

Habermas and Art: the Colonization of the Lifeworld

ABSTRACT

For Jürgen Habermas, the pathologies of late capitalist democracies stem in large part from what he calls the colonization of the lifeworld. Colonization occurs when the media of money and power infiltrate the lifeworld, which supplies the symbolic resources for socialization, social cohesion, and cultural transmission. This paper will suggest that, while Habermas does not explicitly address the potential of art to counteract this colonization, his ideas about the role of communicative action in social life point to a more active role for the arts in this area than he himself has proposed. I then examine the debate that ensued as a result of the 1990-91 “High and Low’: Modern Art and Popular Culture” exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (MoMA) to assess the extent to which art can generate communicative action that could counteract the colonization of the lifeworld.

INTRODUCTION

This paper will explore the role of art in Habermas’s work with regard to its potential to promote individual emancipation and a functioning lifeworld. The focus will be on art’s capacity to generate communicative action, and to counter the effects of the colonization of the lifeworld. The potential of art to achieve these effects stems from the unique social and theoretical role visual art in particular has historically played in Western societies. As an object created specifically to generate meaning exhibited in the public space of the museum, the work of art, as noted by Kant (Weber, 1976), invites and indeed requires interpretation and communication. Added to this is the treatment of the sphere of art in theory: art as both an antidote to and critique of capitalism has been a recurring theme in the writings of political and social critics since the industrial revolution. This unique role occupied by the arts in Western history leads to the question investigated by this article: are the discussions arising from art objects and exhibits uniquely suited to generate reflection on social issues that might escape notice in more traditional social and political fora? As will be described below, an analysis of the critical reception of the 1991 “High and Low” exhibit revealed a self-reflective attitude regarding the colonization of the lifeworld itself. This suggests that the arts have an important role to play in public life, namely, to promote a particular form of communicative action in the public sphere, perhaps one which plays a unique role in counteracting the effects of this colonization.

The “High and Low” exhibit is an interesting case for our purposes here as, nine years after Habermas published “Modernity and Postmodernity” (1981), his most sustained engagement with the question of the aesthetic in modernity, the foremost modernist museum in the world attempted to confront this same issue in a blockbuster exhibit. And indeed, many elements of Habermas’s argument in this article appear in both the exhibition catalogue, the critical reaction to the exhibit, as well as in several of the artworks on display. This exhibit provoked the most extensive critical reaction of any exhibit in MoMA’s history up until that time (Coleman, 2016), making it a useful limit case to examine the potential of art to generate communicative action that could counteract the colonization of the lifeworld.

Another goal of this paper is to enlarge the field of the sociology of art to include a focus on the intellectual content of art, specifically, the intellectual content of the visual art exhibited in museums as elaborated in art criticism. While, since the publication of Howard Becker's *Art Worlds* (1982), anti-elitism has pervaded most approaches to the analysis of art (de la Fuente, 2007), I will show that the social and theoretical space of artworks designated as "high" has indeed granted a special role to the "high" visual arts in Western society. Habermas's theory of the role of communicative action in society then allows us to see that that the critical discourse generated by exhibits of art in museums can provide public reflection on important social issues, like the colonization of the lifeworld, rarely addressed through other public fora.

This paper will begin with an overview of Habermas's theory of the colonization of the lifeworld, then will turn to a historical account of the theoretical and social space occupied by "high" art over the past 200 years in Western Europe and the United States. In this context, the evolution of Habermas's ideas about art and its role in modern society will be discussed. Finally, MoMA's "High and Low" exhibit will be examined to gauge the extent to which "high" art can generate a public discussion which can counteract the colonization of the lifeworld.

THE COLONIZATION OF THE LIFEWORLD

Habermas regards modern society as comprising both a system that operates in order to fulfill the material and administrative needs of the society, and a lifeworld, the shared meanings that social actors must have to ensure social cohesion, individual satisfaction, and the reproduction of the society over time. In order to effectively coordinate the material reproduction of society and maintain social order, the system has evolved streamlined processes to orient action, namely, the media of money and power (Habermas, 1987; 1975). These media have been developed to coordinate action as they can effectively circumvent the process of reaching agreement, which, for Habermas, is the original form of coordinating action in human life (Duvenage, 2003). These media are used in the system to motivate action, based on the incentives of profit and administrative/ juridical power. The problems begin, for Habermas, when these media (and their accompanying motivations) infiltrate the lifeworld, short-circuiting the processes of communicative action (reaching agreement) that are necessary to sustain the lifeworld structures of socialization, social cohesion, and cultural continuity. While the system can function effectively dispensing with much communicative action, indeed, it must, argues Habermas, when the system reaches the level of complexity that is has in late capitalism, the lifeworld cannot function without individuals engaging in communicative action.

