



CONCEPTUAL ART AND THE ROLE OF CERAMIC MATERIALS IN CREATING MEANING

Yusuf Can Kulakⁱ

Department of Art and Design,
Institute of Fine Arts,
Dokuz Eylül University,
Turkey

orcid.org/0009-0001-2612-3303

Abstract:

The process of artistic transformation, which began with avant-garde art's attempt to break established rules, reached its peak by focusing on the ideas and concepts put forward by Conceptual Art rather than the physical existence of the work. Today, this phase, which has evolved into the post-conceptual process, questions the concept itself while shifting artistic production into a panoramic framework through tools such as irony, aesthetic transformation, and new media. The Conceptual Art movement, which developed particularly after 1960, questioned the evaluation of art based on formal values and brought its intellectual aspects to the forefront. In this context, ceramic material has evolved beyond being merely decorative or functional, transforming into a form of expression capable of conveying conceptual content. In line with this historical and conceptual perspective, a collection of artists representing the contemporary panorama has been created based on the phenomenological approach of the research. This collection includes artists such as John Baldessari, Lawrence Weiner, Joseph Kosuth, Sol LeWitt, and Marcel Duchamp, pioneers of Conceptual Art, as well as artists who contributed to the development of Conceptual Ceramic Art, including Bernard Leach, Lucie Rie, Sam Bakewell, Tim Kowalczyk, AES+F, Karin Lehmann, and Ai Weiwei. Additionally, figures from different disciplines, such as Sarkis Zabunyan, Dan Flavin, and Jannis Kounellis, who demonstrate the role of ceramic material in conceptual production, have also been included in the study. This research article aims to examine the interaction between Conceptual Art and Ceramic Art, revealing how ceramics have transformed into a conceptual material throughout history. In addition to the aim of the article, which is to examine and highlight the position, development, and current performance of Conceptual Ceramic Art within Conceptual Art using a phenomenological approach. The main problem of the article is to analyze how approaches that go beyond conventional understandings of art and evaluate ceramics as a tool for ideas and conceptual thinking have developed, and how they are interpreted in contemporary art practices. The study's methodology was conducted using analytical and descriptive approaches based on a literature review. The study was conducted using analytical and descriptive

ⁱ Correspondence: email y.cankulak@gmail.com

approaches based on a literature review. Data were collected through library research, databases, and detailed examinations conducted in virtual/physical exhibition environments. Within this scope, the effects of Conceptual Art on ceramics, the conceptualization process of ceramics, and the intellectual productions of artists have been analyzed. The findings reveal that Conceptual Art pushes both the formal and content-related boundaries of ceramic production, demonstrating that ceramics are not merely visual/functional objects but have also become powerful tools that convey ideas, criticism, or discourse. Consequently, this study emphasizes the new meanings and expressive possibilities that ceramics have gained in the context of Conceptual Art, offering a critical perspective on the artistic value of the material.

Keywords: conceptual art, ceramic art, Ai Weiwei, Joseph Kosuth, post-1960 art

1. Introduction

The process of artistic transformation, which began with avant-garde art's attempt to break established rules, reached its peak by focusing on the ideas and thoughts put forward by Conceptual Art rather than the physical existence of the work. Today, this phase, which has evolved into the Post-Conceptual process, questions the concept itself while shifting artistic production into a panoramic framework through tools such as irony, aesthetic transformation, and new media. Conceptual Art emerged in Europe in the early 20th century and began to lay its foundations, but its real impact began to spread from America in the 1960s. Thanks to artists who embrace and continue the legacy of avant-garde art today, these influences have transformed into the Post-Conceptual process. In other words, although the beginning of this movement as a process dates back to the early 20th century, it is accepted that it began to show its real effects in the art environments that developed in the 1960s, and today we are experiencing the Post-Conceptual Art phase.

Conceptual Art has found multiple definitions in various sources that support one another. Looking at these definitions, new trends in this genre, initially referred to as "Thought Art" and "Information Art," became more pronounced with the emphasis on conceptualism in minimalist artist Sol LeWitt's 1967 article published in *Artforum* magazine. After Sol LeWitt's article, the concept of "conceptualism" became a general term encompassing all alternative forms of expression of the period (Antmen, 2009, p. 193). In addition, "Conceptual Art has been defined as post-object art or idea art" (Wainwright, 2018). "Conceptual Art was first expressed as Concept Art by Henry Flynt in a Fluxus publication in the early 1960s" (Özayten, 1997, p. 971). The emergence of Conceptual Art in the 1960s marked a significant turning point in art theory and has been the subject of various conceptualizations throughout this process. Art historians and theorists have explained this understanding of art not only under a single definition, but also through various labels such as *Non-Objective Art*, *Objectless Art*, *Immaterial Art*, *Idea Art*, *Non-Retinal Art*, *Thought Art*, and *Information Art*. Therefore, Conceptual Art can be regarded as a platform that opens up the definition and function of art for discussion through its own naming practices. Conceptual Art brought about a major change in the art world, particularly in the 1960s and 1970s, leading to the development of innovative perspectives on the nature of art. In many publications classifying contemporary art, *Conceptual Art: Formations, Performance Art*,

Body Art, Environmental Art, Land Art, Poverty Art, Process Art, and Video Art are listed under the heading *Post-Object Art/Non-Object Art*. In addition, other important movements such as *Land Art, Fluxus, New Media Art, and Art & Language* are also included under the umbrella of Conceptual Art. However, on the other hand, it is also a known reality that Conceptual Art has formed its own conceptual foundations by incorporating artistic attitudes from many artistic perspectives into its own body. It has drawn on certain views that would fundamentally change the perspective on art and the function of art, such as *Cubism, Dadaism, Ready-mades, Impressionism, Photorealism, Minimal Art, and Pop Art*, to establish its own principles (Özayten, 1997).

