

The Public Sphere

The term “public” is pivotal in the museum context. As suggested in the introduction, the multiple applications and pervasive use of the term may appear – misleadingly – to render it useless. I examine in this chapter the complexity of the term in order to reveal both its shortcomings and its potential in the context of museums. I also explore possible ways to extend its use in that context.

Apart from the general everyday references to the museum’s public nature or function, the most frequently cited reference to the term “public” in museum studies is to the work of Jürgen Habermas (1989). There is a certain irony here, as I detail later, in that Habermas does not himself make the link between culture, spatial practices or aesthetics often assumed in such citations. But inaccuracies in the ways in which Habermas’s work is employed in discussions about museums are less important than an understanding of how his work may lend itself to a deeper exploration of museums, in particular of the way in which they attempt to be democratic and genuine institutions of, and for, the public. In this sense, I rework Habermas’s “public sphere” as a *cultural* public sphere to reveal the significance of “the cultural” in understanding the public realm. I will begin with a detailed consideration of the key tenets of the idea of the “public sphere,” and then work towards an understanding of how museums are relevant to the concept.

The notion of a “bourgeois public sphere” was proposed by Jürgen Habermas in 1962. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (STPS) was translated from German in 1989 and has received considerable attention from critics since. There has been a resurgence of interest in critical theories of the public sphere, particularly theories that have emerged from the Frankfurt School – from Habermas, Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge (Koivisto and Valiveronen, 1996; Johnson, 2006). These critical theorists, as we see later in this chapter, have refocused the attention of academics in the Western world on the political implications of the public

sphere, because of the way the concept of the public sphere engages with concepts of democracy and societal organization (Johnson, 2006).

Habermas identified literary discourses of the bourgeois public as most prevalent and influential in his historical model and theory. (This may be because of his background in journalism.) I suggest this is a relatively narrow conception, in which the literary discourse and literary “publics” are prioritized at the expense of other “publics.” Those that challenge Habermas’s model or are not included in his concept may, however, be understood by investigating cultural discourses other than literary ones. The significance of cultural disciplines is not sufficiently apparent to Habermas. Though he claims that interdisciplinarity is necessary for considering the public sphere and discourses on democracy, Habermas himself fails, importantly, to draw on those disciplines that are concerned with cultural institutions and practices in civil society and democracy.

The idea of the “public,” as defended in this book, intersects with notions of “public” in several academic disciplines and related professions. We find, however, a number of poorly conceived understandings of the public sphere in these other disciplines, particularly in understanding the intersection between museums and museum studies, and history, colonialism, urbanism, and visibility. A new, cultural understanding of the public sphere acknowledges many different ways of “being in public.” The public is not an amorphous or homogenous grouping of subgroups or individuals. Nor is public space merely a simple nostalgic representation of the public sphere (see Chapter Three). The production of the public sphere involves complex exchanges and negotiations between different forms of communications and practices of *being in public*. This is not a notion that rests upon difference, bracketed off from an otherwise all-inclusive idea of the public. I will suggest that, from a perspective that is cultural, spatial, and intersectional, it is also possible to identify the emergence of new publics.

Many critical accounts of the term “public” investigate specific or actual sites in their search for evidence of the existence of a public sphere (Iveson, 2008; Mitchell, 2003; Smith and Low, 2007). However, these actual sites are often given marginal status in critical accounts of the public sphere, as such. This is despite the potential centrality of visual and spatial discourses to various formations and understandings of the public sphere. It is essential to consider these discourses (and their limitations) as iterations, as practices, of public address and potentially representative discourses of the public sphere. The *performative* aspect of democratic sites is often overlooked, while the existence of physical space is prioritized over the practice of democracy. The practice of being part of the public in the space

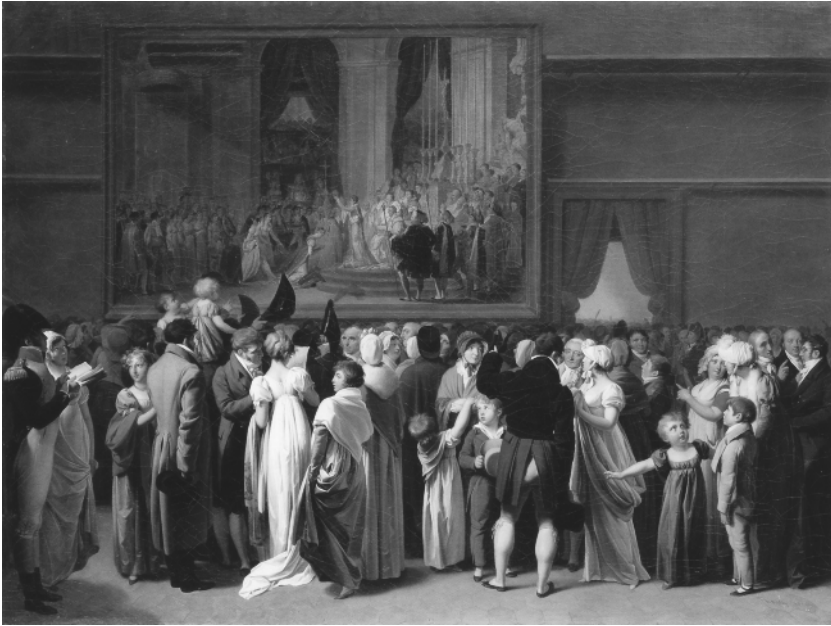


Image 1.1 Louis-Léopold Boilly, *The Public in the Salon of the Louvre, Viewing the Painting of the “Sacre”* begun 1808, Woodner Collection. Image courtesy of the Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, USA

of the museum – recognizing how being a citizen in the museum constitutes the public – is valuable for understanding the democratic nature of the museum. To understand democracy we also need to recognize that many different versions of democracy exist. There are, however, some key or core characteristics, including a particular form of rhetoric (see Held, 1996). By investigating actual spaces and places of the public in which this rhetoric is performed, it is possible to see how public spaces constitute a critical visual discourse of the public sphere. These spaces include the museum.

Habermas and the Public Sphere

The idea of the public sphere has received renewed critical attention since the translation of Habermas’s foundational text, *The Structural*

Transformation of the Public Sphere, coincided with major world events including the fall of the Berlin Wall, the reunification of Germany, and the Tiananmen Square Massacre in China (Koivisto and Valiveronen, 1996). The work of Jürgen Habermas, a critical theorist, member of the Frankfurt School and foremost commentator on the public sphere, is also considered valuable because of its strengths relative to other theoretical approaches. Benhabib (1992a), for example, proposed three distinct models of the public sphere, and favored Habermas's over the Arendtian and liberal (Kantian) conceptions, because "questions of democratic legitimacy in advanced capitalist societies are central to it." "Nevertheless," she added, "whether this model is resourceful enough to help us think through the transformation of politics in our kinds of societies is an open question" (Benhabib, 1992a: 74). A discussion of the relevance of Habermas's theory to the museum will provide one point of entry to answering this question.

Habermas's work has received significant critical responses from many disciplines (including sociology, philosophy, media studies and cultural studies). Of particular interest in this present discussion is how his work and that of his critics intersect with space and vision, or with the spatial and visual discourses of the public sphere.

