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Making Play or Playing the Game? On the Question of a “Cleft Habitus” at the Doorway to the Art Field

Abstract This article concerns the question of how marginalized individuals at the doorway to the art field manage their position of uncertainty, what Bourdieu calls a “cleft habitus,” and in some cases challenge the repressive norms. Bourdieu’s perspective on how historical crisis prompts change at the macro level is used to view how “micro crises” in the lives of individuals leads to resistance against normative requirements. The article suggests that within situations of micro crises individuals assume three strategies to handle the contradictions they are faced with: 1) expand upon their cultural capital (these resources can then be used in opposition to the institution of the field within which they were accumulated in the first place); 2) move to an alternative scene and audience; or 3) create a new or emergent future horizon through which they can reinterpret their past and present situation.

Keywords Micro Crises; Cleft Habitus; Future Hope; Future Expectations; Artistic Performance

To pass freely through open doors, it is necessary to respect the fact that they have solid frames. This principle, by which the old professor had always lived, is simply a requisite of the sense of reality. But, if there is a sense of

reality, and no one will doubt that it has its justification for existing, then there must also be something we can call a sense of possibility.

Robert Musil

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In the first volume of his novel *The Man Without Qualities*, Robert Musil plays with the idea that there are two kinds of people: those with a *sense of reality* who understand what can be carried out and realized, and those with a *sense of possibility* whom we label utopians, idealists, or downright fools. The peculiar feature of the latter is not only that they miss noticing whether certain doors might be closed or not; they also possess “an ability to conceive of everything there might be just as well,

and to attach no more importance to what is than to what is not” (Musil 1995:11).

Such individuals, according to Musil, can thus look at the future either more or less realistically, anchoring their view of it in the world they have already experienced, or letting their eye be guided by dreams and fantasies. His categorization is a playful one, but nevertheless related to a classical sociological problem; ultimately understandable as the question of what shapes individuals’ ability to act beyond the everyday routine and—further on—to challenge their prevalent situation. Historians and sociologists have, quite similar to Musil, described how history appears changeable and something more than the sum of experiences, when our views of the future embody creative and “unrealistic” expectations. These analyses are often connected to descriptions of the modern project’s politicizing tendency and the concomitant rise of new “isms,” or the founding of the ability to reshape horizons of expectation through the activities of social movements. Change is thus understood as imaginary that has real effects when the symbolic conceptions to make the future, as something beyond the current, are translated into concrete collective actions (e.g., Bourdieu 1988; Fantasia 1988; Koselleck 2004).

Such processes do not only unfold at the level of the group. In this article, the question of social change and social reproduction is explored at the individual level. The main question guiding my examination concerns the possibilities of individual agents to free themselves from repression. I investigate the means and visions that might be activated in the process of individual transformation. To a large extent my analysis is framed by Pierre Bourdieu’s approach. Even though most so-

ciologists might overlook Bourdieu’s perspective in this context, I will argue for its usefulness.

While Bourdieu (e.g., 1988) has accounted for the ways that moments of *historical crisis* can promote social change on a collective, macro level, I will focus on the micro aspects of social life and how, what I call *micro crises* can allow individuals to offer resistance to normative requirements. Micro crisis can create situations of uncertainty for those in marginalized positions; an ambivalence which may create pain, shame, and can reproduce social circumstances; but may also contain the possibility of going beyond the familiar.

Empirically, my arguments derive from a qualitative study of the careers of artists and visual arts education in Sweden. In this article, I pay particular analytical attention to the stories told by one female art student whose social background complicates her ability to navigate the school environment, and who therefore must creatively improvise to gain a measure of recognition within it. This student eventually turned away from a career in art, instead turning art into a hobby and becoming a police officer. I explain why she responded in this way, and also how she used her response to oppose exclusionary social regulations at the school. In the concluding section, I argue that individuals within similar situations of micro crises can assume three strategies that enable them to break with social rules and repressive norms. In that way, the empirical case is used as a metaphorical technique that is employed to clarify and develop certain theoretical arguments which can best be demonstrated and understood in a concrete, interpretive context (cf. Bourdieu 1996).

Methodological Framework

In February 1999, I conducted ethnographic research in a school offering preparatory training in visual art and sculpture. In Sweden, preparatory art schools provide a form of education that students commonly attend before applying to one of the few university-level programs that offer more prestigious academic education in fine arts. I spent two weeks observing classroom instruction and interaction, and conducted interviews with students, faculty, and school administrators. My purpose was to provide specific material for follow-up interviews with a small sample of female students to understand in depth the reasons why some individuals give up their initial dreams of being an artist, while others continue along their chosen career path.