All these art movements agree that, despite using language and a wide variety of objects as signs/tools to convey ideas and concepts, none of these tools is perceived as a work of art. Here, the work of art is solely the concept or idea that the artist wishes to convey. Therefore, it seems important to evaluate such works holistically rather than identifying them with or classifying them under any particular art movement. The emergence and rise of Conceptual Art in the 1960s triggered a significant transformation in ceramic art as well. Alongside conventional ceramic forms and techniques, meaning, ideas, and concepts also became part of ceramic art. The elements of "idea" and "thought," which are fundamental characteristics of conceptual art, combined with conventional ceramic production processes, take the art to a new dimension. This transition has enabled ceramic artists to create works that emphasize the conceptual aspects of art rather than just the material and form. Moving beyond conventional ceramic forms, artists have begun to produce abstract and multi-layered works that encourage the viewer to think and question. In other words, ceramic art has moved beyond conventional codes such as form and function and has begun to explore the intellectual dimensions of art. This situation has necessitated the development of new forms of interpretation and evaluation criteria for both art producers and art viewers. Influenced by conceptual art, ceramic objects have ceased to be merely aesthetic or functional objects and have become elements imbued with meaning, requiring viewer participation. This has necessitated the development of new ways of reading and evaluating, both for art producers and art viewers. The transformative effect of conceptual art on ceramics has reshaped the relationship between material and meaning, elevating art from a visible object to an intellectual and philosophical platform. This interaction has strengthened ceramics' place in the art world, offering artists more freedom and abstract forms of expression, and making ceramics an important medium in contemporary art. This interaction has strengthened ceramics' place in the art world, offering artists more freedom and abstract forms of expression, and making ceramics an important medium in contemporary art. Ceramic artists have developed quite different strategies to express their own dialectical visions. During this process, they sometimes incorporated ready-made and found objects directly into their works, and sometimes enriched their creative expression by adding these objects to their productions. This approach not only gave artists unlimited freedom of choice in terms of tools but also allowed them to use ceramics not only as an aesthetic form but also as a tool for thought. Therefore, the questioning of the value judgments of art as a whole has also occurred in ceramic art. Given the relevant historical and conceptual perspective, a collection of artists representing the contemporary panorama has been created based on a phenomenological approach to research. This collection includes artists such as John Baldessari, Lawrence Weiner, Joseph Kosuth, Sol LeWitt, and Marcel Duchamp, pioneers of Conceptual Art, as well as artists who

contributed to the development of Conceptual Ceramic Art, including Bernard Leach, Lucie Rie, Sam Bakewell, Tim Kowalczyk, AES+F, Karin Lehmann, and Ai Weiwei.

Additionally, figures from different disciplines, such as Sarkis Zabunyan, Dan Flavin, and Jannis Kounellis, who demonstrate the role of ceramic material in conceptual production, have also been included in the study. The aim of this research is to demonstrate that ceramics are not merely a formal or aesthetic production field; they have also become an art form capable of carrying intellectual, critical, and social content. To this end, the effects of the Conceptual Art movement on ceramic art are analyzed, and the conceptualization process of ceramics is evaluated within a historical context. The fundamental problem of this research is to examine the transformation process that ceramic art has undergone in a historical and cultural context, particularly through its interaction with the Conceptual Art movement. In this process, ceramics have been reinterpreted not only as a means of shaping form but also as a form of communication capable of carrying critical and intellectual content. The research addresses the stages through which this transformation has passed, the artists and artistic approaches that shaped it, and how it is represented in contemporary art. Furthermore, it discusses the intellectual foundations of Conceptual Art and the potential of ceramic material to produce meaning in artistic and philosophical contexts. First, the emergence of Conceptual Art in the 20th century, the paradigm shift caused by art's focus on ideas rather than objects, and the philosophical approaches behind this artistic understanding are examined. Next, the historical use of clay, its cultural symbolism, and the dimensions of meaning it carries in modern art are examined. The unique role of ceramic material within Conceptual Art is evaluated, particularly in the second section, along with contemporary examples and artist practices. The evolutionary relationship between ceramics and Conceptual Art is examined in the context of how artists achieve intellectual transmission through the material. Furthermore, the role of ceramic material as a means of meaning-making within Conceptual Art is discussed, and assessments of the transformation of art in the present day are presented through this relationship.

2. The Philosophy and Critical Approach of Conceptual Art after 1960

Following the Conceptual Art movements of the 1960s, the definition of art, its tools, aesthetic value, and interpretation began to be questioned anew. During this period, the fundamental purpose of art shifted from producing "beauty" to achieving intellectual production. Sol Lewitt clearly articulates this understanding by stating, "*In conceptual art, the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work*" (Harrison & Wood, 2016, p. 892). According to Godfrey, Conceptual Art is concerned not with material but with ideas and meaning (Godfrey, 1998, p. 4). Jankauskas, on the other hand, states that this movement focuses more on the artist's idea than on the art object (Jankauskas, 2019). For conceptual artists, thought is the fundamental element of art; manual skill takes a backseat (Fineberg, 2014, p. 290). This artistic approach opposes the conventional status of art, collecting, and the value of artworks as commodities (Godfrey, 1998). According to Farago, this attitude arose as a reaction to the glorification of artists during the Renaissance and the market-oriented understanding of art (Farago, 2017, p. 219). In this context, form, material, and aesthetics are relegated to the background; what matters is not the objects themselves, but the conceptual value they carry (Harrison & Wood, 2016, p. 893). Conceptual

Art aims for the viewer's intellectual participation rather than aesthetic concerns. In this respect, it takes a stance contrary to conventional standards of appreciation. According to Farago, these works do not have a distinct worldview or message (Farago, 2017, p. 246). Representational elements are avoided; concepts take precedence over objects. Various tools such as everyday objects, maps, videos, and language can be used in art production (Godfrey, 1998, p. 4). In Sol Lewitt's words, "*the logic of a work is sometimes a tool used to destroy*" (Harrison & Wood, 2016, p. 893). Conceptual Art aims to make the viewer think by making them feel they do not understand. This stands out as a paradoxical strategy. The viewer's perception is constantly reshaped. Therefore, Conceptual Art paves the way for different views to emerge in art circles, for these views to clash, and for the definition of art to be re-examined. This situation can elicit both positive and negative reactions from the viewer. While some may find Conceptual Art innovative, others may perceive it as meaningless and complex. However, all of these reactions are part of the questioning attitude that Conceptual Art aims to achieve. In this way, the definition of art and the roles of the artist and the viewer are reconsidered. Conceptual Art may cause discomfort or disappointment in the viewer. However, this effect is inherent in the playful nature of art. While giving a critical response, the viewer is unconsciously drawn into the dialectical structure created by Conceptual Art. As Wood puts it, the boundaries of this art are blurred, and all that remains is the concept, "*like a grinning Cheshire cat*" (Wood, 2002, p. 6).

