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Deaccessioning as a Long-Term Organizational Strategy

A Case Study of the Museum Langmatt

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Abstract

This case study of the 2023 deaccession of three Cézanne-paintings from the Swiss Museum Langmatt's collection supplements the deaccessioning discourse with the strategic management perspective. The research question of whether the deaccessions can be interpreted as the operative manifestation of a long-term organizational survival strategy is addressed with a qualitative mixed-methods-approach combining data from two semi-structured expert interviews with document analysis. In the theoretical part, the researcher proposes the term operationally motivated deaccessioning to describe the investigated form of deaccessioning. The analysis considers three perspectives: the internal (museum director), external (ICOM) and cultural policy perspective (canton Aargau's Head of Culture Department). Analogous to the principle of a SWOT analysis, the data is examined for information on the museum's identity and environment as well as on the deaccessioning process itself to determine whether the deaccessions were embedded in a wider strategic context. Although ICOM's ethics-centered argumentation, designed for universal applicability, is hard to grasp with strategic management's focus on unique organizational circumstances, the data suggests that the sale of paintings was indeed part of an organizational survival strategy. This finding results in the hypothesis of a general correlation between a specific type of deaccessioning and the main organizational strategy. The paper concludes with the proposal of a new typology, which organizes types of deaccessioning in relation to both strategic and ethical considerations.

Keywords: collection management, deaccessioning, main organizational strategy, museum management, organizational survival, strategic management

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List of Abbreviations

AAM	American Alliance of Museums
AAMD	Association of Art Museum Directors
CHF	Swiss francs
ICOM	International Council of Museums
IMA	The Indianapolis Museum of Art at Newfields
NZZ	Neue Zürcher Zeitung
USD	US dollars

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1. Introduction

Deaccessioning, the permanent removal of items from museum collections, is undoubtedly one of the most controversially discussed practices in museum management, particularly when financial motives are involved. Prominent deaccessioning cases frequently make headlines in the international arts pages and are being debated passionately. Oftentimes, it is not only the reasoning behind specific deaccessioning cases, but the question of the practice's validity itself, which is being questioned.

At the same time, deaccessioning is becoming increasingly relevant. The discourse on the topic is closely interwoven with many of today's most pressing museum management challenges: climate change is fuelling the debate on sustainability in museums, not least with regard to managing perpetually growing collections. Questions of social justice, such as calls for repatriation of looted art, are challenging the traditional image of museums as eternal repositories. And, in times when public funds are being redistributed to increase national defense budgets, the financial safeguarding of cultural institutions is more topical than ever.

Against this background, it is not surprising that the case of the Swiss Museum Langmatt, which auctioned off three paintings by Paul Cézanne in 2023, received international media attention, the majority of which was critical. An article in the German weekly newspaper *Die Zeit* headlined its article on the case with a quote by Tobias Bezzola, then-president of ICOM Switzerland, who called the sale "high treason against cultural heritage" (Enggist, 2023); museum director Markus Stegmann argued in the Swiss regional newspaper *Tagblatt* that the sale was unavoidable, because "the very existence of the museum was threatened" (Altorfer, 2020). Significantly, the latter article labelled the discussion about deaccessioning "the most heated debate in the museum world"; the two quotes exemplify the opposing camps in this debate.

The present study will take a fresh look at the much-discussed case of Museum Langmatt by appreciating it from the perspective of strategic management. Exploring the connection between the deaccessioning case and the museum's wider organizational objectives, it intends to supplement the discourse to date, which, as indicated above, has largely revolved around questions of ethical justifiability. The aim of this case study, however, is not to examine the transferability of the case to other museums in order to propose sales

from museum collections as a panacea for financially challenged institutions. Rather, it intends to expand the current debate by introducing strategic management tool to better understand the relationship between a relevant operational measure and its overarching strategic context.

1.1 Research Question

As quoted above, Museum Langmatt's director justified the sale of the paintings with an existential threat to the institution's continued existence. In strategic management terms, he described the museum as engaged in a struggle for organizational survival. This study's general research interest in the relationship between operational deaccessioning measure and main organizational strategy can thus be narrowed down to the following case-specific research question: can the 2023 deaccessioning of the three Cézanne paintings by Museum Langmatt be classified as the operational manifestation of an organizational survival strategy?

If the data confirms the correlation between this specific deaccessioning measure and the museum's overall strategy, the research question can lead to the hypothesis of a general correlation between a given form of deaccessioning case and the respective museum's main operational strategy.

1.2 Scope and Limitations

The research design of this thesis is that of a single case study; it examines one specific deaccessioning case in a museum with highly unique characteristics and environmental conditions. The generalizability of findings into universally valid principles is therefore beyond the scope of this paper; at best, it can be hypothesis-generating (Hug and Poscheschnik, 2020, p. 107).

As explained in detail in the methodology chapter, the qualitative data collection presents further limitations: firstly, the researcher did not have sufficient data to equally consider all perspectives on the case, resulting in the underrepresentation of the critical stance on the case. Secondly, the analysis of the organisational environment in particular relies primarily on data generated in qualitative interviews, and is only occasionally supported

by publicly available documents such as the museum's annual reports. A comprehensive analysis of detailed financial documents was ruled out both by the lack of accessibility and the limited scope of the study.

1.3 Structure

As there is no established framework for analyzing deaccession cases using strategic management tools, this study's approach is to a large extent exploratory. Its overall objective of identifying a connection between the phenomenon of deaccessioning and the concept of an organizational survival strategy is reflected in the research question; thus, in a first step, viable working definitions of these two terms will be established in order to specify how they will be used in the course of the paper.

Following these case-specific definitions, the thematic literature will gather key contributions to the debate on the phenomenon of deaccessioning in order to situate the three analyzed perspectives in the wider debate on the topic. The review is organized into four sections: after a brief sketch of the current debate's historical evolution, it will consider some of the most frequent arguments in favor of and against deaccessioning. The third section will outline recent shifts in the debate, while the final subchapter will focus exclusively on one detailed account of a deaccessioning case comparable to the one investigated in the present study.

Chapter 4 will present the study's overall research design and methodological approach. The case of the Museum Langmatt is a qualitative case study, which includes documents as well as self-generated qualitative data from semi-structured expert interviews. The data will be investigated by means of a qualitative content analysis, a method which allows for the consideration of predefined conceptual lenses such as the preliminary definition of concepts in chapter 2.

The analysis itself will thus be guided by an overall deductive approach: the two concepts of operationally motivated deaccessioning and organizational survival strategy established in chapter 2 will provide the conceptual framework to identify relevant data on the possible interrelation of both terms. The main objective of the analysis is to determine whether the deaccessions from Museum Langmatt's collection can be regarded strategic, and if so, whether the underlying strategic reasoning can be defined as an organizational survival

strategy. The discussion section will then relate the findings from the analysis back to chapters 2 and 3, the theoretical section of the study, and, in a final step, to the research question itself.

2. Preliminary Considerations: Conceptual Framework

This chapter establishes case-specific working definitions of the two terms inherent in the research question. After assigning the phenomenon under investigation to one of the widely accepted concepts of deaccessioning types, it will specify this paper's distinction of main organizational strategies with special focus on the notion of an organizational survival strategy.

2.1 Deaccessioning

Chapter 3.1 will show that the term deaccessioning was coined relatively recently to describe a museum-specific operational process. Theoretical considerations of the practice have in recent decades led to a number of systematization attempts, none of which is universally applied. Chapter 2.1 will first address the difference between deaccessioning and disposal and then provide an overview of those types of deaccessioning which are frequently referred to in museum practice in order adequately classify the specific phenomenon discussed in this thesis.

2.1.1 Deaccessioning and Disposal

Strictly speaking, the term deaccessioning refers to the removal of an item from a museum's collection register, while the term disposal is used to describe the practical, physical removal of the object itself (Davies, 2011, p. 21; Wijsmüller, 2017, pp. 11–12). Some of the literature reviewed in chapter 3 differentiates between both term, other authors use one of the two to refer to the process as a whole, among them Gammon (2018), ICOM (2019), and Weil (1997). The use of the term deaccessioning to cover the whole process appears to be most common (Wijsmüller 2017, p. 12). Accordingly, the term will be used in this paper to signify both the administrative and the practical part of the process.

2.1.2 Types of Deaccessioning

As stated above, there is no universally accepted categorization of types of deaccessioning. Wijsmüller (2017, pp. 14–19) offers the most comprehensive attempt of organizing them by underlying motivation. Since her study is concerned with changing attitudes towards the phenomenon of deaccessioning in European museums in light of cultural policy changes, her categorization is informed by the practical usage of the term in collections management, making it suitable for the present case-study. Wijsmüller proposes a categorization into five different types of deaccessioning:

1. Practically motivated deaccessioning: Stating that “in practically motivated disposals the primary outcome of the process is not to improve the content of the collection, but the physical condition of it” (p. 15), Wijsmüller lists shortage of storage space, objects containing harmful substances, cases of pest infestation, or damage beyond repair as practical reasons for museums to dispose of items.

2. Curatorially motivated deaccessioning: Wijsmüller describes curatorially driven deaccessions as grounded in “the knowledge of the content and context” of the respective collection, defining the desired outcome as “the improvement of the content of the collection” (p. 16). This entails the removal of works which are less relevant for the collection, or considered of poor artistic quality as well as the reinvestment of deaccessioning funds into the acquisition of new works or the direct care of the collection (ICOM, 2019); in this sense, curatorially motivated deaccessioning supplements the overall quality management of a collection. As Wijsmüller points out, official deaccessioning guidelines by museum associations generally consider curatorial reasons the most valid motivation for deaccessioning works from collections (p.16).

3. Philosophically motivated deaccessioning: Referring to recently emerging debates particularly in Finland (Sarantola-Weiss & Västi, 2016), Wijsmüller argues that in recent years a new approach to questions of deaccessioning re-evaluates the very reasons for collecting items by highlighting the tension between museum collections’ mission to preserve objects for eternity and a physical object’s limited lifespan.

4. Economically motivated deaccessioning: In the introduction to her study, Wijsmüller labels “[e]conomically motivated disposal” as “unethical” and “the greatest fear for all museums” (p. 5). The characterization of this practice as unethical will be explored in more depth during the literature review in chapter 3. According to Wijsmüller, “disposals for profit” (p. 19) involve all sales from museum collections whose profits are not reinvested into the collection itself or its indirect care (as is the case with curatorially motivated deaccessioning), but used to cover operational costs.

5. Bulk disposal: Bulk disposal encompasses those forms of disposal of large amounts of similar, sometimes “mass produced objects of insignificant monetary value” (p. 19). They are typically collected by cultural history or science museums and of limited relevance for museums with fine art collections.

With regard to relevance for the case of Museum Langmatt, the following study will be concerned with the two forms of deaccessioning which Wijsmüller refers to as curatorially and economically motivated deaccessioning. Although in theory all forms of deaccessioning can generate profit, it is these two categories that feature most prominently in the discourse, as will be shown in chapter 3. This study thus follows Wijsmüller, who categorises pragmatically motivated deaccessioning and bulk disposal as generally unproblematic (pp. 14-19). The notion of philosophically motivated deaccessioning does not appear to be used widely, so it will be excluded as well.

The category of economically motivated deaccessioning, i.e. the sale of museum objects with the aim of generating funds that are not invested in the collection or its maintenance, but in museum operations, describes the case of Museum Langmatt most accurately. In the following, the category will therefore be investigated with regard to its applicability for this study.

2.1.3 Case-Specific Definition

As will be shown in the literature review, the distinction between deaccessions whose funds are reinvested into the collection or its care, and those which use funds to cover

operational costs, is accepted in both the academic and the professional debate. As with Wijsmüller, the former category is generally labelled by museum associations as ethically justifiable, while the latter is rejected. On closer inspection, however, the exact designation of this pair of terms as curatorially and economically motivated deaccessioning is imprecise.

Both forms of deaccessioning result in the permanent removal of an item from the respective collection in order to generate funds. They therefore have the same intermediate goal, but different final goals; in one case the financing of the collection, in the other the coverage of operational costs. The term curatorially motivated deaccessioning, however, carries the ultimate goal of the sale, the improvement of the quality of the collection, in its name, while the term economically motivated deaccessioning is named after its intermediate goal of raising funds, suggesting that profit maximization is an end in itself. Since, as chapter 3 will illustrate, these differences in labelling go hand in hand with an ethical qualification, they must be considered biased. The term is thus unsuitable for the purposes of this paper.

A more nuanced labelling of those types of deaccessioning that aim to cover operational costs should therefore be developed analogously to the term curatorially motivated deaccessioning and bear the ultimate goal in its name. For this reason, the term operationally motivated deaccessioning will be used in the remainder of the paper.

2.2 Organizational Survival Strategy

The term organizational survival strategy is borrowed from Varbanova (2013, p. 124), who adapts strategic management concepts for the context of arts organizations. This chapter will start by briefly considering the notion of strategy itself and concepts corresponding to organizational survival strategy in the general field of economics before moving on to Varbanova's definition. In a third step, the specific requirements of museum management will be considered to determine whether Varbanova's definition must be further adapted. The chapter concludes with a case-specific definition of the term.

2.2.1 Organizational Survival in Strategic Management

The term strategy has been defined in numerous ways across the literature with no single, universally accepted definition; for this study, the researcher mainly consulted Hill, Jones & Schilling (2019) and Welge, Al-Laham & Eulerich (2024). The first attempt of a broad,

general understanding of the term, however, is based on Chandler's (1982) basic definition of business as actions taken to reach an organization's "long-term goals and objectives" through specific "courses of action" (p. 13). These usually involve the consideration of the organization's internal strengths and weaknesses as well as its external opportunities and threats, which in their totality constitute the organizational environment (Sarsby, 2016; Wunder 2016, pp. 26–130). Among the most popular and widely used frameworks for the analysis of this environment is the SWOT-analysis (Welge, Al-Laham & Eulerich 2024, pp. 468–470).

The general strategic direction resulting from this analysis depends on whether the environmental conditions are predominantly favourable or unfavourable. If strengths and opportunities prevail, the organisational environment permits the implementation of offensive or growth-focused strategies like market penetration or market development; if, on the other hand, weaknesses and challenges prevail, the environment calls for defensive or survival-focused strategies (Wunder 2016, pp. 140–142).

Wunder organizes the possible strategic options into the three main organisational strategies growth, stability and retrenchment (pp. 165–167). With regard to retrenchment strategies, he differentiates between several sub-strategies "ranging from turnaround or the divestment of certain divisions and businesses to the sell-out of the entire company, bankruptcy or liquidation, the termination of the business" (pp. 165–167).

2.2.2 Organizational Survival Strategies in Cultural Management

Varbanova (2013) adapts of the principles of strategic management in business administration to the field of cultural management, taking into account the specifics of arts organizations. Apart from the fact that they generally operate in a "predominantly nonprofit environment", she emphasises creativity, entrepreneurship and innovation as essential qualities necessary for arts organisations' survival and growth (p. xi). Her definition of strategic management elaborates on the definition in the previous chapter, describing it as

[...] a system of approaches, methods and tools for the evaluation of and choice between alternative(s) to achieve the mission and priority long-term goals in the most effective way, given external and internal influencing forces and considering the organisation's resources and capacity, as well as its innovative, entrepreneurial and creative potential. Strategy is important because it helps the team to achieve its primary goals and fully utilize its creative potential and resources,

while at the same time seeking ways to implement intrapreneurial elements and become financially sustainable.

(p. 121)

Furthermore, Varbanova maintains that “questions of strategy are inextricably linked to organisational identity and its mission” (pp. 58–65). The inclusion of an arts organization’s unique identity and mission represents a notable addition to chapter 2.2.1’s basic definition of a business strategy.

Varbanova’s distinction between an arts organization’s general strategic directions largely mirrors the set of main strategic options outlined above. She proposes a set of “[m]ain organisational strategies [as] ways to solve the main problems within an organisation and set up the main ‘road map’ in the organisation’s development” (p. 123). She also includes the basic principle of defining the main strategic direction under consideration of the internal and external environmental conditions through a SWOT-analysis (p. 124), summarizing the resulting options as follows:

- Strategies of intensive growth are relevant for organisations with a predominantly favourable environment characterized mainly by strengths and opportunities.
- Strategies of stability are suitable for those organisations which are characterized by both favourable and unfavourable internal and external conditions; in the face of prevailing weaknesses and threats, strategies of stability can help to sustain current operations over a longer period of time without drastic changes.
- Innovation strategies are relevant for those organisations whose positive development indicates a potential to creatively deviate from current strategic course.¹
- Survival Strategies are the only strategic option for arts organisation whose internal and external environment are characterized by weaknesses and threats so fundamental that the continued existence of an arts organisation is jeopardized.

