

# MINIMALISM AND INSTALLATION IN CONTEMPORARY CERAMIC ART<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

The subject which held as research is based on analyzing the individual artwork through the concepts of 'Minimalism' and 'Installation'. The main goal to focus on these topics is the balance between reductionist attitude and repetition of the units. The popularity of these two concepts in contemporary art is undeniable truth, but the use of these trends in ceramic art is not as well-known as the other fields. Through this study, taking attention to minimalist installations in ceramic art is another goal. In this context, the first part consists of the emergence of Minimalism and its basic properties, leading figures such as Donald Judd and Sol LeWitt's artistic perspectives. The second part focuses on the key features of the Installation Art and Ceramic Art, discussed through the works of John Mason, Clare Twomey, and others. The use of these movements in this field, differences, and similarities between the past and present are the last part of this research.

**Keywords:** Minimalism, Ceramics, Installation, Reductive, Repetition

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## Introduction

Many art movements have been prominent at different times in the history of art. Minimalism, which appeared in the 1960s, and Installation Art, which began to manifest itself in the 1970s, are among the movements that gained prominence in ceramic art as in many other areas of artistic practice. Although ceramic art seems to followed behind the trend and conceptual change that developed in the 1960s and 1970s such as; performance art, land art, conceptualism, installation, etc., within these art movements, it is also suggested that most of them had effect on ceramic art that were already present but significantly neglected.

...It was as if ceramics needed the critiques and theory around contemporary movements in painting and sculpture to remind it of what was already there. This was particularly true in relation to architecture where the vigour of the relationship between architecture and ceramics and crucially, the consequent innovative ways of showing work, that had existed in Vienna and in Germany at the Bauhaus, had dissipated. The desire for ceramics to have the equal space with other art forms in the museum and gallery... (Waal 2003:184)

When considering the departure from tradition and the innovation and adaptation of the modern age, it is important to acknowledge seminal figures in the development of what we would consider to be modern ceramic art. Looking at the forefathers of contemporary ceramic art, it is impossible to ignore the contribution of Bernard Leach (1887-1979) in the United Kingdom and his later contemporary Peter Voulkos (1924-2002) in the United States of America (Kalay 2013:68).

### Minimalism and Installation in Contemporary Ceramic Art

Minimalism, which emerged against Abstract Expressionism, was a movement with certain identifiably key characteristics namely that rejected symbolic expression.

...The term 'Minimalism'(or 'Minimal Art') reveals an avant-garde style which started in New York and Los Angeles during the 1960s, mainly linked with the work of Carl Andre, Dan Flavin, Donald Judd, Sol LeWitt and Robert Morris. Primarily sculpture, consist of mainly single or repeated geometric forms. They are made by skilled workers with the instruction of the artists by using industrial production. There is not any trace of emotion. Minimal work doesn't include anything beyond its literal existence, or its presence in the physical world. Materials appear as they are; if there is any color it is non-referential. Mostly they are placed in walls, corners, or they are placed on the floor instead of pedestal, it is an installational art that denotes the gallery as an actual place, offering the spectator conscious of moving through the space... (Meyer 2000:15)



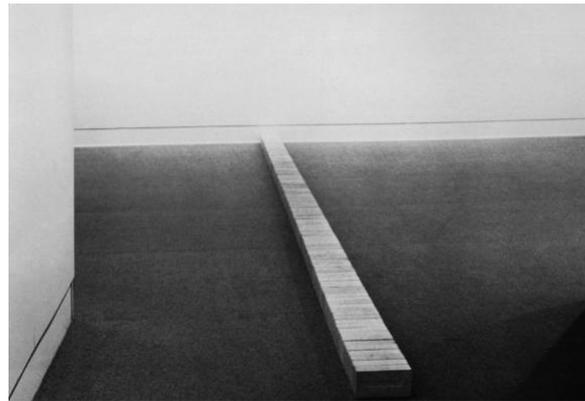
**Figure 1.** Sol LeWitt, Serial Project I.

([https://www.moma.org/learn/moma\\_learning/sol-lewitt-serial-project-i-abcd-1966](https://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/sol-lewitt-serial-project-i-abcd-1966))

Since the mid-1960s the adjective 'minimalism' or 'minimalist' has been pulled and stretched to cover such a wide range of sculpture, painting and other art forms and it is suggested that it has lost whatever

purposeful limits it may have once had. Mostly geometric, plain, monochromatic, or overall abstract looking work has been categorized as minimalist.