When viewed through this metaphor, conceptual art places greater importance on intellectual structure than physical presence. In this context, Marcel Duchamp's work *La Fountain – Fountain*, 1917/1964 (Image 1) stands out. An ordinary ceramic object, the urinal, has been elevated to the status of a work of art without any intervention. As the viewer approaches this object with sensory awareness, it becomes both ordinary and extraordinary, much like Schrödinger's cat. As Kuspit points out, when the viewer sees the object as art, it becomes ordinary; when seen as an ordinary object, it becomes art (Kuspit, 2006, p. 39). Thus, Duchamp's *La Fountain* takes on a structure that is constantly dissolving and reconstituting itself; that is, the link between representation and reference is severed. In this example, Duchamp's industrial ceramic object embodies the fundamental strategy of Conceptual Art with its potential to transform the everyday into a conceptual playground. From a philosophical perspective, Conceptual Art shares a common characteristic with many art styles within this tradition: it encourages people to question and think. This approach, aiming to push the boundaries of logic, has given rise to various artistic movements, which have developed different perspectives under the umbrella of Conceptual Art.



Image 1: *Fountain* (Replika), Marcel Duchamp, 1917 / 1964. (Tate, 2024).

Another noteworthy and conceptually iconic work is "One and Three Chairs," created in 1965 by Joseph Kosuth, a member of the Art and Language Group. Among conceptually based disciplines, the Art and Language Group is the formation where the most complex, remarkable, and extreme intellectual movements take place. Founded in England in 1968, the group, comprised of Terry Atkinson, David Bridge, Michael Baldwin, Mel Bochner, and Harrold Hurrell, creates hypothetical art situations through collaborative projects by asking critical questions about art (Özayten, 1997, p. 1606). In the article titled "Feeling Good: The Aesthetics of Corporate Art," written by Michael Baldwin, Charles Harrison, and Mel Ramsden, members of this group, the relationship between contemporary art and capital is evaluated through the theory of corporate art (İz, 2012). According to Bochner, "*an absolute Conceptual Art work must be based on two points. The first is that the work must have an absolute linguistic equivalent, that is, it must be definable and, when expressed, can be re-experienced and continuously repeated.*" The second is that the work has no "aura" or singularity whatsoever (Antmen, 2009, p.195).

The group advocates for exploring art through discussion. As a conceptual practice, they relegate the object to the background, instead utilizing terminology from philosophy and science that can be considered more experimental, and presenting their written texts as works of art. They frequently draw upon linguistics and semiotics. The views of structuralists and linguists such as Wittgenstein and Saussure have been greatly utilized. Therefore, the language to be created is important in their work. Consequently, by refraining from using objects, the theory itself is presented as a work of art. They use complex language and a sarcastic approach in their texts. On the other hand, the audience also becomes a reader of texts in response to the group's work. As in other conceptually based disciplines, this group also works with the concern of making the audience active. Instead of producing works to be exhibited in galleries and venues, the group members published many of their texts, which generated discussion about art, in magazines. However, many of the works produced were still exhibited in art galleries. In this context, the group's "Index 01" project, which contains their oral and written discussions, is noteworthy. The work consists of documents compiled from articles, discussions, and correspondence related to art written by the group for the Index 01 project they prepared for the "Documenta V" exhibition held in Kassel, Germany, in 1972 (Ward, 2019). As mentioned above, Kosuth's 1965 work, "One and Three Chairs" (Figure 2), is a conceptually quite different example for the viewer. The work consists of a real chair in the center, a photographic image of the same

chair on the left, and the dictionary definition of the chair on the right. Kosuth bu çalışmasıyla, görsel algıdan dile ve dilden anlayışa uzanan zihinsel süreçlerin ardındaki dinamikleri araştırarak sanatın doğasını sorgulayan eserlerinde izleyiciyi felsefi bir sürece dahil etmiştir (Antmen, 2009, s. 192). With his work *One and Three Chairs*, Kosuth pushes the boundaries of language considerably, basing it on the doctrine of trichotomy, which presents three images of the same entity or indicates that three things form a single whole (Kulak, 2020, p. 83).



Image 2: "One and Three Chairs", Joseph Kosuth, 1965, (Moma, 2004).

This is also an investigation of truth and alludes to Plato's metaphor of the couch. In Plato's work "The Republic," mimesis is criticized in relation to truth. In the copy-model relationship in the theory of ideas, the activity associated with mimesis is of the lowest degree. Plato divides this relationship into three parts using the example of a chair: "the original chair, the chair made by the carpenter, and the chair made by the painter" (597b). In this respect, Kosuth concretely incorporates the "Idea," or concept, which Plato places at the top of his hierarchy, into the work of art. The dictionary definition in the work represents the pure, linguistic form of the chair concept, aiming to achieve a higher artistic truth than the physical object (the real chair) and its visual imitation (the photograph). In short, rather than breaking the chain of mimesis condemned by Plato, Kosuth presents the concept at the top of the chain (the Idea) directly as a work of art, thereby shifting art from the imitation of physical form to the idea itself. This is the most fundamental example of Conceptual Art's principle of "the idea of art."

3. The Use of Clay Material in Conceptual Applications

Clay, one of the fundamental materials in humanity's relationship with nature since ancient times, has a deep-rooted history both historically and functionally. Archaeological and anthropological findings reveal that clay was widely used by early human communities to meet their daily needs. This material has gained indispensable functionality throughout history thanks to its ease of production and moldability, i.e., its potential to be plastic; over time, it has become important not only functionally, but also as a means of aesthetic and intellectual expression. Clay has been considered one of the oldest and most functional raw materials throughout history due to its ease of acquisition and malleability (Cooper, 1978, p. 4).). Indeed, being virtually the only plastic material that humans could shape in the earliest periods of history has given clay a unique position. However, it was only possible for this material to

acquire ceramic properties with the controlled use of fire. In this context, ceramic production is directly related to the technological and cultural advances that developed after the controlled discovery of fire (Arcasoy, 1983, p. 1). Findings dating back approximately 32,000 years have revealed that people used clay to produce various objects (Farbstein & Davies, 2017, p. 3). These objects differ from the ceramic forms we are familiar with today. The findings reveal that the first ceramic experiments and products consisted of cone- and ball-like objects and human (anthropomorphic) and animal (zoomorphic) figures that emerged during the Upper Palaeolithic period, the final phase of the Old Stone Age (Yoleri & Öztürk, 2023, p. 58). Despite its structurally simple components, the development of technical capabilities over time has led to the use of different materials and methods, making clay a more striking and expressive material in artistic applications. The production process involving clay consists of multiple stages, including extraction from nature, kneading, shaping, drying, firing and glazing, and finally placement in a space. This multifaceted production process also brings about physical and conceptual transformations in the material (Terwiel, 2010, p. 46). In both conventional and contemporary art practices, clay offers artists broad expressive possibilities, not only due to its formal richness but also because it can be used as a metaphysical medium of representation. In this context, the approach of the renowned philosopher Heidegger to matter provides an important theoretical foundation for understanding clay's potential for artistic transformation. Heidegger states that the understanding of soil or earth in our everyday lives as "*a mute substance that can be shaped by human actions*" provides a suitable starting point for thinking. According to him, "*the field and ground of artistic shaping is matter*" (Bolt, 2015, p. 43).

