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**Conceptual Approaches in  
Contemporary Ceramic Art**

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## An Introduction to ATINER's Conference Paper Series

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**Integral Development of a Project for the Improvement of Operation of Municipal Slaughterhouses, and the Technology of Sustainable Use of Their Waste and Wastewater**

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**Abstract**

The period, which we are in since the second, half of the 20th century is called Postmodernism and considered to be end of the art. During this period, many developments and transformations were occurred. According to these efficient transformations, the ceramic art was influenced as many art disciplines.

In the 20th century, ceramic art has been accepted as an artistic discipline with the 19th century and later by industrial revolution, the developing of technology and differing cultural structures. In this process, conceptual art works were created by contemporary ceramic artists' interpretations.

In the ceramic art history, conceptual art history has an important place because of enabling of the creating ceramic art works that stands against the traditional and the modernist style.

In this study, contemporary ceramic art are examined in the light of conceptual art philosophy with the art works of conceptual ceramic artists.

**Key words:** Ceramic, Conceptual art, Postmodernism

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### **Post-modern Period and Post-modern Theories**

Industrial revolution whose results experienced concretely in Europe in the 18th century caused a technological and economical growth. With this growth experience, a new life style and way of living called 'modern' has emerged.

Modernism had become a period when mind came into prominence and positivism, techno centrism and universality spread. Modernism, in its simple form, is described as a transition from an economical situation based on agriculture and crafts to an active situation where industrial education, transportation and communicating devices were developed. While this transition period brought a distinctive specialization in society, it caused the departed old values of the society rebuild. Revolutions experienced in political, technological and industrial areas formed the bases of rebuilt society.

Modernism, perceived as positivist, technology centered and rationalist inclined in general, is identified with the belief of absolute right, the planning of social order in a rational way and standardization of knowledge and production (Harvey, 1998:21). Two world wars brought an end to modernism which had the features stated above.

In 1960s post-modernism was called as the end of the modern ideology. At that time there were people that claimed post-modernism as a fracture from modernism, while by the others it was claimed as a criticism in modernism itself. The main feature of post-modernism is the effort of freedom towards knowledge monopoly caused by the modernism.

The word post-modern started to be used at the end of the last century. It was, at first, thought to be used by Arnold Toynbee in his work published in 1939. However the term post-modernism – in the sense that the collapse of humanist values – was used by a German intellectual in a book published after the First World War.

According to Toynbee, the most distinctive features of Post-modern age are big wars, revolutions and confusion. This confusion expresses the cultural collapse, at the same time. When we came to 1960s, the word post-modern was started to be used in a way that expresses the new inclinations in art and architecture. In this period, many cultural and social theorists started to use the term post-modern in a context that expresses a radical fracture in terms of art and culture (Kılıc, 2007: 9-10). Not coming true of the things that modernism pledged, disclaiming of wrong belief that it could solve everything (nuclear weapons, chemical waste, hunger, poverty, environmental pollution), usage of modern science in personal political choices and its being accused of helping to sustain the totalitarian governments, the increase of differences between reality and theories in modern science, modernism not dealing with the human existence's mystical and metaphysical aspects even ignoring them and concreting of modern science and its forgetting of emotions are the main causes of emerging and hanging of post-modernism and the experienced fraction.

There are no common features in post-modern perception. Therefore it is not a philosophical theory and 'ism' like idealism, materialism, pragmatism. Since it does not have basic principles as it is in 'isms', it can not be called as an 'ism'. The best expression to this is that post-modern situation is being experienced. The main features of post-modern situation are stated as ambiguity, fragmentation, humiliation of regulation, irony, loss of self, hybridization, attendance, being carnivalesque, textuality, back to the future, anything goes.

#### **Post Modernism and Art**

Art phenomenon that has changed by gaining different qualification and interpretation up to now has been impressed by the post-modern period since 1960s.

Post-modern transform that has been experienced in art is a period when big fragmentations have happened in terms of history of art.

Since the day it has emerged, phenomenon of art has developed by gaining different qualification and interpretations by many works of art done. The concept and thoughts that emerged with the perception of contemporary art in 1900s started to bring forth the production in 1960s. Art tendencies belong to 1960 and after 1960 called as “post-modern” tendencies in art had become a period when big fragmentations happened in terms of history of art with the experienced industrial interactions after the World War II.