Minimalist works of prominent figures of the movement, represent more than just a brief style quickly superseded by another in progression for ‘new looking’ art. These artists recognized that industry, through the preciseness manufacturing, controlled the aesthetics of objects more than any other artist could. Their goal was eliminating the metaphor and make their work as radiant and specific as possible. Strict rules of Minimalism, which emphasizes surface, form and mass production, stand in sharp contrast with the handmade nature of ceramic art at the time and its quest for original colour and texture. Reductive attitude, which has been identified with minimalism, was expanded and widened after the discovery of new uses of new materials (Kalay 2013:68).



**Figure 2.** Carl Andre, Lever, 1966.

(<https://i.pinimg.com/736x/ca/85/e5/ca85e5c648400a4f5e9ceeb4cbc341ab--beaux-arts-environment.jpg>)

John Mason became an important example in ceramic art who expanded the boundaries of the medium, as his works transformed from abstract expressionism to post-minimalism. Mason created known objects through constructions using functional industrial components. Hudson River (1978) was formed through repeating the same object (here, industrial bricks) in a monotonous way to form the larger object. They are all elements that can be repeated without emphasis, which are products of the same mass production. They moved away from the notion of focusing on the centre of form or adjustment. No part is more important than other parts and each part has significance in its own context. Grand Rapids (1973) is another work that explores these ideas of repetition and manufacture (Figure 3).



**Figure 3.** John MASON, “Grand Rapids”, Fire Brick, 20x72x306 in, 1973.

([http://franklloyd.com/dynamic/artwork\\_exhibit\\_display.asp?ArtworkID=1613&ExhibitID=71&Exhibit=Previous](http://franklloyd.com/dynamic/artwork_exhibit_display.asp?ArtworkID=1613&ExhibitID=71&Exhibit=Previous))

Doris Kaiser (Germany), Rosaline Delisle (Canada), Martin Bodilsen Kaldahl (Denmark) and Wouter Dam, Geert Lap and Martin Smith (UK) can be displayed as examples of minimalist ceramic artists (Figure 4-5-6).



**Figure 4.** Geert Lap.

(<http://www.stedelijk.nl/en/artwork/12549-mist>)



**Figure 5.** Wouter Dam.

(<http://www.wouterdam.com/>)



**Figure 6.** Martin Smith.

(<https://www.rca.ac.uk/more/staff/professor-martin-smith/>)

...these artists make forms that might be described as minimalist: uncommunicative reflections on segment and portion gained through a clarity of profile and tonality that is gained by detailed surfaces. The details of these surfaces are the main difference from the Orientalist ceramic aesthetic, where variety of texture or tonality in a surface encourages the spectator and handler of the pot to make connections with natural forms or processes in these ‘self-critical’ minimalist forms the connections are most likely to be with industrial process... (Waal 2003:184)

Minimalist works can be considered under the heading of Installation Art that regards as primary the creation of place and interaction within the gallery space. These works acknowledge that the gallery is both an artificial construct and, at the same time, a very real place. Today, general use of Minimalist terms, might be different than historical background of it. Artists who have maintained their reductionist attitude in their forms, also tend to care about the content, unlike historical minimalists. These artists cannot also exclude themselves from using what technology has offered to us and through this these artists have created a new language of expression, albeit with traces of the past.

Rosalind Krauss discusses on her essay 'Sculpture in the Expanded Field' (1979), that the extension in sculpture is the result of submitting the contemporary is made enjoyable by being made something familiar. This approach definitely had an impact on contemporary ceramic art as well as other fields.