As exchange comes to be effected through impersonal, abstract media like money and power instead of between socially-located individuals or groups, Habermas sees a crisis point realized in modern society, evident in two specific outcomes. Firstly, as exchange is done through anonymous media, the workings of money and power are effectively immunized against critique or action on the part of the general public (Habermas, 1975, 1987). Secondly, the utilitarian logic of profit maximization of capitalist enterprise has pervaded society. This happens both through employment patterns as well as government policy, for, as the state is ultimately dependent on funds from capitalist enterprise, government intervention in social life through extensive social services works to transfer this utilitarian attitude to more and more areas of life. Examples include educational policy that promotes job skills over education, urban renewal programs whose policies prioritize luxury and tourism real estate over middle-class

infrastructure and community building, and government spending policies that promote GDP growth over employment and standard of living of the general population.

We have seen the spread of institutional power into the communicative spaces of the lifeworld in the United States in recent years, in particular in those areas of life responsible for cultural transmission: educational and cultural institutions (Lee, 2014; Lo and Bahar, 2013; Hancock, 2008). Evidence of diminishing spaces for communicative action in political life has been documented in Europe (Edwards, 2007) as well as the role of the lifeworld and the effect of its colonization in social movement participation (Fields, 1991; Edwards, 2008). The world of art has also seen the encroachment of the media of money and power into its structures, diminishing spaces for communicative action. However, owing to the particular theoretical and social space occupied by art in the past 200 years in the Western world, this exhibit, as I explain below, was in a unique position to generate public reflection on this very fact.

THE THEORETICAL SPACE OF ART

In his *Sources of the Self* (1989), Charles Taylor has provided the most complete overview of how art came to play this special role in the Western imagination. Its origins lie ultimately in the Romantic movement of the late eighteenth century, which affirmed the rights of the individual, the imagination, and feeling against a rationality, exalted by the Enlightenment naturalists since Descartes, which sought to control and exploit an instrumentalized world of dead matter (Taylor, 1989). The eighteenth century Deist view of interlocking purposes becomes, through the Romantic transformation, the notion of a purpose or life force coursing through nature, and of a voice or impulse of truth which exists within every individual (Taylor, 1989). It followed that if our access to nature is through an inner voice or impulse, human beings can only know this nature through articulating what they find within them. Thus, in Taylor's view, the idea of nature as an intrinsic moral source is inextricable here with an 'Expressivist' vision of human life, in that in this view, fulfilling one's nature means embracing this inner impulse and expressing it, that is, making what was hidden manifest in the world.

Seen as essential to human fulfillment was not just life, but a feeling and vision of ourselves as expressed at its most highest in art (Taylor, 1989: 22). It was thus that in this historical period that the word art came to embody a certain kind of practice; while before an art had been any human skill, the word now meant a certain kind of skill, the 'imaginative' or 'creative' arts, and, more importantly, 'art' came to stand for a special kind of truth, 'imaginative' truth, and 'artist' for a special kind of person. It is not surprising that it was also at this time the arts as a special kind of discipline, which included the fields of literature, music, painting, sculpture, theatre, etc., was established, and distinguished from other areas of human knowledge and skills (Williams, 1958).

As Raymond Williams explains in his classic *Culture and Society: 1780 – 1950*, the modern definition of culture was formed in response and partly in opposition to the development of the industrialized societies of the Western nation states. In a sense, ‘culture’ embodied characteristics that were seen as being distinctly human, such as emotion, aesthetic pleasure, morality, and imaginative freedom that were viewed as being eclipsed by the social repercussions of the new economic order (Williams, 1958). With the Expressivist turn as a cultural movement and its repercussions in the arts, comes the view of nature as a reservoir of truth which resides within the individual, a reservoir to be drawn on to produce works which express something about the universe and the human beings which are part of it which cannot be accessed in any other way. From the end of the eighteenth century right up to today, this vision of an inner source of truth, separate from, independent of, and indeed opposed to the human capacity for rational, instrumentalizing thought, will be a persistent theme in artistic discourse, from the Romantics’ notion of the artistic work as ‘objectifying’ a life force which runs through all of nature, through the Modernists’ varying attempts to free human experience from the growing rationalization abetted by the accelerating development of technology, up to the Postmodernists’ attack on the notion of a unitary self in the search for liberation from a repressive, de-humanized world (Taylor, 1989).

While sociologists have emphasized the status preoccupations of the upper classes and efforts to distinguish themselves and their cultural consumption from the lower classes (DiMaggio, 1982; Bourdieu, 1984), an equally important dimension of the distinction between the “high” arts and craft, folk, or commercial art were these new *beliefs* about art. The belief that artworks contained a special sort of truth led to a creation of a new tradition of scholarly inquiry that combined aesthetic criticism, philosophy, and political theory. Habermas, as the most prominent member of the second generation Critical Theorists, can himself be situated in this line of thinkers: major themes in his work can be traced most directly to first generation Critical Theorist Theodor Adorno, but also reach back to the German Idealists, beginning with Emmanuel Kant and including Friedrich Schiller and Herbert Marcuse.

