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Over Thousands: Ai Weiwei and Antony Gormley in Ceramic Perspective

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Abstract

Mass production that started with the Industrial Revolution, and the art movements that successively appeared with modernism and the psychological pressure of World Wars I and II affected the artist's way of expression. This development process in art started with Dada, and was followed by Abstract Expressionism, Pop Art, Conceptual Art and Neorealism. During this period, the perception of uniqueness of an artwork was surpassed an object or item from daily life started to be exhibited in art galleries. Artworks were made using an object in a composition, and this tendency started to be used by artists. Two artists who made their projects in ceramics are chosen in the research, and it is discussed why they used thousands of objects, and the conceptual perception of the work through the examples of 'Sunflower Seeds' by Chinese artist Ai Weiwei and 'Field in the British Isles' by English artist Antony Gormley.

Keywords: Ceramic art, Ai Weiwei, Antony Gormley, installation, thousands.

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1. Introduction

The process of mass production with the start of the Industrial Revolution had substantial impacts on art and the artists who were psychologically affected by World Wars I and II and thus, the perception of an artwork. Its greatest impact and contribution revealed itself with the art movements rising successively. The first of them, Dada, was an international art movement with a mutinous spirit, aimed to demolish traditional way of perception of art. As one of the leading figures of the Dada movement, 'Marcel Duchamp's antipathy towards the 'craft' associations of visual art and his concomitant belief that ideas should replace manual skill as the prime components of works of art, led to his selection of 'ready-made' items as art objects from 1913 onwards' (Hopkins, 2006). One of these ready-made objects, 'Fountain' is regarded as a breaking point in art since it questioned the conception of whether an artwork should be created by its artist, taking an everyday object and exhibiting it as an artwork and, moreover, contextualising a manufactured product artistically. It is seen that movements such as Pop Art, Funk Art, Neorealism, Hyperrealism and Conceptual Art had impact on this breakage as well. The common ground of these movements in terms of artistic approach was that they used everyday objects as works of art in different ways. Such objects were satirical, humorous artworks that were exactly the same as the object itself or made of ceramic clay with a hyper-realistic style.

Particularly in Conceptual Art, the conceptual–intellectual extent of a work has become much more crucial than its physical presence. Thus, expressive possibilities in art have further expanded and materials used in producing art have further diversified thanks to the rapid advances in science and technology. This diversity also had impacts on scales of an artwork. As a consequence of all the technological developments, installations that are works built for the particular space have started to enter into the art world. Installation, with its definition in the visual arts, is 'a display of objects that are in relation both with the space they are in and each other in terms of meaning and perception, all together'.² Installations that are often applied by artistic disciplines such as painting, sculpture, printmaking and ceramic have gained different perspectives with Conceptual Art. By taking a look at two exhibitions of two artists held in the same gallery, it is possible to illustrate these perspectives in terms of installations and the change in perception of an artwork. It can also be illustrated through Yves Klein's 'The Void' exhibition held in Iris Clert Gallery in 1958 and French artist Fernandez Arman's (1928–2005) 'Full-Up' in the same gallery in 1960. Klein displayed a gallery painted in white and completely empty. By exhibiting the gallery itself as an artwork, Klein created a metaphysical space in favor of art (Suzen, 2010). Offering his own artistic perspective to the viewer with his work, Klein underlined that the limits of art is about perception. After two years, Arman opened his 'Full-Up' exhibition in the same gallery and he made it unfunctional by piling it up with various objects. Pointing to a culture of consumption, Arman's works are basically a juxtaposition of everyday objects such as soccer shoes, cars, fork, hammer, credit card, bottle cap, pistol' (<http://lebriz.com/pages/lst.aspx?lang=TR§ionID=2&articleID=554&bhcp=1>, Access Date: May 9, 2017). His works based on piling up numerous everyday objects are called 'Accumulations'.

American Allan McCollum (1944) is another artist who criticises a culture of consumption through consumption objects and, just as Arman, displays hundreds and even thousands of a same object all together. Focusing on mass-produced products and individuality, McCollum's 'Over Ten Thousand Individual Works' is one of the most significative experiences in McCollum trajectory. Even if this work is identified by a specific name, it is part of a continuous project that includes the whole corpus produced by the artist, as he stated in an interview: 'For me, my whole life's work is a single project. I think of it like a book. I keep adding chapters, but it's all the same book'.⁴ McCollum's series entitled 'Over Ten Thousands Individual Works' is also the starting point for this research. From this point, exhibiting of thousands or even millions of pieces, objects or components in galleries is an artistic approach frequently encountered in recent years. Producing ceramic works with this understanding, British artist Antony Gormley's 'Field for the British Isles' installation, and Chinese artist Ai Weiwei's 'Sunflower Seeds' installation have been discussed in this research in terms of content and expression.

