Victoria
(Source: Mara Sison)



Fig. 12 Installation view of *Sekala Niskala*,
Footscray Community Arts, Victoria
(Source: Mara Sison)

4.2 Increasing collection exposure through loans

Acquiring works for exhibitions through the years meant that Kabo could collect significant works from mid-career and emerging Indonesian artists (whilst acquiring additional works from galleries, artist studios, and fairs between these exhibitions). Although Kabo's collection primarily comprises works from Indonesian artists, he expanded his geographical scope to Australian and Southeast Asian contemporary art. The collection gained momentum and significance in contemporary art, receiving yearly requests to loan works for external exhibitions, festivals, and long-term displays.

A significant work by Australian artist Aly Aitken in Kabo's collection was loaned to the Melbourne Fringe Festival in 2017 (Fig. 13). The large-scale metamorphic *Outside In*, 2014, of stacked leather-covered chairs reconfigured with animal-like parts and teeth, was installed in the Arts Centre Melbourne, Victoria, and was a looming figure as audiences mazes through the space towards the absurdist performance *Discordia* between 27 September and 1 October 2017.



Fig. 13 Aly Aitken, *Outside In*, 2014
(Source: Aly Aitken)

In 2018, two works by Indonesian artists from the collection were loaned for *My Monster: The Human-Animal Hybrid*, RMIT Gallery, Melbourne, 29 June - 18 August 2018. Heri Dono's *Flying in a Cocoon*, 2001, mixed media installation, variable size (Fig. 14), and Eko Nugroho's *Trap Costume for President 2*, 2011, embroidered rayon thread on fabric backing, 146 x 190 cm (Fig. 15), were included as 'these works explore... segregation and alienation; freedom and oppression; fractured relationships with the natural environment and other animals, as well as struggles with our public and private personas' (Tsitas, 2018).

In a similar trend of metamorphosis, two installation works from the collection were included in *Morphosis*, Bundoora Homestead, Bundoora, Victoria, 2021, curated by Julian Goddard. Abdi Setiawan's *What else could we think about? – Bon Appetit*, 2014-17, teakwood, variable size, and Fika Ria Santika's *Terkurung Hendak di Luar: Limpapeh 1-4*, 2018, mixed media installation, variable size, were selected from the Kabo collection. Unfortunately, the exhibition had limited exposure to the public due to strict lockdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic in Victoria.



Fig. 14 Installation view of *Flying in a cocoon*, 2001
RMIT Gallery, Melbourne
(Source: RMIT Gallery)



Fig. 15 Installation view of *Trap Costume for President 2*, 2011
RMIT Gallery, Melbourne
(Source: RMIT Gallery)

As Australia was slowly opening its doors after the pandemic, a second edition of *#Perempuan* (Figs. 16 & 17) was held at Castlemaine Art Museum, Victoria, an Australian regional art museum, from 19 March to 4 April 2021. This time, existing works from the Kabo collection were selected, with some reappearing from the first *#Perempuan* show. Arum Dayu's *Kapan nikah?* (*When are you going to get married?*), 2018, photo prints mounted on aluminium Dibond, audio recording; Patricia Untario's *Silence*, 2018, 220 pieces of blown glass; Octora Chan's *Take my heart in sweet surrender and tenderly say that I am the one you love and live until the end of time*, 2018, ambrotype print on steel plates housed in a Victorian hearse; and Ruth Marbun's *One is a million*, 2018, watercolour on paper and soft sculpture installation. Other artists included in this exhibition are Citra Sasmita, Fitri DK, Maharani Mancanagara, and Maria Indria Sari, whose installation works of life-size dolls covered with thousands of safety pins (*Destiny and Regret*, 2014, and *Post-partum Syndrome: Sunk*, 2014) were initially acquired for *Shout! Indonesian Contemporary Art* in 2014.