The beginnings of a notion of the work of art as issuing from or realizing an ‘epiphany’, that is, the work of art as “the locus of a manifestation which brings us into the presence of something otherwise inaccessible, and which is of the highest moral or spiritual significance, a manifestation which also defines or completes something, even as it reveals” (Taylor, 1989: 419), are found in Kant’s *Critique of Judgement* (Taylor, 1989). This recovering of contact with a moral source in that “the epiphany is our achieving contact with something, where this contact either fosters and/or itself constitutes a spiritually significant fulfillment or wholeness” (Taylor, 1989: 425) is the centerpiece of the arguments of both Schiller (Weber, 1976) and Marcuse (Weber, 1976) about the role of the aesthetic experience in modernity. And finally, the thinker who juxtaposed the epiphanic power of art most forcefully to a vision of the world around us as we ordinarily experience it as dead or forsaken would be Adorno, expressed most unforgivingly in his *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

Habermas’s own ideas about the role of the aesthetic in modernity have evolved over his scholarly career. In *Legitimation Crisis*, Habermas presents art as an “explosive ingredient” within bourgeois ideology (1975: 78). He argues that extensive state intervention in both public and private affairs, e.g. education, administrative regulation of social interaction, urban planning, the scientization of professional practices, etc., takes the place of the autodetermination of these areas of life by the citizens themselves, resulting in the transfer of the instrumental rationality of the capitalist economic system into the communicative and cultural spheres of society (1975).

While privatized religion, scientific philosophy, and strategic-utilitarian morality have all been put to use within the economic and political systems, bourgeois art remained independent, “collect[ing] residual needs that could find no satisfaction within the ‘system of needs’” (Habermas, 1975: 78). These needs he characterizes as “the desire for a mimetic relation with nature; the need for living together in solidarity outside the group egoism of the immediate family; the longing for the happiness of a communicative experience exempt from imperatives of purposive rationality and giving scope to imagination as well as spontaneity.” (1975: 78). However, at this point, Habermas does not elaborate on how art could contribute to democracy, and instead warns against the surrealist attempts to reintegrate art with life.

Habermas further develops his ideas about the role of the aesthetic in modern society and the life of the individual in his Theory of Communicative Action (TCA), Volumes I and II (1984, 1987), and in “Modernity and Postmodernity” (1981). Habermas discusses what he terms the “aesthetic validity claim” as part of his discussion of speech act theory in TCA. The aesthetic validity claim is one of the three possible validity claims actors can make through speech; the other two are the cognitive and normative. While cognitive validity claims are based on observable evidence, normative validity claims on legitimate social relations, aesthetic validity claims are based, Habermas argues, on the perception of truth or truthfulness on the part of the speaker. Habermas further distinguishes between expressive and evaluative aesthetic validity claims: while expressive utterances reveal something about our subjective experiences and are judged by the truthfulness or sincerity of expressions (1984), evaluative utterances indicate our values, and are judged by the perceived adequacy of these standards of value. Aesthetic validity claims are different from the other two types of validity claims, for Habermas, because, unlike cognitive and normative validity claims, aesthetic validity claims do not make the claim to universality implicit in the former. This is also the case with evaluative validity claims (Habermas, 1984). In fact, aesthetic criticism is “a variation of a form of argumentation in which the adequacy of value standards, the vocabulary of our evaluative language generally, is made thematic” (1984: 20). Artworks here, however, become the argument (1984).

In “Modernity and Postmodernity,” Habermas for the first time puts forth a role for the aesthetic in countering the colonization of the lifeworld and contributing to the emancipation of the individual:

A reified everyday praxes can be cured only by creating unconstrained interaction of the cognitive with the moral-practical and the aesthetic-expressive elements ...as soon as an [aesthetic] experience is used to illuminate a life-historical situation and is related to life problems... [t]he aesthetic experience then not only renews the interpretation of our needs in whose light we perceive the world. It permeates as well our cognitive significations and our normative expectations and changes the manner in which all these moments refer to one another (1981: 11-12)

In this article, he cites from a novel by Albrecht Wellmer to provide an example of how this could happen; the “High and Low” exhibit gives us the opportunity to test his thesis in real life.