In Habermas's *STPS*, the argument about the central role of discourse on public matters in the formation of the public sphere became in particular the basis of his later work on "communicative action."¹

Habermas repeatedly uses the term "public sphere" but does not elaborate on its spatiality in either a material or theoretical sense. Despite this, the notion of a public sphere invokes certain spatial metaphors, the most obvious being a *spherical* form, such as a globe or a ball. Specific forms of architectural space have historically represented political and cultural concerns in social or public life. For example, in Western cultures, the sphere, seen in Étienne-Louis Boullée's 1784 project for a memorial to Isaac Newton (see Image 1.2, *Cénotaphe de Newton*) and in his museum and library designs, has been purposely used historically to represent democratic space in its "natural" form (Boullée, n.d.). The significance of such cultural forms and expressions of public space is, as we will see, overlooked in Habermas's writing, and yet his concept of the public sphere both suggests and ultimately depends on spatiality.

The public sphere is not represented as an actual space in Habermas's theory; instead, it refers to the conduct of public discourse, understood primarily as literary and discursive. It may therefore be found on the pages of an eighteenth-century pamphlet or in discourse about public matters in coffee houses, market places or literary salons. While Habermas's historical

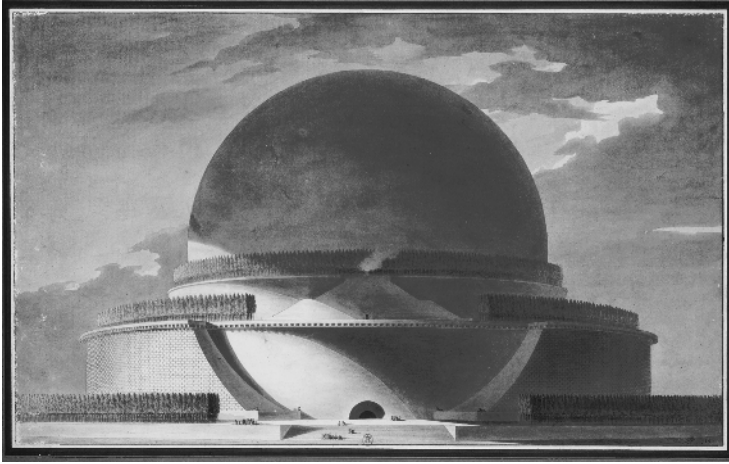


Image 1.2 Étienne-Louis Boullée, *Cénotaphe de Newton*, 1784. Bibliothèque nationale de France

model cites *places* where such discussion occurs (European coffee houses or market places, among others), the centrality of actual space for the public sphere is not, in itself, considered significant. This is examined later in Chapter Three.

Habermas's research into the emergence of the liberal bourgeois public sphere in eighteenth-century France led to the theory of the bourgeois public sphere as a "site" where the interests of the state, the commercial class and the bourgeoisie intersect. This model then became generalizable for Habermas as the "liberal public sphere" or "public sphere." The public sphere exists between the state and the private body of persons; it functions to rationally contemplate matters of public importance. Habermas's public sphere is not an "actual" body of people; yet it has the potential to have "real" power. The mechanism by which it becomes real is discourse or debate about matters of public importance. In this model these debates affect public opinion and have influence on government policy and its implementation. The spatial context itself is, Habermas implies, not relevant to, or constitutive of, such discussion.

To speak simply of influence is insufficient for understanding what is at stake. Nancy Fraser (1992: 134) distinguishes between "strong" and "weak" publics and argues that the public sphere – as a sphere between

government and civil society – is weak because those “whose deliberative practice consists exclusively in opinion formation and does not encompass decision making” cannot claim to have real influence. For Fraser, deliberative practices do not necessarily translate into actual social change. The capacity to influence and the power to implement actual change is essential, she concludes. This requires a reworking of Habermas’s model to take into account the real-life processes of democracy. Fraser’s critique offers a model for subjecting Habermas’s theory to an analysis built around the centrality of cultural space. Indeed, if we consider Fraser’s argument in the museum context, we see that the capacity of the museum to exist between government and civil society is in many countries compromised by the state’s interest (via funding and policy) in the role and function of the museum. The museum’s capacity to be democratic, in Fraser’s sense, may be limited to opinion formation but not actual decision making and may not actually effect social change: in this manner the museum is rendered a “weak public.” As we will see, however, the capacity of the museum as a public sphere is more complex than this. It may be weak in its relationship with the state, but powerful in serving as a site for community and democratic “publics.”

Habermas’s concept of the public sphere remains valuable, however, despite inconsistencies in his use of the concept. Where he is clear, though, is in identifying literary discourses as media where the primary articulation of – and the formation of – the public sphere occurred: “The medium of this political confrontation was peculiar and without historical precedent: people’s public use of their reason (*öffentliches Rasonnement*)” (1989: 27). He continues:

The “town” was the life center of civil society not only economically; in cultural-political contrast to the court, it designated especially an early public sphere in the world of letters whose institutions were the coffee houses, the salons, and the *Tischgesellschaften* (table societies). (Habermas, 1989: 30)

He defines “public spaces” as sites where public discourse occurs. “The commons was public, publica: for common use there was public access to the fountain and market – loci communes, loci publica” (Habermas, 1989: 6). (Today this would also include print and electronic media with the actual physical space being secondary to the function of discourse on public matters.) Thus, while he emphasizes the “virtual” nature of the public sphere, concealed in the processes and exchanges of discourse, debate and communication, he also notes the physical spaces in which these processes took place. He fails, nonetheless, to recognize the significance of these

spaces. The importance of this recognition, however, should not be overlooked. It will be of significance in understanding the nature of the *cultural* and *spatial* public sphere.

For Habermas, the public sphere becomes known through the process of promotion and publicity generated by an emerging bourgeois public involved in reading societies and lending libraries, talking in coffee houses and clubs, seeking new ways to participate in the governance of their society. Habermas elaborates on the structured way in which the bourgeois public sphere developed into another platform from which the public could represent itself: "through the vehicle of public opinion it put the state in touch with the needs of society" (1989: 31). Publications and the development of the mass media became (and remain) critical conduits for such publicity. Publicity in Habermas's work refers to the way in which the public sphere is disseminated: through the "world of letters," where "rational critical debate which originated in the ... conjugal family, by communicating with itself, attained clarity about itself" (1989: 51). The public articulation of arguments, presented in written form in letters, books and papers, became for Habermas a technical and cultural context in which the bourgeois public sphere was constituted (Warner, 1992).

Access to the public sphere of representation came to be considered a basic right of citizens, but for Habermas, representation in the public realm was conditional upon the public use of reason.² Sentiment, for Habermas, is too personal, irrational and particular in this model, and becomes a significant point of contention in critiques of the *STPS*. Relying on the "natural" goodwill of citizens will not guarantee, Habermas concludes, that the private interests of individuals will not determine their deliberation on public matters. To participate in public discussion citizens had to be willing to compromise, to transform their views. According to Habermas, then, new problems arose historically, as different sectors of society demanded access to the public sphere as a "basic right," without necessarily understanding the rational form of discussion that was required for democracy to work.

The will to participate in democratic processes was not itself sufficient for democracy to work. In the practices of Habermas's public sphere in the late eighteenth century, citizens were required to participate, and comply with, recognizable forms of interaction in the public sphere, where the notion of freedom (of speech, of the press) was indeed limited, and contingent upon public norms that were subject to change. The mode of discourse allowed negotiation, hence change, to occur if there was consensus. To understand these basic rights and forms of representation, citizens needed to be literate

in the structure of public discourse and democracy. Habermas's concept of the bourgeois public sphere relied on the ability of citizens to recognize particular norms and forms of representations in the public sphere, namely the literary and the print media.