Fig. 16 visitors at *#Perempuan*
Castlemaine Art Museum, Victoria
(Source: Mara Sison)



Fig. 17 Installation view of Octora Chan, *Take my heart...*, 2018,
and Arum Dayu, *Kapan nikah?*, 2018
Castlemaine Art Museum, Victoria
(Source: Mara Sison)

The success of *#Perempuan* at Castlemaine Art Museum attracted the interest of another regional art gallery. Federation University's Post Office Gallery, Ballarat, Victoria collaborated with Kabo and his team to curate an all female artist exhibition. *EM | BODY: works by Indonesian women artists* (Figs. 18 & 19) was held at Post Office Gallery from 2 September to 21 October 2022. This was the first time works from the Kabo Collection by Audya Amalia, Ayu Rika, Dita Gambiro, Erika Ernawan, I GAK Murniasih (Murni), Restu Ratnaningtyas, and Theresia Agustina Sitompul were exhibited in a Ballarat-based gallery.



Fig. 18 opening event of *EM | BODY*
Post Office Gallery, Ballarat
(Source: Mara Sison)



Fig. 19 visitors interacting with Audya Amalia's work
Post Office Gallery, Ballarat
(Source: Mara Sison)

Melbourne-based artist Paul Yore's major solo exhibition, *Paul Yore: WORD MADE FLESH*, held at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, from 23 September to 20 November 2022, featured two works from the Kabo Collection (Figs. 20 & 21). This event marked the collection's first loan of works specifically for an extensive solo artist exhibition.



Fig. 20 Paul Yore, *Mother Tongue*, 2017
ACCA, Melbourne
(Source: Mara Sison)



Fig. 21 Paul Yore, *It is all your fault, mum*, 2016
ACCA, Melbourne
(Source: Mara Sison)

2024 was an eventful year, starting with the 24th Biennale of Sydney: Ten Thousand Suns, Sydney, 9 March – 10 June. *The Korei Transformation*, 2024 (Fig. 22), a large-scale installation by a young Papuan art collective (based in Yogyakarta), Udeido Collective, was loaned and exhibited in the UNSW Galleries, Sydney. This was a significant event for the collective as *The Korei Transformation* was the collective's first work to be exhibited outside of Indonesia.



Fig. 22 Udeido Collective, *The Korei Transformation*, 2024
UNSW Galleries, Sydney
(Source: Biennale of Sydney/Jacquie Manning)

The *Indian Ocean Craft Triennale: Codes in Parallel*, held in August–October 2024, Perth, included four installations from Kabo's collection. Dias Prabu's *Between Traditions: In the Circle of life and Death*, 2021-24 (Fig. 23), a 21-piece batik installation, each spanning 100 metres long, was installed at the Holmes à Court Gallery. @No.10, West Perth. Rudi Hendriatno's *Fate Machine*, 2016 (Fig. 24), a 7-piece mechanical installation made entirely out of teak wood, and Yudi Sulisty's *Sejarah Yang Hilang* (The Lost History), 2011 (Fig. 25), a life-size installation of a military gun, were exhibited at John Curtin University Gallery, Perth. Abdi Setiawan's *What else could we think about? – Bon Appétit*, 2014-17 (Fig. 26), was loaned for a second time and exhibited in Fremantle Arts Centre, Fremantle.



Fig. 23 Installation view of Dias Prabu, *Between Traditions: In the circle of life and death*, 2021-24
Holmes à Court Gallery. @No.10, West Perth
(Source: IOTA)



Fig. 24 Installation view of Rudi Hendriatno, *Fate Machine*, 2016
John Curtin University Gallery, Perth
(Source: IOTA)



Fig. 25 Installation view of Yudi Sulisty, *Sejarah yang hilang*, 2011
John Curtin University Gallery, Perth
(Source: IOTA)



Fig. 26 Installation view of Abdi Setiawan, *What else could we think about? – Bon Appétit*, 2014-17
Fremantle Arts Centre, Fremantle
(Source: IOTA)

Art Gallery of Ballarat, Victoria, presented *Ebb and Flow: Contemporary Indonesian Sculpture from the Konfir Kabo Collection*, 15 June – 24 September (Figs. 27 & 28), highlighting exceptional sculptures and installations in the collection from Arya Pandjalu, Dyan Anggraini, Entang Wiharso, Erwin Windu Pranata, Fika Ria Santika, Heri Dono, I Made Djirna, I Wayan Upadana, Ichwan Noor, Ivan Sagita, Laksmi Shitareshmi, Meta Enjelita, Sekarputi Sidhiawati, Tamara Pertamina (Tamarra), Taufik Ermas, and Theresia Agustina Sitompul.