THE SOCIAL SPACE OF ART

Along with its unique place in the history of criticism, art and its criticism have occupied a unique social space over the past two hundred years in capitalist democracies, as described by

Habermas himself in his early *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1996). Here, like Taylor, Habermas touches upon the special role of art in modern society, but with an emphasis on how this was a necessary step in the development of modern democracy. Here he traces the differentiation of one of the three spheres of modern life, the aesthetic (1981), in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In this period, he argues, we see the development of both the specifically aesthetic validity claim mentioned above as well as the public sphere of aesthetic production and criticism (1996). The development of the bourgeois family, the growing marketplace for cultural goods such as novels, plays, and autonomous artworks along with a discourse of criticism diffused through pamphlets and journals, and, finally, the creation of the physical spaces in which people could gather to discuss these works, were all interrelated phenomena that led to both a public sphere for critical, although not strictly political, discussions as well as a private world to which only the individual had access (1996). Along with the intimate sphere of the family, Habermas argues, this "...public sphere in apolitical form... provided the training ground for a critical public reflection still preoccupied with itself – a process of self-clarification of private people focusing on the genuine experiences of their novel privateness" (1996: 29). Habermas sees these discussions of aesthetics as creating both the psychological attitude (access to subjective needs and desires) and the social infrastructure necessary, (the coffeehouses, Tischgesellschaften, and salons, as well as the press and professional criticism) for the eventual flowering of the modern public sphere that, he argues, democracies must have to redeem their promise of a true rule of the people (1996).

We can see a similar relationship between the field of visual art and criticism and politics in France, as detailed by Thomas Crow in his *Painters and Public Life in 18th Century France* (1985). While the field of art criticism began in France with anonymous pamphlets criticizing the public Salon exhibits of the mid 1700s, the field of modern art in the United States developed much later. A substantial critical discourse did not emerge until the nineteen forties through the texts of art critics such as Clement Greenberg, Meyer Schapiro, Harold Rosenberg, Hilton Kramer, and Barbara Rose. Essential for the establishment of any modern cultural field (Ferguson, 1998; Baumann, 2007), discourse works to both legitimize a new cultural object *and* to create new values (Habermas, 1984), changing the meaning, significance, and, importantly, the experience of the object for the reader.

Along with the growth of art criticism, the social space occupied by "high" art contributes to its distinction both from other forms of cultural production as well as its privileged position with regard to generating a public discussion of social issues. As I have demonstrated elsewhere (Coleman, 2016), once an artwork is labeled "high" and exhibited in a museum, a claim of universal worth is made. This moves the artwork from the sphere of subjective taste and into the realm of normative validity claims, through which, according to Habermas, universal assent is at least in theory a possibility. It is therefore also the normative claims of high art that distinguish this type of cultural production from commercial, popular, or folk art (Eyerman & McCormick, 2007). Moreover, the uniquely American emphasis on museums as a source of moral and intellectual education has only added to the trend found in art criticism to link arguments about the work of artworks to their value to society as a whole (Einreinhofer, 1997). Finally, the art museum has been, especially since the growth of the public for museums after the 1970s, a part of the public sphere in a way that other venues for high art (theaters and classical concert halls) have not (Dubin, 1999).

THE “HIGH AND LOW” EXHIBIT

“High and Low” was an important exhibit in the history of American art for several reasons. Firstly, it represented the most public clash to date of the opposing theories about art of the modernists and postmodernists, a debate that had divided the art world since the 1970s. Secondly, as mentioned above, “High and Low” received more press than any other exhibit in the history of MoMA to that date (Coleman, 2016), with reviews in print media from around the country, from specialized art journals such as *Artforum* to popular national magazines such as *Time* and *Newsweek* as well as daily newspapers from all regions of the country. Finally, the fact that this reckoning with postmodernism was taking place at the museum that had done more than any other museum in the world to enshrine modernism as the preeminent art and theory signaled both a turning point in the art world as well in the history of the museum.

The exhibit was on view at MoMA in New York from October 1990 through January 1991, and then traveled to the Art Institute in Chicago and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. It was organized around three periods that mirrored MoMA’s permanent collection: the first section dealt with early modernists, such as Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque, Joan Miró, and Max Ernst; the second dealt with the Pop artists, such as Roy Lichtenstein, James Rosenquist, and Claes Oldenburg; and finally, a contemporary section featured three artists prominent on the contemporary art scene in the nineteen-eighties: Jeff Koons, Elizabeth Murray, and Jenny Holzer. The theme was the intersections between modern art and popular culture. To that end, examples of popular culture were displayed next to the works of modern art, and explanatory texts pointed out how the artists had used or were inspired by specific images or strategies taken from the visual culture of the period.