(p. 124)

With regard to strategies for an institution’s survival, Varbanova differentiates between “strategies for increasing revenues and strategies for decreasing expenditures” (124). Varbanova lists the sale of assets under both sections:

In strategies for urgent increases in revenues, the focus is on

- implementation of new projects and initiatives for fast increases in sales in order to achieve higher revenues quickly;

¹ Adding a fourth main organizational strategy to the set of three strategic directions established in chapter 2.2.1, Varbanova describes innovation strategies as appropriate for organizations which favorable future prospects. This fourth category is more complex in the sense that it does not only rely on the analysis of the current state of an organization, but additionally on reliable predictions about its future development. Since she names innovation as a feature of any given cultural organization, and because she associates it with the same, generally favorable conditions associated with growth strategies, the present study does not adopt innovation as a category of its own, but understands it as a subcategory of the main organizational strategy growth, thus adhering to the distinction between three main organizational strategies introduced in chapter 2.1.

- persistent and focused fundraising from diverse sources;
 - **sale of part of the organisation's assets which are not that important for the basic operations²**;
- or
- innovative approaches towards self-generated income from peripheral and additional commercial activities.

In strategies for urgent decreases in expenditures (economical way of operating and shrinkage), the focus is on

- analysis of the whole cost structure for all programmes and operations and subsequent cuts of ineffective costs;
- decreases in indirect costs for administration, maintenance of the building and others;
- reduction of waste in every possible way (travel expenses, payments to suppliers, etc.);
- cuts in staff benefits which exceed a certain level;
- **sales of properties, equipment or other assets that are not key to the main processes**;
- delays in payments due to creditors (if any); or
- increases in 'in-kind' contributions—finding out what the organisation could do with its own resources without purchasing or renting anything.

(p. 124)

Considering this study's focus on deaccessioning as a means of generating additional funds, the case of the sale of paintings from Museum Langmatt's collection will be understood as a strategy to increase revenue. However, while using slightly different wording each time, Varbanova generally considers the sale of assets a valid survival strategy, if the assets in question are "not that important for the basic operations" or "not key to the main processes". The question of whether the three deaccessioned Cézanne paintings are considered essential to Museum Langmatt will become relevant in the analysis (chapter 5).

It is important to note that Varbanova's definition of main organizational strategies is geared towards all types of cultural organizations and does not take into account the context of museum management, where the labelling of collection items as assets is considered problematic (American Alliance of Museums, n.d.). Although she defines assets as "all financial and material resources which are at the disposal of the organisation and can be activated for realization of the organisation's goals" (p. 272), it is not possible to say with certainty whether her notion of an asset is broad enough to include the actual museum collection.

2.2.3 Organizational Survival Strategy in Museum Management

Museums are unique institutions with distinctive characteristics that set them apart from other cultural offerings (Falk & Dierking 1997). Since Varbanova's adaption of the main

² Emphasis added.

organizational strategies growth, stability and survival to the field of cultural management is designed to be applicable to all types of cultural organizations, a case-specific definition of an organizational survival strategy must first consider the specific characteristics of museum management in order to determine whether the definition established above needs to be amended further.

Literature highlighting the unique characteristics of museums and their implications for museum management suggests that the majority of high-level challenges faced by museums is indeed comparable to those of cultural institutions such as theaters or libraries: Kotler, Kotler & Kotler (2008), for example, highlight issues such as audience development and generating revenue as two of many central strategic concerns of museums. Chaitas, C., Chipangua, N. & Meparishvili, N. (2024) focus on the strategic importance of partnerships and collaborations. Parry (2020) and Stemberger & Kralj (2020) are among many voices stressing the importance of digital innovation in museums. Since these overarching strategic needs of museums are in line with those of other kinds of cultural institutions, Varbanova's distinction of the three main organizational strategies growth, stability and survival does not require further specification for the purpose of the paper at hand.

2.2.4 Case-Specific Definition

The working definition of the term organizational survival strategy was established in three steps, proceeding from general to specific, starting with the origins of the concept in strategic management, moving on to Varbanova's adaption for the field of cultural management, and concluding with a brief consideration of the specifics of museum management.

In strategic management, survival strategies focus on actions derived from analyzing the organizational environment to secure an organization's continued existence. In the context of cultural management, the perspective is expanded to include the organization's unique identity and mission. The case-specific definition thus understands organizational survival strategies as targeted actions to improve an organisational environment characterised by existential weaknesses and threats, while taking into account the organisation's unique identity.

3. Literature Review

The following thematic review of the literature on deaccessioning provides a general overview of the debate while organizing relevant texts according to their relevance for the present case-study. Apart from key contributions such as Gammon (2018), it is guided by the theoretical framework established in chapter 2 in order to identify common arguments for and against deaccessioning with special focus on the concepts of operational motivation, organizational survival, strategy, and organizational identity.

The first subchapter will be dedicated to Gammon (2018), who has undertaken the only comprehensive historical-critical study of the topic of deaccessioning so far. This text is given particular attention for two reasons: firstly, it defines the time-frame of the reviewed literature; secondly, it delineates the historical emergence of the two argumentative strategies deaccessioning denial and deaccessioning apology, providing the two extremes of the spectrum on which the contributions to the debate can be situated.

Chapters 3.2 and 3.3 will then shed light on the fundamentals of the contemporary discourse around deaccessioning, which is, as will be shown, largely centered around ethical considerations. Chapter 3.2 will present some of the most frequently used arguments for and against deaccessioning. Chapter 2.3 will then outline those more recent developments in the debate which have laid the foundations for current positions, which are shifting focus from an ethical to a pragmatic, case-specific perspective and consider deaccessioning a managerial concern internal to institutions. Chapter 3.4 will highlight Jandl's (2021) account of the Berhskire Museum's deaccession because of its particular relevance for this study: apart from illustrating the shift in the debate outlined in chapter 3.3, her investigation is comparable to the present study terms of both its object and overall interest in the interplay between operationally motivated deaccessioning and the museum's strategic context.

It is important to highlight that the debate on deaccessioning is primarily advanced by museum practitioners rather than researchers. The review therefore presents peer-reviewed articles as well as non-academic contributions to the debate. This broad range seems appropriate in light of the fact that deaccessioning is first and foremost a practical museum management concern. Nevertheless, a source-critical approach will have to take into account the fact that some arguments are supported by anecdotal evidence rather than

empirical data, and that they may be shaped by the authors' personal preferences, professional biographies, or the audience of peers they are addressing.

3.1 Historical Delimitation

Gammon (2018) offers the only comprehensive, critical history of museum deaccessioning in Great Britain and the United States. Chronicling notable cases covering the time-span from the 17th to the 21st century, he demonstrates that the professional debate emerged only recently, triggered by increased public focus on controversial high-profile deaccessioning cases, and that the term deaccessioning is itself a neologism, although "[...] the practice itself has been an integral part of the museum experiment since at least the founding of the British Museum in the eighteenth century" (p. xi).

Specifically, Gammon identifies the 1972 Hoving affair, the Metropolitan Museum of Art's sale of works from its collection to finance the acquisition of a portrait by Velázquez, as the origin of the contemporary debate on deaccessioning. He criticises the lack of transparency and the disregard of legal concerns in the process; two aspects which he defines as crucial to a successful deaccessioning process (pp. 201–233). Among the many contributors who second this temporal positioning, Courtney (2018), Garfield (1997) and Miller (1997) all highlight the importance the significant public interest in the case as well, with Courtney linking the introduction of the term itself to the rising public interest in the phenomenon.

Gammon analyses historical deaccessioning cases in order to illustrate the emergence of two opposing, equally "reductive" (p. 274) perspectives on deaccessioning: on the one end of the spectrum, he defines deaccession apology as a rhetoric strategy centred around the justification of the permanent removal of museum items by labelling them as inherently flawed and, consequently, unfit for the museum collection that houses them. On the opposite end of the spectrum, deaccession denial constitutes the categorical rejection of the possibility of removing items from collections (pp. 233–251).

Both of these hyperbolic extremes, Gammon argues, are based on the same misunderstanding of the role that deaccessioning plays in museum practice. He critiques the notion of "curatorial judgement" (p. 17) as evaluating an item's assumed inherent properties to classify them as either objectively museum-worthy or inherently flawed. Instead, he maintains that "curation is essentially a creative process" (p. 16) and advocates an

understanding of museum collections as flexible agents whose collecting strategies evolve over the course of history. This idea of dynamic entities exerting agency in a changing world corresponds with Varbanova's (2013) definition of "strategic management in an arts organisation as a process to manage changes [...] in an open system of interaction between an organisation and its environment" (p. 1; see also pp. 86–119).

3.2 The Ethics-Based Deaccessioning Debate

A central argument against deaccessioning is grounded in the traditional understanding of museums as custodians of cultural heritage (Lewis, 2004). Derived from this definition of a museum's identity, the stewardship of collections constitutes any museum's core function and informs its overall mission of collecting and preserving items for future generations. Miller (1997, p. 91) states that "[m]useums exist to preserve objects of cultural and scientific importance. This function makes them unique" (p. 93). Weil (1997b) summarizes the three core functions of museum as preservation, study and public communication (p. 63). While Varna (2007) refutes the categorical prohibition of deaccessioning, her assessment of its ethical, legal and practical challenges is still based on an understanding of museums as caretakers of cultural heritage (p. 1).

With museums' main function of custodianship, the long-term commitment to collecting and preserving transcends the interests of individual institutions and focuses instead on the museum objects which they house (Lewis 2004). Authors adopting the view of museums as custodians of cultural heritage therefore reject deaccessioning for financial reasons, particularly to support operations, as it undermines the fundamental commitment to collecting and preservation.

The assumption that this understanding of museums and their core function is shared by the general public results in one of the most frequently uttered concern of deaccessioning critics: the loss of public trust, and, consequently, of institutional integrity. Voices in favor of deaccessioning, on the other hand, argue that public trust extends beyond a museum's ability to keep its collection intact.

This view contends that the public has entrusted museums with the authority and responsibility to develop and manage a collection of art and provide public enjoyment of art through exhibitions. [...] Museum mission statements define the museum's purpose and obligation to its own

community. [...] [M]useums have to establish their authority to accomplish their missions, thereby gaining the public's trust. Maintaining the public's trust, accordingly, is a matter of maintaining the museum's authority and trustworthiness in defining its mission.
(Tam, 2016, p. 862)

Tam connects the public trust to the degree to which a museum serves its community by means of an actively defined mission. It is important to note, however, that this argument is presented in the specific context of legislative deaccessioning concerns in private museums in the United States. It thus omits the crucial aspect of public funding, which amplifies deaccession critics' concerns about losing the general public's trust. Weil (1997c) points out that institutional integrity and financial support are closely interlinked. He argues that "[...] the public's perception that a museum is able to help itself through sales from its collections must inevitably make it a less appealing candidate for outside support" (p. 89). Using the metaphor of a cookie jar, he warns that "once the lid is removed, it may prove impossible to ever to get it permanently back in place" (p. 91). Weil's metaphor mirrors one of the most fundamental concerns of deaccessioning critics, referred to as the "slippery slope" (Gammon, 2018, p. 235; Jandl & Gold 2021a, p. 98) of deaccessioning. Simmons (2013) offers a comprehensive summary of the individual points which constitute this line of argumentation.

Inherent in the slippery-slope-argument is the perception of museum collections as static entities, which may grow over time, but from which no item must be removed. This stance, proponents of deaccessioning argue, is based on the implied qualification of past curatorial decisions as absolute and thus beyond reproach (Gammon, 2018, p. 235). Present-day curators' decision-making processes, on the other hand, are thus indirectly labelled as potentially deficient, prone to fleeting trends and potentially neglecting the overall historical contexts. This juxtaposition of absolute (past) and relative (present) curatorial judgement is all the more remarkable considering the fact that the museums have undergone a profound process of professionalization in recent decades (Malaro, 1997, p. 44), resulting in curators' "heightened concern for quality, [...] questioning the validity of retaining objects that are not clearly furthering the goals of their museums" in order to identify and deaccession "objects that are extraneous to their missions" (p. 45). Malaro suggests that subtractions from museum collections should be aligned with the institution's overall strategic objectives in the same way that additions are: "[w]hen you look at the total collection management picture within a museum, and demand that all facets be reviewed and controlled in light of the museum's

mission, the matter of deaccessioning falls into perspective. It becomes a small part of an integrated plan [...]” (p. 48).

3.3 Recent Shifts in the Debate

As shown in the preceding chapter, the ethics-driven debate on deaccessioning is based on the notion that all collecting institutions have a collective identity and common core mission, which is the collection and preservation of physical objects. This idea of the museum’s core function has itself undergone a paradigm shift in recent decades, which has been described as a shift from an object-centered to a people-centered understanding of the museum (Falk & Dierking, 2012; Weil, 1999). The increased focus on the institution itself and the reconsideration of its contribution to society has had a significant impact on all aspects of museum work, including deaccessioning. Authors have been questioning whether the preservation of individual artworks at all costs can be considered more ethical than permanently depriving local communities from a cultural offering, or than letting go staff when closing an institution (Jandl 2021; Kopel, 2021). As indicated in the introduction, the reevaluation of the notion of deaccessioning ethics incorporates crucial discourses of our time, among them questions of social justice and sustainability.

A number of contributions contextualize deaccessioning within the global debate on restitution and repatriation as a means of addressing historical injustices in postcolonial times. Gates (2021) questions the legitimacy of museums holding collection items which were taken during colonial expeditions and examines how European inalienability laws create obstacles to deaccessioning. Rose (2021) investigates a specific restitution case, focusing on the British Museum’s controversial handling of the Benin bronzes. Clarifying that the article is discussing “calls for returns as social justice” rather than “museological deaccessioning” in a narrower sense (p. 215), the author stresses the case’s relevance for post-pandemic social justice movements, concluding that “[i]t would [...] be inaccurate to use [the terms, T.N.] restitution and deaccessioning interchangeably” (p. 216). Rose concludes by implicitly linking the refusal to return looted art to Gammon’s concept of deaccession denial, which is based on the two premises that items “have never left, and therefore should never leave, collections” and that, “if materials do leave, it is a form of looting which will leave the museum empty” (p. 220). De Barros Gomes and James-Perry (2021) propose a proactive approach to

repatriation using the example of the New Bedford Whaling Museum's handling of objects of Native American origin. While these authors do not discuss deaccessioning for financial reasons, they share an understanding of museum collections as fundamentally dynamic entities, arguing in favor of the removal of items from museum collections as the result of periodic collection reviews based on changing societal needs.

Similarly, the growing focus on sustainability reflects the increasing tendency to perceive collections as dynamic rather than static entities. Macdonald & Morgan (2018) explore the challenges associated with the continuous expansion of museum collections. They argue that unchecked growth is unsustainable and propose the concept of de-growth as a strategy to manage collections responsibly. Similarly, Richardson and Worts (2018) explore the sustainability implications with regard to both the environmental and financial consequences of perpetually expanding museum collections. Questioning the sustainability of building centralized facilities to store and exhibit ever-growing collections by highlighting the potential environmental impact of such measures. Cooper & Galletin Rigsby (2021) give an account of the conception and implementation of IMA's Collection Ranking Project, initiated in 2015, a complete review of the collection's approximately 50,000 works of art, which has led to the deaccessioning of over 7,000 objects. Addressing sustainability, not least fiscal, from the internal perspective of the institution, they suggest that museums should "[shape] the size of the collection around the ability to properly care for and exhibit it" (p. 276). In summary, these contributions to the debate maintain that museum collections are flexible entities which evolve and change in line with wider societal changes.

3.4 Strategy and Survival: The Institutional Perspective

Jandl & Gold (2021c) offer a selection of case studies of museum deaccessions, six of which are gathered under the sub-headline 'survival'. Among these six cases, Jandl's (2021) account of the Berkshire Museum's deaccessioning of paintings in order to save the museum from permanent closure offers a number of similarities to the present case of Museum Langmatt³, as will become apparent in chapter 5.1.

³ These similarities were brought to the researcher's attention by Jandl in an email from March 11, 2025, during which she referred to her article on the topic.