Habermas's claims about the necessity and universality of "rationality" have been subject to criticism (Young, 1990, 1992; Robbins, 1993; Ingram, 1994; White, 1995). Inclusion in the public sphere, in Habermas's model, requires reasoned and rational discourse on matters of public concern. Inclusion, however, does not ensure equality. Despite the rhetoric of inclusivity, a public sphere based on these principles, I argue, will be precarious. "Oppositional" public spheres, according to Habermas, should modify their forms of discourse to comply with apparent normative conditions of the "mainstream" public sphere. I argue, however, that this modification does not acknowledge the contested nature of the public sphere itself. The representation as well as recognition of the public sphere in spatial and visual discourses illustrates contestation of the public sphere. It serves to underline the relationship of the public to democratic forms, which are themselves based on contestation.

Despite such shortcomings in Habermas's idea of the public sphere, Nancy Fraser concedes that "[t]he idea of 'the public sphere' in Habermas's sense is a conceptual resource that can help overcome . . . problems arising from 'less precise' understandings and uses of the term" (1992: 110). For Fraser, "Habermas's idea of the public sphere is indispensable to critical theory and democratic social practice" because it illustrates the "distinctions among state apparatuses, economic markets, and democratic associations," which are central to democratic theory (1992: 111). This is useful for an understanding of the public role of the museum.

Richard Sennett (1992) has also written extensively on the history of the term "public" and its uses. According to Sennett, the practice of public life has shifted from an extrinsic to a more intrinsic individualistic practice. This, he argues, is to the detriment of both the individual and society. Sennett claims that confusion and difficulty can arise with the term "public" when individuals work out "in terms of personal feelings public matters that can be dealt with only through codes of impersonal meaning" (1992: 5). The individual, for Sennett, can act or engage on the public stage with the "greater" social good in mind, demonstrating a public conscience. This is distinct from self-gain. Sennett further argues that a problem emerges when notions of democracy are negotiated on an individualistic basis, because it is likely that such notions are being negotiated to satisfy individual needs rather than for the "common public good." Yet what does it mean for something to be a "common" good? The use of the term "public" often

“betrays a multiplicity of concurrent meanings” (Habermas, 1989: 1). Such multiplicity is apparent in the museum context too.

Reasoned and rational discussion, according to both Habermas and Sennett, performs a normalizing function. It allows individuals to enter the public sphere as equals to negotiate public matters for the public good. However, while reason and rationality appear to be enabling in Habermas’s and Sennett’s models, they are also used to exclude individuals from the public sphere. Habermas’s model also excludes the dynamic way in which contestation between competing publics about what constitutes the public sphere may be an effective way for the public sphere to remain relevant in social life. It is Habermas’s requirement for reason and rationality that obscures these dynamics, and attracts most criticism from critics (and critical supporters alike). Both Habermas and Sennett recognize, however, that though rationality and reason are key principles of modern liberal democracy and the public sphere, they are not necessarily always employed. Nor are they used in the same way all the time. We consider this further, below.

The different types of public spheres that arise from this discussion of the *bourgeois* public sphere and the way in which the term “public” functions in relation to democracy are discussed below. The tensions between the empirical (historical) and abstract (theoretical) modes in the *STPS* must also be considered. To explore these tensions, I draw on Habermas’s critics, for whom the public sphere is exclusionary, and expand on their work to consider the importance of visual and spatial discourses. For museums, this discussion reflects tensions in theory and in practice. This is in part because the invention of the modern public museum coincides with the era in which Habermas locates his concept of the public sphere. In order to make this connection between Habermas’s public sphere and its visual and spatial aspects, let us turn to the *STPS* in detail.

Structural transformation of the public sphere

Emerging from the German intellectual tradition of critical theory, Habermas, like his colleagues in the Frankfurt School, was concerned with the theory and practice of democratic social systems. The Frankfurt School did not produce a unified critical theory of society, but engaged in extensive multidisciplinary approaches, and at times oppositional theoretical approaches to critical theory. It influenced many academic disciplines concerned with issues of social life and domination. The concept of the public sphere is said to be one of the most “significant contributions of the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School” in recent decades (Koivisto and Valiveronen, 1996: 18).

In his preface to the *STPS*, Habermas states that “the category ‘public sphere’ must be investigated within the broad field formerly reflected in the perspective of the traditional science of ‘politics’” and argues that the public sphere does not fall within the ambit of political sciences alone (1989: xvii). For Habermas, an analysis of the public sphere necessarily engages numerous disciplines; otherwise the object “disintegrates.” In other words, the public sphere is fundamentally an interdisciplinary realm.

In the words of Thomas McCarthy, in his introduction to the 1989 edition of the *STPS*, Habermas presents a “historical-sociological account of the emergence, transformation and disintegration of the bourgeois public sphere” (McCarthy, 1989: xi). It is a sphere that he defines as being between “civil society and the state” (1989: xi). The bourgeois public sphere was “institutionally guaranteed” – it was officially recognized by the state and consulted accordingly as a sphere with a critical function in relation to the state. It was constituted by private people, who put reason to use in public discourse and it “publicly monitored” the state through such discussion (McCarthy, 1989: xi). To qualify for access, citizens needed to be educated and owners of property. Discussion occurred around matters regarding the state and so-called civil society. The right to freely express views critical of the state significantly altered the relationship between the state and private citizens.

Habermas writes:

The French Revolution eventually triggered a movement toward a politicization of a public sphere that at first revolved around literature and art criticism. This is true not only of France, but holds for Germany as well. A “politicization of associational life,” the rise of a partisan press, the fight against censorship and for freedom of opinion characterize the change in function of the expanding network of public communication up to the middle of the nineteenth century. The politics of censorship, with which the states of the German Federation fought against the institutionalization of a political public sphere and managed to delay its advent until 1848, only made it more inevitable that literature and criticism would be sucked into the whirlpool of politicizations. (1992a: 424)

The bourgeois public sphere was critical of the mechanisms and outcomes of the absolutist state as representing only the interests of the monarchy and the clergy. This critique enabled the development of a public sphere that, according to Habermas, was not only more democratic, but also itself became the site for the development of modern democracy. We should note here, the emergence of the modern “public” museum in this same era.

Habermas's account identifies the structures by which the bourgeois public sphere developed as a new tier of the representable public through publishing in the newsprint media. He identifies the public as distinct from the state, the marketplace and the intimate sphere of the family. According to McCarthy (1989: xi), Habermas traces the emergence of the bourgeois public sphere in relation to "the interdependent development of the literary and political self consciousness of the new class" in the mid-eighteenth century (through to the Revolution of 1789). A type of self-reflexivity was fostered through new cultural practices such as reading societies and political journalism. Developing alongside the political manifestation of the bourgeois public sphere were forms of communication that functioned as new and effective conduits for this self-representation. What emerged was a particular type of "representative publicness."

The groups functioning in Habermas's version of the bourgeois public sphere used the print media, conversation, reading groups and literary organizations, and rational debate in public spaces such as coffee houses, markets and town squares. Habermas's new representable public also created new expectations about the citizen's right to avenues through which to express their views, and the right to access domains in which a citizen's views could be communicated to other citizens. A new means of discussing and disseminating one's views became available and subsequently became politically powerful in articulating the concerns of the public.