2. Antony Gormley (1950) 'field for the British Isles', 1989–2003

Born in London in 1950, the artist studied Archeology, Anthropology and History of Art at Trinity College in Cambridge in the years 1968–1971. Travelling to India and Sri Lanka, the artist was interested in Buddhism, and decided to become an artist during this time. After attending Saint Martin's School of Art and Goldsmiths in London from 1974, he completed his studies with a postgraduate course in sculpture at Slade School of Fine Art in 1977–79. Making sculptures by moulding his own body since the 1980s, the artist produced *Field* series with the participation of the public.

Antony Gormley's installation entitled 'Field for the British Isles' (1993) is a series he installed in various worldwide locations under the name of Field. The first Field series is an installation consisted of 150 figures the artist and his assistants made in 1989 (<http://www.artscouncilcollection.org.uk/learning-research/field-british-isles-antony-gormley>, Access Date: May 12, 2017). The figures of installation displayed in New York were arranged in a concentric semicircles, leaving a path open to the viewer to enter the circle (<http://lebriz.com/pages/lsd.aspx?lang=TR§ionID =2&articl eID=554 &bhcp=1>, Access Date: 09.05.2017).

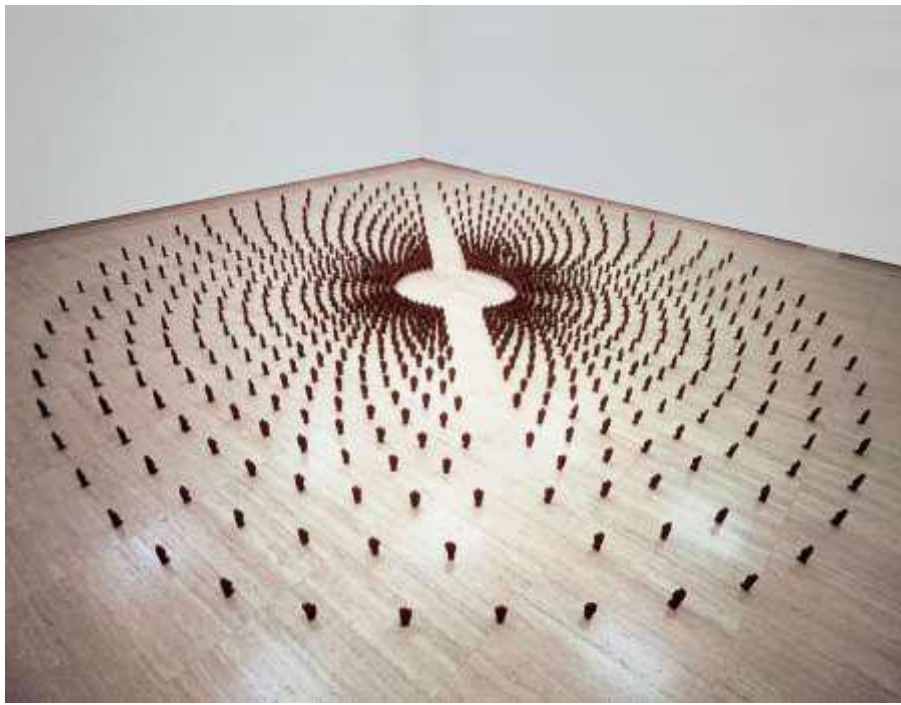


Figure 1. Antony Gormley, Field, 1989–2003

The composition of the figures rhythmically moving away from a circular center has a distinct impact. The second *Field* series that the artist made in the same year with the assistance of the students in Sydney, Australia was consisted of 1,100 figures while the third had 35,000 figures handmade by 60 men, women and children, aged six–sixty, who were family members manufacturing bricks in Mexico in 1990. This series made in Mexico was the first version in which the figures were designed to fill a space, blocking it out and obstructing the viewer from entering. (<http://www.artscouncilcollection.org.uk/learning-research/field-british-isles-antony-gormley>, Access Date: May 12, 2017). Occupying the whole space of the gallery room and facing outward toward a single available viewpoint, the figures were arranged in an order that restricts the viewer from entering into their space. It was paid special attention to figures shaped in sizes from 8 to 26 cm to be able to stand

upright on a flat surface and to have a pair of eyes. This *Field* series made in Mexico is sometimes known as American Field, and it is stated that it also has been a pioneer for its European versions.