Jandl prefaces her investigation with a series of guiding questions, which confirm its relevance of the case for the present study: “[w]hat should a museum do when it is no longer financially sustainable and has exhausted all its options for survival? What does a museum mean to its community? Who gets to decide? And what is more important, the museum or the art that it holds?” (p. 97). While not explicitly framing her use of the word survival in the context of strategic management terminology, its crucial importance for her account of the case is illustrated by the fact that it is used no less than seven times throughout the article. Additionally, the mentioning of the institution’s relevance for its local audience alludes to its unique identity and mission (chapter 2.2.2). Finally, the question of whether the museum itself or the works of art it holds are to be prioritized reflects the changing discourse around deaccessioning ethics outlined in the previous chapter. Jandl’s case study is considered a reference for this paper in that it addresses the correlation of deaccessioning and strategic planning to guarantee the organization’s survival under consideration of its identity and mission.

Founded by a local industrial magnate in 1903, the Berkshire Museum’s 1932 charter defines the institution’s purpose as promoting art, culture history and science for the benefit of the local and regional community (p. 99). Jandl details how the changing demographic landscape later resulted in structural financial problems:

At that time the museum was running an average annual deficit of approximately \$1.15 million on an annual budget of close to \$3 million, a deficit that was drawing down the endowment. The endowment itself had dropped to about \$10 million, and the board calculated that if the museum’s financial problems were not remediated it would be forced to close in a matter of years.
(p. 99)

Having investigated multiple strategic options, the museum’s trustees hired an external consultant with whom they developed a strategic paper entitled *New Vision* in an almost two-year-long process; notably, Jandl labels this paper a “survival plan” (p. 107). The plan involved raising 55 million USD by selling up to forty works of art “to remedy a longstanding structural deficit and renew itself for a changing demographic” (p. 97). Specifically, forty million USD were to go towards an endowment in order to sustainably support operating costs with the generated interest, with an additional budget to fund repairs and renovations (p. 102). Ultimately, this financial goal was reached after selling 22 works (p. 97–102).

The plans received negative media attention, critique from the AAM and the AAMD, caused local protests and resulted in legal proceedings (p. 103–112). Among the most critical

voices was The Los Angeles Times art critic Christopher Knight, who proposed that the most responsible course of action would have been to permanently close the museum and disperse the collection (p. 115). Jandl's evaluates this proposal in the context of the museum's mission, referencing the above-outlined shift in the debate on deaccessioning

This proposed solution means the community loses everything: the museum and the objects it stewards. And it holds no guarantee that those objects would remain in the public domain. The trustees of the Berkshire Museum weighed these questions in the context of the museum's charter and mission statement, and the needs of their community. They determined, after lengthy and painful deliberation and with community input, that the museum and its impact on the community is even more valuable than any individual work of art.
(p. 115)

The similarities and differences between the deaccessions from the Berkshire Museum and the present case will be addressed in more detail in the discussion section at the end of chapter 5.

3.5 Literature Review Summary

The debate on the topic of deaccessioning has developed continuously since its emergence in the United States in the early 1970s. Although it was possible to categorize all referenced contributions as either in favor of or against deaccessioning, the two extreme argumentative poles of categorical rejection and unconditional support of the practice are the exception. Instead, the discourse is advanced through nuanced contributions with a tendency towards one of the two perspectives.

By far the largest number of voices in the debate center their argumentation around ethical considerations. The assumption of one generally valid definition of museums as repositories informs the critical attitude particularly towards operationally motivated deaccessioning, because it considers any sale from a museum collection a fundamental failure to fulfil the institution's core mission of preservation.

The debate has developed analogously to a larger paradigm shift in museum studies, which no longer defines museums as object-centered, but increasingly as people-centered entities. In this connection, museums are increasingly considered unique institutions with individual identities and specific missions. Simultaneously, museum collections are perceived as dynamic rather than static, resulting in a growing acceptance particularly of curatorially

motivated deaccessioning. Most recently, more voices advocating what in this paper is referred to as operationally motivated deaccessioning are joining the debate.

The literature review presented one recent contribution which explicitly attempts to contextualize a specific deaccessioning cases within the framework of the owning institution's struggle for financial survival, thus confirming the relevance of the present case's research question. Apart from that, other authors implicitly address the interrelation of museum strategy and deaccessioning, but the review did not produce qualitative research directly connecting specific deaccessioning cases with the strategic management framework of the three main organizational strategies. While this case study is not sufficient to fully address this gap in the literature, it represents a building block to a potential future consideration of different types of deaccessioning from a strategic management angle.

4. Methodology

As stated in chapter 1.1, the aim of this paper is to investigate whether it is possible to analyse Museum Langmatt's deaccessioning case from a strategic management angle; specifically, to determine whether it can be qualified as the operational manifestation of an organisational survival strategy. Since a systematic categorization of deaccessioning types along the lines of the main organisational strategies does not yet exist, this case-study adapts an explorative approach. The following chapter will introduce its research design and methodology and explain the rationale behind the chosen approach with respect to the research question and the preliminary considerations. After detailing the sampling criteria and the methods of data collection, it will outline the coding process before concluding with remarks on ethical considerations and the limitations of the chosen methodological framework.

4.1 Research Design

The overall research design of the paper at hand is that of a qualitative case-study. As Merriam and Tisdell (2016) emphasize, qualitative research is generally suitable for exploring complex phenomena in-depth, as it allows researchers to understand the meaning and context behind specific practices such as strategic measures in a museum. Following Varbanova's (2013) definition of cultural organizations as "complex systems" (p. 5) and strategic responses to the changing organizational environment as "a multilayered and complex process" (p. 33), the Langmatt deaccessioning case is considered such a multifaceted process with complex stakeholder relations and therefore best approached qualitatively.

Hug & Poscheschnik (2020) maintain that single-case studies are approached qualitatively more often than quantitatively (p. 92), and that "[t]he single case does not necessarily have to be a single person, but can also be a social system, such as [...] an institution" (p. 94). Since the paper at hand is dedicated to the in-depth analysis of one specific managerial measure in one specific museum, approaching the research question within the overall framework of a qualitative case study is thus adequate.

Furthermore, as mentioned in chapter 1.1, the present study's general approach of linking a specific type of deaccessioning with a main organizational strategy may, if successful,

lead to the hypothesis that similar cases can be analyzed accordingly, and that, once a sufficient amount of data has been gathered, a new typology of forms of deaccessioning may contribute to debate on deaccessioning as well as museum management. Hug & Poscheschnik highlight the hypothesis-generating potential of case-studies (p. 107) as well as their advantages for practical application (p. 110), thus confirming the relevance of the chosen research design for this paper's objectives.

4.2 Methodology

The case-study will combine document analysis and semi-structured expert interviews in a mixed-methods-approach. Merriam & Tisdell (2016) recommend these two methods, because they provide rich, detailed data which is hard to obtain through quantitative methods.

Before the actual collection of the data for the analysis detailed in chapter 4.3, a preliminary period of unstructured desk research focused mainly on the media coverage regarding the sale of paintings as well as on a review of the museum's annual reports from 2011 until 2022 available on the institution's website. Furthermore, books, pamphlets and web resources were consulted in order to establish an understanding of the broader cultural, historical and economic context the museum operates in. The desk research informed the introduction to the present paper's case in chapter 5.1 and provided initial insights into the museum's organizational environment discussed in chapters 5.2.2 and 5.2.3. Most importantly, the initial review of media reports resulted in the identification of three distinct perspectives on the case, and thus to the selection of interviewees and analyzed documents.

In their entirety, the variety of sources included in the desk research and the combination of expert interviews and document analysis supports the validity of the findings, enhances the reliability of the expert's interview responses, allows for cross-referencing, and thereby ensures triangulation. Gläser & Laudel (2010) recommend supplementing the self-generated data from qualitative interviews with the analysis of other documents, maintaining that triangulation is crucial as "a method that aims to increase the empirical validation of results by combining independent procedures" (p. 105).

4.3 Sampling and Data Collection

The original selection of three interviewees, one of whom was ultimately substituted with a document analysis (see below), was guided by the researcher's attempt to provide a variety of perspectives on the Langmatt case. As indicated in the previous chapter, it resulted from an initial review of the related media coverage, which revealed two distinct perspectives: the internal, defensive perspective represented by museum director Markus Stegmann, and the external, critical perspective of ICOM Switzerland, represented by then-president Tobia Bezzola. A third perspective, the public policy angle, emerged from the review of other web resources and literature on Museum Langmatt, which was conducted in order to identify the museum's most crucial stakeholders; Museum Langmatt receives public funding from both the municipal (the city of Baden) and regional (the canton of Aargau) level of public administration. In order to avoid overrepresentation of the cultural policy perspective, the cantonal level, represented by Georg Matter, Head of the canton's Culture Department, was selected⁴.

Interview requests were sent out via email on August 15, 2024 (interviewee 1, Markus Stegmann) and September 11, 2024 (interviewee 2, Georg Matter and Tobias Bezzola). Markus Stegmann responded positively on August 17, and the formal invitation to an online meeting including the request to sign the data privacy agreement and declaration of consent was sent out on December 12, followed by an email with technical instructions later on the same day. The signed version (attachment A1) was returned by Stegmann on December 13.

Georg Matter did not respond to the initial outreach email. After a follow-up e-mail on November 1 remained unanswered, a second follow-up mail was sent to one of his staff members on November 24, which was answered positively on November 25. Between November 27 and December 2, the date for the interview was coordinated between the researcher and another staff member from his office. The signed data privacy agreement and declaration of consent (attachment A2) were returned signed on December 17.

⁴ This selection was based on the initial assumption that the regional administration would have a more significant impact on the museum than the local administration. In hindsight, the direct involvement of the municipality in the elaboration of the strategic plan Zukunft Langmatt (see chapter 5) would have justified a different selection.

Tobia Bezzola replied negatively to the initial outreach email on 15 September and referred the researcher to his successor, ICOM Switzerland president Jaqueline Strauss and the association's secretary general Katharina Korsunski, whom the researcher contacted via email on September 18, followed up with a second email on October 1. Korsunski's request for additional information on the specifics of researcher's thesis lead to an exchange of emails, which ultimately resulted in a negative response on October 9. A final email from October 10 remained unanswered. The interview was subsequently replaced with a document analysis. In order to best meet the research interest, the selection of documents was based on two criteria: firstly, the consideration of ICOM's general stance on the topic of deaccessioning; secondly, the consideration of statements relating specifically to the Langmatt case. The former criterion was met by ICOM's publicly accessible Code of Ethics for Museums (International Council of Museums, 2017) and Guidelines on Deaccessioning (International Council of Museums, 2019), the latter by journalistic interviews with Tobia Bezzola, in which he transfers ICOM's general attitude to the topic of deaccessioning to the specific situation of the Langmatt Museum, confirming his status of an expert comparable to the two interviewees.

The two interviews were conducted in German via the online meeting platform Zoom on December 16 (Markus Stegmann) and January 7, 2025 (Georg Matter). They were recorded with Zoom's own recording function as well as with the researcher's phone. Both versions of the recording were deleted from the devices after transferring them to an external hard drive.

Both interviews were then transcribed and translated from German to English by the researcher using the transcription software Descript, with two subsequent revisions for each interview (attachments C1 and C3). Interview 1 was transcribed and translated between 16 and 23 December 2024. The first revision took place between 27 and 30 December, the second between 2 and 5 January 2025. Interview 2 was first transcribed and translated from January 7 to 11, 2025; the revisions took place from January 12 to 16 and 17 to 19, respectively.

4.4 Conception of the Interview Guides

The interview guides (attachments B1 and B2) had the overall objective of generating as long passages of free narration as possible narration while avoiding leading questions.

Both interview guides shared the same overall design. They started and concluded with the same questions, while the main part took into account the specifics of the respective interviewee's professional role and expert knowledge. The introductory question had the double function of helping the interviewees get accustomed to free, uninterrupted narration and, simultaneously, of summarizing their professional backgrounds to establish their positions as experts, following Mieg & Brunner's (2001) definition of an expert as "somebody who has specific knowledge/skills based on many years of experience" (p. 6).

The main part of interview guide 1 had three main objectives. Firstly, to obtain data on those aspects of the museum considered relevant with regard to the conceptual framework, namely perceived identity, mission and organizational environment. Secondly, to find out whether these aspects were considered during the deaccessioning process. And thirdly, to obtain data on as many aspects of the actual deaccessioning process as possible. The main part of interview guide 2 had two main objectives. Firstly, to obtain data on all above-mentioned aspects from an external public-policy perspective. Secondly, to clarify the interviewee's scope of responsibility in relation to the museum and thereby the specific nature of his stakeholder status.

Both interviews concluded with the same two questions. The second-to-last question asked for the interviewees' recollection of public reactions. It had the objective of producing data on the degree to which they are aware of critical stances on the deaccessions, how they rephrase and frame these stances, and how they evaluate them. Honoring the requirement of avoiding leading questions, the phrasing of the question avoided the qualification of these reactions as 'critical' or 'negative', and ICOM Switzerland was not mentioned.

The final question addressed the evaluation of the museum's situation before and after the sale of paintings as well as its long-term consequences. This question enabled the researcher to compare the two interviewees' assessment of the results the deaccessioning process had produced. By inviting them to think of the state of the museum in terms of a before-and-after scenario, with the deaccessioning of the paintings as the caesura, the researcher aimed at obtaining answers that would describe the current state of the institution as either more positive or more negative than before the deaccessioning.

Both interview guides were divided into core- and follow-up questions in order to provide the researcher with further options to stimulate free narration if necessary. However, during the conduction of the interviews, it became apparent that both interviewees answered

freely and extensively without incentives. Particularly interviewee 1's answers to the first questions were already so extensive that many follow-up questions became unnecessary; according to Mieg & Brunner (2001, p. 17) this is a common phenomenon in expert interviews. As the interviewee himself explained, he had since published an article and an entire book about the case; this may explain his vivid recollection of details and overall narrative coherence. The scope and detail of the replies exceeded the researcher's expectations, so that the structure of the interview guide had to be abandoned early on, and follow-up questions were generated on the spot based on the interviewee's statements.

4.5 Research Ethics

Ethical conduct which meets the academic standards of qualitative research (Danner-Schröder & Müller-Seitz, 2023) was prioritized during all phases of preparing and conducting the interviews. Honoring the principle of informed consent (Bryman, 2012), the interviewees were informed about the purpose of the interview as part of a Masters' thesis already during the initial outreach e-mail. They were provided with enough information on the research topic "to make an informed decision about whether or not they wish to participate" (Bryman, 2012, p. 138) and invited to ask questions before, during and after the interview.

The data privacy agreement and declaration of consent were sent out via e-mail and returned signed by both interviewees before the interviews took place. The actual interviews commenced with a standardized introduction thanking them for their participation and for signing the agreement and declaration. The introduction furthermore included another summary of the researcher's project, an invitation to respond as comprehensively as they wish and to refuse to answer at any point, as well as the option of reviewing the transcript in order to require changes or reductions. The researcher undertook to make all requested changes and deletions demanded by the interviewees.

The option of anonymisation was discarded in view of the chosen interview form (Hug & Poscheschnik, 2020, p. 48), the status of the interviewees as official representatives of their respective institutions, and because both ICOM Switzerland and the museum director had previously commented publicly on the investigated case on numerous occasions. The interviewees' personal opinions or private, potentially sensitive data, which may have

required anonymization, were irrelevant to the research objective and thus not obtained in the first place.

4.6 Data Analysis

Providing an analytical model elaborating on Mayring (2007/1983), Gläser & Laudel (2010) recommend qualitative content analysis as the adequate analytical tool for qualitative, semi-structured expert interviews (p. 17). While they acknowledge that expert interviews can be analyzed both deductively and inductively, meaning that categories and codes “can either originate from theoretical considerations or be developed while reading the texts” (p. 45), they emphasize the advantages of an overall deductive approach.

The category system for the extraction is based on the study variables or influencing factors conceived in the preliminary theoretical considerations and the hypotheses about the causal mechanisms linking them. This ensures that the theoretical preliminary considerations guide the extraction. Mediated by the category system, the theoretical preliminary considerations also structure the information base and thus support its use for answering the research question. However, the category system is also open: It can be changed during extraction if information appears in the text that is relevant but does not fit into the category system. (p. 201)

The present study is based on such preliminary considerations: the theoretical framework developed in chapter 2 provides the two concepts of operationally motivated deaccessioning and organizational survival strategy. While the research question is not assuming a causal mechanism between them, it does assume a correlation. The concepts guided the establishment of categories and subcategories⁵ as well as the overall coding process. Although Gläser & Laudel’s overall approach is deductive, it considers inductive elements by remaining “open to unforeseen information throughout the analysis process” (p. 199). Accordingly, some of the actual codes were retrieved inductively during the process of coding and subsequently assigned to the corresponding categories and subcategories.