Habermas's bourgeois public sphere essentially depended on a concept of normativity; on the idea that a developed practice of social and political actions would become regular and accepted in political life. These practices, such as using reason and rationality in personal conversation and public discussion, become institutionalized as norms.

The practices and contexts used to establish normative communication are a highly contentious aspect of Habermas's notion of the bourgeois public sphere. He claims that particular modes of communication and forms of behavior are necessary for communicating with others on public matters in the public sphere. An atmosphere conducive to consensus, compromise and rational discussion is, he states, paramount. It is a domain where private subjects are conscious of being "in public" and "acting for" the public good. The private sphere, in contrast, is particular or subjective. The historical and conceptual exclusion of the concerns of the private sphere from the public sphere, Habermas argues, is necessary to prevent the emergence of as many versions of the public sphere as there are private persons. How would consensus and agreement be reached on matters of public importance, he asks, if all matters were basically negotiated on the basis of private interests alone? The bourgeois public sphere is a model

expressed in a historical moment, a real historical example of how democracy should work and how it could work effectively. As a real practice, it existed for a relatively short period of time, but it remains an ideal, yet workable, form of social organization.

Habermas's bourgeois public sphere cannot be understood outside of, or apart from, "the unique developmental history of the civil society" from which it originated (1989: 6). Habermas himself considers a sociological method too limited for understanding its emergence because it "proceeds on a level of generality at which unique processes and events can only be cited as examples – that is as cases that can be interpreted as instances of a more general social development" (Habermas, 1989: xv–xviii). It is important to use "equally strict criteria for the structural analysis of the interdependencies at the level of society as a whole" (1989: xv–xviii). Habermas's work, thus, uses "features of a historical constellation that attained dominance and leaves aside the plebeian public sphere as a variant that in a sense was suppressed in the historical process" (Habermas, 1989: xviii).

The *STPS* charts democracy as central to the experiences of modernity. However, like the project of democracy, Habermas sees the emancipatory capacity of the experience of modernity as incomplete, and remaining incomplete to this day. Habermas's later work, particularly his work on theories of communicative action, also considers forms of purposeful and rational interaction between individuals that enable them to participate effectively in public processes. Forms of communication, particularly the use of reasoned and rational argument in the process of negotiation in the public domain, preoccupy Habermas. In his later work, the notion of democracy is developed from the *STPS* and is significantly influenced by the combination of empirical (socio-historical) work and the theoretical development of the public sphere. The theory is based on empirical research on the late eighteenth century, and the way in which Habermas later modifies his thinking demonstrates his commitment to using these practices in his work.

Throughout Habermas's work, revolutionary mid-eighteenth century Europe forms a key point of reference, having both real and imagined potential for the full emancipation of the people. For a short period, the educated and uneducated strata, he notes, became committed to the function of the bourgeois public sphere: the bourgeoisie and the working classes joined forces to constitute the liberal bourgeois public sphere.

The writings of John Stuart Mill and Alexis de Tocqueville, Habermas notes, raise a fear of the majority, a specter of the dominant opinions or "unreconciled interests," becoming a coercive force overwhelming the "compulsion of reason" in the public sphere (1989: 132). Public opinion, understood in this sense, becomes "the reign of the many and the

mediocre”; this in turn is understood as characterizing the unruly masses (Habermas, 1989: 133). The outcome, according to Habermas’s critique of de Tocqueville, was *conformity* of public opinion rather than consensus through critical debate, or the considered form of deliberation, favored by Habermas.

This critique may suggest that the possibility of more than one type of public sphere, indeed of competing public spheres, is not part of Habermas’s thinking. However, in writings following the publication of the *STPS*, including engagement with critiques of *STPS*, he outlines the kinds of differences that may be tolerated within his model of the public sphere (Habermas, 1992a). However, these differences are not unlimited. Despite acknowledging that at least “[e]mpirically, [he] has learned most from the criticisms that point to the exclusionary mechanism of the public sphere,” Habermas still argues for the centrality of consensus and the use of reason and rationality in the public sphere.³ In privileging this form of public engagement, Habermas overlooks (as do his critics) the significance of space as an alternative – in a non-exclusionary way – in which the public sphere operates and the public itself is constituted. For museums it suggests we consider how discussion contributes to understanding how exclusion is produced, *and* how processes of deliberation in the formation of consensus, or a limited version of it, are determined and performed, and by whom.

Public Sphere/Private Sphere

Habermas’s conception of privateness encompasses not only the private individual in the context of the market economy and commodity exchange, but also the private person in the home or the familial context. For Habermas, such separation is necessary to maintain the distinct functions of each sphere. The private sphere tends to be linked to the public sphere, though, when the market economy affects the economy of the private sphere:

The line between state and society, fundamental in our context, divided the public sphere from the private realm. The public sphere was coextensive with public authority, and we consider the court part of it. Included in the private realm was the authentic “public sphere,” for it was a public sphere constituted by private people. Within the realm that was the preserve of private people we therefore distinguish again between private and public spheres. The private sphere comprised of civil society in the narrower sense, that is to say, the realm of commodity exchange and of social labor; imbedded in it was the family

within its interior domain (Intimsphäre). The public sphere in the political realm evolved from the public sphere in the world of letters; through the vehicle of public opinion it put the state in touch with the needs of society. (Habermas, 1989: 30)

The private and public spheres were distinguishable on the basis of the private interest lying outside the public realm, and ceasing to matter in the public sphere: "The public's understanding of the public use of reason was guided specifically by such private experiences," which developed from the "subjectivity of the conjugal family's intimate domain (*Intimsphäre*)" (Habermas, 1989: 28). The concept of private, however, is also entwined with the private market economy:

The status of the private man combined the role of owner of commodities with that of head of the family, that of property owner with that of "human being" per se. The doubling of the private sphere on the higher plane of the intimate sphere . . . furnished the foundation for an identification of these two roles under the common title of the "private" . . . the political self-understanding of the bourgeois public originated there as well. (Habermas, 1989: 28–29)

According to Habermas, blurring the distinction between the private and public spheres weakens the political possibilities for reforming a "truly liberal democracy," the central project of his model. When the boundaries between public and private become significantly obscured, what could be termed a "pseudo" public sphere is created:

The downfall of the public sphere, demonstrated by its changing political functions, had its source in the structural transformation of the relationship between the public sphere and the private realm in general. (Habermas, 1989: 142–143)

As outlined above, the public sphere sits between the state and the pre-modern court on one hand and between civil society and the private intimacy of the newly constituted conjugal family on the other. This new sphere developed via new literary, cultural and political debates. As we have seen, new forms of social life in cafés, and in literary and debating salons, employed reasoned and rational critique. Public opinion forming and the development of publicity ensued, as literary journals and print media flourished, and in academies and galleries and salons. New public spaces emerged. The public museum was one of the most significant.

Habermas on Art and the Public Sphere

Art – its appreciation and practice – is considered by Habermas as more appropriately understood within the private sphere than the public. Released from its functions in the service of social representation, art became an object of free choice and of changing preference. “The ‘taste’ to which art was oriented from then on became manifest in the assessments of lay people who claimed no prerogative, since within a public everyone was entitled to judge” (Habermas, 1989: 40).