In line with Heidegger's approach, the process by which clay material acquires plasticity from the moment it is obtained from nature and reaches its final form transforms the artist into a sort of alchemist. The interaction between matter and form is based on the synthesis of the material components of clay, namely the elements of earth (dry) and water (wet). The clay structure formed by the combination of these two opposing qualities embodies the relationship between the artist's creative process and what exists. At this point, everything transforms into a singular entity born from the combination of matter and form. The physical change that clay undergoes during this process is described in materials science by the concept of plasticity. Plasticity refers to a material's malleability and ability or potential to be shaped; this allows the artist to intervene in the properties of clay during the creative process and transform it in a unique way. In other words, plasticity defines clay's flexibility capacity, that is, its moldability and openness to change (Peterson, 2019). When combined with the artist's creative processes on the conceptual plane, this quality transforms into a form of production that is not only technical but also conceptual. Artists have the power to transcend clay's natural process, imbuing the material with different meanings and transforming it on the conceptual plane. In this context, clay is not merely a physical form but also a carrier and vehicle for thought. In conceptual art practices, many artists remove ceramic objects from their everyday context and place them in new contexts, causing the denotative meaning to undergo structural breakdown and become loaded with connotative meanings. This demonstrates the powerful intellectual flexibility and semiotic potential of clay. Therefore, clay offers a multifaceted field of expression that can be evaluated not only as a technical material but also in terms of its scientific, philosophical, and technological dimensions. These characteristics explain why clay remains an indispensable

production tool for contemporary artists. At this point, the fundamental difference between fired and unfired clay becomes apparent. Clay can only be defined as ceramic when fired. Its state before firing demonstrates its plastic potential. However, artists use both states to develop their conceptual strategies, employing clay as a material in various forms in works that respond to the viewer's input. Therefore, Conceptual Art approaches that developed after 1960 led to clay being considered not only as a means of producing baked objects, but also as an intellectual material with the potential to generate meaning. With this period, clay began to find its place in artistic production even without being fired; it became a carrier of philosophical and conceptual content rather than merely formal. Although the use of clay, especially in the context of philosophical inquiry, led to certain classifications in the field of ceramics, its metaphorical treatment has increasingly emerged as a significant trend. This form of use redefines the artist's relationship with the material; for clay is not merely a substance to be shaped, but also becomes the carrier of the existential and intellectual plane. In this context, the works of Sarkis Zabunyan, known as Sarkis, who holds an important place in contemporary Turkish art, are noteworthy. Focusing particularly on concepts such as memory, space, and time, the artist constructs layered meanings by bringing together different materials in his works. Sarkis *Untitled*, 1968-1969, (Image 3) uses photographic negatives taken in Paris in May 1968, along with unfired clay material placed on a wooden panel (Saltonline, 2013, p. 42). In this installation, clay is positioned more as a carrier of meaning than as a form; it is used to take advantage of its plastic potential. Sarkis's approach to using raw, unfired clay emphasizes the material's temporary, transformable, and fluid nature, aiming to establish a direct intellectual connection with the viewer. Thus, in such Conceptual Art practices, clay has become not only a physical but also a philosophical and ontological material.



Image 3: *Untitled*, Sarkis Zabunyan, 1968–1969. (Saltonline, 2013)

The Marl Hole Project, designed and curated by ceramic artist Neil Brownsword, is a process-oriented land art event that took place as part of the first British Ceramic Biennial, held in Stoke-on-Trent from October 3 to December 13, 2009. Brownsword stated that his aim was to confront traditional ideas about clay and to re-evaluate the status of a material that has been logically confined to its dominant industrial connections (Tuxill, 2010, p.155). The project consisted of a series of experimental processes by Brownsword and three invited international artists (Torbjorn Kvasbo, Alexandra Engelfriet, Pekka Paikkari) to create artworks in the Marl Hole clay quarry over a five-day period (Stacey, 2010). Each artist developed different methods for working in their surroundings using the most basic tools, such as dump trucks and shovels. The resulting temporary works represented a radically different approach to examining clay in

its raw state. The curators provided no text to help viewers gain anything beyond a superficial idea of the work's intentions. It demonstrates that the project shares some fundamental characteristics with the post-minimalist land art projects of the 1960s and 1970s. Therefore, the Marl Hole Project provides a new critical context for this seemingly process-oriented work (Tuxill, 2010, p. 156). As seen in images (4 & 5), they wrote certain concepts in letters on the topography where they were found, using raw clay obtained directly from nature. Conceptually, the use of writing in art to convey an idea actually expresses reason (logos). Many artists use writing in various forms in conceptual artworks. Among these, artists such as Marina Abramovich, Joseph Beuys, Yves Klein, Christopher Wool, Guerrilla Girls, Kay Rosen, Jason Rhoades, Erica Baum, Sean Landers, Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger, Mel Bochner, Lawrence Weiner, John Baldessari, and Joseph Kousth have conceptually used writing in their works (Cohen, 2019). The main reason for doing this is to show that art is not only material by pushing aesthetic value into the background, and to encourage the viewer to think through concepts. However, the writing itself also has aesthetic value in terms of typography. The use of writing in this work (Image 5) with the mud form of raw clay not only shows a close parallel to the productions of the Art & Language Group, but also reflects the ecological stance of conceptual art. The use of raw clay in its mud form in this work (Image 5) not only shows a close parallel to the productions of the Art & Language group, but also reflects the ecological stance of conceptual art. In this challenging performance by the artists, the raw clay is again left to undergo an ecological process in nature. Conceptually, this work is also an important example of Land Art. The Marl Hole Project challenges conventional ideas and methods applied to clay and, while using very primitive techniques, the material exhibits a new approach.



Image 4 - 5: *The Marl Hole Project*, Neil. Brownsword, 2009, (Tuxill, 2010).