The “High and Low” exhibit, like “Modernity and Postmodernity” (1981), was an examination of the great cultural divide that had opened up in the past few decades between those with continued faith in the project of modernity, and those that questioned the very premises of this project. While in the exhibit, the latter were termed the “postmodernists” and, in Habermas’s article, are labeled the “Young Conservatives,” both groups share this fundamental loss of faith in the metanarratives of modernity. The exhibit in fact, was designed by curator Kirk Varnedoe¹ to counteract what he regarded as the pessimism of contemporary postmodern art and theory. Interestingly, as illustrated by Varnedoe’s selections for the Contemporary Reflections section of the exhibit and the catalogue descriptions of various other postmodern artists, much of this work can be read as commenting on and criticizing, albeit without ever naming it as such, Habermas’s vision of modern society and its colonized lifeworld.

In the exhibition catalogue. Varnedoe identifies the work of Robert Venturi and Robert Smithson as the origin of this “darker sensibility” he sees in postmodern art and theory. Their cynicism and pessimism, respectively, about modern society, he argues, manifested itself in their vision of the American West, which provided, “not vast possibility but a prophetic glimpse of a fixed and unvarying cultural order” (Varnedoe and Gopnick, 1991: 369). With the introduction of irony into art and architecture with postmodernism, continues Varnedoe, came also the nihilism of Smithson, whose “big, grim earthworks,” announced an “apocalyptic primitivism” (Varnedoe and Gopnick, 1991: 370). For Varnedoe, Smithson thought civilizations, like nature,

¹ The exhibit was co-curated with Adam Gopnick, but media attention focused on Varnedoe as new chief curator to signal the direction MoMA would take with regard to contemporary art. In this article, I will also focus on Varnedoe.

were both ruled by the principle of entropy, and that ultimately and inevitably, “inanimate matter [would triumph] over the busy irregularities of life” (Varnedoe and Gopnick, 1991: 370).

These descriptions of postmodern art ring familiar. In “Modernity and Postmodernity,” Habermas argues that, while critics like Daniel Bell place the blame on modernist culture as responsible for glorifying hedonism and undermining the work ethic necessary for a successful capitalist economy and stable social order (Habermas, 1981), it is in fact the successful capitalist economy that is the *cause* of these new developments in modernist culture. Habermas argues that “under the pressures of the dynamics of economic growth and the organizational accomplishments of the state, this societal modernization penetrates deeper and deeper into previous forms of human existence, (1981: 7), thereby subordinating the lifeworld to system imperatives. Indeed, critic Bill Jones sees in Smithson’s work an explicit attempt to abandon art institutions to save art itself. As he points out in his review of “High and Low,” “[Smithson’s] work in the American desert was tantamount to an attack on the institution, to save that which was most valuable in art” (1990: 3). The sense that modern capitalism had reached its apex and was now winding down, leaving its detritus behind with which to fashion works of art to represent the empty, deadened state of modern society, resonates with Habermas’s description of the destruction of the communicative infrastructure of society, the forces of institutional power and capitalist profit abandoning the people for whom it was supposedly designed to serve.

This convergence between postmodern works of art and Habermas’s colonization thesis is perhaps most clearly seen in Varnedoe’s description of the work of Ashley Bickerton. While Varnedoe characterizes Bickerton’s work as “apocalyptic melodrama,” his description of it evokes a surprisingly vivid visualization of the colonization of the lifeworld. Bickerton’s slabs of anodized aluminum covered in corporate logos, which “combine the look of the credits at the end of a PBS documentary with the casing of a hydrogen bomb” (393), presented, for Varnedoe, “a chilling vision of corporate culture whispering to itself in code. A monolithically ceremonial civilization without private life or discourse, ominous signs arranged in endlessly reductive patterns” (393).

We see something similar with Jenny Holzer, one of the three artists displayed in the Contemporary Reflections section of the “High and Low” exhibit. Describing Holzer’s installation at the Guggenheim Museum in New York in 1989, Varnedoe observes that “Holzer ... was almost Smithson-like in voicing the kinship of primitive ritual and modern spectacle” (Varnedoe and Gopnick, 1990: 398), adapting Frank Lloyd Wright’s spiral, which for Wright, “was the ultimate organic metaphor for growth” (Varnedoe and Gopnick, 1990: 401), to Smithson’s darker, entropic vision of a culture mindlessly repeating the forms of the past (Varnedoe and Gopnick, 1990).

While Varnedoe accuses critics of attaching “a rhetoric totally out of proportion to its real core of feeling” (1990: 373) to the work of such postmodern artists as Cindy Sherman, which, for him, at best, “communicated “[t]he new sense that one could find one’s own self only by losing it in the language of public spectacle,” critic Carter Ratcliffe of *Elle* magazine countered with his own, surprisingly Habermasian interpretation of Sherman’s work in his review of “High and Low.”