The coding process itself took place between 20 and 29 January 2025. It commenced in the Microsoft Word documents containing the English translation of the transcripts. After

⁵ The categories and subcategories were established in part by breaking down the case-specific definitions established in chapter 2 into their semantic components, and in part by further differentiating categories with too large an amount of data to process. The main category ‘environment’, for example, was replaced by the two main categories ‘favorable’ and ‘unfavorable environmental conditions’, which were then further specified into subcategories according to the principle of a SWOT-analysis.

two initial full readings of both interviews and the ICOM-related documents, the third line-by-line reading was accompanied by color-coding and note-taking on paper. The extracted data, still unorganized, was then transferred to an Excel spreadsheet (attachment D2) and assigned a main category. All further subcategorization and the final coding (attachment D1) took place in the spreadsheet.

4.7 Limitations

The most significant limitation of this case study is the imbalance in the amount of data representing the three perspectives on the case. The necessity to replace the interview with ICOM Switzerland with a document analysis, as well as the different lengths of the two interviews which were ultimately conducted, led to a surplus of data on the museum's internal perspective. This surplus of data is reflected in the analysis, which considers more data from the interview with Markus Stegmann than from the other two perspectives. Therefore, a degree of bias in favor of this perspective cannot be ruled out.

Furthermore, although the selection of interviewees based on media coverage ensured that the three distinct perspectives on the case (see chapter 4.3) are represented in the data set, the interviews themselves revealed further potential interviewees who could have provided additional insights. Among these are the municipal government, the board of trustees, external advisor Martin Heller, or museum staff members. The inclusion of further museum representatives or a second cultural policy representative was ruled out early in the process to avoid further imbalance in relation to ICOM's perspective. Still, in a more elaborated investigation, a number of additional perspectives could have been included.

5 Case Study: Analysis and Discussion

The following chapter presents the results of the qualitative content analysis of the two semi-structured expert interviews with museum Director Markus Stegmann and cultural policy representative Georg Matter as well as of the documents selected to represent ICOM Switzerland's perspective on the case. First, an introduction to the case will offer a brief overview of Museum Langmatt's history as well as those aspects which the researcher considers essential to the understanding of the deaccessioning proceedings. After this introduction, the analysis itself will be conducted in subchapters largely based on the categories and subcategories established during the coding process detailed in chapter 4.6. Following the analysis, the discussion section of this chapter will relate the findings of the analysis back to the conceptual framework established in chapter 2 and the literature review in chapter 3 in order to adequately address the research question.

5.1 Introduction to the Case

The Museum Langmatt is a private foundation in the city of Baden (Canton of Aargau) in Switzerland, established following the testamentary disposition of the local citizen John Alfred Brown (1900–1987), who left the estate to the city of Baden on the condition that a foundation would be established to honor his parents' memory by making the property and art collection accessible to the public (Preiswerk-Lösel, 2001a, p. 38). The estate consists of a manor house built between 1899 and 1901, the park surrounding it, interior furnishings, as well as one of the earliest and biggest private collections of French Impressionist paintings in Switzerland (Preiswerk-Lösel, 2001a).

The property and art collection originally belonged to John's parents Sydney William (1865–1941) and Jenny (1871–1968) Brown. Sydney was co-founder of Brown, Boveri & Cie. (BBC, since 1988 ABB), a successful electrical engineering company of central importance to the local history of the city of Baden. The couple were dedicated art collectors; initially they mostly purchased works of the Münchner Secession, but later sold this collection to focus on French Impressionism, with the majority of works having been acquired in the period between 1908 and 1909 and occasional subsequent purchases (Preiswerk-Lösel, 2001c). After 1920 their collecting activity shifted to the 18th century (Preiswerk-Lösel 2001a & 2001c). Today the

art collection is considered to be of both national – the Browns were among the first and most serious Swiss private collectors of French Impressionism – and international importance. The villa itself is seen as an important witness to both the local history of the city of Baden and life in Switzerland at the turn of the century, and the surrounding gardens are a popular recreational destination for locals as well as museum visitors (Stöckli, 2001).

The current director Markus Stegmann joined Museum Langmatt in 2015. In the years following, he collaborated with a project team headed by the foundation council and Patrick Nöthinger, Head of the Cultural Department of the City of Baden, to conceive the comprehensive strategic paper *Zukunft Langmatt* (Heller & Froböse, 2020), which was coordinated by cultural entrepreneur Martin Heller as external advisor. The paper included a comprehensive overview of structural and program-related proposals, detailed the separation of financial responsibilities between the city of Baden and the foundation, and, most important for the purposes of this paper, the proposal to deaccession paintings from the collection to guarantee the long-term financial security of the foundation. While the foundation receives support from the city of Baden as well as the Canton of Aargau, the foundation capital itself was insufficient to finance the museum in the long run. On 3 June 2020, Baden's city council voted to implement the plan (Fahrländer, 2020c).

On June 18, 2023, the citizens of Baden voted in favor of the municipality contributing 10 million CHF to Museum Langmatt's comprehensive renovation (Kirchoff, 2023). Later that year, the museum received international and mostly critical media attention because three paintings by Paul Cézanne were to be sold at Christie's auction house as part of the *Zukunft Langmatt* plan. The paintings in question were *La mer à L'Estaque* (Cézanne, circa 1875), *Quatre pommes et un coteau* (Cézanne, circa 1895/96), and *Fruits et pot de gingembre* (Cézanne, circa 1890–93). An article in the German weekly newspaper *Die Zeit* from September 7, 2023 quoted the then ICOM Switzerland President Tobias Bezzola in its title, who described the sale of paintings as “high treason against cultural heritage” (Eggert, 2023). The *Art Newspapers* article of October 12 also headlined its article with a statement by Bezzola, who described the sale as “very short-sighted” (Hickley, 2023a). The *New York Times*

reported on the sale on November 9 and 10 (Hickley 2023b & c), immediately before and after the auction⁶.

The evening sale of the New York branch of the Christie's auction house brought in the required amount of 40 million CHF. The auction proceeds were invested according to a financial plan elaborated by external experts, enabling the museum to sustainably finance operations through the annual interest without using the foundation capital (Heller & Froböse, 2020, pp. 61–65). At the time of writing, the museum is closed for renovation. It is scheduled to reopen in 2026.

5.2 Analysis

5.2.1 Organizational Identity and Mission

While neither Markus Stegmann nor Georg Matter frame their statements on Museum Langmatt's unique organizational identity and mission in managerial terms, they both refer to what they consider the institution's unique features throughout their interviews. Stegmann stresses the high quality of the collection of paintings by stating that

[...] the Langmatt is one of the most important private collections of French Impressionism in Europe. That is not us saying that, that is specialists who have been visiting us in past years. [...] [T]his collection [...] contains about 50 paintings of French Impressionism, the largest group is by Renoir, then we have a large group by Cézanne, by Pissarro. And we have [...] excellent works [by] Degas, there are individual works by Monet, by Gauguin. [S]o [...] that is quite a wide range. And [...] there are about 20 of them playing in the Champions League. So these are really unique, outstanding masterpieces that do not have to shy away from being compared to the largest museums in the world.

(Interview 1, lines 378–346)

⁶ The New York Times coverage, particularly Hickley 2023a, focuses on a restitution agreement regarding the painting *Fruits et pot de gingembre* (1890-93), which, as Stegmann recalls in interview 1 (lines 583–631), triggered another wave of media reports in the period leading up to the auction. The agreement lies outside of the scope of this thesis and it is not included in the analysis chapter, since does not appear to fundamentally complicate the deaccessioning case: during the provenance research in preparation for the auction, experts found evidence that the painting was partly owned by a Jewish art dealer who, under pressure from the National Socialist regime, appears to have sold his share in the painting under duress and on unfavorable terms. The Langmatt Foundation proactively approached the heirs, who were unaware of their ownership of the painting, and reached a settlement for an undisclosed amount within one weekend. Stegmann mentions the case proactively in his interview (Interview 1, lines 23 to 34) and describes the negotiations as amicable. His recollection is consistent with the media coverage by the New York Times, which gives a detailed account of the case and directly quotes the heirs' lawyer.

His qualification of the paintings as “very excellent” and “playing in the Champions League” is informed not by their monetary value, but by his professional background as an art historian (lines 24–25), and he is supporting his own assessment by the external authority of experts (see also line 426). His familiarity with the collection’s artistic quality and art historical relevance becomes apparent when he offers a comparative evaluation and situates an individual work in the context of the artists’ overall oeuvre:

An example is the *Château Noir* by, um, Cézanne. It exists in different versions, as is typical of Impressionism. And I saw a version in the National Gallery in London. And that version is far weaker than our version. [...] And there are works by Pissarro, where we have a pendant at Museum Winterthur, and [...] ours is [...] clearly artistically stronger.
(lines 347–356)

Within the art collection, Stegmann highlights the particular relevance of a specific group of paintings, “namely most of the works [acquired, T.N.] between 1908 and 1919. [...] [A]t that time, Impressionism was [...] in large parts, still contemporary art and completely misunderstood by the public” (lines 370–372). He refers to “the very early acquisition period” as “the most important thing about this Impressionist collection” (lines 369–370), broadening the collection’s importance beyond the artistic value inherent in the works themselves by taking into account their owners’ collecting history.

This assessment exemplifies Stegmann’s perception of the Browns’ art collection as part of a larger institutional context. He repeatedly refers to other components which constitute the Browns’ estate, most prominently the historical manor house which houses the collection, its interior design and collection of crafts and furniture (line 358), concluding that “the whole thing constitutes a real ensemble” (line 367). In short, he defines the Museum Langmatt as a cultural-historical museum rather than an art museum in the narrow sense; for him, the paintings are an important part of the estate as a whole.

Cultural policy representative Georg Matter seconds this understanding of the institution’s identity. Asked about how he would define the museum’s mission, he describes it as “a cultural and historical monument [...] that the population can experience” in order “to be able to immerse oneself in this world of the early industrial era [...] here in the canton or in Switzerland, in this way of life, the reality of this industrial family. So that is of big value to me” (Interview 2, lines 395-401). Matter thus highlights the unique cultural value of the museum, its function as a historical witness to a specific time period in history, as its core

function. Furthermore, his description of the visitor experience as immersive takes into account the institution's value from its audience's point of view.

Within the museum's audience, he identifies the inhabitants of the city of Baden as particularly important benefactors of its value. He perceives Museum Langmatt as "especially unique, because it is strongly connected with the history of the city, which has a strong connection to this industry. And [...] also in terms of art, although there are two or three other smaller institutions where art is also mediated or shown, but of course not at the same level, right, as in the Langmatt" (lines 418–422). His summary of what he believes to be the institution's core function explicitly ties its identity to its uniqueness, aesthetic qualities, historical and local relevance, and its recreational value.

It is simply an important place for [...] the city of Baden. It is a beautiful place. It is a place [...] where you [...] can also experience the park, where you get a cultural offering, right, from the foundation [...]. In this sense it is important as a cultural institution, not just as a monument, but really as an institution, which delivers a contribution to the cultural life in our canton, this institution is important, and unique in what it does and how it does it, right?
(lines 411–414)

In contrast to these elaborate statements on Museum Langmatt's specific properties, the documents reviewed to obtain information on ICOM's perspective on the case offer no data on the association's understanding of the museum's unique organizational identity. The most comprehensive dataset reviewed is then-president Tobia Bezzola's journalistic interview with the Swiss newspaper Tagblatt (Raymann, 2023b), which is solely dedicated to ICOM's evaluation of the Langmatt's deaccessioning case. Despite this focus, it does not provide insights into how Bezzola or the association itself understand the museum's specific mission and identity. It does, however, contain statements on what ICOM generally considers a museum's mission. Bezzola states that "[a] museum should always see itself as a trustee" and specifies ICOM's stance on the relation between works of art and the institutions which house them: "Ultimately, the discussion always boils down to the question of 'means and ends'. The collection, the cultural asset, is the end. The museum is the means, and it is transient. The institution's purpose is not itself, but the collection. This must be preserved" (Raymann, 2023b).

Bezzola thus insists on the preservation of physical artefacts as the main task of any collecting institution; the existence of the institution is subordinate to the existence of the artefacts which it houses. Although the interview takes place against the background of the

specific case of Museum Langmatt, Bezzola leaves it at this general definition and merely states that this prioritisation is “always” valid.

Bezzola’s definition of the core function of museums is set out in ICOM’s Code of Ethics (International Council of Museums, 2017). ICOM’s nature as an international professional association representing a large number of diverse institutions makes statements about institution-specific organisational identity and mission impossible. It therefore seems self-evident that the association’s Code of Ethics was conceived only to summarise "principles generally accepted by the international museum community" and to set "a minimum standard for museums" (Preamble). Among these universally valid principles, there are statements on the identity and mission of museums.

ICOM’s Code of Ethics is divided into eight sections, each of which consists of a number of paragraphs elaborating on a principle prefixed to each section. For the purpose of the study at hand, and with regard to Bezzola’s statements, the first two sections and the principles which precede them, are particularly relevant.

1: Museums preserve, interpret and promote the natural and cultural inheritance of humanity

Principle

Museums are responsible for the tangible and intangible natural and cultural heritage. Governing bodies and those concerned with the strategic direction and oversight of museums have a primary responsibility to protect and promote this heritage as well as the human, physical and financial resources made available for that purpose.

(pp. 1–2)

2: Museums that maintain collections hold them in trust for the benefit of society and its development

Principle

Museums have the duty to acquire, preserve and promote their collections as a contribution to safeguarding the natural, cultural and scientific heritage. Their collections are a significant public inheritance, have a special position in law and are protected by international legislation. Inherent in this public trust is the notion of stewardship that includes rightful ownership, permanence, documentation, accessibility and responsible disposal.

(pp. 7–8)

The direct comparison between Bezzola's and ICOM’s definition of the core task of museums shows a complete congruence in terms of content. In particular, ICOM’s definition of the preservation of artefacts as a museum’s “primary responsibility”, the notions of “holding in trust”, “stewardship” and “permanence” appear to form the basis of Bezzola’s argumentation. The comparison between his statements and the ICOM Code of Ethics thus

confirms that the then president was indeed speaking in his professional role as a representative of the association. This finding makes it possible to qualify him as an expert analogous to the two interviewees in this study.

To summarize, Markus Stegmann and Georg Matter both define Museum Langmatt's organizational identity as unique and many-faceted, while ICOM, even in public comments on the specific museum, refers to a minimum definition of identity applicable to the diverse range of institutions the association represents.

5.2.2 Favorable Environmental Conditions

Although none of the questions in the interview guides explicitly asked for a list of the internal and external environmental factors which exert an either positive or negative influence on Museum Langmatt, Markus Stegmann's answers in particular contain numerous indirect references to what he considers to be the strengths and opportunities of his institution. Some of these are, as will be shown below, confirmed by Georg Matter's account.

The uniqueness of its cultural offering and the high quality of its painting collection, which were discussed in the previous chapter, can themselves be seen as internal strengths of the Museum Langmatt. The collection is the only specific aspect of the institution's internal and external environment which Tobia Bezzola refers to when stating that any sale of paintings from the collection would be "very painful and causing substantial and irretrievable damage to the historic Brown collection" (Raymann, 2023b); this may be interpreted as an indirect acknowledgement of the collection's overall quality. Apart from this statement, the researcher did not find data on ICOM's evaluation of the museum's favorable and unfavorable environmental conditions.

Apart from the organizational identity and collection, Stegmann's account appears to emphasize the importance of people-, and communication-related factors: in particular, he mentions his team at the museum, the board, the political stakeholders as well as the museum's visitors and the local public as forces which he believes to exert a positive influence on the museum.

Stegmann describes the collaboration with the Board of Trustees as very productive and highlights the crucial role of two specific key members of the board in his work.