Like the concert and the theatre, museums institutionalized the lay judgment on art: discussion became the medium through which people appropriated art. Innumerable pamphlets criticizing or defending the leading theories of art built on the discussions in the salons and reacted to them: art criticism became conversation (Habermas, 1989: 40). Amateurs were the most immediate audience for art in the first half of the eighteenth century. Art critics played a significant function in relation to the production of art, as the publication of criticism helped distribute information about the arts generally, and about the relative value of different works. The art critic then went on to function as a public educator:

The art critics could see themselves as spokesmen for the public – and in their battle with the artists this was the central slogan – because they knew of no authority beside that of the better argument and because they felt themselves at one with all who were willing to let themselves be convinced by arguments. At the same time they could turn against the public itself when, as experts combating “dogma” and “fashion,” they appealed to the ill-informed person’s native capacity for judgment. (Habermas, 1989: 41)

Salons and coffee houses also became sites for audiences of art criticism. Criticism appeared in journals. While some “tastes” were still recognized as connoisseurship, the individuals who constituted the public were “not to be obligated by any judgment except their own” (Habermas, 1989: 41). Here Habermas seems to suggest that artwork only reached the public via criticism in journals distributed in coffee houses and salons; he does not see art as intrinsically communicating and debating issues of public concern. This will emerge as an important gap in his work.

Habermas’s essay on “Modernity: An unfinished project,” first written in 1980 and later published in an edited volume, sets out his view on the nature of art in relation to the everyday practice of life. It elaborates on aesthetic modernity, which was “begin[ning] to take shape clearly with Baudelaire and with his theory of art.” Modernity is:

[a] consciousness . . . that expresses itself in the spatial metaphor of the avant-garde – that is, an avant-garde that explores hitherto unknown territory exposes itself to the risk of sudden and shocking encounters, conquers an as yet undetermined future, and must therefore find a path for itself in previously uncharted domains. (Habermas, 1996: 40)

Habermas's call for a non-aesthetic assessment of modernity and the public sphere is cause for concern if we are to consider the museum and its practices as central to both. It is the transgressive and the interconnected aspects of art and the public sphere that I will now focus on.

The mobility of the avant-garde (which included artists) is problematic for Habermas's theory, because of its contingent, unknowable nature. The avant-garde's "anarchistic" intentions are to be subversive and to rebel "against the norm-giving achievements of tradition" from the Enlightenment (Habermas, 1996: 41). But for Habermas, the use of reason and rationality are necessary for such unsettling times: precisely what the avant-garde lacks is the necessary respect for reason and rationality. The "elite counter-cultures" from which artists ("bohemia") emerge are misguided, according to Habermas, because their primary focus is on lifestyle, and their concerns are too subjective and too particular. He writes of the avant-garde, that "the idea that the mission of art is to fulfill its implicit promise of happiness by introducing into society as a whole that artistic lifestyle that was defined precisely as its opposite" (1996: 44). The project of modernity, he says, "only comes into clear view when we abandon the usual concentration on art" (1996: 45), and the focus on art is "too particular" a discourse, requiring specialist knowledge, setting itself apart, creating "expert cultures," from the general everyday lifeworld experience of the public. Art and institutions of culture are deemed autonomous rather than part of a broader context of social life, despite the new relationship of the museum to the state and public affairs more broadly.

Immanuel Kant's writing on the public sphere strongly influenced Habermas. Following Kant (1952), Habermas argues that "[t]he quality of a work [of art] is . . . determined quite independently of any connections it might have with our practical relation to life" (Habermas, 1996: 47). Rather than being understood as a vital part of political discourse offering representations and articulations of the critique of modernity, art and visual representations of the public sphere are considered outside public discourse unless they are understandable to the "expert in the field of everyday life" (Habermas, 1996: 51). Provided that one's experience of art can be seen to relate, or be relevant, to the "problems of life . . . [art can then enter] a

language game that is no longer that of art criticism proper” (Habermas, 1996: 51). It is only then that aesthetic experience can be open to reason in the discourse of modernity or even democracy, where:

aesthetic experience not only revitalizes those who need interpretations [of everyday life] in the light of which we perceive our world, but also influences our cognitive interpretations and our normative expectations, and thus alters the way in which all these moments refer back and forth to one another. (Habermas, 1996: 51)

As I outline below, the inclusion of aesthetic experience as a legitimate part of the public sphere is also significant for understanding the museum as a public sphere. Spaces of the city are both the symbolic and real spaces of modern life/spectacle. The aesthetic, represented in the museum, comes to



Image 1.3 Hubert Robert, *Projet d'aménagement de la Grande Galerie du Louvre en 1796*, 1796. Paris, musée du Louvre/© Photo RMN/Jean-Gilles Berizz

be a form of simultaneous normative/avant-garde discourse in the public sphere: the interaction of the aesthetic dimension (private) and the institutional (state) enter public discourse and thus the public sphere.

Encountering modernity, I argue, was as much a spatial experience in eighteenth-century European social, private and public life as it was an intellectual experience. In France in particular, promenading, or walking, in public spaces in the city and surrounds was a significant aspect of public life, and is represented in Western art and socio-historical accounts of the period. The city became the obvious site for the new bourgeois public to *see* itself, but residents of Paris also made their presence apparent in Sunday sojourns to the nearby provinces. Noting these trends, many writers and critics in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries concerned themselves with the extraordinary development of leisure and cultural activity that was specific to the experience of modernity. The spectacle and experience of world fairs, museums, the new glass-covered arcades, and department stores came to represent modern life and a different type of democratic potential. This kind of activity demonstrated one way in which modernity was articulated, and coincided with the development of new forms of social behavior and organization.⁴ As represented in art of the period, it was a time when the newly formed bourgeoisie could see themselves and *be seen* as a public.

Historical coherence

The historical coherence of Habermas's bourgeois public sphere has attracted significant criticism. Critics ask, for example, whether the public sphere actually existed, as he describes it, in the period. His account is also contested on the grounds that it excludes different cultural communities, and therefore excludes the history of non-bourgeois sectors of social life. It is noted that Habermas openly privileges literary discourses because of their prevalence in representing the public sphere.

According to Geoff Eley, "[i]t is important to acknowledge the existence of competing publics not just in the nineteenth century, when Habermas sees a fragmentation of the classical liberal model of *Öffentlichkeit*, but at every stage of the public sphere and, indeed, from the very beginning" (1992: 306). In popular, peasant, working-class movements and nationalistic movements, Eley argues, we see such subaltern publics being constituted. Benjamin Nathans (1990) suggests that from its very inception, the bourgeois public sphere was heterogeneous, and identifies the existence of this differentiated and contested public and social life in late eighteenth-century Europe. Historical research, Mary Ryan (1992) suggests, reveals that the bourgeois public was never "the public." All three

critics argue that, contrary to Habermas's account, a host of competing counter-publics arose, virtually contemporaneous with the bourgeois public. These included nationalist publics, peasant publics, elite women's publics, and working-class publics. If, then, there never was an actual "Habermasian" public sphere, is it possible to produce one based on an idealized concept?

Alternative views: counter-publics

Other critiques of Habermas's work can be found in critical theory, philosophical and cultural critiques of communication theory and practice, and the history of women's systematic exclusion from the public sphere. Despite criticism, however, Habermas's concept of the public sphere is still considered valuable. It is commonly used as a springboard for a wider range of speculations on the concepts and practices of democracy and the social structures that underpin it. Habermas's public sphere, according to Miriam Hansen, "continues to provide an objective standard for political critique" (1993: xxvii) for a variety of disciplines, and for a large number of theorists concerned with democracy.