Ceramic artist Karin Lehmann's work *Sediment Sampling*, 2014 (Image 6), conceived in the gallery space, is a work that emerged during the process. The work involves combining material and process to explore materials and their properties until the work emerges. This demonstrates that the artist approaches her work within the context of process metaphysics. As seen in the study, ceramic forms created in different colors were left in a wet state for a period of time without firing and documented. Just like fleeting thoughts, the forms undergo structural breakdown during the process. As seen in this work, which is based on transience, it indicates

that clay can be used metaphorically to convey a thought even without being fired, i.e., without being turned into ceramic (Rodgers, 2014).



Image 6: *Sediment Sampling*, Karin Lehmann, 2014. (Rodgers, 2014).

Sam Bakewell's installation "Imagination Dead Imagine" (2015) (Images 7 & 8) is a work that can be associated with ceramic art, a material- and process-oriented artistic discipline, and Conceptual Art. Based on the title of the work, Bakewell questions themes of the death of creativity or failure, emphasizing the conceptual weight of the work over its aesthetic value. The work itself is a tool that embodies the idea of a "pseudo-shaman's mud hut" made from temporary materials such as coconut oil and Chinese clay, or raw or unfired clay (Arts Council England, 2015). Along with the waste ceramic objects displayed inside the hut, it can be interpreted as a performative act criticizing the artist's act of creation and the art market's expectation of a "finished work." This approach refers to the fundamental principles of Conceptual Art, which focuses on the idea, process, and context rather than the finished work itself, thereby adding intellectual depth to the work and giving it a critical dimension, distinct from conventional ceramic production.



Images 7 - 8: *Imagination Dead Imagine*, Sam Bakewell, 2015, (Arts Council England, 2015).

Sustainable approaches to ceramic creation, ecological methods, and conventional craft techniques are present in Conceptual Art and the current practices of many contemporary ceramic artists. In this context, artist Diana Butucariu produced the artwork "Raw Clay" (Image 9) in 2022, which is considered a Conceptual Art piece in an ecological context. In her "Raw

Clay” project, artist Butucariu brings together and develops various production methods with the aim of creating contemporary, sustainable ceramic artworks. The artist uses local clay sources found in nature in the region where they reside to produce their works. During the production process, the artist mixes the clay material with other natural organic materials, such as grass or branches, to shape the works. Thus, the use of unprocessed (raw clay), or in other words, uncooked clay as raw material for the creation of the works also ensures that the pieces are biodegradable at the end of their production cycle. The gradual disintegration and dissolution of the work over time relates to both the Marl Hole Project (2009) and Karin Lehmann's Sediment Sampling (2014) from ecological and ontological perspectives. The artist's “Raw Clay” project is an experimental part of her doctoral project on Sustainability in Ceramic Art (Ceramic Now, 2023).

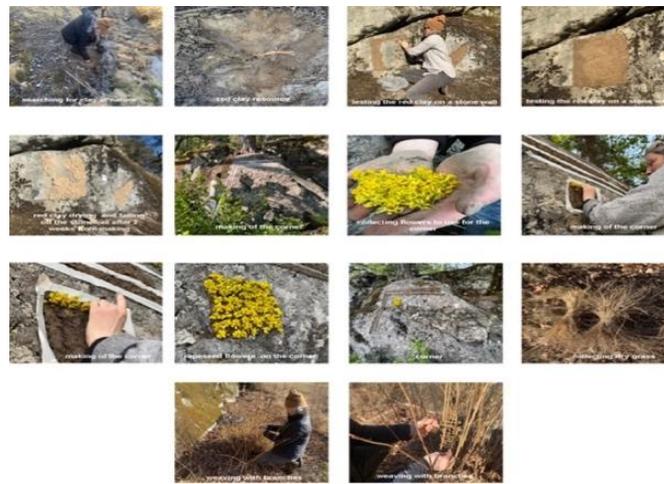


Image 9: *Raw Clay*, Diana Butucariu, 2022. (Ceramic Now, 2023).

4. The Artistic Transformation of Ceramics and Its Use as a Medium of Expression in Conceptual Art

Ceramics is an interdisciplinary art form known for its unique production processes and aesthetic values. It can be said that ceramics has developed a special language, both technically and artistically. Etymologically, ceramics is derived from the Ancient Greek words *keramos* + *ikos* (Etimoloji Türkçe, 2024). The word is translated as follows: English: ceramic, French: Céramique, Russian: керамика, German: Keramisch, Turkish: Seramik. Traditionally, ceramics were associated with the earthenware form, but in the modern era, the use of ceramics as a material and form of expression has undergone a major evolution. While historically limited to earthenware objects, in the multidisciplinary nature of contemporary art, ceramics have expanded their boundaries by interacting with other art forms and aided by technological advancements. This process has enabled ceramics to be used not only as an aesthetic tool but also as a means of creating an intellectual language. In the post-1960 period, the Conceptual Art movement allowed ceramics to transcend their conventional use, encouraging their use as a symbolic and philosophical form of expression. This strong relationship with Conceptual Art transformed ceramics from a field previously seen only as a craft into a central focus of

intellectual and philosophical inquiry. Ceramic material became a tool for generating conceptual meaning and expressing the artist's thoughts. During this period, the aesthetic dimension of ceramic material was transcended, and both the material and the process were used as fundamental elements in meaning-making. The integration of ceramics with technology gave the material new forms of expression and provided artists with previously impossible possibilities. Conceptual Art has offered artists the opportunity to move away from conventional forms of art-making and toward more abstract and intellectual content. In this context, ceramics have been approached not only as an aesthetic object but also as a means of expression, a language that conveys ideas. However, under the influence of Conceptual Art, a perspective emerged that did not align with the conventional values of ceramics, leading to debates, particularly among some artists who championed aesthetic and craftsmanship principles. These artists argued that the plastic values of ceramics should be prioritized and that aesthetic concerns were important.