Moreover, to cap off the year, Soni Irawan, *Tribute to Street Fighters*, 2019, an installation of Indonesian advertising street signs, which was initially exhibited in Paris, was recreated at a laneway (Lyric Lane) in Canberra for the Canberra Art Biennale, Canberra, between 24 September and 26 October.



Fig. 27 opening event of Ebb and Flow
Art Gallery of Ballarat, Victoria
(Source: Art Gallery of Ballarat)



Fig. 28: Opening event of Ebb and Flow
Art Gallery of Ballarat, Victoria
(Source: Art Gallery of Ballarat)

5.0 Discussion

The Kabo Collection demonstrates how a private art collection can do more than accumulate and store artworks. Instead, it can be used to share art with the public, support artists, and create new cultural opportunities. In recent years, private collectors have started taking on a more active role in the art world by assisting in presentations, supporting exhibitions, and working with artists and curators. Konfir Kabo's approach is a strong example of this.

Kabo has used his collection to increase artists' visibility from early exhibitions like *SHOUT!* to significant events such as the Biennale of Sydney. His support assists artists in reaching new audiences. In this case, Indonesian contemporary artists have been provided an additional vehicle to reach international viewers through Kabo's collaborations with well-known institutions.

However, activating a private collection within public spheres raises practical and ethical considerations. While this model fosters accessibility and visibility, it depends heavily on the collector's personal resources, decision-making, and vision. While this can be positive, especially when the collector is thoughtful and inclusive, it also means that a lot of responsibility and control sits with the collector. This power should be considered carefully, especially when private collections are shown in public spaces. Still, Kabo's practices show that private collectors can play an essential role in the broader art world through genuine collaboration and curatorial transparency. In Kabo's case, the curatorial and selection processes concerning artists and their works have been conducted through collaborative engagement with independent curators and museum/gallery directors to ensure they are relevant to the institutions and events.

6.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper has examined how a private art collection can be activated in the public sphere to foster cultural exchange, encourage creative collaboration, and enhance the visibility of artists. Tracing a timeline of exhibitions, partnerships, and curatorial projects, the

Kabo Collection demonstrates a shift away from traditional private ownership models and passive collecting, functioning as a dynamic and responsive platform. By commissioning new works, supporting emerging talent, and enabling public access through exhibitions and loans, this activation-based approach ensures that artworks remain relevant and are continually reinterpreted within shifting public discourses. Public and private art institutions play a vital role in nurturing relationships with private collectors, supporting public engagement, cultural dialogue, and the expansion of programming with distinctive artworks that might otherwise remain unseen.

Based on these findings, it is recommended that private collectors who are interested in expanding their role in the industry, adopt engagement-focused practices such as exhibitions, commissions, and loans; that public institutions establish clear and transparent frameworks for collaboration while maintaining curatorial independence; and that ethical guidelines address decision-making, artist payment, and accountability to manage power dynamics. Sustained support for artists through repeat collaborations is encouraged, and future research should continue to explore private collections as active cultural participants, particularly through practice-based approaches and in cross-cultural contexts.

Acknowledgments

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Paper Contribution to the Related Field of Study

This paper contributes to the study of contemporary private art collecting and the role of the collector in the art world. It opens avenues for further studies on collector-led cultural production, public and private partnerships, and methodological approaches that integrate curatorial practice with scholarly analysis. It offers a framework for future studies on collaborative collecting practices, cultural exchange, and the evolving relationship between private ownership and public access.

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