The obligatory relationship between art and economical reality was more evident than ever before and it showed itself in new architecture that developed under the patronage of multinational companies. Architecture was the most argued area at the beginning of the post-modern period. This is both due to the criticism of the architects like Charles Jenks, Rob Krier, Robert Venturi, Michael Graves and Frank Gehry to the international modernist form created by the Le Corbusier, Gropius, Van der Rohe and they created buildings themselves called “post-modern” (Yılmaz, 2006: 339).

Modern architecture purified from beautification and historical reference was evaluated as cold and concrete blocks that are alien to humankind by the architects that defend post-modern vision. Modern movement that started to agonize was founded by Charles Jenks the pioneers of post-modernism.

“Modern Architecture died at 15:32 on 15<sup>th</sup> July 1972 in Missouri St. Louis USA. The death penalty was executed by breaking down a few buildings in Pruitt Igoe with dynamite.”

This event was announced symbolically as the death of modern movement and as the birth of post-modernism (Onder, 1994: 5).

With the start of post-modern period a lot of concepts and descriptions were questioned again. This situation caused a new language that composes of cultural indicators to occur. This new language emerged as a response to the tempestuous flow of indicators those conflicts in the infinite channels of “world of copies”. New developments let people know that the copied, multiplied ones replace the original ones. A focus point, a centre or a historical privilege was out of question and media seized the management of history. According to French philosopher Jean Baudrillard we have been living in a world of “instant impact” and the art that keeps up with the time we are in was not the concrete side of Modernism but it was the art that is based on the instant impact of electronic age (Morgan, 200: 187).

Names that come to mind when mentioned post-modernism are Rauschenberg, Baselitz, Schanbel, Kieper, Warhol in art; Senchs and Venturi in architecture; Artoud in theatre; Barthes, Barthalime and Pynchon in literature; Lynch in cinema; Sherman in photography; Derrida, Lyotard and Baudrillard in philosophy (Sarup, 1995: 155).

Instead of impressionist, post-modernist are closer to the anti-impressionists in art. Anti-impressionist art is described as the non-preserver of the nature. What is basic for the art is to express not to imitate. While the impressionists were dignifying the spontaneousness, the post-modernists were trying to destroy it. Post-modernism re-explains the meaning of the relationship between art, the object of art and the viewer. This perception prefers thought and concept to form. It detaches the process from the object of art by saying that object of art is composed in a designed process.

#### **Post-Modernism in Ceramic Art**

Ceramic has existed in our lives since B.C. and the acceptance of it as an artistic discipline was in 20<sup>th</sup> century. Ceramic objects have existed in every period

due to their functionality. However as a result of the experienced industrial revolution they were thrown into the back ground due to the material diversity and the foundation of the factories. This decline period came to an end first due to Arts And Crafts Movement, and later The School of Bauhaus. “The ceramic workshop in The Designing School of Bauhaus has been the department that produces the most artistic works among the other material workshops by developing in its own way (İnal, 2006: 107).” However original searching in ceramic art started in a school that was founded by Bernard Leach who inhabited in Japan for a long time. Leach taught the quality ceramic production techniques that he learned in Japan in that school. As the students of that school, Hans Cooper, Lucie Rie and Ruth Duckworth laid the foundations of ‘ceramic art’ by their expressionist works. After 1969, ceramic art that caught a contemporary and an artistic language by Funk Art, became a part of post-modern process. The perception of shape and color of post-modern ceramic are quite different from classical and modern periods. Color was another item that differs and it was often used as a symbol by the artist in a broad scale along with its all enthusiasm and intensity.

### **Conceptual Works in Post-Modern Ceramic Art**

The art of 1960s and 1970s happened with the consciousness of western people that questioned their society and the values of the world where they lived. In this context, the art after 1960s was founded on two main traditions: Matisse and Duchamp traditions. Artists that were under the influence of Matisse traditions produced works that are appropriate to the existed artistic classifications at that time. However artists that were under the influence of Duchamp traditions, questioned the art and its place in the world. Conceptual art has been coming from the Duchamp tradition school.

Conceptual art is the re-discovery of some fundamental tendencies (Dada, surrealism, futurism, constructivism, productivism) that emerged in Europe between two world wars in terms of social and artistic areas in 1960s. The root of the tendency was started in America and then it expanded to France, Germany and many other countries.