[S]omething else, I think, that was decisive for really succeeding, looking back, that is three decision makers in this years-long process, that is Lukas Breunig-Hollinger, the president of the foundation, that is Stefan Bräm, the treasurer and vice president of the foundation, and that is me. That the three of us did not only agree among each other regarding what the right way forward was, but that we basically complemented each other in our specific abilities perfectly, until this day.

(Interview 1, lines 187–190)

Identifying the foundation's president and vice president as key stakeholders, he elaborates how their individual professional areas of expertise complemented each other. "Lukas Breunig-Hollinger is a lawyer, for construction law, Stefan Bräm is a financial specialist and, and I contribute the professional [knowledge, T.N.], everything concerning museum affairs" (lines 191–193). In Stegmann's opinion, it was the combination of a common vision and the diverse skillsets which created an amicable, non-competitive atmosphere which facilitated decision-making processes.

And the fact that this was possible without, as I often had experienced, vanity is at play, or that [...] power issues play a role. That [...] never played a role. It was always about the Langmatt, and [...] no matter how big the problem, it was always about 'how do we solve this?', so consistently solution-orientated, pragmatical, unagitated, working off one problem after the other.

(lines 197–201)

The interview with Georg Matter does not offer a direct comment on how he evaluates the relationship between the museum director and his stakeholders; however, it is noticeable that he refers to the museum as 'they' a total 16 times⁷, which may suggest that he perceives the museum and its board as speaking with one singular, unifies voice.

While the relationship between the museum management and the board is here defined as an internal matter, the cooperation between the board and the community constitutes a communicative relationship between the internal and external organizational environment. Stegmann does not dedicate much detail to the nature of this relationship; however, taking into account the initial conflicts between the board and the municipal government, which will be discussed in chapter 5.2.3, the many years of cooperation between the municipality, museum management and board as part of the Zukunft Langmatt strategy (Interview 1, lines 265–277) suggest a positive working relationship between all involved partners. The fact that the strategic plan was initiated by the municipality itself (lines 265–269) in order to secure the museums' future, supports this impression.

⁷ Interview 2, lines 70, 107, 110, 167, 168, 443, 445, 446 (2x), 447, 448, 458, 461, 463 (2x), 464.

The museum's productive collaboration not only with the municipality, but also with the regional public administration is not being addressed in either of the two interviews and can therefore not be backed up by the researcher's self-generated data. However, the amicable relationship between museum, municipal and regional government became apparent in the researcher's preparations; incidentally, it was Markus Stegmann himself who nominated Georg Matter as possible interviewee. Moreover, it manifests in financial contributions from both administrative levels: the canton's annual contributions have been governed by a service agreement since 2010; since 2014, the municipality of Baden has contributed an annual operating contribution as part of the Swiss Cultural Property Act (Museum Langmatt Baden, 2024, p. 28). In a nutshell, while public funding is ultimately insufficient, as chapter 5.2.3 will demonstrate, it has been stable for more than a decade.

The overarching impression that Stegmann sees his employees as an internal asset arises from the comparison of his description of the state in which he found the museum when he took office with his evaluation of its current state. At the beginning of the interview, remembering how he had to deal with understaffing and the loss of specialist skills and experience in 2015, he recalls how "personnel structures had eroded" because of staff members who "left the museum in the probation period" (lines 82–83), and how the specialist positions were vacant. These staff-related challenges will become relevant again when dealing with the museum's internal weaknesses in chapter 5.2.3. In the context of internal strengths, they emphasize how positively he perceives his staff's present performance, indirectly characterizing them as efficient when stating that "after the repositioning in 2016, until 2023, the visitor numbers almost quadrupled, with a staff expansion only from 5.5 to 6.5 people, so that is really a great success" (lines 63–64). The museum's corresponding annual reports confirm that between 2015 and 2023 the number of visitors increased from 6,692 (Museum Langmatt Baden, 2016, p. 2) to 25,382 (Museum Langmatt Baden, 2023a, p. 4) visitors.

The museum's audience growth is linked to what appears to be another significant opportunity in the external organizational environment: the high level of support from the local population of the city of Baden. The annual reports show that local residents constitute the biggest segment of the total audience, and as the number of visitors increases, so does the proportional share of this particular segment, with the ratio rising slightly from 47% in 2016 to 49% in 2023. Referring these figures back to Georg Matter's emphasis on the importance of the museum's cultural offering for the local community (chapter 5.2.1), one can

conclude that this offering is indeed considered relevant by the citizens of Baden, manifesting in their actual participation.

The relevance of the local population as one of the museum's most crucial external stakeholder becomes apparent in connection with the positive outcome of a 2023 public referendum on the granting of 10 million CHF for the museum's complete renovation (Stadt Baden, 2023). The significance of this referendum in connection with the deaccessioning case will be discussed in detail in chapters 2.5.7 and 2.5.8. In this chapter, it is primarily relevant as a measurable variable that makes it possible to categorize the support by the citizens of Baden as a significant external opportunity. Stegmann himself demonstrates his awareness of this opportunity when stating that "[t]he popular vote was overwhelmingly well received with 79.25 percent, which is of course great. I mean [...], when does that ever happen, that 10 million in a small town with 23,000 inhabitants, yes, well, that's great and that means that people are really behind this museum" (lines 653–656).

Overall, the collection of paintings can be seen as the organization's most crucial strength, both in terms of its artistic quality and its status within the general context of the museum's diverse offerings. The support by the local population constitutes its most relevant external opportunity.

5.2.3 Unfavorable Environmental Conditions

The analysis of Museum Langmatt's internal weaknesses and external threats is roughly divided into two parts, following the course of interview 1 with museum director Markus Stegmann. It begins with the unfavorable environmental conditions which he encountered when he first joined the organization in 2015 and leads into an assessment of those weaknesses and threats which can be considered systemic and therefore pose a long-term challenge for the institution.

The second question in interview 1 addressed the state of the museum upon Stegmann's arrival at the institution in 2015. While it did not specifically ask for negative environmental factors, the director's detailed account of the problems he identified upon his arrival illustrates his overall impression of the organization as fundamentally disorganized. Regarding human resources, he recounts that

[...] the personnel structures had eroded [...]. So that means I only partly had structures of this museum team which I was able to take over, because others, well, just were not there anymore. And in the whole area of collections, exhibitions, [...], archive, [...] there was only one volunteer who had worked at the Langmatt for half a year. So that means we had an enormous loss of know-how and knowledge, where I had to think about how, with these desolate personnel structures, can we get back to a normally functioning museum as fast as possible.
(lines 82–90)

Chapter 5.4.2 demonstrated that Stegmann perceives the museum's current number of annual visitors as one of the museum's strengths. As quoted above, he phrases his satisfaction with the attendance rate as a development, comparing the visitor numbers in 2015 to those in 2023, thus allowing the conclusion to be drawn that the earlier attendance rate of 6,692 visitors was considered too low and therefore a weakness.

One of the most vivid memories in Stegmann's account is that of the structural damage to the building, which was apparent to him in several ways when he took over as director. He uses the visible damage almost as a metaphor to describe the state of the overall state of the organization.

[...] So I can describe that with an image. When I came here, I still remember, there were these big, beautiful, historical chimneys, threatened by collapse, propped up and scaffolded, there was a terrace above the kitchen, so there was water leakage in the kitchen, and construction management had not been present on the construction site for three months. And these are conditions which are simply unbearable, right? So, if the museum is affected by construction emergencies and you actually have to worry if you can even keep the museum open, then construction management must be present on a regular basis and make sure that everything is going [...] well.
(lines 91–102)

The urgency of addressing these damages was amplified by an "ultimatum from the insurance company" which, according to Stegmann, said "in essence, that if certain construction measures, for example a new storage, were not carried out until the end of 2015, then the insurance cover for the museum would expire" (lines 104–107).

Finally, Stegmann's description of the working relationship between the two crucial internal and external stakeholders board and municipal administration points to dysfunctional patterns of communication and lack of cooperation, which he labels "a stalemate situation". He remembers that

looking back, [...] [it] was a lot of work to get [the board of trustees and the city of Baden] to one table, because they, to say it bluntly, put the blame on each other. The city said, you as a foundation, you are carrying the responsibility, and the foundation said, unfortunately we don't have money, and the inheritance originally went to you, so you can't completely talk your way out of this. And that was actually a stalemate situation, which I did not, which I only experienced in its

final phase, but which had been, um, blocking these structural renovations for years. They did not find a way with each other.
(lines 165–174)

In summary, the initial negative environmental factors included numerous aspects of the organisation, from a lack of human resources and low visitor numbers to structural damage to the building and poor stakeholder relations. Chapter 5.2.4.1 will take a closer look at how these challenges were addressed.

In addition to these environmental challenges, the director names the chronic lack of funds as the environmental factor which had the most significant negative impact on the institution. In the following, this factor is defined as both external threat (lack of public subsidies) and internal weakness (declining foundation capital).

Museum Langmatt receives consistent contributions both from the regional (Interview 2, lines 66–73) and municipal (Interview 1, lines 235–238) administration and can thus be considered stable. Still, the funds are insufficient in terms of covering the museum's operating costs (lines 239–240). Georg Matter's account specifies the nature of the canton of Aargau's financial contributions to the museum: "[t]he Langmatt belongs to those institutions that get an operational contribution from us from the canton, so not the full amount, but a larger contribution to the institution. [...] So that happens within the framework with regard to art museums, it is actually only the Langmatt that gets the operating contributions from us" (Interview 2, lines 67–70). Just like the canton is not able to grant full operational support, Stegmann recalls how the city of Baden conceived the very idea of a long-term strategy to save the museum as a consequence of their insufficient funding: "the city has always said, [...] we don't have money now, we don't have half a million, um, which we can give the Langmatt annually, that is *simply not possible*" (Interview 1, lines 258–260).

Moving on from the external to the internal organizational environment, Markus Stegmann's assessment that the foundation capital was "far too low from the start" (line 162) leads him to stress the urgency of the steadily dwindling financial cushion, concluding that a few years into his tenure "the foundation capital had melted so much that everyone involved, the board of trustees and myself, was aware that clearly, something fundamental had to happen" (lines 231–215). He puts the average annual structural deficit at around half a million CHF (line 223). This assessment is verified by the annual financial reports published on the

museum's website (Museum Langmatt Baden – Stiftung Langmatt Sidney und Jenny Brown, 2016 – 2023, sections 3), which point out that the long-term fulfilment of the foundation's purpose was at risk due to the progressive decline in its capital. Stegmann summarizes his account of the foundation's finances by highlighting the urgency and gravity of the situation, concluding that "it was actually clear how long the foundation's capital would last. And soon you could count that on one hand, the number of years [...] and then the money would have been gone (lines 226-235).

5.2.4 Strategy

In the following, the data material is analysed for those passages which qualify the museum's decision-making and planning processes as targeted actions geared towards the organizational environment. This includes the external opportunities and threats as well as the internal strengths and weaknesses identified in chapters 5.2.2 and 5.2.3. Furthermore, the extent to which this is done under consideration of the organisational identity outlined in chapter 5.2.1 will be examined. Actions which can thus be labelled strategic will be presented in two parts, moving from short-term stabilization measures to the long-term strategic plan which included the sale of paintings from the collection.

5.2.4.1 Short-Term Measures: Stabilization

Outlining his beginnings as director at Museum Langmatt in 2015, Markus Stegmann gives a detailed account of the multitude of impressions of the various challenges he was facing at the time. He describes the disorganised state of the institution as almost overwhelming; indeed, in his very first remark on his tenure he concludes that "in retrospect it is actually a bit of a blessing that I did not know about what was ahead of me" (lines 53–54). Asked about his recollection of the state the museum was in when he took over the role as director, he vividly describes his inner progress from initial overwhelm to the attempt to structure his numerous impressions, in order to ultimately be able to act on the basis of this structure.

Recalling how “when [he] arrived, [he] saw already after a very short time, that many things that are normal in other museums were not normal at the Langmatt” (lines 79–80), he elaborates this statement with a detailed description of the museum’s weaknesses and threats concerning human-resources, structural damage, insurance-related problems, and stakeholder management which are detailed in chapter 5.2.3. Throughout this narrative, he keeps stressing the feeling of urgency created by the most immediate challenges which pressured him to act “as quickly as possible” (line 127); particularly regarding the threat of losing insurance coverage, which made it necessary “to enter into a dialogue with the insurance really quickly and find a solution, because it was absolutely impossible” (lines 114–115). Similarly, he states that “the foundation council also had their backs against the wall” (lines 124–125). He then proceeds to describe how he organized the internal and external challenges he had identified.

It was the most important thing to summarize this whole situation, the most important thing was, I have, um, within about three weeks, I made a kind of plan. I found out which deficits this museum had listed. Then I prioritized them. And then I put them on a timeline, like a matrix. And I proposed this to the foundation council in November 2015 and said, so, this is what needs to be done, that is my idea in this order, with this prioritization, uh, in the next few months. Are you in or not? And then they said, we will do it just like you propose.
(lines 117–124)

Stegmann’s usage of verbs like “summarize” and “prioritize” give the impression of a structured process, which is further supported by his mentioning of “a kind of plan”, which he visualized in the form of “a timeline, like a matrix”. The above-quoted section also illustrates how his actions were determined by the previous identification and evaluation of the most urgent internal weaknesses, thus allowing for the qualification of these measures as strategic. Furthermore, in the process of elaborating this initial strategic plan, Stegmann simultaneously addressed the issue of stakeholder management by proactively communicating with the board early on, possibly laying the groundwork for the productive working relationship he nowadays considers a strength of the museum (see chapter 5.2.2). He phrases the overall guiding question behind these initial measures as “how [...] can we get back to a normally functioning museum as fast as possible” (lines 89–90), indicated that stabilization in order to continue operations was the highest priority. In this sense, while not constituting a fundamental turnaround (Kaiser, 2008), the short-term measures can be qualified as an initial stabilization-strategy which “embraces short term survival” in order to provide a “basis for the medium and long term” (Lesirge & Barnard, n. d.).

Against the background of chapters 5.2.2 and 5.2.3, it becomes apparent that Stegmann later defines the initial weaknesses and threats as strengths and opportunities, suggesting a successful stabilization. The present study's overall research interest is not to assess the success or failure of specific strategic measures taken by Museum Langmatt – rather, the research design investigates the existence of a general causal connection between main organisational strategy and specific deaccessioning form and should therefore be applicable to other studies regardless of a given strategy's effectiveness. Still, the successful application of the measures is worth noting in this specific context, because, as will be shown below, it constitutes the prerequisite for the development of a long-term strategy, which addresses the museum's central weakness: the chronic underfunding of the foundation.

5.2.4.2 Long-Term Measures: 'Zukunft Langmatt'

Chapter 5.2.3 identified the museum's finances, the insufficient municipal and regional public funding and the steadily declining foundation capital, as the most detrimental factors in the internal and external organizational environment. Stegmann characterized them accordingly when he maintains that they impaired the management's ability to address all of the museum's other weaknesses and threats. "[O]f course [...] it was not just this and that which was not in good order, but at the same time there was no money. [...] That means you actually have the challenge and, at the same time, no money. [...] [T]hat, of course, intensified the whole situation again" (Interview 1, lines 155–164). He concludes that by "2016, it [had become, T.N.] clearly visible that it was necessary to act, something fundamental had to happen" (lines 251–252).

As indicated above, lobbying the city of Baden for further funding had proved unsuccessful; it did however, provide the impulse for the municipality itself to propose a strategic long-term plan for the museum. As Markus Stegmann puts it, "so they said, now we need a project that clarifies how this museum can be [...] financially supported in the future, so that it can persist" (lines 265–266). The comprehensive strategic paper *Zukunft Langmatt* (Heller & Froböse, 2020) was a collaboration between the Baden's City Council and the museum's Foundation Board facilitated by cultural entrepreneur Martin Heller as external advisor. It covered all areas of the museum's work, from finances and programming to practical administrative issues.

The strategic paper's Management Summary offers a brief rundown of how the museum's main weakness affects all other areas of the museum's operations. This becomes apparent with regard to necessary renovations.

Early on in the work process, it became clear that not only the villa building but also the Langmatt Foundation's finances were in need of renovation. Its foundation assets, which were already too limited when it was established, are close to being exhausted despite efficient management. The foundation has no funds for the essential structural repairs. It will not be able to keep the museum running with exhibitions and events programme alone for much longer. If the foundation is forced to cease its activities or if the villa's substance continues to deteriorate, responsibility for the Langmatt will fall back to the town of Baden. It had appointed the foundation as the sole heir to the estate in 1988, which opened the museum in 1990.

