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Visual Arts Teacher Candidates' Views on Conceptual Art (Case of Pamukkale University)

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Abstract

Emerged in the second half of the 20th century, conceptual art is an understanding of art which questions the relationship of art with the conveying object, features its intellectual aspect rather than mere aesthetic pleasure, and contains different and eclectic compositions. The purpose of the current study is to identify the views of visual arts teacher candidates studying at Pamukkale University on conceptual arts. In this sense, convenience purposive sampling within qualitative research was used. As for the data gathering instrument, an open-ended question form was used in order for students to express their views in writing. The questions were finalized through expert opinion of three faculty members in the area. 47 students studying at 4th year answered the questions. The answers were analysed through descriptive content analysis and themes and concept codes were identified. The findings were then interpreted by the researchers. In the results section, various conclusions were drawn.

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1. Introduction

Dating back to the work of Marcel Duchamp titled as the ready-made, conceptual art has been effective as an approach emphasizing intellectuality since the 1960's. Questioning the formalist structure brought by modernism, it created a new understanding of art. When 1960's actions of formalism and abstract expressiveness were combined with Duchamp's works, it can be said that painting and sculpture in the traditional sense were affected negatively, but adapted to the new way of expression. Art work has started to be thought different from aesthetic perception after a long time, and its status has become a matter of debate. In the new process, the relationship between figure and language has been strengthened (Atakan, 2008:25). Conceptual art is based on emphasizing concepts of

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language, questioning the difference between art and handwork, and elements such as using different techniques and materials in works. (Atakan, 2008:24). At the same time, it presents propositions on anecdotes related to life. How do we interact with each other? How do we move? How do we live? And etc. This teaches us to be conscious of our movements and reactions, and helps us to understand ourselves as individuals (Lynton, 2009:329). Performance art in which the artist use their body or shows in the form of happening, installations going beyond traditional methods such as painting and sculpture, art approaches in the form of field or environment art conducted in open space to exceed both physical and ideological limits galleries and museums are all evaluated under the approach of conceptual art (Antmen,2008:193). While art perception and practices constantly change with new opportunities for expression, arts education process cannot stay the same. Arts education mostly refers to a controversial process in terms of its scope and teaching areas in formal and informal education. According to Read, art represents plastic-visual aspect as its essence (San,2003:24). In parallel with the rapidly changing visual culture, the concept of "visual arts education" instead of arts education has been used in recent years. In general sense, arts education is an area aiming to develop individuals' aesthetic feelings in spiritual and physical education, and to mature their abilities and creativity. While the emphasis on "aesthetics, creativity, ability" in the descriptions of arts education in the past as above features individuals emotional and physico-moto development, it has been realized that cultural and cognitive dimension of art should also be considered. In this sense, conceptual art can be seen as a natural part of multi-disciplinary visual arts education.

1. Method

Descriptive analysis method based on written interview technique within qualitative research was employed in the study (Yıldırım & Şimşek,2011:224). *Open-ended Written Interview Form* was used as the data gathering tool. This form consisted of 5 questions. To ensure content validity, the questions were negotiated with three experts in the field Evaluating the issue based on how the issue is perceived, its effect on individual and social development, its relationship with arts production and arts education, the questions below were included in the interview form (Creswell, 2005).

2. Findings and Interpretation

1.1. Finding I and Interpretation

What are your views regarding conceptual arts? Explain with examples.

The written answers of the students were analysed through descriptive content analysis, and converted to themes and concept codes. 5 main themes were evident in the students' answers. The themes included (1) providing a general description of conceptual art, (2) the relationship of conceptual art with teaching-learning processes, (3) the relationship of conceptual art with the context and sociocultural environment, (4) sample practices for conceptual art, and (5) being interested in conceptual art.

While describing conceptual art (1), the codes revealed from the students' statements were "intellectual art, untraditional, extraordinary, free, reformist and different". On the other hand, 14 of the 47 students did not state anything and did not have any knowledge, and 4 provided wrong information. *Student 19: "Conceptual art means to combine extraordinary ideas and the understanding of arts. New and different ideas are always interesting."* *Student 36: "It is a concept beyond canvas and paint, but about being free in terms of technique and materials in arts. It has been popular since the 1960's."* *Student 46: "As far as I remember, it is a view of art focusing more on meaning and concept rather than the shape of the object."* Although these explanations are insufficient, it can be seen that the students were able to interpret what conceptual art is. However, they did not include any examples with respect to conceptual art. It can be inferred that the students did not have any or sufficient knowledge and experiences of conceptual art. While explaining the relationship of conceptual art with teaching-learning processes (2), the students participated in the study featured the codes such as "conceptual art not being included in the visual arts program, factor of the faculty members and visual arts teaching". On teaching-learning processes, Student 20 said: *"I don't have any views on conceptual art. If you said not being unique and doing exactly what the teacher says, I would have a wider repertoire of example."*, and Student 39 stated *"Our arts education is not enough to answer this question"*. Based on these statements it can be inferred that conceptual art is not included in the teaching