Seven women were chosen to represent a range of differences and contradictions reflected in art education in the Swedish art field. Their background in art, their professional interests, and dreams of their future were very different, signifying a spectrum of economic risk-taking in making career choices. At one end of this spectrum were those who wanted to work as independent artists. In the middle of the spectrum they tended to express an ambition to develop creative abilities, but in fields that promised more economic security than independent arts practice (i.e., crafts, design, publicity, advertising). At the other end of the spectrum were those who planned not to practice their art professionally, viewing it instead as something to pursue on the side as a hobby. One of them taking this latter stance was “Linda,” whose case is taken up in more detail below.

The sample of female art students reflects a degree of heterogeneity that, in another kinds of categori-

zation, might be seen as uniform in terms of, say, gender, ethnicity, or class. To date, these women have been interviewed over the course of 15 years.¹ Empirical materials collected over time can be helpful to avoid reducing phenomena to essential and causal explanations on the basis of just one occasion or event (Bourdieu et al. 1991). Despite several interesting sociological studies built upon life history data (e.g., Bertaux and Bertaux-Wiame 1983; Elias 1993; Messerschmidt 2000; Connell 2006), it is uncommon for a sociological study to so deeply analyze individual actors over time, and to focus broadly on experiences beyond one’s professional career to those that include the other spheres of life.

The purpose of this method is to avoid the problems of essentialization and “othering” by analyzing *dissimilarities among women* instead of *differences between women and men*. Moreover, this method permits one to see differences that are “internal” to each of the women interviewed—that is to say, differences displayed by the subject over time, and when moving from one environment to another (Braidotti 1994). This latter perspective provides the basis for framing my analysis around data from six extended interviews with only one actor. Moreover, tracing the life path of Linda will serve as an example of a clarifying *deviant case* that is able to reveal something essential about the logic of the art field, norms, and rules which I will discuss next (Platt 2000; Bettie 2003).

¹ To date, I have conducted in-depth interviews with the women in 1999, 2001, 2002, 2003/2004, 2008/2009, 2011, and 2012. The material provides part of the data for a research project funded by The Swedish Research Council (ref. 2008-1304). In addition to this qualitative material, the research project is also built upon a survey sent to professional visual artists in Sweden.

The Field of Art and Its Specific Rules

Embarking on an artistic profession can be characterized as a risky endeavor in which high investment can be expected to yield significant returns in only a few individual cases. In Sweden, professional artists generally have long educations that, despite their considerable investment in educational capital, result in a precarious position in the labor market that includes high unemployment and low income. Investigations by the Swedish Arts Grants Committee (2011) show, for example, that even if two of every three artists in Sweden have at least some years of post-secondary school education (compared to one of every three in the country’s total population), the median income of Swedish artists (in visual art and design) is nearly 40 percent less than that of the total population.

For those who embark on such an insecure career path, it is an advantage to possess some form of “venture capital” (Flisbäck 2013), an additional stock of resources that can provide one with basic security. Not surprisingly then, it is students from well-educated homes who come with pre-existing familiarity with the arts that dominate higher education programs in arts in Sweden. It is a pattern that seems difficult to change as the proportion of art students from working-class backgrounds has remained steady for over a century, compromising 10 to 15 percent of the total group. Furthermore, like the Swedish art scene more broadly, the student bodies of arts programs are also made up primarily of those coming from the larger cities (Gustavsson and Börjesson 2008).

Despite broad uncertainties plaguing artists’ working life in the West, the number of trained profes-

sionally practicing artists has increased over the past two decades (Menger 2006; Røyseng, Mangset, and Borgen 2007; Forsman 2008). The growing numbers of those striving to enter the field make the competition more and more intense for the few established positions within reach. For Bourdieu (1996; 2000), the art field is of special sociological interest on this account in its conditions of extreme competition the social exclusionary processes become particularly pronounced. At the same time, however, social structures tend to be removed from sight because of an ideological framework that others have called a *talent ideology*, peculiar to artistic modernism in which artistic talent is proclaimed to be an inborn gift that, regardless of circumstances, will eventually always flourish and be rewarded (Nochlin 1973).