On the other hand, with Conceptual Art, artists who treated ceramics as a language, a form of expression, sought to create new meanings in opposition to the conventional uses of the material. The convergence of ceramics with Conceptual Art reinforced the idea that a material should express not only shape and form, but also a thought, a message, an inquiry. This transformation has taken ceramics from being merely a craft tool to becoming an important element of contemporary art. During this period, the production of ceramic objects became part of an intellectual process, offering artists a unique and powerful form of expression. The use of ceramics during this period has provided artists with the opportunity to use the material as a tool to express their own philosophical and intellectual views, reshaping ceramics as a form of expression and a language of communication. This situation has emerged particularly through the metaphorical use of ceramics, and many artists have used the expressive power of clay beyond the conventional function of objects. As a result, ceramics has become independent from its conventional use in the past under the influence of Conceptual Art, gained a new form of expression, and secured an important place in contemporary art. This transformation has ensured that ceramics, as a material, is a tool that carries both aesthetic and intellectual meaning. By moving beyond its conventional context, ceramics has gained a deeper, multi-layered meaning in its relationship with Conceptual Art, enabling it to be used as a powerful means of expression in contemporary art that interacts with different disciplines. In the contemporary art scene, ceramics has gained value not only as a physical material but also as a conceptual and philosophical means of expression. Consequently, ceramics has taken on a position that is both compatible with and critical of production relations. After the 1960s, influenced by Conceptual Art, ceramics offered artists new possibilities for expression. With technological advances, ceramics were reproduced and gained a hybrid identity (both traditional and contemporary). At the same time, industrial ceramic objects produced in series provided artists who used them as art objects with the opportunity to create subjective expressions. Chronologically, ceramics, which was an ordinary object in everyday life at the beginning of the 20th century, have been integrated into the field of art with Modern Art. The use of ceramics beyond its traditional form as a vessel moved beyond conventional ceramic production with Bernard Leach's activities in the 1920s. His work shows that ceramics began to be produced with intellectual and philosophical concerns. In other words, Leach used ceramics with artistic intent to create

sculptural works, pioneering its use not only as a form beyond everyday utility but also as a vehicle for thought and expression (Image 10).



Image 10: *Spherical Vase*, Bernard Leach, 1927. (The Garnered, 2017).

In another example, it can be said that the influence of the minimalist art movement is clearly visible in Lucie Rie's (Image 11) porcelain works. With an understanding characteristic of minimalist artists, Rie's works strive to move away from the conventional ceramic context by simplifying the form and avoiding excessive ornamentation. Specifically, the simplification of a bowl form with just a small touch shows that the work is approached as a conceptual process and carries meaning beyond visual expression. This approach emphasizes that form carries not only aesthetic but also intellectual content (Artnet, 2019).



Image 11: *Squeezed Bowl*, Lucie Rie, 1958. (Artnet, 2025).

According to Cooper, during that period, many artists aimed to use clay not only to make usable vessels but also as a medium to convey their ideas (Cooper, 1978, p. 32). In this vein, important ceramic artists such as Bernard Leach, Lucie Rie, Peter Voulkos, Britt Ingrid Presson, and Hans Cooper used abstract concepts in their ceramic practices. Within this framework, these artists not only contributed greatly to the development of Ceramic Art but also pioneered the advancement of ceramics on a conceptual platform. Therefore, although ceramics initially progressed with an abstract understanding, it has gradually transformed into a field of practice that also incorporates conceptual ideas. After 1960, similar to other art forms, changes occurred in the production and consumption of ceramic art, and the interaction between ceramics and Conceptual Art developed in an anachronistic manner.

5. Artists Who Use Ceramics as a Conceptual Tool and Their Works

In its relationship with Conceptual Art, ceramics has transcended its role as a mere material, enabling artists to develop a conceptual mode of expression. This process positioned ceramics in the post-1960 period as a vehicle for conveying thought independently of conventional aesthetic understanding. Ceramics has undergone a significant turning point in terms of aesthetics and functionality, developing in parallel with Conceptual Art and securing its place within modern art. Based on the historical purpose of ceramic material, this section features works by some important artists that can be evaluated within a conceptual framework. Given the known chronology, it is considered that the works of the artists discussed should be evaluated holistically within the formations emerging from the Conceptual Art perspective rather than within the framework of a movement. Otherwise, evaluating these works outside their meaning and context could lead to confusion. In this context, the works of interdisciplinary artists working with ceramic material, evaluated from a conceptual perspective, are included.

5.1. Dan Flavin, *Roses*, 1966

Minimalist artist Dan Flavin is known for his works made with specially scaled fluorescent lamps. Flavin's works that use ceramic objects as a conceptual practice are exemplary in this context. When examining the artist's "*Roses*" 1966 (Image 12), it can be seen that the artist has removed the form, which could be perceived as a vase from a classical perspective, from its context and used it for a different purpose. The vase has gone beyond being a purely functional object and has acquired a conceptual meaning. At first glance, the work allows the ceramic objects used to be perceived in a new context. While this work can be perceived as a vase from a conventional perspective, it has also been evaluated as a conceptual application through the integration of a digital flower image into the ceramic form with the help of electrical signals. In other words, ceramic objects have been removed from their everyday context and elevated to an artistic platform. Such applications may invite viewers to question, "I could do this too, is this art?" because this is inherent in the nature of Conceptual Art.



Image 12: *Roses*, (Dan Flavin, 1966. (Moma, 2025).

5.2. Jannis Kounellis, *Fishbowl*, 1958

In many of Jannis Kounellis' works, ceramic material is used as a conceptual approach. In particular, the work featuring two live fish and a knife object inside a porcelain plate filled with water standing on a chair demonstrates the artist's meaningful interaction with ceramic material (Walsh, 2017). Specifically, Kounellis is known for incorporating living objects and ordinary materials into his artworks within the framework of the Arte Povera movement. The artist adopted a similar approach in his work *Fishbowl*, 1958 (Image 13), deepening the meaning of the work by combining conventional ceramic objects with living beings. Such practices go beyond the use of ceramic objects as conceptual tools, offering the viewer a physical and metaphorical experience.



Image 13: *Fishbowl*, Jannis Kounellis, 1958. (Walsh, 2017).

5.3. Cengiz Çekil, *Düzenleme No:2, (Arrangement No:2)*, 1986

Cengiz Çekil produced significant works in the field of Conceptual Art during the 1970s, using everyday objects, particularly low-value materials such as construction materials, ceramics, and clay. In his exhibition titled “Arrangement No. 2,” presented at the Turkish-American Association Art Gallery in 1986, there was a rectangular area created with bricks in the gallery space, containing 10 ceramic water jugs and growing grass (Sönmez, 2008, p. 73). This work presents ceramics beyond their conventional use in a conceptual form of expression. Cengiz Çekil's work *Arrangement No. 2*, 1986 (Image 14) reflects an approach that uses ceramic material beyond its conventional use, in a conceptual expression. The multiplied form of the jars and the use of the earthen area is one of the rare examples where both fired and unfired ceramics are conceptually placed. This is an important work that shows how ceramics are transformed into a tool that carries meaning beyond being a material.



Image 14: Cengiz Çekil, Düzenleme No:2, (*Arrangement No:2*), 1986. (Saltonline, 1986).