Gormley's work entitled *Field for the British Isles* was originally made in 1993 and the artist later produced an installation of the same series consisted of 25,000 figures for the exhibition Arte Amazonas held in Museu de Rio de Janeiro in Brazil. *European Field*, on the other hand, is consisted of 40,000 figures made in Ostra Grevie/Switzerland. Lastly, an installation he named as *Asian Field* consisted of 200,000 figures made by 350 villagers in the Guangdong province of China, and exhibited in Guangzhou, China in 2003 (<http://www.artscouncilcollection.org.uk/learning-research/field-british-isles-antony-gormley>, Access Date: May 12, 2017).



Figure 2. Antony Gormley, field for the British Isles, Terracotta, 2009

[Source: <http://www.antonygormley.com/projects/item-view/id/245#p2>, Access Date: May 12, 2017]

Made in different countries between the years 1989 and 2003 and named with different entitles, Gormley's Field series were produced with 'little more than two or three squeezes of clay in the hand, these small figures crowded together to form a mass that is both menacing, or questioning and absurdly affecting in its vulnerability (De Waal, 2003). Gormley also was chosen for the England's most prestigious prize 'Turner Prize Award' in 1994.

With his installation, Gormley reaches the viewer in two different ways. The first is that people from different countries, different social classes and different levels of culture touching clay experience a feeling as the participants and become a part of a production. The second is that thousands of figures wholly occupy an art gallery. So, its impact on the viewer who sees millions of figures all together on the doorstep of a gallery room where the installation is exhibited is extremely deep. However, this impact also raises some questions. The viewer who encounters with thousands of figures gazing at him on the doorstep of a gallery full of them hesitates on who the viewer really is. The installation's dense arrangement that wholly occupies the space of the gallery room offers the observer a view identical to the meaning of Field in terms of both scene and color.



Figure 3. Antony Gormley, Field for the British isles detail, Terracotta, 2009

[Source: <http://atelier29.blogspot.com.tr/2009/09/antony-gormleys-field-for-british-isles.html>,

Access Date: May 19, 2017]

Another impact of *Field* on the viewer is the similarity of the figures with the idols and figurines of the ancient cultures. The figures' historical resonance (Japanese 'haniwa', Chinese terracotta warriors) is less significant than the impact of the installation itself: the challenge to museological convention is that the artifacts have taken over' (De Waal, 2003). Identifying man with the soil, Gormley's installation also makes the viewer question the concept of unity and sameness. With this perspective, terracotta *Field* series of Gormley 'suggests that the earth holds the memory of our ancestors and also promise of the unborn. It has a life, a memory and a conscience' (Schwartzm, 2008).

Earlier works of Gormley are the installations consisted of the casts of his own body. However, here we see neither a correct cast of a human body nor a sculpture of his body. Hand-crafted human figures in various sizes with simple forms, and their gregarious arrangement make the viewer ponder on the installation through its levels of historical, spiritual, conceptual and symbolic meanings.

3. Ai Weiwei (1957) 'Sunflower Seeds'–2010

Producing works within the context of Conceptual Art, Chinese artist and prodigy Ai Weiwei expresses his critics against what is happening both in his own country and the world, through his art.

In this research focusing on installations consisting of thousands of pieces being exhibited in galleries as a way of artistic expression, Ai Weiwei has been discussed over his installation entitled 'Sunflower Seeds'. Being exhibited in Tate Modern in London, this installation is made up of millions of hand-crafted porcelain seeds produced by more than 1,600 artisans in Jingdezhen, China, and it took two and a half years.

'Sunflower Seeds' installation consisted of 100 million porcelain sunflower seeds weighing 150 tonnes, and was exhibited at the Turbine Hall in Tate Modern in 2010, covering the 1,000 m² floor to a depth of 10 cm. Before the show in Tate Modern in London in 2010, Weiwei's installation was displayed at 12 galleries across 11 cities, nine countries in various versions with different amounts of seeds (<http://www.aiweiseeds.com/press>, Access Date: May 19, 2017)



Figure 4. Ai Weiwei at Tate modern with sunflower seeds in his palm, 2010

[Source: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1319515/Tate-Modern-carpeted-millions-sunflower-seeds-art.html>, May 20, 2017]