Like other distinct fields in modern society, the field of artistic production has emerged in a historical process of differentiation and specialization (Elias 1993; Bourdieu 1996). Sociologists and art historians have linked the origins of the contemporary field and the notion of art to the modern project developed with a specific, clearly-defined knowledge, and that remains relatively autonomous from competing societal interests. Within the contemporary field of art, one can detect remnants of modernism’s avant-garde romanticism that approaches artistic work as a striving for individual development that maintains precedence over the need for security in everyday life. It is a perspective in which artistic activity is looked upon as basically the opposite of the mundane world of material necessity, repetitive household work, and caring for friends and family (Bourdieu 1996; Pollock 1999). The notion of the art field as autonomous carries the idea of an artistic vanguard whose creations

the public will only come to understand in the future, logic which Bourdieu (1996) characterizes as *the economic world reversed*. To be able to afford this kind of work investment, however, one must have in one’s possession a sufficient amount of resources that enable one to make decisions about career and life that do not center on securing the stability of one’s material conditions. Just as with the value of vintage wine that only goes up with time, what is expected of aspirants in the art field is to have enough temporal distance from necessity, a position achieved over the course of a generation, at the least. To enter the art field, one needs to have developed the proper predisposition to operate within it, an embodied “practical sense” that Bourdieu calls a *habitus*.

Habitus, Social Change, and Its Limits

My concerns rest on the issue of how actors make creative use of cultural meanings and their varying amounts and forms of capital (e.g., symbolic, economic, social) to both change and reproduce their social situations within the framework of what seems possible to them. In this examination, Bourdieu’s concept of habitus is useful for allowing one to explore temporal sequential processes in which actors develop images of self in relation to previous and present social settings (cf. Potter 2000; Vaughan 2002; Emirbayer and Johnson 2008) and, as I will stress, in their outlook towards the future.

Habitus can serve as a tool to examine how emotions steer our life projects, influence our judgments of taste, and affect our values. Our habitus both aligns us with the prevailing valuations of a specific field, and also enables us to adapt to them (or fight to ad-

just the rules) (Bourdieu 2000:160-161; 2004:109-110, 372-374; 2008:89). Sociologists have sometimes interpreted—and criticized—habitus as internalized dispositions that activate mechanical responses formed in prior social situations. One recurring problem with these criticisms is that they tend to take habitus as only an orienting force socially imprinted by the past, while missing the equally important flexibility and temporal dynamic in the concept (e.g., Alexander 1995; Sayer 1999; 2005; Archer 2000; 2012; Bettie 2003; Beart 2012). From my perspective, one’s habitus is neither a static base imprinted in early life, nor an effect of socialization that follows a linear chain. As Marcoulatos (2001:4) points out, habitus is “the living energy of individuals who emerged as such within the particular environment.” Individuals pursuing their life projects always find themselves situated in different fields and spaces at different points in time. The individual mark of each one’s habitus is thus always a relatively unique set of life experiences that unfold over time and that combine in different social settings. In other words, our habitus is created processually in the face of the rules and rewards derived from diverse and simultaneously constituted social environments (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Bourdieu 2000; cf. Potter 2000:242; Vaughan 2002; Peters 2011:68).

Another often unrecognized merit of the concept of habitus is its potential to reveal how *social change* takes place and allows room for improvisation, within *limits*. For example, the ability to change one’s appearance and behavior, which might be assumed to result from mental reflection on one’s own actions, may remain hampered by a body that is unaccustomed to the new ways of bearing and expressing itself. What might be expected in a new space may

be too far removed from the practices previously inscribed in the self and the body (Bourdieu 2008:86).

What may appear to some critics as a logical contradiction with the concept of habitus (Alexander 1995), actually reflects the necessary complexity of an analytical tool for comprehending “dialectical movements between different levels of analysis” (Potter 2000:242). Furthermore, when there is an asymmetric relation between the resource expectations set by the institution or environment and the actual capital possessed by a social actor, a sense of insecurity and self-doubt may result from the actor’s habitus being caught in contradiction (Bourdieu 2000:163).