...Around late 1960s and beginning of 1970s, "sculpture" changed its forms into piles of thread waste on the ground, or sawed redwood timbers rolled into the gallery, or tons of soil brought from the desert, or stockades of logs surrounded by firepits, the term sculpture turned into something else. The historian/critic simply performed a more extended sleight-of-hand began to construct his genealogies out of the data of millennia rather than decades...(Krauss 1985:279)

Different and more exacting strategies exist to make the experiencing of art more complex. Some of them contradict with progression intended to fill gallery area so that audience must recognize formality and impact of architecture. This involves replacing the color, irregularity and informality of clay (which is a primary material in general) with the whiteness, purity, and texture of the gallery space. Clare Twomey, a British ceramic artist, ensured the breaking of her work with every step taken by the audience when she filled the gallery with hundreds of fragile bone china boxes in *Consciousness/Conscience* (2001). Unexpected and unavoidable destruction in the space of gallery is created through the consciousness of moving and the involvement of the audience with the work. Twomey's installation is a great example that shows the interaction with audience where the viewer shows physical actions to activate the work and they become a part of the installation and space (Figure 7).



**Figure 7.** Clare TWOMEY, "Consciousness/Conscience", Unfired Bone China Tiles, Tate, Liverpool; Crafts Council, London; and Icheon, Korea, 2001-2004.

(<http://www.claretwomey.com/>)

One of the ideas that underpins Installation Art is its temporary nature and its connection between the terms such as space, gallery, the uniqueness of the gallery, audience, time and process (Oliveira vd. 1994:14). It aims to carry the audience to the moment through deconstructing (or sometimes destroying) the gallery or museum space and this it highlights that something can be experienced briefly. This is an approach adopted both by functional ceramic artists that produce cups as well as by their more conceptual sculptural counterparts. Observed physical interaction of the audience with the work (arguably pioneered by Carl Andre in 1969) started to lose influence in the 21st century.



**Figure 8.** Carl Andre.

(<http://accademiartgallery.wikispaces.com/Carl+Andre#men%C3%B9>)

Today, installation has developed in a way that is more flexible and encapsulates the artists and viewers. Ceramic artists exhibit their commitment and unity with clay ultimately in the context of ceramic installations of the 21st century. It can be observed in created installations that clay is brought together with different materials such as video and other contents.

Installation Art has been combined with clay in many different formats. Clay is used in its unfired form as well as in its fired form in installations, which can be observed on Antony Gormley's works, such as; *Host (1997)* and *Field (1993)* in both ways, also can be observed on Sadashi Inuzuka's installation called, *Nature of Things* which artist placed it under the skylight the Canadian Museum in 1995. Inuzuka covered the gallery floor with a pool of unfired white slip in 6.7m diameter ringed with terracotta cones. In 1996 he covered the whole floor of art gallery in British Colombia with a similar idea. Currently, Installation Art appears as a language of expression preferred by many artists in the field of ceramics as well as in other areas of art.

### **Conclusion**

Minimalism, which also became a lifestyle in many societies with its simplicity, has not only demonstrated a great progress in artistic areas but also in industrial areas. Ceramic artists, who have developed a unique language of expression with both forms and ways and presentation, preferred installation art, which is currently quite widespread in many fields of art, as a language of expression and transferred it into their works. As the ceramic spectators and artists get much more familiar with the new trends, display, spaces, etc. they therefore have the talent to make connections to the important aspects of the discipline. The history of ceramic has many references on repetition and seriality. Repeated ceramic work took a central space within the area of studio pottery.

The phenomenon of "concept", from which many contemporary artists cannot stay away, (unlike previous Minimalists) has manifested itself in individual practices that have been created in line with the concepts of Minimalism and Installation Art. Works, which are created with a minimalist approach, also incorporate a concept and provide messages for their audience. Even though artists apply unit repetitions and geometric forms which remain in the foundation of minimalism in their personal works, the fact that the concept has been also included in this perspective demonstrates the current degeneration of minimalism. This practice of using repetition of a smaller form to create a larger work is one that has been very strongly adopted by ceramic artists. Artists reflect the influences of the world in which they live and also in relation to their sense of self and the process of creating works of art.

Ceramic artists have used clay as a material to express themselves. Throughout centuries the use of clay has been accorded a value, a powerful sense of clay as earth allowed them a kind of expression that they couldn't obtain easily with other materials. It is not surprising at all that so many disciplines, which remain in a connection that cannot be separate from each other, are in interaction with each other and material has manifested itself by ensuring coherence with concept. Minimalism and installation are distinct disciplines; they have transformed and reached our time from the past with influences by all innovations brought by technology and time and have taken on their current form in contemporary ceramic art which keeps developing itself with the combination of contemporary trends.

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