When Cindy Sherman photographs herself in guises borrowed from the society pages, B-movies and horror films, and the wall-less museum of fine art reproductions, she is not merely elaborating an aesthetic point about the arbitrary nature of images. ..she is trying to do what our institutions would like to do for us: define the self. Sherman’s self-definitions

conflict so vehemently that each becomes a hilarious, sometimes bitter jibe at all the others. But a joking sense of self is better than a ready-made one imposed by the megaforges of politics or the marketplace. (1990: 2)

In Ratcliffe's interpretation, the work of Sherman can be understood as an aesthetic reaction to a sense that the institutions we have built up, occupational, governmental, even educational, work to *impose* identities and ways of life upon us, instead of responding to our genuine needs and desires. Habermas would call this "reification," that is, that these institutions have calcified into quasi-natural edifices that stunt human expression and communication rather than encourage them (1987).

Several critics commented, in different ways, on the reification of the art world in the 1970s and 80s. Artist Barbara Kruger, writing before the exhibit even opened in *The New York Times*, presented a description of current society that recalls visions of Habermas' colonized Baudrillardian lifeworld, where institutions, not individuals, create the reality we experience. As she puts it:

Seeing is no longer believing. The very notion of truth and how it manifests itself in pictures and words has been put into crisis. In a world bloated with images, we are finally learning that photographs do indeed lie. In a society rife with purported information, we know that words have power, but usually when they don't mean anything... We are literally absent from our own present. We are elsewhere, not on the real, but in the represented. (1990)

Critics chided MoMA for trying to reinvigorate modernism by ignoring, condemning, or absorbing new developments in art that actually throw into doubt the central tenets of modernism, perpetuating the public perception that the institution was "out of touch with the real world and little more than [a] historical storehouse[]" (Higgins, 1990). The exhibit "serves only as an example of the further decay of the relationship between art and art institutions" observed Higgins, while Thomas Crow argued that the curators' tone of "forced lightness" in the catalogue was actually targeting the attempts by postmodernists to communicatively open up the artistic field to new voices in the artistic community: "in order to turn over the unstated assumptions, the consensus attitudes that have caused their exclusion, they must make explicit arguments from first principles" (1991). He notes that most prominent are gay men and women trying to integrate a nonrepressive, nonexclusionary vision of sexuality and politics into the practice and interpretation of art (1991).

Critic Thomas McEvilley focused on MoMA as an institution and the very practical ways that the museum avoids opening itself up to changes coming from artists outside the establishment. He notes that the museum trustees allowed prior MoMA Director of painting and sculpture William Rubin to pick his own successor with "only the most token gestures toward open canvassing, advertising, competitive interviewing, affirmative action, and so on" (1991). Likening "High and Low" to the *'Primitivism'* show of 1984, "the Modern's last great paean to class structure and the colonialist era," he accuses the trustees and curators of using the museum and artworks "to consolidate a certain power structure, in part by obscuring the social issues which must invite criticism of it." Condemning what he sees as MoMA's narrow narrative of modernism, he argues "[t]his appearance of stasis is unreal, and disconnects art from one of its primary social functions," which, as he describes it, acting as an "envoy" to the world about the

“new frameworks of identity,” which our culture is currently creating (1991). Randy Gragg also notes that, “while the guard may have changed at MoMA, same political party is firmly in control.” He notes that out of over 50 artists, only four are women, all are white, and the show only presents French, Spanish, and East Coast-based artists (1990).

While the critics above center on what they perceive as the colonization of the art world by the institutional power of MoMA and modernism as a movement, the question of the colonization of the art world by money was also raised in both the critical reaction to the exhibit and in the exhibition catalogue. In the catalogue, Varnedoe discusses artists who confront the issue, although his description of them portrays their efforts as a protest against the emptiness of the game of art itself. These artists, dubbed by Varnedoe as the “Post-Structuralist Marxists,” and “Marxist Post-Structuralists,” working in the 1980s, “would insist that all that was possible now was a flat recycling of imagery and style from degraded pop culture to degraded modern art... Only by refusing to participate in the bourgeois game by which originality was constantly seduced and betrayed could one protest” (Varnedoe and Gopnick, 1990: 389). Artist Hans Haacke, Varnedoe argues, with works such as “The Saatchi Collection,” was trying to show that “Saatchi was out to demoralize avant-garde art in the interests of international capitalism” (Varnedoe and Gopnick, 1990: 390). However, one could also interpret Haacke’s intentions as to reveal how a private collector and art investor could use art exhibits at museums as a way to drive up the prices of his own artworks. This is precisely the accusation leveled at Saatchi nine years later in an article about the “Sensation” exhibit at the Brooklyn Museum, written by Hilton Kramer (1999), in which he described how Saatchi artificially created the “Young British Artists” movement and promoted artists in a way that effectively circumvented the communicative action of critics, substituting money for critical debate as the arbiter of artistic quality.