Theorists of the same period, including Geoff Eley (1992), Joan B. Landes (1992), Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge (1993), and Michel Foucault (1965, 1973, 1977), have engaged significantly with Habermas's use of reason in thinking about democracy. They cast public life and the public sphere in a different light: as being contested and contestable; as producing alternative publics; as producing a democracy that is forever in transition, potential and incomplete. Are spatial and visual discourses not significant cultural and aesthetic discourses on democracy and public life in the late eighteenth century, they ask? It is in such aesthetic discourses that we find a more fragmented and diverse notion of modernity, offering a significant challenge to Habermas's view.

Building on this work, I seek to understand how the historical specificity of Habermas's model might have an impact on the concept of the public sphere as it relates specifically to the idea of the museum and to its practices. The *STPS*, according to Peter Hohendahl, is Habermas's response to the political pessimism of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Hohendahl, 1992; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1972). In contrast to these theorists, Habermas makes a positive assessment of the European Enlightenment; he does so also in his account of the (incomplete) project of modernity. For Habermas, the emancipatory potential of a bourgeois public sphere lies in its capacity to allow the "individual" subject to be free within the institution of democracy.⁵

The provocative tension and potential in Habermas's work, for Hohendahl, lie in the difficulty of distinguishing between the public sphere as a theoretical concept and as an "actual" model of the public sphere. Hohendahl views Habermas's later work as an attempt to deal with some of these issues, which were unresolved in the *STPS*.

Critical limits and situated reason

Thomas McCarthy considers the way in which the subjects' social, historical and political context affects their understanding of argumentation in the public sphere. McCarthy's critique of the public sphere focuses on the dependence on the use of reason in accessing the public sphere. Subjects, he argues, may be unable to access or develop the type of reason required for use in the public sphere. In response, I ask: If access to the public sphere is contingent upon the use of reasoned and rational discourse, how is the public sphere accessible to all?

Seyla Benhabib, Thomas McCarthy, and Nancy Fraser raise concerns about how the norms and forms of communication of the public sphere are actually negotiated and understood. Benhabib notes the absence of any discussion of negotiation and development of the public sphere in Habermas's work. Habermas claims that the avant-garde as a transgressive movement did not "speak for the public sphere, nor did [it] constitute a public sphere" (1992a: 421). However, as Hohendahl points out, Benhabib's critique tends to rely on Habermas's more recent writing rather than his *STPS* (which does acknowledge some contestation). The empirical character of the *STPS*, with, for instance, Habermas's identification of "actual" sites where public discourse occurred, is different from his later, more abstract concept of communicative action.

It is apparent in Habermas's *STPS* that a certain decorum and protocol were required (or at least preferred) for the people to participate in public discourse; indeed it was considered necessary in public spaces, such as cafés or town squares, and in contributions to newspapers (Benhabib, 1992a). We will see in the representations of how the new public museums were imagined that this was also the case.

The insistence on particular procedures – the use of rationality and reason – established through the process of citizens *observing* democracy becomes the inflexible aspect of Habermas's public sphere. While such procedures were meant to guarantee the nature or form of the public discourse, ways of interpreting so-called normative practices of being in public could also be misinterpreted. In this sense, although people may have observed and then imitated what they observed, that did not necessarily guarantee access to a



Image 1.4 Honore Daumier, *Free Admission Day – Twenty-Five Degrees of Heat*, 1852. Acc. no. 920048 – Research Library, The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, California (920048)

forum for public discourse or the power to influence discourse. Using these practices could become the basis of exclusion – and the basis of the moralizing role that the museum would take.

Building on the above critiques, I consider below the possibility of a non-universal public, and the role of vision and visibility when deciphering the public sphere. I discuss the way in which the cultural sphere, in general, offers viable, alternative discourses through which to consider the public sphere.

The central problem is whether or not Habermas's public sphere takes account of different cultural values and needs. Habermas (1992a) acknowledges both that there are many different communities and that they need some way to communicate with each other. He recognizes that generalized points of communication are necessarily made on an abstract level, and that these are required for reason and rationality. He argues that such a level of abstraction is required for understanding the public sphere. This, however, does not necessarily negate the need for (non-abstract) norms and consensus as the fundamental tenets of the public sphere.

According to Hohendahl, in McCarthy's critique of the public sphere "the debaters and the sites are not stable and have to be negotiated in accord with specificity and its needs and values" in a pluralistic society (1992: 106). There are many forms of engagement with the public sphere which produce a more divergent notion than Habermas's, McCarthy argues. This conclusion is supported by the work of others such as Mary Ryan (1990, 1992, 1997), who critiques the public sphere on the basis of history, presenting a counter-narrative based on her research on the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the ascension of women (as citizens) into the political field in the United States.

Inclusion in the public sphere, particularly in Habermas's model, requires reasoned and rational discourse on matters of public concern, but inclusion does not assure equality; it often merely brackets difference. By bracketing I mean tolerating, or including, yet presuming that the difference seen should be modified to comply with the apparently normative conditions of the public sphere – this implies that the counter-public must surrender its difference.

As Fraser argues:

[I]f social inequalities in deliberation means proceeding as if they don't exist when they do, this does not foster participatory parity. On the contrary, such bracketing usually works to the advantage of dominant groups in society and to the disadvantage of subordinates . . . But this assumption is counterfactual, and not for reasons that are merely accidental. In stratified societies, unequally empowered social groups tend to develop unequally valued cultural styles. (1990: 64)

The point is that democracy of a Habermassian kind has not yet been achieved. Fraser is more interested in the type of democracy that does “actually exist,” imperfect as it may be. The forms of communication between publics, the public sphere and the state need to be decipherable and flexible, she suggests, so that negotiation between them can occur. In a Habermassian sense, such modification should take into account the essential notions of communication in the public sphere. However, accommodating the existence of competing publics involves not only modifying the form of discourse of the public sphere to reflect “actually existing democracy,” but also needs to take into account the multiple ways in which different publics articulate their “publicness” and the spaces in which they present themselves. In particular, I argue the importance of visual and spatial discourses as crucial elements of the public sphere, offering viable alternatives to the centrality of the literary public sphere.