This feeling of being deviant, which derives from a position of marginalization, can create three possible responses by agents in dominated groups. One possible reaction to feelings of otherness can be a rejection of the values held by the established group in favor of an alternative or “counter” culture (Bourdieu 2004). A second response is when the repressed understand their marginalized position as something caused by their own actions, thus becoming victims of what Bourdieu has termed *symbolic violence*. In such cases, the actors are bound by situations in which they have internalized the views and interpretations of the dominant, which are then taken for granted (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:120-122; Bourdieu 2000:138-141). A third response can occur when individuals with a *cleft habitus* accept the established rules, but whose feeling of sharing the common belief system creates a critical, creative, and reflexive eye. This critical stance towards the established logic may lead to attempts to resist these conditions, while also, paradoxically, sustaining a longing for recognition and a hope for the

future (Bourdieu 2008:100, 107). As I have noted, this article aims to understand the concrete circumstances in which individuals engage this third approach.

The Future as Something Beyond the Present

To emphasize how individuals’ perspective of the future affects their ability to challenge and reproduce social conditions, I (re)turn to the classical work of Kurt Lewin (1964; 1999). Lewin claims that an individual’s actions always take place within a *life space*, which consists of the individual and their subjectively experienced surrounding situation. It is not only the present that exists in the life space of an individual, the past, as well as the future are also always current. In the life space occurs a dynamic interaction of different temporal conditions that change through reflection, new experiences, and social interaction. For the individual, new events may change the view of the past, adjusting old perspectives and memories. The individuals’ desire for a different future, along with reflections on present and past behavior, may give rise to a change in their current situation. According to Lewin (1999) who distinguishes between *hopes* and *expectations* for the future, the temporal irregularities of social life generate new experiences that are more than just additive. While expectations may be based on realistic experiences, hope can have an utopian dimension and creative potential. From this perspective, therefore, it is reasonable to assume that what is a plausible expectation for one actor may be a distant hope for another, depending upon the particular characteristics of one’s habitus. The distinction between hopes and expectations can thus become a useful supplement to Bourdieu’s concept of habitus.

Similar to what can be experienced at a collective level, individuals’ images of the future may have the transcendental power to change current circumstances when a seemingly “unrealistic” sense is translated into concrete practices. At the macro level, this point has been put forward by Bourdieu in his analyses of social change. According to Bourdieu (1988; 2000:229), each relatively autonomous social field, with its shared definitions concerning values (as the art field), has its own chronology, which—despite fierce competition for positions—contributes to the sense of unity among its actors. A unanimous sense of time among actors gives a field a certain stability, contained within what Bourdieu (1988) has described as an *illusio*; a collective belief that it is worth accepting the rules of a game in which everyone is given equal possibility of participating and that playing the game is worth the investment.

Historical crises can disrupt the *illusio*, breaking the temporal order and causing the rules of the game to lose their hold on participants. In crises, Bourdieu observes (1988), actors within one field can come to reflect upon their own situation in light of the situation of actors in another field. The mirroring of situations across fields can be similar to an act of solidarity, whereby the different times of the different fields become synchronized, and give rise to a shared desire for change. When the habits and routines of the everyday are broken, optimism about the future spreads among those who previously saw themselves without a means to exert influence. A historical crisis, explains Bourdieu—specifically referring to the student rebellion in May 1968—represents the *critical moment* when “the ordinary experience of time, as a simple re-enactment of a past or a future inscribed

in the past” (1988:182), may be broken, and anything can suddenly seem possible.

In other words, crisis represents a social situation standing outside of the everyday, arising when actors operating within a given institutional framework have accumulated sufficient amounts of resources to enable them to *distance themselves from the everyday rules of their field*. According to Bourdieu (1988), in a crisis, these resources can then be used in opposition to the very institutions of the field within which they were accumulated in the first place. Capital deemed to be of value and serving as an instrument of domination at one point provides soil for social change at another, becoming a useful tool for critical scrutiny of existing power relationships. Paradoxically, then, symbolic capital can be a powerful instrument for dominated groups when, as it is revealed, it can expose the symbolic violence operating in and through all forms of power. My own research on individual actors’ lives and their efforts to change course or resist suggests that this same explanatory framework can be usefully applied at a micro level as well, as I will demonstrate next.

Uncertainty in an Artistic Career

Linda, born in 1977, grew up in a small, rural community with few connections to the world of arts. Nevertheless, among her family members there was a certain aesthetic sensibility. Linda’s father liked to color ready-made pictures that he bought from the local hobby store; one of her uncles used to paint in his free time; and an older sister with an interest in the arts encouraged Linda in her creative pursuits. While these practices need to be considered to understand

Linda’s decision to apply to art school, the amount of cultural capital possessed by her family did not derive from legitimated or institutionalized artistic accomplishment. As Linda recounted, in choosing an occupation, it was economic security that had to be the primary consideration. Her stress on economic security was an attitude that clashed with her general understanding of artistic occupations as being demanding and “tough,” but ultimately rewarding of talent and effort for those with patience and perseverance. Many times she has asserted that: “There are so many financial problems you have at first before you become famous” (Linda, 2002).