(p. 8)

Maintaining that the city of Baden, which had inherited the Brown's estate, carries the main responsibility for the museum's future, this brief summary describes how a one-off subsidy for the renovation of the building would not provide a sufficient financial cushion to secure the museum in the long term. The summary continues with a shared responsibility proposal for how the foundation and the city could secure the continued existence of the museum in the future.

The city and the foundation are therefore jointly managing the 'Future Langmatt' project, and as a result they have agreed on a clear division of roles for this future. The foundation is reorganising its finances and securing the museum's long-term operation; the city is making the largest contribution to the costs of the restoration, in which third parties are also participating. Neither party is in a position to manage the construction and operation alone - which is why they are joining forces and sharing responsibility.

(p. 8)

With this clear definition of areas of financial responsibilities, the city of Baden and third parties (among them the canton of Aargau, see chapter 5.2.5) are to make large contributions to the renovation of the building; in compensation for these high, but one-off costs, operations are to be secured by the foundation itself, which commits to addressing the lack of foundation capital.

5.2.5 Stakeholder Involvement

Representing the canton of Aargau, which contributed six million CHF to the Villa Langmatt's complete renovation (interview 2, lines 262–265), Georg Matter participated in what he refers to as a "support group" (interview 2, lines 121–122). He characterizes these meetings as "an information exchange pool and also a monitoring pool to accompany all the

planning and then also the implementation [of the renovation, T.N.]” (lines 123–125). The Canton was not actively involved in the drafting of the Zukunft Langmatt strategic paper, which, as mentioned above, was developed as a collaboration between the municipality and the foundation. This distance from the overall strategic process may explain why Matter does not refer to the strategy by its official name; still, he is able to summarize the main thrust of

[...] this strategy, which had been elaborated [...] in Baden [...] where they concluded that [...] in order to tackle the further developments in a more targeted way, the aim would be a kind of division of tasks, with the public sector being primarily committed to infrastructure, that is, this factory owner’s villa and the park, while the foundation itself is responsible for ensuring that it can continue to maintain the collection itself and the exhibition activities. And that was then connected with the urgent need to refinance.

(Interview 2, lines 104–115)

Markus Stegmann recalls the first time the external advisor Martin Heller introduced the idea of selling paintings from the collection in connection with the strategic plan. He describes his own as well as the other participants’ initial reaction as “extremely shocked” (Interview 1, line 281); he does not elaborate on how precisely this idea was discussed, but describes it as “a long process, [...] because we said, it can't be, it has to be possible to find other ways to raise this money” (lines 286–287). This statement indicates that strategic alternatives were likely discussed.

Martin Heller had this idea, he said we don’t have, well, just one construction site, that is the building, but we literally have this second construction site, with the foundation finances, we have to solve both. It does not make sense if we only solve the construction work, and renovate and find the money for it, and soon after the foundation will go down the drain. And he said, [...] well, I see you have a great collection, and [...] I see you have possibilities there, and I suggest you sell paintings.

(Interview 1, 273–279)

Although both the museum director and the representative of the canton stress the fact that the Museum Langmatt is an independently operating foundation under private law (Interview 1, lines 53–54; Interview 2, line 161), and that the canton of Aargau is not represented in the Foundation Board (Interview 2, lines 160–178), Matter recalls being informed about the intended deaccessioning early on and frequently over a longer period of time. He states that “[i]t was not just in *one* session that we were informed about the current status regarding the sale of the paintings, but [...] the topic was discussed again and again in two or three sessions over, [...] I would say, one and a half, two years” (lines 212–214). In his recollection, the related conversations appear to have been factual and non-confrontational. “I am sure that there also must have been a brief discussion, but [...] I can't remember that

there was really any controversy in this [...] group. It was noted with interest and [...] the various aspects that are associated with this sale or planned sale were discussed and [...] to a certain degree also reflected upon. (138–143).

Matter recalls the specific questions he had concerning the impact of such sales for the relationship between the overall quality of the collection and the museum's identity. "[F]or me, of course, the, the first question that came to mind was, yes, what does that mean for the collection per se, right? How relevant are these works that are now being sold in the context of the entire collection?" (lines 187–189). He also indicates that the museum director was able to provide a satisfactory explanation when he "immediately explained that this was an important criterion for the selection of these works, that it is not the core pieces from this collection, but peripheral works [...] in the overall context of the collection. And that's why it is also justifiable from the point of view of the collection, right?" (lines 191–194). The following chapter will demonstrate that Matter's summary of Stegmann's reasoning is in line with the latter's detailed account in the expert interview.

5.2.6 The Deaccessioning Proceedings

Stegmann's summarizes the deaccessioning process, from its inception through the implementation and final auction sale as a "very long process [...], because it is not at all so that one suddenly had an idea and thought, okay, now let's sell a few paintings" (lines 421–423). This process started by identifying a suitable cooperation partner that would provide the expertise to navigate secondary art market. Taking into account the large sum that the foundation needed according to the external financial advisors, and acknowledging that external competence was needed, because Stegmann himself was "not an expert on the international market" (line 427), the selection was narrowed down to those large, international auction houses with experience in valuations of this size and access to the relevant customer segment (lines 428–430). The Board's choice ultimately fell on Christie's New York department (line 638).

In order to determine whether the high amount of money necessary could actually be reached at auction (lines 423–435), the museum invited the auction house's valuation experts to Switzerland to assess the collection.

And then [...] we invited them, I still remember, as the next important step, in the summer of 2019, they travelled here, [...] and really [...] with the top [...] of the company, and [...] they were a seven-member delegation, [...] really everything of rank and name, and [...] they then examined the collection and we asked them, so please make suggestions, what, in your opinion, the collection offers.
(lines 431–439)

Although he does not disclose the specific works that were under discussion, it can be assumed from Stegmann's report of "very long discussions" (line 440) that there must have been an overlap between the auction house's preselection and those works which the museum wanted to remain in the collection. The starting point for the museum's internal deliberations was a process of elimination, which specified the paintings that the museum wanted to keep in the collection at all costs: "And then a very long discussion began, because it was not clear for a long time, [...] which paintings can you really sell? But it *was* very clear that there were certain things we did *not* want, namely, [...] to sell the paintings that were acquired in this early acquisition period, between 1908 and 1919. Because that is an art historical achievement, which the Browns had accomplished" (lines 439–445).

The naming of a specific period of the brown couple's collecting activity provides an indication of the group of works that Stegmann describes as the core of the collection.

The delimitation of a specific time period of the Brown couple's collecting activity provides clues what, in Stegmann's view, constitutes the core of Museum Langmatt's art collection. He defines the Impressionist paintings not as an isolated art collection, but as an integrated, if crucial, part of a presentation which contextualizes the Browns' exceptionally early interest in Impressionist painting within their overall biography, the bourgeoisie lifestyle of wealthy industrial families in Switzerland at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, and thus as a tangible part of local industrial history. The paintings are thus embedded in the overarching cultural-historical narrative which was defined in Chapter 5.2.1 as essential to the Museum Langmatt's identity.

In addition to this relatively straightforward classification by acquisition date, Stegmann mentions a second, more complex consideration: the reconstruction of the Browns' personal preferences based on historical documents.

And the second thing is, we found a kind of floor plan that John Brown had made. It is not dated. We don't know exactly when it is from. But [...] he made it himself. And he put paintings in there that he did not think should be lent out. [W]e then successfully decrypted this list. You have to imagine that somehow it says Renoir, Renoir, but then it also says something like boat or fish. And with boat and fish, we know quite clearly which paintings he meant. But with Renoir or with Cézanne, if it's just the artist's name, we of course don't know, well, which painting he was referring

to. [...] But based on historical photographs of these rooms [...] of which he had made the floor plans, that is first of all the dining room, the library and the gallery, [...] we were able to, without a doubt, [...] identify the paintings that he did not want to lend out. And we said, well, if he didn't want to lend these out, then definitely don't sell them.

(lines 446–464)

By cross-referencing the information found in John Brown's self-drawn floor plan with historic photographs of the villa's interior, Stegmann wanted to make an informed decision guided by the will of the paintings' original owners. This approach to framing the painting collection in the institution's overall context aligns with the overarching mission of a cultural history museum: to convey as authentic a picture as possible of those aspects of history that shape its identity and purpose. In this light, the museum's guiding principle of "sell[ing] as few paintings as possible" to avoid "a bigger bloodletting" (lines 476–477), in other words to keep an unavoidable gap in the collection as inconsequential as possible, seems coherent.

In combination, Stegmann's statements provide a picture of the complex considerations, which weighed different kinds of value against each other: firstly, the monetary value of the paintings, which had to be high enough to achieve an auction result that would fulfil the foundation's financial goal; secondly, and closely related to the former point, the overall artistic value, which would justify such a high estimate, and thirdly, the curatorial value in the specific context of Museum Langmatt's collection. Stegmann's description of the selection process suggests that the attributions of these different categories of value were assigned to the most competent parties in each case: the auction house experts determined the monetary value, while the museum team was able to evaluate the importance of the individual works for the Brown's collection history. The artistic quality forms the intersection of both parties' competences. It affects both the monetary value and the curatorial value of the paintings.

Stegmann himself explains the thorough internal investigation with the goal "to maintain the foundation's purpose" (line 501).

the whole Langmatt is based [...] on the foundation deed, the foundation document is based on the will. And the will [...] from 1979 [...] is [...]the most important piece of writing, because it demonstrates the founder's wishes. And the founder's will is, of course, the deciding factor for a foundation. And that's why we've always thought about, yes, what would the family have done in this situation. And we are absolutely sure that the family would have acted in the same way, because they themselves repeatedly sold paintings, to buy other paintings, for example.

(lines 501–511)

This focus becomes especially apparent when he talks about the only Fragonard painting in the museum's collection, *Jeune fille au chat* (Fragonard, circa 1770).

So there is a spectacular case that a picture of Fragonard was bought in 1919, and for that the Browns sold eight impressionist paintings, among them two Cézannes, so not just any impressionists, but really two high class ones [...] in order to buy a Fragonard. From today's point of view, a very bad deal, but that is not what it is about. But it is about, how did this family actually behave in it [the time of, T.N.] its collecting activity, and what is really essential in this will, which is then reflected in the foundation mandate.

(lines 512–527)

While Stegmann acknowledges the fact that the presence of an 18th century painting in a collection renowned for its Impressionists is surprising, he justifies the work's relevance for the collection with the Brown's personal attachment to it, which is evident in the substantial financial efforts they undertook to acquire it. He thereby further highlights the importance of the former owners' personal tastes and preferences for the museum's self-understanding. Furthermore, he indirectly points at the fact that the collection was neither static nor in constant expansion. Already the Brown's early shift of interest from works of the Munich Secession to French Impressionism (Preiswerk-Lösel, 2001a) was accompanied by numerous sales of artworks. The example of *Jeune Fille au Chat* thus demonstrates that the Browns themselves sold parts of their Impressionist collection, among them Cézanne paintings. His comments on the Fragonard support the argument that the Browns themselves did not assign the same level of importance to all their paintings, and that the dynamic nature of the collection can be defined as one of its characteristics.

5.2.7 External Communication

The timeline of how and when Museum Langmatt's intention to sell paintings from its collection was offered actively by Markus Stegmann during the interview; it was not a response to a direct question, but rather a preface to a different answer regarding his recollection of how the public reacted to the deaccessioning plans. In this light, the topic appears to be of central importance to him, and his description frames the external communication measures as decidedly strategic. The press release was, according to Stegmann's recollection, sent out in May 2020 (lines 535–538), informing not just the general public, but, as he emphasizes, specifically the local residents, about the fact

that [...] the Langmatt, at the time we did not yet know exactly when, but [...] in the medium-term future, would have to sell paintings to increase the foundation's capital enough to finance the museum through the interest in the future. And the occasion for this [...] communication – we thought very carefully about this, is it the right time or not? – was a decision

by Baden's residents' council on the approval of Zukunft Langmatt, that is, of this strategy by Martin Heller. This is a municipal, well, a project that was carried out by the city and the foundation together.
(lines 538–545)

The museum director here explicitly contextualizes the communication of the plans as part of the overall communication plan of the 'Zukunft Langmatt' strategy in preparation for the referendum on a municipal loan for Villa Langmatt's general renovation. This referendum was necessary because the amount that the city of Baden was to provide exceeded the decision-making powers of the local political representatives (Interview 2, lines 232–261).

Stegmann's remark regarding the inhabitants of the city of Baden not having a legal stake in the foundation's deaccessioning plans echoes one of the central concerns of the Zukunft Langmatt strategy, the clear division of responsibilities between the municipality and the foundation, whereby the municipality is responsible for the building fabric, while the foundation is responsible for financing operations (see chapter 5.2.4). This means that the citizens of Baden did not vote on the deaccessions, but only on the loan for renovations (interview 1, lines 547–548; Interview 2, lines 257–258). In this light, the early and proactive communication of the deaccessioning plan is particularly noteworthy: from a strategic point of view, there would have been arguments for a more cautious communication, as negative news coverage could have affected the vote on the credit negatively. Stegmann explains the proactive approach with the close interdependence of structural renovation and refinancing, which he considered relevant for voters to make an informed decision. This suggests that transparent communication was prioritized even against the prospect of a potential strategic disadvantage.

[...] we thought that it is now very important for the city council and also for the public, who learn about this decision via the media, what the consequence of the approval of this strategy is, even if the city of Baden, the citizens council, does not vote on the sale of the paintings, that is the matter for the owner, i.e. the Langmatt foundation, but that is a joint project, so that means that if you now approve this, this strategy, Zukunft Langmatt, ultimately, that also means a sale of these paintings.
(lines 545–551)

The foundation wanted to emphasize the fact that a vote in favor of the 'Zukunft Langmatt' strategy as a whole, and of the loan in particular, would trigger the deaccessioning proceedings. This indicates that external advisor Martin Heller's assessment of Museum Langmatt's organizational environment had a direct impact on the specific design of the long-term strategic plan: the identification of the building's structural damage and the eroding

foundation capital as the museum's most fundamental internal weaknesses, and particularly the two factors' mutual dependence, manifested in the strategy as a conditional relationship between renovation and deaccessioning, because both weaknesses are reinforcing each other and can therefore only be addressed simultaneously. The cumulative damage effect of the two most unfavorable environmental factors was translated into a predefined procedural dependency of the two corresponding strategic responses.

5.2.8 Reactions

The potential negative impact of critical reporting was brought up in the previous chapter in the context of the public referendum. Stegmann confirms that corresponding concerns were already voiced early on during the process of designing the Zukunft Langmatt paper. "I don't think anyone was really comfortable with it", he recalls, "because, of course, you knew that would lead to public discussions, that could damage the image" (lines 304–306). The discomfort was thus not yet related to the specific strategic context of the referendum – Stegmann already mentions it during his account of the external advisor's original introduction of the idea early on in their collaboration –, but directed towards the prospect of harm to the museum's reputation in general.

Markus Stegmann and Georg Matter were both aware of the negative media coverage after the announcement of the sale. Stegmann remembers that the news "got a lot of coverage, and [...] most of it was [...] negative, you simply have to say that very clearly" (lines 552–553); adding shortly after that "there were different reactions, but just many, many negative ones" (line 556). His reference not only to the negative thrust, but also to the large amount of reporting indicates a high amount of engagement with the opinions voiced; this impression is supported by the fact that the press section of Museum Langmatt's website offers a comprehensive archive of scanned newspaper articles, radio and television reports (Museum Langmatt Baden, n.d.). Matter's recollection is less detailed – presumably due to the fact that, as head of the canton's Department of Culture, he is responsible for a large number of institutions (Interview 2, lines 39–43). He is, however, able to recall that Tobia Bezzola's reaction "was then picked up by various media, but otherwise I can't remember what else was there. But that popped up over a few weeks or months. As I remember that popped up once in a while. Yes. I can't really say much more about that" (lines 294–296).

Both interviewees proactively mention ICOM Switzerland's then-president Tobia Bezzola as a prominent voice in the critical public discussion. In Stegmann's account, he names Bezzola as an example for reports he perceived as "quite spiteful" (Interview 1, line 253): "I remember one [statement] by [...] Tobia Bezzola, who is the former president of ICOM Switzerland, who thought that this was utterly impossible, that this was against the ICOMs statutes, and [...] you must not do that, and that it was a no-go, so to speak, and so on" (lines 553–557). The summary of ICOM's categorical rejection is as brief as it is adequate; chapter 5.2.1 indeed demonstrated that ICOM's Code of Ethics and Deaccessioning Guidelines generally reject operationally motivated deaccessioning, because it fundamentally undermines ICOM's definition of a museum's core function of preservation.