In post-modern process, multidirectional and multilingual structure of art has embraced a Post-Duchampian ‘non performance’ culture over serial production objects and brings the experience forward. Post-modern art apprehension created a rooted alteration in time and size perception by combining conceptual suggestions that are not to be concluded with the object with the technological innovations. This situation makes the articulated, complicated and jointed formation apparent.

The thought of conceptual art increases retrospective searching to determine the global theoretical power of ‘art’, by enforcing the description of art as a visual or comprehensive spatial experience and as an object of entertainment. Therefore; conceptual apprehension that brings the various forms of cultural experiences, represents a milestone along with the effects of its relationship with art.

When we look at the relationship between conceptual apprehension and ceramic art, we see that the structural features of ceramic material support conceptual expressions. Ceramic material that is usually in the foreground with its plasticity, is a tool that reinforces the thesis of work in conceptual works.

Ceramic art’s catching the age, as it is in other artistic disciplines, makes it possible to produce in conceptual art that is one of the post-modern tendencies. When these works of art are examined, we see ceramic works of art that mention political and ideological statements including the performance area. Mineo Mizuno, Nina



Hole, Pekka Paikkari, Ai Weiwei, Richard Notkin, Marek Cecula, Clare Twomey are the pioneer artists of contemporary ceramic art that create conceptual works. In Turkey, İnel İnal, Mutlu Başkaya are the young generation ceramic artists that add conceptual expressions into their works.



**Figure 1:** ‘Forever’, Clare Twomey, 2010

Clare Twomey makes an allusion to English Burnap Collection that is in Kansas Nelson Atkins Museum, in his conceptual arrangement called “Forever”. The artist picked a cup called Sandbach from the 1345-pieced collection. He get 1345 pieces of the same cup produced in a firm named Hartley Greens & Co. Leeds Pottery in the north of England. The visitor may take a cup if they want during the exhibition. However they have to sign a contract guaranteeing that they will keep the cup forever.



**Figure 2:** ‘Passages’, Richard Notkin, 1999

Richard Notkins interprets the danger of nuclear war in his work “Passages.” Passages composes of two works called The Gift and Legacy. The Gift was cook with the 4x4 cm sized saggar method and colored by obtaining black, gray and white tones. It composes of 1700 ceramic tiles. An image of mushroom cloud emerges when it is

seen from a distance. However; when it is examined closely, images of war symbols are seen on each tile.



**Figure 3:** ‘Kendi Şehrini Yarat’ (Create your City), İnel İnal, 2009

İnel İnal aims to have the viewer questioned the city where he/she lives in his arrangement “Kendi Şehrini Yarat” (Create your City). The work is composed of 1000 ceramic Lego pieces. With the exclusion of broken pieces, the artist draws a picture associating the prejudices and opinions of people that live in different social structures about each other.

This project points out that the other ruins the monotonous structure of ranked with its conflicts and disorder, and it shows that the ones that are above are the aligned, and the ones that are below are underfoot by breaking. In this way, the project makes the aligner felt guilty about breaking and stepping over the broken.



**Figure 4:** Conceptual Works of Mutlu Başkaya

One of the works of Mutlu Başkaya, who introduces a different aspect to Turkish ceramic art with his criticisms and satires, is his serial called ‘Umut’(hope) that combines form and concept. “Unhappiness that is caused by daily politics over people, may turn into hope with little dreams when thought optimistically. In the

forms created with this thought, ladder is the symbol of hope; however; when we feel pessimistic it talks about ambiguity and symbolizes the way from light to dark.

### **Evaluation**

Post-modernism affects the unsettled ideologies by being realized on the unbreakable lines of the society in 1950s-1960s. In this way, all doctrines established by modernism lost their importance with the fragmentations in every area. The distinctive point in post-modernism is that little pieces protect their existences effectively and there is a unity composed of different hierarchies.

Ceramic has a long historical background and it followed a rugged path after 19<sup>th</sup> century Industrial Revolution. Ceramic art is not a decorative and plastic value anymore by means of the social and cultural values and technology developed in Post-modern period. It catches a conceptual language with the works of contemporary artists. Post-modern period ceramic artists produce conceptual works by interpreting traditional and historical items according to the contemporary apprehension.

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