When Linda began studying at art school, what she had in mind was a career as a part-time artist, figuring that, perhaps, she would supplement her income with work as a furniture maker or as an art teacher. By the end of her second year at school, she had put aside completely her dream of pursuing art as profession and had begun to view the prospect of working in fine arts as a proposition that was simply too risky. When the other art students were busy preparing applications for university programs in fine arts, Linda submitted her application to the police academy instead. Today, Linda works as a police officer, while still showing her work in art exhibitions and doing paintings for a commission.

Proximity to Life’s Necessities

At the art school, the students tended to be accorded a different status depending on how they saw their future as artists: the higher the economic risk of their future career plans, the higher the cultural

esteem they enjoyed among their peers. Harboring notions of financial security signaled the absence of a desire to commit the kind of time and energy necessary for serious art-making activities. To downgrade one’s art practice to the level of a hobby was generally viewed as abandoning the life of an artist for other projects and pursuits. Linda’s plan to combine art with other gainful employment was thus perceived as violating the selflessness of the artists’ ethos.

Linda’s mother is a secretary, and her father a medical doctor, the first in the family to attend university. A generation back, Linda’s family members had been farmer and factory workers. We might hypothesize that Linda had not yet achieved enough temporal distance from a family situation where the necessities of the natural and social world still shaped or determined her life decisions. In interviews, Linda has often expressed an attitude that art should speak and appeal to the masses and be sellable. So, for example, after an exhibition in 2001, Linda noted that she had “showed some aquarelles, maybe a bit because I knew that people would be, like, more into buying that sort of stuff.”

Linda’s goal of seeking recognition from a broader public was treated as a problem at the art school. At one of the faculty meetings that I attended, the art works shown at a recent graduate exhibition were discussed, with some of the students being noted as particularly deserving of praise, while a few were talked about as being more questionable in terms of the quality of their work. One of these latter was Linda, whose art was explicitly criticized for catering too much to popular taste.

Few Entrances to Learning the Rules of Art

The students at the art school were taught the modernist way of looking at art production, which promulgated that all types of art expression could be utilized for one’s creative purposes as long as they were previously untried. The didactic aim was that the students would find their own unique artistic language. For those students with knowledge of art history and familiarity with the field of contemporary arts, this type of pedagogical approach opened up a wealth of possibilities. These students tended to approach their teachers with more ease and with the language and body of knowledge that could be used to discuss their art, all things that someone like Linda lacked. For her, this relatively freewheeling pedagogical style was a significant source of insecurity.

As previous studies from Sweden show, the quality of learning experience in arts programs depends to a large extent on the individual students’ own ability to take the initiative in seeking supervision; with those failing to meet this expectation deemed unfit for the rigorous demands of the profession, an elitist attitude that tends to pervade the educational institutions through which artists enter the field (Edling and Börjesson 2008; Edström 2008). Such an individual-centered pedagogy and meritocratic approach give rise to the operation of a *hidden curriculum* at school, whereby students with high amounts of cultural capital gain advantages by having a preexisting familiarity with the values and knowledge taught, including the ability to read and interpret the school’s system of codes (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990). For Linda, the unstructured program of study at the art school

proved a disadvantage, while the more formalized instruction and learning structure that she encountered at the police academy suited her much better.

In her artistic expression, her life style, and her goals, Linda represented a fish out of water at the art school. Her “sporty” clothing style, short hair, and the fact that she exercised regularly contributed to her becoming, in her own words, something of an “outsider” among the other more bohemian dressed art students. Her feeling of a lack of acceptance in the arts program made it more difficult for her to become acclimated to the environment. After a while, she turned elsewhere, making friends outside the school.

Both Linda’s appearance and attitude reflected her marginal status at school, as well as in relation to the system of belief that has governed modern art. The modernist creed long advocated by the cultural avant-garde imposes a logic requiring the artist to be preoccupied with the creation only of work that is new and original, that the public will likely only understand in the future, if ever (Bourdieu 1996; Bloom 1997). Even though it is a requirement that has been challenged by the postmodern turn in art in recent decades, it was the modernist logic that dominated the school environment in which Linda was acting.