As stated above, Matter exclusively mentions ICOM's representative in his response to the question whether he is able to remember public responses: "So, of course I mainly recall the reaction from [...] ICOM, I think it was [...] from this president, Tobia Bezzola. [...] This statement by him, which was very critical, or even a bit scandalizing, right?" (Interview 2, lines 288–290). When asked whether he would be willing to attempt to paraphrase ICOM's position, Matter offers the following summary:

[Tobia Bezzola] kind of pleaded that [...] there basically must not be any deaccessioning from a collection. That was basically the core of what he said. And from the point of view of conservation or cultural preservation, right? So, his attitude was basically, once something has been included in a collection, it is there for a good reason, and the moment you remove it again, right, the collection is no longer the same, and thereby ... so, as you said, in my own words: the way I understood him, he said, a collection is broken when you remove something from it that had been included into it before. Yes, so that's how I read it.
(lines 354–363)

Considering his above-noted detachment from the specifics of the public discourse, Matter's relatively detailed summary illustrates the apparent effectiveness of ICOM Switzerland's mediation of their own perspective on the Langmatt case. His own wording, if somewhat colloquial, corresponds with the findings of chapter 5.2.1, which connected the unconditional primacy of keeping the collection intact to the understanding of a museum as repositories for tangible cultural heritage. His summary leads him to the conclusion that, according to this understanding, any removal of items from a collection represents a fundamental break with a museum's identity and mission.

Matter continues with his own assessment of ICOM's stance on the Langmatt case, labelling it as "ideological" with reference to its general nature, criticizing that no distinction was made between different types of museums.

I think he mixed things up a bit too generously, right? What a public museum is, or a museum or a collection that was created and financed by the public sector; and what a *private* collection is, and a *private* museum, right? Where private money ultimately made the collection possible. And I think he didn't really talk about that. He judged it very ideologically, in my opinion, right? As if it were a public, a state collection, right? In which case I would totally agree with him, right? Yes, you can't just do that, right? That would still need other decision-making processes, right? Before you can do something like that.
(lines 299–306)

While he does not explicitly refer to Museum Langmatt's unique organizational identity, he does emphasize the relevance of its legal status as a private foundation and contrasts it with the sponsorship model of public museums. He thus voices skepticism towards the general applicability of deaccessioning standards and argues in favor of a differentiated evaluation of managerial responsibilities which takes into account the respective institution's legal context. Stegmann takes a similar stance to the criticism voiced by ICOM: "I found [the argumentation] too reductive, they did not look closely at what the circumstances are. What kind of museum is this? So that this is a foundation that is allowed to sell, that it is a private collection, no state or municipal funds, and so on" (Interview 1, lines 569–572).

Matter extends his criticism of a standardized, universal understanding of the identity of museums to their collecting mandate. He clearly rejects the idea of a static, untouchable collection:

I am of a completely different opinion, also as an archaeologist, where we also had collections, or where it was also about archaeological collections, or partly about these questions of what do we preserve, what do we collect at all, etc. And I really don't see it like Mr. Bezzola does. It's a collection, it's something alive, and not just, um, as a one-way street. Not just that something goes in there, but also that something can go out again. In my opinion.
(Interview 2, lines 364–371)

As Matter himself emphasizes, his understanding of museum collections is shaped by his professional biography. Due to his background as an archaeologist (lines 26–38) he is accustomed to working in museums where deaccessioning is a common and mostly uncontroversial practice (see chapter 2.1.2; Matter himself elaborates on the specifics of archaeological museum items in lines 376–386). Considering Stegmann's description of the Brown's painting collection, which was in constant flux during their lifetime, Matter's and

Stegmann's appear to share a similar understanding of museum collections as dynamic entities.

Georg Matter's statement on the difference between public and private museums already indicated that, despite his personal opinion being different, he is still able to acknowledge ICOM's criticism as valid. In fact, in all three cases in which he comments on ICOM's view of the Langmatt case, he expresses a general understanding for the association's concerns. He concludes his answer to the general question of whether he remembers the reporting at the time as follows: "I read it, I took note of it, I also understood it to a certain degree, right? From the position of Mr. Bezzola" (lines 296–298). Likewise, after weighing the ideas of static versus dynamic art collections against each other, he does accept the validity of hesitancy with regard to deaccessioning: "[a]nd as I said before, to a certain extent I can understand that, but not because the collection is broken" (lines 363–364).

Following his criticism of ICOM's failure to consider Museum Langmatt's specific challenges, Markus Stegmann also expresses the necessity of a cautious approach to deaccessioning. He does so in a longer consideration of the possible consequences for the museum field in general:

So they didn't look closely, they just got agitated, they reacted very emotionally. Which I, if I'm being honest, I can understand as an initial reflex [...] because, of course, the colleagues are worried about a precedent being set. So of course, they are worried that [...] in Luzern, in Bern, [...], wherever, that the municipal politicians say well, if you don't have money, do like the Langmatt. And this danger, I can see it, indeed. And that is [...] unfortunate, and politics [...] has the tendency to communicate in a shortened way, [...] and perhaps also to solve problems quickly. And that is not possible here. You have to look closely.
(Interview 1, lines 573–582)

Embedded in these considerations on the risk of imitation, which can tempt cultural policy decision-makers to justify cuts in public museum funding with reference to decisions made in private museums, is once again the insistence that museums should not be subject to universal standards, but should instead be evaluated on a case-by-case basis.

As indicated above, Markus Stegmann mentioned in his interview that alternative financing strategies had been discussed at least twice; the first time by the Board before he became director of the museum, the second time during the development of the Zukunft Langmatt strategy, after Heller had first proposed to sell paintings from the collection. ICOM's data does not offer information on possible alternative solutions. Tobia Bezzola's interview

with Tagblatt, however, contains a statement which can be considered an indication of an alternative strategy; if not tailored to Museum Langmatt specifically, it can be interpreted as general solution for museums who are in financial difficulties grave enough to consider deaccessioning.

Ultimately, the discussion always boils down to the question of “means and ends”. The collection, the cultural asset, is the end. The museum is the means, and it is transient. Institutions come and go, they develop and change. The institution's purpose is not itself, but the collection. This must be preserved. In Switzerland, we also know the case where a foundation has closed its own museum and entrusted its collection to a public institution as a permanent loan [...].
(Raymann, 2023b)

The discussion section (chapter 5.3) will situate Bezzola’s proposal in the overall discourse on deaccessioning and elaborate on the challenges which it poses in the context of the present paper’s overall research interest. For now, it will be considered a viable alternative option which, as Bezzola states, has already been applied in Switzerland. His statement is in line with ICOM’s Code of Ethics in the sense that it understands any given museum’s identity as that of a custodian of artworks, making the preservation of paintings its main mission. According to this definition, any loss of paintings from the collection must be considered a fundamental failure of the museum to fulfil its core function.

Stegmann does not refer to this proposal by Bezzola, but recalls a similar statement by Swiss museum director Dieter Schwarz,

[...] who wrote [...] in a letter to the editor in NZZ, [...] that smaller museums would not have the [...] right to exist in the future, that it would not be possible to maintain them. So, I have to say, a very elitist attitude, which I cannot fully understand, because, really, you are in Switzerland and you care for grassroots democracy, and Dieter Schwarz as a Swiss museum person [...] came across as a little elitist I thought.
(lines 558–563)

Apart from his reflections on the negative reactions to the announcement of the planned sale of paintings, Stegmann mentions in passing that “in the region [...] there was actually more approval, so there was a certain understanding there (lines 564–565). This brief remark can be contextualized in the light of the data from interview 2. As already mentioned, Georg Matter's less detailed memory of the critical reporting can in part be explained by his position in the regional administration. However, it also indicates that the media outlets which are most relevant to his work, because their geographical reach coincides with his radius of responsibility, generally reported less critically than the international media. Accordingly, he does not recall the regional public perception as negative either.

Well, I can hardly remember a critical reaction to it. [...] The way I recall it, it was noted, and somehow nobody found it illogical. In my direct environment, or here in the regional [...] and also in the local context of Baden, as far as I can judge. I don't live in Baden myself, I am not aware of everything that is going on there. But [...] I don't think it was actually somehow odd, right? It was not registered as odd by the people here. To a certain degree that certainly has something to do with the with the canton of Aargau, right? Which is more of a rural agglomeration canton, between the – in Swiss terms, right? – urban centers of Zurich, Basel and Bern. I imagine if it had happened in Zurich, or if it had happened in Basel, I think there would probably have been other reactions. [...] We have a relatively down-to-earth relation to culture here, in Aargau. And I actually interpret these reactions, or rather the lack of a reaction, at least of a negative one, in the canton of Aargau, really in a way that people were like 'Yes, well, why not?', so...
(Interview 2, lines 319–335)

Matter's explanation for the local population's relative equanimity – the canton's rural character and the lower interest in cultural topics compared to large cities – is based on his personal and professional familiarity with the region and can therefore be considered accurate. However, a review of media coverage also shows that local and regional reporting differed in content from international reporting.

The majority of local media reports were published in two periods: first in May and June 2020, after the original publication of the strategy paper *Zukunft Langmatt* and the associated initial communication of the museum's deaccession plans. The researcher's review did not identify international reactions from this period. A second wave of reports then appeared in October and November 2023, concurring with the critical international coverage, in the weeks leading up to the auction of the three paintings at Christie's, and presumably triggered by the auction house's corresponding press release dates September 29, 2023 (Christie's Press Centre, 2023)⁸.

Considering the strategic objective of the external communication in the overall context of the *Zukunft Langmatt* strategy, the review of the media coverage indicates that the museum was successful in the sense that it specifically targeted the local population – its most crucial stakeholder with regard to the planned referendum. The reporting managed to convey the intricacies of Museum Langmatt's complex challenges and integrated the deaccessioning plans into the overall context of the sustainable renovation of the building and the

⁸ Towards the end of the press release, a longer footnote provides a summary of the context of the sale under the heading 'Support for the Museum Langmatt'. However, its primary function as a marketing tool requires an overall positive tone and limits its ability to convey complex, unpleasant content. Therefore, the text follows the established pattern of an auction announcement, whose main message is to convey the rareness and artistic quality of the paintings.

foundation's finances⁹. The later international reporting, however, is in line with ICOM's intention and highlights the association's critical stance¹⁰, while the specific strategic context appears to have been of secondary importance.

5.2.9 Evaluation

With regard to the research question, the deaccessioning's outcomes may be secondary in the sense that, as mentioned in chapter 1.1, the present study adopts a causal-analytical approach rather than pursuing a normative agenda. It does not recommend specific managerial measures as effective and thus transferrable, but is concerned with the overall correlation between a specific form of deaccessioning type and the underlying main organizational strategy. Having said that, the interviewees' evaluation of the effectiveness does deserve attention, because the analysis considers all phases of the deaccessioning process, from its original inception through its practical implementation to its final phase, the evaluation.

From the cantonal perspective, Georg Matter describes the overall process as successful and highlights the Zukunft Langmatt strategy as its starting point.

[T]he strategy [...], that is really a merit of Markus Stegmann. And that triggered a dynamic that ultimately led to this development, which they are now in the middle of, and which has so far gone very positively and as desired. [...] [I]t seems very much like a continuum, right? So they had a plan, they made a strategy, they then derived a plan from that, a process plan. They always moved along that plan, step by step, and basically this plan has always worked the way they wanted it to. Thanks to the good work of Markus Stegmann and also the responsible parties in the foundation council, who did all this very professionally and with the necessary patience and with the necessary communication. So, all in all just a professional crew, which is on it. And in this context the sale of the paintings is just one step, a development stage in this whole development of the last eight years, I would say.
(Interview 2, lines 440–453).

⁹ All reviewed regional articles describe the planned picture sale as an exceptional situation and weigh positive and negative aspects against each other; Fahrländer (2020a, 2020b & 2020c) mentions 'Zukunft Langmatt'-strategy in either the sub header or the first paragraph of all articles and elaborates on its details; Altorfer (2020) organizes her article on the strategy into ten questions, covering the decision-making process and desired outcome as well as legal as well as collection-related aspects.

¹⁰ The international articles from October 2023 either quote Tobia Bezzola directly or refer to the critical perspective on the planned deaccession: The Art Newspaper (2023) headlines its article on the auction with Bezzola's qualification of the sale as "very short-sighted", maintaining that the planned auction "sparks outrage." The description of the sale as "high treason" in the headline of the Die Zeit article, already mentioned in the introduction, is also a direct quote from Bezzola. Artforum describes the "cash-strapped" museum's situation as being "under fire."

Matter thus characterizes the deaccessions as an integrated component of a wider planning process which successfully achieved its objectives. He elaborates by further specifying to role of the deaccessions in the overall strategic context.

Of course, the sale of the paintings was a key moment, insofar as they knew that if *this* succeeds, then the future is actually secured, right? Because the contributions for the renovation were already granted. They knew that they would be able to renovate the building, they would be able to develop the construction. But of course that doesn't make sense if the foundation itself can't continue to function existentially, does it? So in that respect, the sale of the paintings is an important key moment, when it became clear, now things can really continue. Now the Langmatt has a future, right?
(lines 460–467)

Characterizing the sale of paintings as a turning point, Matter highlights their specific relevance to the process of achieving long-term financial sustainability. Stegmann similarly evaluates the process as a success, stressing the achievement of financial stability as its most important outcome.

[T]hese 40.3 million this amount, invested like this, [secure] the museum's long-term future, so we are talking about fifty to eighty years here, where with the 2.5 percent interest rate, which is an extremely conservative estimate, it's probably closer to 3 per cent, um, 2.5 per cent, as I said equals one million, the museum is given a security. [...] [The] goal is that now the museum fulfills the purpose of the foundation.
(Interview 1, lines 667–690)

Stegmann thus links the deaccessions, the central operative measure in the achievement of the strategic goal of long-term financial security, back to the purpose of the foundation, which, as chapter 5.2.1 elaborated, consists in the fulfilment of the foundation mandate and informs the museum's unique identity and mission.

5.3 Discussion

Following Gläser and Laudel's (2010) model for conducting and analyzing expert interviews, which states that, “[i]n order to answer the research question, we must now confront the empirical results with the theoretical context in which the question was formulated” (Gläser & Laudel, 2010, p. 261), the final section of this case study will discuss the findings from the analysis against the background of the preliminary considerations and the literature review.

The two objectives of this discussion are: firstly, to situate the three analyzed perspectives on the Langmatt case in the overall context of the debate outlined in chapter 3; and secondly, to relate the results from chapter 5 back to the two concepts established in chapters 2.1 and 2.2. Since the need for case-specific definitions of the two terms

operationally motivated deaccessioning and organizational survival arose from the research question itself; this approach provides a sufficient basis for determining whether Museum Langmatt's deaccession can be qualified as the operational manifestation of an organizational survival strategy.

Chapters 3.2 and 3.3 demonstrated that the deaccessioning debate can be contextualized in the wider paradigm shift from the object- to the people-centered understanding of museums. The former defines museums as permanent repositories of physical cultural heritage. Derived from this identity, common to all museums, is their core function, the preservation and care of these objects. This mission requires collections to be static; the removal of objects constitutes a failure to fulfil the museum's core function. In contrast, proponents of a people-centered museum conception understand the collection as a dynamic entity that reacts to environmental influences. They emphasize the relevance of the unique identity of individual institutions and the resulting specificity of their mission, which arises from the uniqueness of the institution and its environment.

The data generated from the two expert interviews allows for the categorization of interviewees 1 and 2 as representatives of the people-centered view of museum. Chapter 5.2.1 shows that they both emphasize Museum Langmatt's complex, multifaceted value proposition, defining it not only as a place for enjoying visual art, but as a witness to industrial history and a significant site for local identity formation, while highlighting its recreational value. They define the collection of Impressionist paintings as part of a larger context, from which they derive the viability of balancing of the importance of individual paintings against the importance of the museum as a whole.

ICOM, on the other hand, advocates an explicitly object-centered understanding of museums; the analysis of its Code of Ethics, also in Chapter 5.1, demonstrates that the preservation of objects is viewed as the central mission common to all museums. Against this background, Tobias Bezzola's definition of museums as "means to an end" (Chapter 5.2.1) illustrates ICOM's prioritization of the preservation of objects over the preservation of the institution itself.