Alternative public spheres

One of the central figures of modernity recognized in literature, history, geography and sociology is Charles Baudelaire’s nineteenth-century *flâneur*, walking the street, experiencing the modern life ([1863]1986). The *flâneur* existed in a time and space experienced differently than in previous centuries. Baudelaire’s dandy – voyeur, commentator and man of the street – came to signify the urban experience during the period post-1848 Revolution (Clarke, 1985). This relationship indicated a belief that aesthetics were key to the experience of modernity. It also generated anxiety. In 1903, Georg Simmel wrote of his concern of the impact of the modern city on individual subjectivity. In a similar vein, Sennett (1992) argued that modernity required a new attitude toward others in social life. Janet Wolff, Griselda Pollock, and Carol Duncan argue specifically that the domain of modernity, as it is discussed in literature and art history, “describes the experience of men,” with an emphasis on “the public world of work, politics and city life.” “[D]espite the presence of some women in certain contained areas,” Wolff argues, “it was a masculine domain” (Wolff, 1985: 37). The discourses of modernity here reflect similar concerns noted above in the work of Ryan, Landes and Fraser, that the defining characteristics of the public sphere do not acknowledge the structural boundaries that prevented greater participation from women.⁶

Landes (1988, 1995) uses paintings as a basis to critique Habermas’s universalist public sphere and to demonstrate its exclusive nature. The importance of vision to modernity is its relationship to space illumi-

nating an important connection with public life. Visuality in the form of paintings communicated particular discourses of modernity and the social position of women: “the socio-political implications of spatial organization of the painting itself” can indicate details about social relations (Massey, 1994: 232).⁷

Vision and visuality are important aspects of imagining both the public sphere and the public space. Vision and visuality refer not only to the physical act of seeing, but also to its social and historical contexts. Both vision and visuality are historical and social. Yet, as Hal Foster outlines:

neither are they identical: here the difference between the terms signals a difference within the visual – between the mechanism of sight and its historical techniques, between the datum of vision and its discursive determinations – a difference, many differences, among how we see, and how we see this seeing or the unseen herein. (1988: ix)

Nevertheless, the importance of vision and visuality as a mode of discourse has not been examined in most accounts of the public sphere. Visual representations of publicness and the emergence of the bourgeois public sphere were, according to Joan Landes, potentially prophetic of the role women play in democratic societies (Landes, 1988). The speculative or subjective character of interpretations of “the visual” (like the spatial) could in part be responsible for this neglect. The (uncertain) science of the senses – aesthetics – in relation to the public sphere has been overlooked. This may explain why museums have been overlooked in Habermas’s model.

Contested Boundaries and Cultural Spheres

The traditional distinction between public and private, as it affects women in the public sphere, remains a vital point of contestation in Habermas’s concept of the public sphere for Benhabib (1992a) and others, including Ryan (1992, 1997), Landes (1988, 1995), and Fraser (1989, 1990). The common concern expressed by these theorists is that the private, domestic and familial spheres are treated by Habermas as lying outside the public sphere. They argue that the private realm is also of a political nature. The two spheres are inextricably intertwined. Different forms of participation in the public sphere, as I discuss later, may, however, reveal alternative forms of discourse and thereby alternative publics. As I discuss in Chapters Four and Five, the move within the museum context to seek engagement with communities in new ways signals the recognition by some

museums of formations of discourse other than the more general notions of public and audience.

Despite this, for Benhabib, Habermas's theory of the public sphere emerges as superior to other models of "public space." Benhabib (1992a: 73) identifies Habermas's "discursive public space" as a model "which envisages a democratic-socialist restructuring of late capitalistic societies." She indicates the importance of the domain where public discourse occurs and is legitimated. According to Benhabib, the articulation of public discourse as it occurs in public space is central to the public sphere as a model of democracy. The domain where public discourses occur is thus spatialized.

For Benhabib there is a need for a more complete theory of the public sphere, one that encompasses those who are excluded. Such a theory would necessarily consider the normative character of the public sphere and its development to date. The conceptual basis of Habermas's writing about the public sphere, especially his notion of the normative forms of discourse, is more useful, Benhabib suggests, than his focus on the historical emergence of the bourgeois public sphere.

It appears that one implication of Habermas's argument is that the post-bourgeois public sphere of the late twentieth century is rendered politically less effective if the inclusion of the private sphere is as rapid and extensive as that which weakened the short-lived bourgeois public sphere of late eighteenth century Europe. As Habermas traces tensions arising from this liberal rhetoric of being accessible to all (which was not the case in practice), we see that, according to McCarthy, with:

the further developments of capitalism, the public body expanded beyond the bourgeoisie to include groups that were systematically disadvantaged by the workings of the free market and sought state regulation and compensation. The consequent intertwining of state and society in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries meant the end of the liberal public sphere. (1989: xii)

In other words, although Habermas's bourgeois public sphere is no longer feasible or "real," it has been influential in current critical thinking, in attempts to "salvage that arena's critical function and to institutionalise democracy" (Fraser, 1990: 58). By understanding the conditions that allowed the public sphere to emerge, it is possible to comprehend whether the "public sphere can be effectively reconstituted under radically different socio-economic, political and cultural traditions" (McCarthy, 1989: xii).

The insistence on a normative mode of behavior and communication certainly limits the potential of the public sphere to be accessible to all.

Cultural differences, for instance, not only challenge the premise of the public sphere but also require the content and focus of deliberations in that sphere to change. Despite the centrality of the cultural and historical specificity of Habermas's public sphere, the importance of the cultural is not fully acknowledged. Acknowledging cultural differences has the potential to undermine Habermas's universalizing principles. How might these different cultural values be part of the public sphere? Were they indeed part of the historically specific model he devised? A consideration of the links between late eighteenth-century modernity and particular discourses on the public sphere may indicate the potential for a more pluralistic or combative public sphere.

Unlike Habermas, McCarthy and Benhabib argue that the public sphere is inherently cultural and that it is expressed and shaped through the cultural interaction of those who participate in it. Unlike Habermas, though, they do not explore this empirically. They argue that acknowledgement of the existence of different cultural values introduces a challenge to the normative aspect of Habermas's public sphere. It is important to remember that Habermas's public sphere, as outlined in the *STPS*, is cultural – that is, literary – in a general sense. This is crucial. It appears that Habermas excludes other forms of the cultural as residing in the private domain, yet the literary is considered generalizable and essentially public. Specifying any other particular cultural form or practice dedicates it to the private intimate domain, not to the public sphere. In effect, a tension between the content and form of the public sphere develops. This is also where the aesthetic is implicated in cultural forms or practices. Because, following Habermas's interpretation of Kant, the aesthetic is considered to be based on subjective judgments – and for Habermas it is considered too particular for public discourse – such judgments are personal and not generalizable or rational.

The Role of Space and Vision in the Public Sphere

Public discourse is inherently spatial and visual and within that context it positions the role of institutions such as museums as central to the discussion of the public sphere. Space and vision are part of the working processes of the public sphere. The public sphere does not exist *a priori*.

The function of public discourse is to “hold the state accountable to ‘society’ via ‘publicity’” (Fraser, 1990: 58). The recognition of the public sphere and public opinion, in the form of publicity, therefore requires familiarity with the means of representation of the public sphere. On this

point Habermas acknowledges that publicity is a necessary function and practice of the public sphere, but he does not fully acknowledge its frequently visual character. For instance, in “earlier varieties of the public sphere it was important that images of the body not figure importantly in discourse” (Warner, 1992: 385). Emerging here is a paradoxical, unacknowledged reliance on the visibility of the public sphere in the forms of publicity needed to produce the public sphere. The appearance of public buildings housing public authorities, the spectacle of “official” state receptions, the published public opinion seen in print, all rely on being seen to produce and reproduce the appearance of democracy. The visual character of Habermas’s bourgeois public sphere emerges in both the metaphorical use of things visual and in the reliance on visual signs of the public sphere, such as cultural material produced in response to contemporary life. Art and architecture, and representations of public space in the museum context are, I argue, visual signs of the public sphere and articulate the museum as a cultural public sphere.