Deviating From the Norm at the Entrance to the Art Field

Individuals like Linda, who go against prevailing norms and lack access to the legitimate resources and recognized practices, can, in this scenario, easily become “stigmatized” in their social environment. Treated as an “other,” Linda and several of her class-

mates reported how she was seen as “lesbian” and “unfeminine” by other art students, due to her appearance. Projections of her as a deviant in the scholastic entrance to the art field were thus framed in terms of the representations of sexual “otherness” in the society. Moreover, Linda described her isolation at the art school as something that only got worse over time. After a while, she started avoiding going to parties with her fellow students, having been treated particularly offensively on one such occasion. Among the partygoers, there had been a group of men who had begun asking questions about her androgynous way of dressing, which they found disturbingly “different” from the normal. Soon enough, they, as Linda herself put it, also “made attempts at physical closeness” while harassing her with obscene comments. The following quote can be read as describing an extreme example of what she often had to face for having been relegated to the status of an outsider in the school environment. At a party with her schoolmates:

This one guy from my class, he was really drunk and was screaming obscenities in my ear: “Hey you, you know what they’re doing out there in the bathroom? They’re busy having sex in there.” I got a bit angry with him, and I turned around and said: “You know what? Why are you screaming in my ear? I’m not deaf!” Then he tried to put me down even more, and started saying that I was being so “bitchy.” (Linda, 1999)

Linda’s story can be interpreted as one of failed attempts to adjust to a lifestyle that would better blend in with that of the other art students. Sometimes this could be a matter of assuming a “more feminine” exterior. All in all, it thus appeared that Linda’s habi-

tus not only failed to represent the socially approved norms for how an *art student* should look and act like but also diverged from the notion of how a *female heterosexual* art school student ought to be like.

Parodying the Art Field’s Prescriptions

With her deviant habitus (represented by the combination of her specific endowment in inherited capital, her previous experience, her future life goals, and her present appearance), Linda was a “challenge” to the other students’ belief in the art game, or *illusio*; the collective belief that playing on the art field is fair and worth its effort (Bourdieu 1988). She was punished for this in a classic gendered way, such as when the harassment was directed at her female body. Despite being the subject of brutal treatment, Linda was able to critically examine the domination to which she was subjected, refusing to simply settle into the marginalized position that she was being relegated to. An example of this was Linda’s input at the art school’s student exhibition when, besides exhibiting traditional watercolor paintings, she also contributed a solo performance work. When we met in 1999, Linda recounted this event, supporting her story with photographs. In her performance, she had “dressed up” in a short skirt, high heels, acrylic nails, fake eyelashes, and a blond, long-haired wig, serving home-baked cookies to those in the audience. The performance was entitled: “I Want to Become a Police Officer.” It was an outrageous performance, intended to be provocative, and it illustrates the theoretical issues we have been considering.

Linda’s performance can be interpreted as an attempt to resist submission to the repressive norms of

a school that stands at the doorway to the art field. While defiantly displaying her newly chosen occupation (police officer), Linda was simultaneously testing a means of artistic expression that was new to her. In that way, she not only challenged the restrictive position but also stretched herself by trying out a medium for creating art works that were not sellable. In addition, through the overdone sexy-girl look, she made a caricature of the demands for more conventional codes of feminine appearance and behavior. In the following quote, Linda describes how she had made an effort to imitate La Cicciolina, the Italian singer, politician, and porn actress who in the 1990s became well-known in the established art scene as well, due to her collaboration and marriage to the well-known American artist Jeff Koons:

I dressed up as a kind of “Cicciolina.” It was such a great thing to do, even though I looked like a transvestite and the cookies didn’t taste good. But, the thing in itself was damn fun; it was great. (Linda, 1999)

Even if she herself did not formulate it explicitly, Linda’s performance can be seen as a critique of the established art scene, stereotypes of (heterosexual) femininity, and demands for adjustments to the norms of the art school. Although Linda’s teachers reportedly considered her performance to be too populist (a stance at odds with the formula for becoming a successful artist), Linda reported that several of her fellow students expressed great respect for it and began to look at her with fresh eyes and a newfound admiration.

It may seem ironic that it was when Linda had made up her mind to leave the school that she started receiving recognition from others, a recognition prompted

by her challenge and parody of the marginalized place to which she had been previously assigned. Next, I will look more closely into the social factors enabling Linda’s attempt to break from the mold.