This prioritization provides the argumentative foundation for Bezzola's proposal, presented in Chapter 5.2.8, to close the museum and transfer the painting collection to a financially stable museum as a permanent loan. In the same chapter, Markus Stegmann recalls

a similar statement by the Swiss museum director Dieter Schwarz, who maintains that smaller museums are generally not fit to survive in the long term.

This interplay of deaccession criticism and the questioning of an institution's right to exist constitutes a direct parallel to the reference case of the Berkshire Museum presented in Chapter 3.4. In response to the museum's deaccessioning plans, an art critic proposed to close the museum instead of selling works from the collection.

A direct comparison between the analysis and chapter 3.4 reveals that not only the case of the Berkshire Museum itself, but also the approach with which Jandl (2021) examines it, show numerous parallels to the present case study. Although Jandl does not use the explicit framework of strategic management terms to describe the deaccession process, she examines the connection between deaccession measures and their overall strategic context, explicitly labelling the process as a survival measure. In both cases, the respective museum's mission is derived from a foundation charter which informs its unique, locally rooted identity and mission to provide a cultural offering specifically tailored to the cultural needs of the local population. Both museums assess the significance of their collections in a context-related manner; however, unlike the Langmatt Museum, the Berkshire Museum was forced to sell paintings that were considered essential to this identity.

Both the Berkshire and the Langmatt Museum were concerned with the long-term improvement of their financial situation; in both cases, external consultants facilitated the elaboration of corresponding strategy papers. The negative public reactions constitute another parallel, although Museum Langmatt received support from the local and regional public (see chapter 5.2.2). A key difference, however, lies in the communication of the respective strategies: Jandl notes the Berkshire's lack of transparency, while the data in chapter 5.2.7 suggests that, in the case of Museum Langmatt, transparent communication was prioritized as part of the overall strategy, since the local population was a key stakeholder with regard to the referendum on large financial subsidies for comprehensive building renovations. In summary, chapter 3's consideration of Jandl's Berkshire Museum investigation as a reference case seems justified, since both the overall research interest and the object of investigation are to a large degree comparable.

Before linking the results of the analysis back to chapter 2's case-specific concept definitions, the underrepresentation of ICOM's critical perspective on the case needs to be

addressed once more. Chapter 4.7 already highlighted the imbalance between the amount of self-generated data from the two expert interviews and the documents used to analyze ICOM's stance on deaccessioning in general and the Langmatt case in particular. Against the background of the analysis, it becomes clear that insufficient data cannot fully explain this underrepresentation; apart from the quantity of data, it was first and foremost their integration into the overall context of the analysis that proved difficult.

These challenges are best illustrated by the interplay between the data analysis in chapters 5.2.1 to 5.2.3 and the working definition of the term organizational survival strategy in Chapter 2.2.4. The definition relies on a concept of strategy that requires the consideration of both the organizational environment and the unique organizational identity (see Varbanova, 2013, pp. 58–65). It is based on the assumption that cultural institutions can possess an intrinsic cultural value, and that their preservation represents a valid strategic goal in itself.

However, since ICOM advocates the object-centered understanding of museums detailed in Chapter 3.2, it does not consider questions of an organization's individual circumstances but instead assumes the comparability of all institutions. The association's ethics-centered argumentation is thus incompatible with the case-study's overall approach, because it is not case-specific, but designed for universal applicability. To a large extent, ICOM's ethics-based evaluation of the case thus eludes the analysis with the concepts of strategic management.

With these limitations in mind, the qualitative data generated through the two expert interviews provides numerous indications of the strategic nature of Museum Langmatt's deaccessioning proceedings.

The analysis of the organizational environment (chapters 5.2.2 and 5.2.3) revealed the overall picture of an organization in which systemic, negative factors predominate. Stegmann's statements in particular highlight the systemic and increasing lack of funds, which negatively impacted all functional areas of the museum and, according to his own evaluation, constituted its most unfavorable environmental factor. The analysis in chapter 5.2.3 categorized it as both an external threat as well as an internal weakness: public funding from the municipality and the canton was insufficient. Although this external threat to the organization was countered by the productive relationship with the two political stakeholders as an external opportunity

(see chapter 5.2.2), this relationship secured stable, but not sufficient funding. In view of the fact that the museum is a foundation under private law, full funding from public funds was never a realistic option.

The other dimension of the financial challenges was internal. According to Stegmann, the foundation's capital was too low from the outset and continued to erode over the years. The internal financial situation was thus not only unstable, but continued to deteriorate over time. Referencing the museum's publicly available financial reports, Stegmann states that the foundation's capital would only have been sufficient for a few more years before the museum would have had to be closed. The urgency of his account led to the finding that the lack of foundation capital was indeed the museum's most dominant internal weakness and indicated the institution's engagement in a struggle for survival.

With regard to chapter 5.2.2's discussion of the museum's most favorable environmental factors, the key external opportunity is the solid support of the local population, which is reflected in measurable figures. The annual reports show that visitor numbers have increased fourfold in ten years, with a high and steadily increasing local share. Most importantly, the referendum discussed in chapters 5.2.2, 5.2.7 and 5.2.8, with its near-80% approval rate for a contribution of 10 million CHF to the museum's complete renovation, illustrates the museum's firm roots in the local community. Stegmann himself emphasizes the importance of this significant local anchoring in chapter 5.2.2.

Museum Langmatt's most crucial internal strength is the high quality of its collection of Impressionist paintings. The analysis of Stegmann's description of the process of identifying potential paintings for deaccession (chapter 5.2.6) showed that different notions of value were weighed against each other in a strategic interplay of external and internal expertise: the monetary value, determined by the auction houses' valuation experts, and the identity-related curatorial value, which considered the context of the institutional identity. The selected paintings thus generated a sufficient amount at auction, while the damage to the core of the collection was minimized.

In a nutshell, the data indicates that Museum Langmatt's deaccessions were indeed embedded in a wider strategic context. They were preceded by the identification of the organizational environment's most crucial favorable and unfavorable factors (chapters 5.2.2 and 5.2.3) and addressed the museum's most pressing weakness, the lack of foundation

capital, by means of its most significant strength, the collection of paintings (chapter 5.2.4.2 and 5.2.5). At the same time, the selection of paintings to be deaccessioned (chapter 5.2.6) was guided by considerations of their relevance to the museum's unique identity (chapter 5.2.1). Finally, the investment concept developed by external financial advisors (chapter 5.1) secures museum operations through the annual interest, leaving the foundation capital itself untouched while guaranteeing a sufficient and sustainable source of income. It thus seems justified to qualify the strategy as long-term. In conclusion, the data analysis suggests that Museum Langmatt's operationally motivated deaccessioning of the three Cézanne paintings was the operational cornerstone of a long-term organizational survival strategy.

The case study has thus successfully demonstrated a correlation between a specific form of deaccessioning and the overarching main organisational strategy. Based on this finding, it is now possible to hypothesize transferability of this paper's overall approach to other cases. The hypothesis derived from the present research is that a general correlation exists between a given type of deaccessioning and the respective museum's main organizational strategy, and that this correlation can be identified using this study's qualitative research design.

Due to the limited significance of single-case studies, supporting this hypothesis requires a significant increase in the amount of available data, gathered through further case studies. Specifically, analyzing different forms of deaccessioning in diverse institutional contexts using a research design comparable to the one presented in this paper is needed. If sufficient data later confirms the hypothesis, it could provide the foundation for a new typology which relates the different types of deaccessioning to the different main organizational strategies.

To conclude this paper, a preliminary draft of such a typology is proposed to illustrate its basic principles. The model highlights the interrelation between deaccessioning and main organizational strategy. At the same time, it incorporates ethical considerations specific to each deaccessioning scenario.

	Survival-driven	Stability-driven	Growth-driven
practically motivated	possibly	yes	yes
curatorially motivated	no	possibly	yes
operationally motivated	yes	yes	no

Figure 1: A preliminary proposal for a deaccessioning typology based on strategic motivation

The matrix considers the relation between an institution's main strategic goal (survival, stability or growth, depending on the assessment of positive and negative factors in the organisational environment) and the tactical reasoning behind the respective deaccession (practical, curatorial or operational considerations). The intersections' colouring indicates the ethical considerations informing each scenario, designating deaccessioning as generally permissible, possible, or not permissible. An expanded version of this model could potentially provide a practical starting for museum management and facilitate the contextualization of deaccessioning plans within the respective museum's strategic goals, while at the same time considering ethical implications.

According to this model, operationally motivated deaccessioning is permissible in organizations facing existential threats to their existence, as exemplified in the present study's investigation of Museum Langmatt. In organizational contexts with neutral or even favourable environmental conditions, however, deaccessioning is likely unnecessary, because strengths and opportunities may present alternative strategic options. Curatorially motivated deaccessioning, the refinement of the collection's quality, is advisable in institutions with more positive than negative environmental factors, because in the absence of fundamental threats to the future existence of the institution, prioritising quality-related curatorial issues can be considered appropriate. In organizations struggling to survive, however, the model suggests that funds should be directed towards operational costs rather than curatorial

refinement in order to stabilize operations and secure the institution's future. Finally, according to this model, practically motivated deaccessioning is always an option, but less likely to be prioritized in the context of an organisational survival strategy, where existential weaknesses and threats require focus on the most urgent organizational issues. In essence, the model attempts to mediate the seemingly irreconcilable ethical and managerial considerations which have been shaping the deaccessioning discourse to date.

5.4 Suggestions for Further Research

As mentioned above, the limited significance of a single-case study calls for its findings to be supplemented by further case studies until a sufficient amount of data is available to adequately test the hypothesis of a general correlation between different types of deaccessioning and main organizational strategies. Ideally, such case-studies will investigate different types of deaccessioning in museums with diverse identities and varied environmentally conditions while at the same time using a comparable qualitative research design to facilitate the comparison and correlation of the data.

To give one example, the removal of duplicates from graphic collections rarely generates funds and is typically considered the result of pragmatic collection management considerations. It may, however, be worthwhile to investigate the connection of this type of deaccessioning and the respective museum's broader strategic goals.

Apart from collecting further data to support the hypothesis, the continuing development of Museum Langmatt's organizational strategy offers itself opportunities for further consideration. Towards the end of the expert interview, in lines 697–709, Markus Stegmann mentions plans for another strategic reorientation of the museum after its reopening in 2026. These statements were not taken into account in the present study, which focused on the deaccession case. Nevertheless, they indicate a fundamental shift of strategy from survival- to stability-driven. Stegmann himself describes the intended development as an improvement in the overall visitor experience; further growth, he maintains, is not indicated with regard to the museum's limited capacities to serve its audience. The detailed consideration of this strategic reorientation provides material for further research.

6 Conclusion

The topic of this Master's thesis was the controversially discussed deaccessioning of three Paul Cézanne paintings from the collection of Museum Langmatt in Baden, Switzerland in the fall of 2023. The discourse on deaccessioning is becoming increasingly relevant in museum management for a variety of reasons, among them the increasing scarcity of funds. Nevertheless, the sale of artworks by museums is often perceived as taboo.

The overarching research interest was to investigate whether it is possible to approach the case using the tools of strategic management theory, specifically the framework of the main organizational strategies. The specific research question was: is it possible to interpret Museum Langmatt's sale of the three paintings as the operational manifestation of an organisational survival strategy?

The first step in approaching this question was to map out the conceptual frame by establishing pragmatic working definitions of the two terms organisational survival strategy and financially motivated deaccessioning. An organisational survival strategy was defined as a set of targeted measures to sustainably improve an organizational environment characterized by weaknesses and threats to the institution's existence, under consideration of the organization's unique identity.

Defining a feasible working definition of the term financially motivated deaccessioning proved more complex. Used for those museum sales whose proceeds go towards operational costs, it is usually contrasted with curatorially motivated deaccessioning, the proceeds of which are reinvested into the collection. While both types of deaccessioning generate funds, the latter is named after its ultimate purpose of refining the collection's quality, while the former is named after its intermediate goal of raising money, suggesting that profit maximization is an end in itself. This insight called into question the terminology's neutrality and thus its suitability for academic contexts. It motivated the proposal of the alternative term operationally motivated deaccessioning, which was used in the further course of the thesis to describe museum sales whose proceeds benefit operational purposes.

The thematic literature review focused on the discourse since the early 1970s, which is generally regarded as the beginning of today's debate on deaccessioning. Much of the debate is, at its core, ethics-based, and concerned with the question of the permissibility of the practice under consideration of the museum's traditional core function of preservation.

According to this understanding, museums are permanent repositories of physical cultural heritage, static in the sense that they may be subject to additions, but not subtractions. While museum associations have gradually acknowledged the validity of deaccessions whose funds are reinvested into the collection or its direct care, deaccessioning for operational reasons is still rejected, since it constitutes a fundamental violation of its core function. Proponents of operationally motivated deaccessioning have highlighted the necessity of the practice in order to save struggling museums; while their argumentation was based on pragmatic considerations, it did not fundamentally question the notion of ethics inherent in the discourse at large.

In recent years, the question of deaccessioning ethics has been raised anew. Parallel to the wider discourse around the redefinition of the very function of museums from object- to audience-centred institutions, recent contributions to the debate pose the question of whether the preservation of individual works of art should be considered more ethical than the preservation of entire institutions for the local communities they serve. Thus, the value of the museum's unique identity was included into the debate, laying the foundation for considering its preservation as a legitimate concern.

The case itself was analysed with a qualitative research design, a mixed-methods approach consisting of qualitative interviews and document analysis. An initial review of the media reports revealed three main perspectives on the Langmatt case: the internal angle, represented by museum director Markus Stegmann; the external, critical voice provided by Tobia Bezzola, then-President of ICOM Switzerland; and the cultural policy perspective, represented by Georg Matter, Head of the Cultural Department of the Canton of Aargau. Data on the internal and cultural policy perspectives was generated through two semi-structured expert interviews. An interview with ICOM Switzerland was not possible. It was replaced by a document analysis of ICOM's Code of Ethics and Deaccessioning Guidelines, which state the association's general attitude towards deaccessioning, as well as those media statements and interviews in which Bezzola commented specifically on the Langmatt case. Although this approach considered general as well as case-specific documents, it did not fully compensate for the underrepresentation of ICOM's perspective in the analysis.

The main analytical categories were developed in a deductive approach according to the conceptual framework established in the preliminary considerations. It was largely structured by the breaking down the case-specific definition of the term organisational

survival strategy into its semantic components; depending on the amount of data, some of the resulting categories were divided into subcategories, and the actual coding combined the overall deductive approach with inductive elements, including codes which emerged during the data review process.

The overall image which emerged from the analysis was that of an institution whose negative environmental conditions far outweighed the positive ones. The most prevalent and systemic internal weakness identified was a systemic, continuously worsening lack of foundation capital, which affected all aspects of the museum's operations and would have led to bankruptcy within a few years. In contrast, the museum's collection represented its most significant strength in that it contained works that were relevant enough for the secondary market to generate the required funds while simultaneously keeping the core of the collection intact. The deaccessioning was thus strategic in the sense that it addressed the museum's most detrimental weakness by means of its biggest strength. At the same time, the organization's unique identity guided the selection of the paintings to be deaccessioned. The discussion section linked these findings back to the research question, concluding that Museum Langmatt's operationally motivated deaccessions were indeed the cornerstone of an overarching organizational survival strategy.

The discussion once more highlighted the fact that the integration of data which was intended to provide information about ICOM's stance on the Langmatt case was only possible to a very limited extent. The analysis had illustrated that this challenge can only in part be explained by the lack of available data. A purely ethics-based argumentation is incompatible with the case-study's methodology mainly because it is designed for universal applicability; it does not take into account the unique identity and environment of the Langmatt Museum and thus eludes analysis with the tools of strategic management.

In a final step, the findings from the analysis motivated the formulation of the hypothesis of a general correlation between different types of deaccessioning and the main organizational strategies. The suggestion for further research was therefore to test the validity of this hypothesis on other deaccessioning cases in order to increase the amount of available data. Should this approach prove successful, it could ultimately result in a new classification of deaccessioning types based on the principles of strategic management. The paper concluded with the proposal of a preliminary model for such a future classification, taking into

account both ethical and managerial considerations in an attempt to reconcile the two seemingly incompatible perspectives.

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