Producing hand-crafted porcelain seeds instead of using actual ones and aiming at a direct interaction between the viewer and the installation, Weiwei's work is interesting not only in terms of its conceptuality but also its realism. Visitors were allowed to interact with the sculptural installation for just 48 hours after the opening the show. During the period, they were able to grab, try to bite, walk across or lie on the seeds. With its interaction-oriented designing and realisation, Weiwei's this work 'goes beyond the simply interacting with an installation since sunflower seeds are part of daily life in China and are readily available as a snack food. At the same time, they were also a dependable source of nourishment to fend off hunger during the Cultural Revolution. During the Revolution, Chairman Mao Zedong was portrayed as the Sun in posters and the people of China as sunflowers with their faces turned toward him' (<https://nbmaa.wordpress.com/2010/11/03/politically-charged-seeds-an-installation/>, Access Date: May 20, 2017). Thus, the artist introduced the viewer what was going on in China for many years by discussing it with its conceptual dimension. For the artist, the interaction between the viewer and the installation is an integral part since it supports the content of the work and completes it. However, the Tate decided that visitors would no longer be allowed to interact with the work because of the dust stirred up. Visitors who saw 100 million sunflower seeds together and had a chance to touch them had an unforgettable and extraordinary experience. After the prohibition, the viewer was only able to see the sunflower seeds from behind a barrier in a particular distance.

In his Sunflower Seeds installation, Ai Weiwei decided manufacturing porcelain sunflower seeds instead of using actual ones so that he contributed to hiring a whole village for two and a half years. What is meant by the sunflower seeds is multilayered. 'Each sunflower seed represents an individual that feeds the sun king Mao; sometimes he scatters people in large masses to step them on, or sometimes he picks one of them and after weighing up, he throws him away into a characterless mass to be lost forever' (Barbany, 2015). Identified with Mao Zedong, sunflower seeds that were a basic nutritional source and brought people together at the era became a theme for Weiwei's work. However, gathering together is not about consumption this time, but rather the production of the work and the employment of the artisans.

4. Conclusion

The content of works, their way of producing, their components and units, their sizes or amounts, and spaces and areas they are displayed have changed as a result of the context of artistic approach changing and transforming in time. It has also been an issue in ceramic art. The works of Antony Gormley and Ai Weiwei, the two most prominent figures of these change and transformation, have been discussed here together, since they both used ceramic art in producing their works and their installations consisted of thousands or even millions of pieces.

Gormley's Field series in which terracotta human figures were handmade with the participation of large masses has been discussed. Once-fired *Field* series consisted of thousands of human figures wholly occupying the exhibiting hall. The arrangement of figures shaped in miscellaneous sizes in the gallery room aimed not to allow the viewer to enter in. One of the earliest methods in ceramics, shaping by hand is used to modify unglazed products fired at low temperature, and such ceramic products dated to the prehistoric era are called pottery today. The name that the artist chose for his installation is also a reference to the historicalness, as a reminiscent of the unglazed, earth-toned ancient pottery. Thousands of pieces to be handmade require time and a great number of people working together. With this aspect, he made many people who had no training on ceramic introduce with the art and feel the pleasure of creating. The viewer looking at thousands of figures gazing at him stands on the doorstep of the gallery room and feels a paradox. Thus, the impact of the work consisting of thousands of pieces is much more surprising, unforgettable and deeper on the viewer than an interaction with one single artwork.

Ai Weiwei's installation entitled 'Sunflower Seeds' with the porcelain seeds hand-crafted in Jingdezhen, China has several layers of meaning, such as the content, the process of production or the viewer's interaction with the work. The installation was produced in Jingdezhen, well known as the capital of porcelain, in China where porcelain production first started, and that makes the work more meaningful as it characterises the highest quality in ceramics. The life-sized seeds made of porcelain created an illusion on the viewer. In accordance with this illusion, the viewer picked up and tried to bite the seeds in an effort to test whether they were real. Grasping, lying down or walking across the seeds, like crossing a pebbly beach, were an invaluable experience for the viewer, and it had a deep impact on his memory. With this aspect, the artwork created a memorable impact appealing to the viewer's emotions, thoughts and reason.

While Gormley's Field installation was consisted of terracotta human figures with their historical connotations, fired at low temperature and hand-shaped by people without training in ceramics, the sunflower seeds in Weiwei's installation were individually hand-crafted and hand-colored by artisans working at porcelain manufacturing, and fired at high temperature. In this aspect, the roughly shaped human figures by using the most primitive method in ceramics and the sunflower seeds meticulously hand-crafted by skilled hands make references to different points with their contents. These works made using primitive and advanced methods of producing ceramics, and their number in the thousands and millions had a deep and memorable impact on the viewer. These works showing the power of installation art to reach to the viewers are significant, as they reveal that the efficiency of the expressional potentials in ceramic art depends on the amount.

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