Concluding Discussion

In this article, I have been highlighting Linda’s performance and her new choice of occupation as an example of how social change and social reproduction can act at the same time and be present in some of the very same processes. Due to her deviant habitus, the exclusion process, and the hidden curriculum of the art school, Linda shifted her aspirations towards another occupational career, while at the same time challenging her marginalized place. Drawing on a form of artistic expression that fits well into the game of the art field, she was able to reveal the art school’s, more or less hidden, repressive norms and prescriptions. In this way, we may say that Linda was able to *visualize the symbolic violence* that she had been the object of.

I would argue that the emotional strength for Linda’s performance had grown out of her feeling and experience of a *cleft habitus*. The disjunction between Linda’s habitus and the common belief system at the art school, combined with an acceptance of and longing for the dominant group’s recognition, gave rise to a sense of possibility and the hope of freeing herself from uncomfortable feelings of estrangement. Linda’s actions may be described as a micro crisis that emerged in opposition to the *illusio* maintained by other students. It can be seen as comparable to Bourdieu’s (1988) historical crises (macro crises), where actors’ field of vision expands to cover, or focus on, other fields, thereby exposing a social institution

to the critical light of alternative perspectives. Such reflexive acts disrupt the routine adjustment of the habitus to objective social conditions, thereby releasing actors’ initiative and giving rise to new ideas and visions of “thinkable” futures. This new-born hope of a different future can serve as a breeding ground for resistance to the *status quo*.

For Bourdieu (2001), the questioning and criticism of the dominant thought patterns reflected in this process is approached primarily as a collective matter of institutional change, since the influence of individual actors is generally marginal, and since the punishment meted out for resistance tends to be both too obvious and too serious in its consequences. The oppositional creative play that Linda enacted could be interpreted as a personal project laden with private significance, while the other actors around her stayed on within the game of the art field, playing along and reacting accordingly. Yet, in my view, it would be a mistake not to pay attention to the significance of the kind of micro crises that her case represents, for it can provide an opportunity to shed light on how social life is produced and reproduced through the experience of an individual actor. It should be emphasized that individual actors contribute significantly to their own social fate, at the same time as they may actively resist the influence of external interests in shaping it. As sociologists, we need to develop adequate explanations for simultaneous and cross-cutting processes and influences. In my study, this has been possible with the help of the specific, qualitative empirical material where I follow a limited number of actors in depth. In the final section, I will discuss three possible conditions that helped make it possible for Linda to dare to take an oppositional public stance.

A New Future Horizon

Being in the art field entails a great deal of freedom in which pride of place is given to individual creativity. For those without the resources to orient and cope in this openness, however, a strong sense of uncertainty can prevail. Linda’s case offers examples of how difficult it can be for an actor who lacks adequate knowledge (i.e., cultural capital), or whose habitus is oriented towards a life in which material necessity determines priorities, to find one’s way into the artistic domain. With the art schools’ loosely structured curriculum and with the task of finding one’s creative expression falling on the individuals themselves, it becomes imperative to master the prevailing cultural codes. Linda’s failures in this regard have made it increasingly difficult for her to orient herself in the arts environment. Instead, she turned to another career more attuned to her habitus.

Yet, a *new future horizon* opened up for Linda when she made up her mind to enroll in the police academy, which meant that she could find a more relaxed freedom in her relation to the game of art, as well as to the dominant rules of social interaction at the art school itself. The new horizon of her future helped to lessen the social pressures of having to fit into her present environment. Thanks to this fact and to the friendships she made outside school, Linda became less vulnerable to criticism from her teachers and fellow art students. This newfound reflexive distance then provided her with the strength to enable her to rise up and challenge her confinement to a marginal position as a deviant.

The ability to depart from the old and break new ground is always based on hopes that have a certain

foundation in reality: although crises can produce a sense that the cards in the game have been shuffled anew for a new deal, one’s winnings and losses are always carried forward to the next round. This can be considered the bodily character of social experience, the embodiment of social and cultural experiences in one’s habitus, which holds important consequences for one’s sense of self-confidence and thus one’s ability to raise one’s voice in opposition to make a different future (cf. Bourdieu 1988; 2008). Linda’s life choices and attitude towards the art field provide an illustration of the kind of fragility from which those in the first and second generation moving up the “class ladder” typically suffer (cf. Bettie 2003). In Linda’s case, the result was that she was left with a distinct feeling of deficiency, which prompted a yearning for recognition.