Finally, one artist in the Contemporary Reflections section also addresses this question of substituting money for critical debate as the arbiter of artistic quality in a very different and much more controversial way: the wily Jeff Koons. One could argue that his continuing success is based largely on his ability and willingness to capitalize on the colonization of the artworld by money. His previous careers as a marketer for MoMA and a commodities broker, invariably mentioned in any article about him, are essential for understanding his attitude towards art and his career as an artist, often described as itself a series of advertising campaigns (McKenna, 1989). Koons speaks admiringly of advertising, seeing it as “more politically effective than art at this point” (McKenna, 1989), explaining that he consciously uses the tools of advertising and entertainment in his work. However, as he revealed in an interview in 1989, not only does he use the *tools* of advertising and entertainment, but has assimilated their aims as well: as he says, “Artists used to be the ones who knew how to manipulate, control and meet the needs of the masses, but we’ve lost that power. And I want to bring that power back” (McKenna, 1989).

Koons makes a direct attack on the distinction between art and the commodity (including those of the culture industry), namely, the determination of value through communicative action vs the determination of value through the generation of money. Advertising and entertainment are aesthetic creations as much as works of art; what differs is the intention, both on the part of the creator and the audience. While the success of advertising and entertainment is measured in profit, leading to methods of manipulating, controlling and meeting the needs of the masses, the success of art is measured in two ways in late capitalism: through the art market and through the communicative action of critics. What makes Koons such a polarizing figure is that he highlights the former over the latter, delighting investors, infuriating critics. Koons lays bare the

contradiction of art in modern society: its priceless nature as a collective vision of what we hold as a society in highest esteem whose value is decided by the interpretation and debate of specialists, and its very specific monetary value as the ultimate luxury commodity, whose worth is decided by the art market. What Koons is in fact selling is this insight about our society and brazenly including art under its purview:

...everything is based on sales...Sales is the front line and no matter what your problem or desire, there's a sales pitch designed for it. And if, in fact, your product is nothing more than pure salesmanship – that is a fabulous product! (McKenna, 1989).

This message, that art is nothing but high-end commodities for the uninformed rich, is brought home through his transformation of low-brow poorly-made kitsch into supersize and glossy versions guaranteed (at least physically) to stand the test of time, hammering home the idea of the equation of art and the commodity. Koons' work seems to say very little aesthetically to critics (David, 2014; Viveros-Fauné, 2014; Micchelli, 2014; Perl, 2014), but says quite a bit to them about the degraded state of the art world today (Smith, 2014; Johnson, 2014; Perl, 2014; Sischy, 2014; Thomas, 2005).

While David C. Walters of the *Christian Science Monitor* confined his review of “High and Low” to an expression of shock and dismay, calling the exhibit “a devastating indictment of the art establishment,” other critics pointed to the colonization of the art world by the power of profit as the explanation for the loss of “high” art’s critical edge (Carlin, 1990). Hilton Kramer has led the battle against the commercialization of art, by the art market and by the museum, since his condemnation of Pop Art in the 1960s (Kramer, 1962). Instead of an avant-garde that produces difficult works that require education and concentration to understand, curators like Varnedoe, Kramer argues, partnering with “the market forces that have turned artworks into the ultimate luxury commodities” (Larson, 1990), are degrading art to the lowest common denominator just like the culture industry does. This is aided and abetted, according to Kramer, by the fashions in academia, which encourage the contextualizing of artworks over understanding their visual form and aesthetic statement (1990a). Kramer is quite explicit in his judgment of Varnedoe’s motives as a museum curator: discussing Varnedoe’s decision to de-accession several works by Renoir, de Chirico, Kandinsky, and Mondrian to acquire a “wildly overpriced” Van Gogh, Kramer notes: “...here was another curator... who looked upon the collection entrusted to his care as a portfolio of “assets” to be liquidated as the gyrations of current taste and the dynamics of the art market dictate” (1990b). Indeed, Jason Edward Kaufman, quoting Richard Hertz in his review of “High and Low,” seems to confirm Kramer’s worst fears about the psychological effects of this colonization of the art world, proclaiming “mass culture is neither deeper nor shallower, but simply a different market than the fine arts” (1991).

In an essay published in the same year as the “High and Low” exhibit, “Has Success Spoiled the Art Museum?,” Kramer discusses how art museums have undergone radical change in the last few decades. The art museum, observes Kramer, has become less a place for the connoisseur “looking for a quiet corner in which to have an unimpeded view of a favorite masterpiece,” than a place for “social diversion” (2006: 311). In her review of “High and Low,” Barbara Rose echoes Kramer’s conclusions about Varnedoe’s motives underlying this exhibit: “A brilliant strategist, Varnedoe has found ways of merchandising the art of the “happy few” to

the ticket-paying hoard who find MoMA cheaper entertainment than the movies” (1990). Both through the art market and through the museum, these critics observe the effects of the colonization of the art world by the media of money.