5.4. Ai Weiwei, Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn, 1995

Ai Weiwei presents sensational examples that push the boundaries of conceptual art through his performances and installations created using replication techniques. In his performance using a traditional ceramic vase from the Han Dynasty, the artist largely creates the protest stance of conceptual art from an intellectual perspective. In this work, Ai Weiwei drops a ceramic vase that is approximately two thousand years old (Image 15), and his action is not only a physical movement but also a combination of historical value and contemporary criticism. By smashing the vase, the artist destroys the object's form inherited from the past, giving it new meaning and demonstrating that art can be used as a tool to question the past. This performance symbolizes both the physical destruction of the ceramic object and the destruction of the historical meaning attributed to it (Guggenheim Bilbao, 2025). Furthermore, the artist's Sunflower Seeds (2010) work is also quite noteworthy in conceptual terms, both in terms of reproduction in art and installation.



Görsel 15. *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* (Han Hanedanlığı Dönemine Ait Vazoyu Düşürmek), Ai Weiwei, 1995. (Guggenheim Bilbao. 2025).

5.5. AES+F, Mare Mediterraneum Series, (2018)

The works of the AES+F collective, whose origins lie in the Soviet Union, may at first glance give the impression of utopian fiction, but upon closer examination, they constitute an uncompromising critical tapestry of imagery. Founded in 1987, the Russian art collective consists of Tatiana Arzamasova, Lev Evzovich, Evgeny Svyatsky, and Vladimir Fridkes, who joined the group in 1995. The group's theatre installations and new media performances are interpretations that analyze the turbulent socio-political landscape prevailing on a global scale

(Scola, 2019). The AES+F collective began its artistic activities in 1987 as the AES Group, founded by Arzamasova, Evzovich, and Svyatsky; the collective later adopted its current name in 1995 with the addition of Fridkes. The group's works function as a "social psychoanalysis" and "collective catharsis," examining the fundamental values, ethical dilemmas, and conflicts of contemporary global culture. In this context, the collective combines ancient myths, historical imagery, and popular culture to reflect contemporary fears, blended with the grandeur of Baroque aesthetics, in a hybrid and hyper-realistic language. In the postmodern world, cyborgs, queer people, migrants, refugees, workers, intersex individuals, artificial intelligence, digital subjects, climate migrants, marginalized groups, animals, and all biological beings coexist. Consequently, this hybridity makes subjectivities fluid while simultaneously making boundaries permeable. The artistic and conceptual resources that make this permeability possible are also in a constant process of redefinition (as cited in Kozak, 2025, p. 125). In this context, the fundamental strength of AES+F's work lies in its aesthetically grotesque and transgressive nature, as well as its conceptually provocative nature. These phenomena are clearly evident in their significant works, such as *Las Riot* (2007), *Allegoria Sacra* (2011–2013), *Inverso Mundus* (2015), and *Islamic Project* (1996–2003), revealing that their artistic production is largely based on the Conceptual Art tradition. As stated, while AES+F is generally known for its video installations producing hyper-realistic images, they have also used (porcelain) ceramic material to complement and strengthen their conceptual approaches.



Image 16: *Mare Mediterraneum*, 2015-2018, AES+F. (Jones, 2019).

The collective uses ceramics as a tool in their works, leveraging the material's potential to represent the comfort, fragility, and traditional luxury aesthetics of the bourgeoisie. Ceramics, with these qualities, becomes a significant material that they use to add depth to their critical and conceptual projects. AES+F has two notable projects in which they utilize ceramics: *Mare Mediterraneum* (2018) and *Europe, Europe* (2008). *Mare Mediterraneum* (2018), shown in (Image 16), is a work shaped by the refugee crisis in the Mediterranean and the paradoxical tension between Europe's humanist values and the comfortable lifestyle of its citizens. As seen in the work, the scene where a group consisting of two women, a young man, and a dog invites two African migrants who have drifted aboard their boat to join their entertainment is just one of nine ceramic pastiches produced in the style of 18th-century European porcelain (Jones, 2019). *Europe, Europe* (2008) addresses the ethnic, interreligious, and socio-economic tensions that emerged in Europe immediately following the 2007 financial crisis. The collective's fundamental

relationship with Conceptual Art lies in the fact that the core aim of their works is to convey an idea or argument beyond the physical object. Therefore, despite their hyper-realistic aesthetic and luxurious production values, they invite the viewer to intellectual and critical reflection on the complex problems of global culture by centering on the concept of social psychoanalysis. In works such as Jeff Koons', *Michael Jackson and Bubbles* (1988) and *Balloon Dog* (1994-2000), the commercial aesthetic he glorified through popular culture imagery and kitsch elements is re-imagined by the AES+F collective as a strategic formal tool. While Koons sanctifies the consumer object by presenting it with a smooth and desirable perfection, AES+F transforms this high-gloss visual language into a tool of sedative provocation. Using this captivating and sterile surface, which mimics Koons' aesthetic, to mask social unease, violence, and global corruption, the collective leaves the viewer on that fine line between aesthetic pleasure and ethical questioning. In this way, they present a contemporary and critical application of the Conceptual Art methodology, emphasizing the importance of the idea presented rather than the material itself. Consequently, AES+F uses ceramics not as an end in itself, but as a conceptual tool. The aesthetics, texture, and historical connotations of porcelain allow for an ironic and sharp presentation of the subjects they critique.

5.6. Tim Kowalczyk, Ceramic Cardboard, 2012

Tim Kowalczyk's work, *Ceramic Cardboard* (2012), (Image 17), which questions the relationship between art and truth at the heart of Conceptual Art, is noteworthy. At first glance, this work appears to be an ordinary piece of cardboard used in everyday life, but it is actually produced by processing ceramic material in an extremely realistic (hyper-realistic) way. With this work, the artist reopens the discussion of established discourses such as originality, uniqueness, and aura in art. Kowalczyk invites the viewer to question their perception of reality by adding texts to the forms. He does this ironically, in a way similar to Rene Magritte's *This Is Not a Pipe* (*Ceci n'est pas une pipe*, 1929). At the same time, this approach parallels the conceptual triad established by Joseph Kosuth in his *One and Three Chairs* (1965) (Image 2), which involves the object itself, its image, and its definition. Kosuth separates the intellectual layers of the object; Kowalczyk transforms the material itself into a tool of illusion, leaving the viewer to ponder the question, Which is real? Ultimately, this work is a masterpiece that demonstrates the aesthetic and conceptual power of art, where the artist's idea and the intellectual stimulus presented to the viewer are paramount.