The (unacknowledged) importance of vision to Habermas’s public sphere also appears in his concerns with a place, or a site, where the public find representations of public opinion. The designation of places as “public,” and hence visible, relies on linguistic distinctions. Habermas traces the etymology of the term “public” to its German root “*öffentlich*,” which was used during the eighteenth century to mean the same as the French term “*publicité*” (publicity). He suggests that “the public sphere did not require a name of its own before this period” (Habermas, 1989: 3). A distinguishing feature of the term “public” in Habermas’s account of its etymology is the difference between the common and the particular (1989: 6). The common is synonymous with the term “public” (*publicus*) and the particular with the term “private” (*privatus*).⁸ The word “public” is more often defined in terms of the word “private”:

In the fully developed Greek city-state the sphere of the polis, which was common (koine) to the free citizens, was strictly separated from the sphere of the oikos; in the sphere of the oikos, each individual is in his own realm (idia). (Habermas, 1989: 3)

Habermas’s model of the public sphere is also paradoxically spatial, in that the discourse that characterizes the liberal bourgeois public sphere actually occurs somewhere – as we have seen, in a *place*: a coffee house, a public square or in reading groups. In identifying these sites, he also marks the development of a public space, a space in which the public congregated freely to discuss matters of importance.

In defining the German history of the term “public sphere,” in her Foreword to *Public Sphere and Experience*, Hansen refers to Habermas’s influence on Negt and Kluge (Hansen, 1993). A footnote at this juncture acknowledges that the term “the public sphere” has strong spatial overtones. Public sphere “implies . . . the social sites or arenas where meanings are articulated, distributed, and negotiated, as well as the collective body constituted by and through this process, ‘the public’” (Hansen, 1993: ix). It also implies a spatial concept of “openness . . . [which is] produced both within these sites and in larger, de-territorialized contexts.”⁹ It also recognizes the possibility to conceive of a public space that is not simply a fixed site. This, I would argue, is not inconsistent with Habermas’s framing of a public sphere:

The public life, *bios politikos*, went on in the market place (agora), but of course this did not mean that it occurred necessarily in this specific locale. The public sphere was constituted in discussion (*lexis*). (Habermas, 1989: 3)

Public life was decipherable in places where people gathered, and if these citizens also came to engage in discussion of matters considered “public,” the places became part of a public sphere. Habermas’s notion of a public sphere is less about location, however, than about the presence of discourse between people on matters public, but, as we have seen, his historical and theoretical account of the emergence of the bourgeois public sphere also identifies material places where public discourse occurred. Material sites are an implicit condition for Habermas’s model of the bourgeois public sphere to exist, even if the existence of public space did not necessarily ensure public discourse.

As discussed above, for Habermas, inclusion of the aesthetic makes the public sphere too context-bound, susceptible to value judgments, and too particular. Culture is interpreted as not being generalizable beyond a specific cultural community. But what else might this particularity reveal, especially as it is cultural minorities’ communities in pluralistic societies that question norms, precisely because of their exclusion from the public sphere? Indeed, have there been other cultural or aesthetic discourses of the public sphere? Do they corroborate Habermas’s account?

It has already been said that the term and concept “public sphere” “implies a spatial concept, the social site or arenas where meanings are articulated, distributed and negotiated, as well as the collective body constituted by this process, ‘the public’” (Hansen, 1993: ix). Rather than pursue this “implication” in terms of what is often understood as a kind of “openness to all,” Hohendahl produces perhaps the most convincing and productive argument around the contemporary relevance of Habermas’s public sphere. He states that:

there is no single model of the public sphere, rather different societies have developed a variety of models with specific institutional and formal (procedural) features . . . The boundaries and the structure of the spaces where public debates of political and social issues take place are not stable; they have to be negotiated in accordance with the needs and values of the community. (Hohendahl, 1992: 107)

In an essay entitled “Further reflections on the public sphere,” published in 1992, Habermas responds to criticisms of his bourgeois public sphere. He also discusses whether the public sphere model is “capable of, or can accommodate the notion of a bourgeois public sphere which has competing public spheres” (1992a: 425). While acknowledging a need to amend some areas of his analysis in respect of the normative basis of the public sphere, he raises the question “What else could stand in its place?” One response is suggested in this book.

Conclusion

As important institutions of the public sphere, museums need to engage in complex negotiations with funding bodies, interest groups, benefactors and their profession if they are to be effective and relevant. Assumptions are often made, however, about what is meant by the term “public” in this context. Its meaning is often assumed, and it is also often assumed that this meaning is shared. In the mid-1980s, Benedict Anderson’s work on the term “nation” identified a similar problem, leading him to argue that the philosophical poverty of the term would underpin conflict on a new scale within nations. So it did: the very meaning of a term that has created conflicts in the world has itself been subject to deep debate. In turn, I argue that the term “public” in the museum context also suffers from a kind of philosophical poverty, rendering it at times almost meaningless. The term is vexed, often bearing expectations that are impossible to meet. In the so-called “history wars” in the United States and Australia, questions about what constitutes the public, public culture and public history were central to the discussion about the identity of the nation. How, then, does the public participate in public culture; with what histories do the people identify; and what constitutes cultural institutions as public? This chapter has examined the notion of the public sphere and its historical, empirical and philosophical underpinnings. It has outlined the different ways in which “the public” is invoked, empirically and conceptually, often in contradictory ways. It has also identified how the aesthetic and cultural contribute significantly to the

public sphere. As I discuss in subsequent chapters, this multiplicity of meanings is reflected in the museum context. I ask: can the public sphere and the museum be genuinely *public*, “open to all,” even democratic?

Notes

- 1 Until the translation of the *STPS*, the two volumes on theories of communicative action were seen as Habermas’s most significant work (1984, 1987).
- 2 This counterposes his own view to that of Rousseau, who, Habermas claims, “wanted democracy without public debate” (1989: 99). Habermas argued that in Rousseau’s approach reason and rational discussion would be sacrificed to popular sentiment.
- 3 He cites Ryan (1992) and Eley (1992) as being particularly compelling, despite some theoretical problems (Habermas, 1992a: 466).
- 4 “Modernity is . . . a matter of representations and major myths – of a new Paris for recreation, leisure and pleasure, of nature to be enjoyed at weekends in suburbia, of the prostitute taking over and of fluidity of class in the popular spaces of entertainment” (Pollock, 1988: 52).
- 5 Michel Foucault makes a significantly different assessment of the Enlightenment, producing different possibilities for the subject in the public sphere and in public space (see Foucault, 1984a). Foucault and Habermas share similar goals – to emancipate the subject – but via different (yet related) means.
- 6 Women are among the alternative, competing publics that have been historically under-represented in public discourse. Landes and Massey recognize that visual discourses of modernity revealed women as significantly marginalized from public life.
- 7 Edouard Manet’s painting *Olympia* (1863, musée d’Orsay) is often cited as an example of this.
- 8 Also see the different ideas of “community” as outlined by Jean-Luc Nancy in *The Inoperative Community* (1991a) and in his article “Of being-in-common” (1991b). The term “community” is described by Nancy as either being in common through choice, or being in common through no choice. The word harbors contradictory meanings, as I discuss in Chapters Four and Five.
- 9 Hansen (1993) opens her Foreword with a quote of Kluge’s, referring to “[t]he public sphere [as] the site where struggles are decided,” which is a distinctly spatial reference. While Hansen acknowledges the spatial dimension of the term “public sphere,” she does not explore this any further in her Foreword. This is surprising given the insightful nature of this comment and the tendency of Negt and Kluge to consider cultural discourses of the public sphere that are non-literary, and how diverse cultural communities contribute significantly to discourses of the public sphere and democracy.