DISCUSSION

So the question is: could this kind of public debate work to counter the colonization of the lifeworld? While the effect is not as targeted as a remedy as we have seen could happen in other specific situations of colonization, like expanding opportunities for gathering and discussions in unions (Edwards, 2007) and changing educational practices (Lee, 2014), “High and Low” was a high water mark for generating and diffusing a widespread public discussion, reaching up to 10% of the adult population in the United States (Coleman, 2016). However, it is the rare exhibit that gets the exposure and provokes the level of interest as did the “High and Low” exhibit. So it is not the quantity of discourse that is the particular promise of art criticism. However, we have seen that art and its criticism have long occupied a unique position in the social and theoretical space of Western society. Can we see in the critical reaction to “High and Low” evidence that this unique position grants it a special power to address the colonization of the lifeworld?

Habermas’s own clarification of the criteria by which expressive aesthetic statements are judged in TCA and the social complex constructed for the aesthetic sphere in modernity reveals that the special power of art derives from the fact that what is at stake is the discussions about art is meaning itself. Art, in its explicit call for subjective interpretation, invites people to connect their own personal experiences and understanding of symbols to something that is also part of the public domain. Habermas’s interest in the literary cafes in 18th century Europe stems from precisely this quality of art. However, his focus there was on these spaces as *Vorforms* for the properly political discussions he sees as essential to a functioning democracy. However, in his later work, he also mentions this world-disclosing function of art (1990: 339), but it has remained undertheorized in his work (Kompridis, 1994). Yet, this quality of art grants it a singular power to create meaning, in that if the interpretation of an artwork is shared, these meanings can become part of the artwork’s meaning, which can then add something new to the shared understanding of social and political reality. In this case, it was the experience of the colonization of the lifeworld that was disclosed.

As mentioned earlier, in “Modernity and Postmodernity,” Habermas for the first time puts forth a role for the aesthetic in countering the colonization of the lifeworld and contributing to the emancipation of the individual, calling for “unconstrained interaction of the cognitive with the moral-practical and the aesthetic-expressive elements,” (1981: 11) as the necessary action needed to demolish reified structures. Can the world-disclosing power of art evident in the “High and Low” exhibit be integrated with this prescription for countering colonization? One could see an art exhibit as an opportunity for the illumination envisioned by Habermas in the following way: the artist is invested with the normative power to present a vision of something of the highest importance to society (Coleman, 2016), an object or experience that works on our senses to evoke our feelings (aesthetic) to change both our values (aesthetic) but also our understanding of the world (cognitive). “High and Low” could be understood as having accomplished this, in that it potentially changed the values of the viewer (promoting skepticism

of modernism) as well as his or her understanding of social and political reality (bringing the effects of the colonization of the lifeworld to public consciousness).

CONCLUSION

As Austin Harrington argues, while most sociologists treat artworks as thematic subjects, their existence as “value-relevant sources of sensuous knowledge” (2004: 207) invites a different approach. For Harrington, “art and social theory form part of a joint venture of cognition of the world” (2004: 207). With the rise of postmodern art in the late nineteen-seventies, this understanding of art has appeared increasingly convincing, as there has been a marked growth in art criticism that explicitly refers to concerns that more typically are found in the domain of social theory. In fact, much recent art and art criticism appears to share the aim of the original project of classical social theory: the critique of the cultural and social effects of the political and economic practices of modern capitalism. In the past three decades in particular, as art museums are increasingly being called upon to fulfill their role as truly public institutions, an important contingent of postmodern art critics creates and evaluates exhibits of art with specifically sociological questions in mind. Through specialized art journals, national periodicals, daily newspapers, websites, and blogs, a substantial public sphere has emerged. The amount to which the concerns in this public sphere overlap with those in sociology is noteworthy: just to take examples from the critical reaction to “High and Low,” we find mention of the effects of capitalism and consumerism on social life and culture (Kramer, 199b; Rose, 1990), the impact of the media and powerful corporations on public discourse and individual identity (Ratcliffe, 1990; Kruger, 1990), elite and popular access to the arts (Mattick, 1990), and the value of high and low culture (Crow, 1990; 1996). In the “High and Low” exhibit, Habermas’s rather subtle and rarified theory of the colonization of the lifeworld was given both artistic and critical expression. Art criticism, I submit, is a means through which these sociological questions, often marginalized in mainstream media coverage, can become subject to public debate. The intellectual content of “high” art and its criticism, in sum, can open up a fruitful new avenue of sociological research in the arts, one which could in fact enrich the discipline of sociology itself.