Image 17: *Ceramic Cardboard*, Tim Kowalczyk, 2012. (Kowalczyk, 2012).

5.7. Burçak Bingöl, Günebakan, (*Sunflower*), 2017

Burçak Bingöl's works in the field of contemporary ceramic art are significant pieces that stand out not only for their technical diversity but also for their conceptual depth. The artist addresses a wide variety of phenomena in her works and interprets the plastic potential of clay in different ways. Her creations, using various materials such as fired clay, unfired clay, glazed surfaces, video installations, and organic objects, transform ceramics into an interdisciplinary art language. As part of the Istanbul Biennial, Burçak Bingöl's ceramic security cameras, decorated with floral patterns collected from Beyoğlu, were placed at various locations throughout the city prior to the biennial. Burçak Bingöl's installation, *Sunflower – 2017* (Image 18), critically examines the concepts of security, surveillance, and visibility (Artfulliving, 2017). This installation by Bingöl exemplifies the tension between surveillance, identity, belonging, and aesthetics - concepts that have been prominent in her earlier works. The reproduction of surveillance cameras in ceramic form and their decoration with local plant motifs aligns with the artist's production practice, which combines traditional craftsmanship with contemporary conceptual strategies. In particular, her other works that center on ornamentation, repetition, and handcraft processes, such as her pieces tracing Ottoman tile motifs on ceramics, are formal precursors to the *Sunflower* series. *Sunflower* is not merely an intervention in the public space within the context of the biennale; it is also an extension of the aesthetic, cultural, and critical themes that are continuous in Bingöl's work.



Image 18: *Günebakan, (Sunflower)*, Burçak Bingöl, 2017. (Bantmag, 2017).

5.8. Yusuf Can Kulak, Olay Ufku, (*Event Horizon*), 2025.



Image 19: *Event Horizon*, Yusuf Can Kulak, 2025. (@Copyright, Kulak).

My studies on this subject are research I have carried out in my own ceramic art. As someone who researches the subject and occasionally produces in the field of ceramics, I believe that it is important to examine conceptual art in the context of ceramic art. In this context, my work titled "Event Horizon" (Image 19), dated 2025, is an example in terms of its relationship with creative post-conceptualism.

The porcelain plates used in this work are positioned as objects of memory because they are products of Sümerbank, which played a critical role in Turkey's history of industrial modernization. The accompanying red clinker bricks were chosen because they are inspired by the İzmir tram line and represent a characteristic unit form of the city. In my experience as a flâneur artist, I have focused on the textural layers and material ontology of the city, going beyond the urban landscape. The neon LED light at the center of the composition is an ontological reference to the concept of "Event Horizon," symbolizing the transition between physical and metaphysical realms. The title of the work, "Yes Horizon," is a direct reference to this term, which represents ultimate limits and irreversible thresholds on a scientific and philosophical level. The vise used in the work, constructed using an eclectic method, symbolizes social authority and control mechanisms through the act of compression. The porcelain, stretched under this mechanical pressure, visualizes the resistance and struggle for existence exhibited by the fragile structure of historical heritage. This study presents a multidisciplinary framework that intertwines material, historical continuity, and cyber-aesthetic elements, inviting the viewer to engage in a critical inquiry into boundaries, conflicts, and invisible forms of energy.

6. Conclusion

This research examines how ceramic material is used as a tool within the context of Conceptual Art and reveals its significant role in conveying intellectual and philosophical messages throughout history. The conceptual approaches at the heart of Conceptual Art have been expressed through ceramic material by both Conceptual artists and ceramic artists. In this context, the transformation of a traditional object into an artistic work, such as Marcel Duchamp's "La Fountain" (1917-1964), demonstrates the significant role ceramics have played in art. Conceptual artists, rather than fetishizing the material, have used it solely to convey an idea.

A similar approach is seen in ceramic art, where the idea and concept, rather than the material, take center stage. Since the 1960s, significant transformations have occurred in the nature of art and the interaction between the artist, the viewer, and the artwork. Conceptual Art had a significant impact on this transformation, paving the way for the emergence of a new understanding of art. Under the influence of Conceptual Art, ceramic art evolved into a more intellectual dimension, and artists began to use ceramic material not only as an aesthetic tool but also as a meaningful language of communication. The philosophy of Conceptual Art was shaped around fundamental philosophical questions such as the definition, function, aesthetic value, interpretation, and conceptual evaluation of art. This research reveals how Conceptual Art has led to a paradigm shift in ceramic art. Ceramics are no longer merely objects or ornaments; they are also carriers of concepts, critiques, and discourses. Artists use this material to communicate with the viewer not only aesthetically but also intellectually.

In conclusion, it has become clear that ceramics are gaining increasing importance as a conceptual tool and medium within contemporary art.

Furthermore, ceramic art transcends conventional codes such as form and function, contributing to the intellectual dimensions of art. This necessitates the development of new ways of reading and evaluating art for both art producers and art viewers.

This study clarifies the place of ceramics within Conceptual Art, proposing a new perspective on interdisciplinary art practices. Therefore, while framing the transformation of ceramics within the context of conceptual art, it also offers a multifaceted foundation for future research.

In this context, comparative studies on how ceramics are conceptualized in different cultural geographies in the future, and how they merge with or conflict with local aesthetic codes, will more clearly reveal the role of the material within global and local narratives. Furthermore, this analysis can be a source of creative inspiration not only for art historians and theorists, but also for artists who wish to incorporate conceptual orientations into their production processes.

In this sense, ceramics is poised to become a language not only of the past but also of the future.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

About the Author(s)

Yusuf Can Kulak, Dr. / Independent Researcher, completed his Master's degree at Dokuz Eylül University, Institute of Fine Arts, Department of Ceramics and Glass, with an application project and thesis on "The Use of Ceramics in Conceptual Art". He received his PhD from Dokuz Eylül University, Institute of Fine Arts, Department of Art and Design, with a thesis and related application project titled "The Impact Of Cybernetics On Visual Arts". Kulak, whose work focuses on the digital transformation of conventional art disciplines, has among his main research areas; digitalization processes in art, algorithmic art, cybernetics, cyber aesthetics, and the reflections of posthumanist theories on contemporary art practice. He continues his academic studies and artistic production as an independent researcher in İzmir. The artist's work aims to examine the ontological relationships between technology and art at the theoretical and applied levels.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-2612-3303>

ResearchGate: <https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Yusuf-Kulak>

Webpage / Portfolio: <https://www.saatchiart.com/en-tr/yusufcan>

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