Change-Enabling Capital

It is within the habitus, where past and present practices are embodied, that attitudes towards the future are formed. It occurs with the convergence of two forces as the pragmatic orientation of one’s sense of reality meets the reality-transcending pull of one’s sense of possibility, producing an orientation towards the future. It was Musil (1995:12) who came close to expressing this perspective when he proclaimed that “[i]t is reality that awakens possibilities, and nothing would be more perverse than to deny it.” In order to be able to take the initiative in her quest to be noticed and acknowledged, Linda first needed an emotional safety net—a sort of venture capital—to fall back on in case her attempts failed. That is what a new future horizon and new friendships offered her. In addition, Linda also needed sufficient cultural capital.

Despite the negative experiences during her time in the arts program, Linda had evidently accumulated enough *cultural capital* to know *how, where, and in what form* resistance to the prevailing codes could be staged. This is the second factor to which I want to draw attention with regard to enabling Linda’s performance. The artistic training that she received helped her to both learn the craft of art and to understand the norms of the field of culture production. For her performance on the opening night of the student exhibition, Linda resorted to artistic tools and means of expression that were neither material, nor marketable, the obverse of those characteristics that she had previously valued.

The artistic forms that Linda utilized for her resistance might also be viewed as a prerequisite for her parody. Thanks to its being staged as a performance, her oppositional play, despite the seriousness of its undertones, was shielded in a certain way by being presented and understood as “only a game,” much as Clifford Geertz (1973:450) showed in his classic essay on the Balinese cockfight. The illusory dimension present in all sport and in all art has the essential function of softening the consequences of these kinds of subtle symbolic criticisms of the hierarchies that operate in everyday life.

Even though my analysis has been developed and made at the micro-sociological level, it has similarities with Bourdieu’s approach and assumptions at the more macro-sociological level. Linda’s example shows that attempts to change repressive situations take place when the marginalized succeed in acquiring some of the cultural capital held by institutions, while going on to deploy this capital as an instrument to undermine the symbolic power derived from these very resources.

A Scene and an Audience Beyond the Ordinary

Linda’s attempt to act independently at the exhibition involved improvisational opportunities that required a certain technical mastery of art as a craft, as well as knowledge of the art field’s rules and norms. Yet, as so many cultural analysts have shown (e.g., Huizinga 1955; Geertz 1973; Bourdieu 1988; Butler 1997), the rule-breaking and the improvisation enacted through this kind of play also require for their actualization a physical scene beyond the space of the everyday. It, too, affords the kind of distance necessary for an act to have effects as an intervention in the struggle about redefining dominant beliefs and values. The opening night of the student exhibition offered Linda such a place for her performance, a scene beyond the ordinary where she succeeded in changing the way other art students viewed her. At the same time, and in the same space, she found a new audience that helped her to have the courage to break with her inhibitions within the art school. In other words, the visitors at the exhibition were not only proffered home-baked cookies, but something of Linda’s new self as well.

Epilogue

By way of conclusion, Linda’s story illustrates the fact that the outcome of the social game in the art field, as well as in all other fields of human practice, can never be predetermined ahead of time. There is always some room for play that can enable a new sense of possibility to emerge, creating a scope for individual maneuvering in social situations. Neither the games called forth in the field of art, nor

Linda’s life trajectory can be understood without account of the unforeseeable possibilities in both.

I have pointed to the significance of the dynamic in the art performance itself, but I would also draw attention to the fact that Linda’s performance was more than a longing for others’ respect, or parody of the power relationships of the art institution. The performance was also a source of durable, creative pleasure. In her preparation, Linda gained a stronger, more consistent sense of self-respect with regard to the craft of art and, in this way, restored her love for artistic expression.

So, to put it in Musil’s terms, within the limits of reality, Linda recovered a sense of possibility for future art practice that had been overtaken by feelings of insecurity produced by her experience at the art school. In this paradoxical way, both social reproduction and social change occurred simultaneously. Later, in 2011, when describing how she found herself, more or less unconsciously, transferring her pleasure in art to her first-born daughter, three-year old Maria, she noted:

I can see that Maria has a good eye for what’s around her. She can analyze paintings really impressively. We were sitting at the table, just now before you came, and she said: “Mommy, look at this apple! Do you see how it looks?” And I, too, sometimes say to her: “Look how nice this is, Maria; what a beautiful flower! I’d like to paint a picture of it.” (Linda, 2011)

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