process, and opportunities for new opinions were not provided enough in the existing program. For the theme 'the relationship of art with the context and sociocultural environment (3), the codes including "positive context factor, negative context factor and sociocultural dimension" were revealed. In this regard, Student 5 said: *"I don't have any views on conceptual art. The reason is that there aren't any resources about conceptual art in our context except the internet or Video art, installation art, etc. Perhaps we cannot have any views about a kind of art that we have never experienced based on assumptions."* Student 29 stated that *"Our society has not exactly adopted conceptual art. People need to see places like exhibition centres and museums. They need to understand that painting is not about paint and paper."* Student 42 asserted that *"The society has not yet adopted conceptual art. The reason is that art does not reach to the society. People have difficulty in understanding works in an exhibition related to conceptual art. More information should be presented so that people will be able to know more about this branch of art. Even the arts students are stranger to this branch."* To sum up, the students pointed out that since they did not encounter examples of conceptual art in their context (the city), they did not have sufficient knowledge about it. Furthermore, generalizing the same situation to the whole society, they attracted the attention to the role of exhibitions and museums. Considering that it is not possible to often see and follow examples of conceptual art in cities other than Istanbul, the students made a well-directed observation. However, it should be emphasized that the increasing number of biennial events in Turkey recently makes works of conceptual arts available for larger regions. As for the theme 'the examples of conceptual art', the students stated installation, video art, and works made with waste materials. The works known by the students included those exhibited widely in exhibitions such as installation and video art, and they also had knowledge about performance art, audio practices and works made with waste materials. As for theme 5 which relates to the students' interest in conceptual art, the codes including "being curious, giving importance, negligence and lack of interest". Regarding this theme, the students' statements are as follows; Student 7: *"Conceptual art had a great importance in terms of developing today's art. It is beneficial particularly for visual arts."* Student 26: *"It is not a movement that interests me. They try to deliver messages, however it does not address my visual perception."* Student 25: *"Conceptual art is not very common today. I would like to see it in exhibitions as a different view of art."*

1.2. Finding II and Interpretation

"From which resources did you first hear about conceptual art? (Undergraduate courses, TV, internet, art magazines, art galleries and museums, others)"

The students' answers were analysed in the form of themes and codes. The codes were gathered under the theme (1) "the resources from which information was acquired related to conceptual art". As for this theme (1), the codes revealed from the students' statements included "undergraduate courses, faculty members, internet, gallery-museum-exhibition, biennial events, TV, art magazines, books and courses". On the other hand, 8 students said that they did not have any knowledge on conceptual art and did not state any resources. Regarding this theme, the students' statements are as follows; Student 3: *"To be sincere, I haven't encountered this concept before in my arts education during 9 years."* Student 9: *"In my undergraduate courses and the biennial events I visited."*, Student 14: *"From the faculty members during my undergraduate courses. It wasn't enough. I don't know enough about it since there aren't any events like exhibitions around"*. Based on these statements, it was found that the students learnt about conceptual art from their undergraduate courses, faculty members, internet and art magazines. At the same time, it was seen that the visits to museums and galleries in big cities contributed to this process to a large extent. 2013 Istanbul Biennial can be given as example.

1.3. Finding III and Interpretation

"Do you think that conceptual art and/or conceptual art education contributed or would contribute to your awareness of life and arts? Explain"

5 of the 47 students participated in the written interview stated that they did not have any views. The students' answers were gathered under the themes "(1) social dimension of art, (2) individual/artistic development, (3) teaching process, and (4) professional development". While explaining the social dimension of art (1), the students' statements revealed the codes including "art-society relationship, art culture, delivering messages, society-

technology relationship, need for arts, societal sensitivity and social perception development". Student 1 asserted that: *"Since art is not created for the society, I don't think that art would contribute to anything in this country."* Student 9 said: *"I don't think so because art has no value in our country. Our people don't even understand landscapes, let alone conceptual art."* Student 25 stated: *"It definitely would. It would be more beneficial if the messages aimed to be delivered through arts would be delivered with a different group of art."* Student 28: *Due to the changing world, developing technology, interests and events, I think that conceptual art would have a great contribution to modern arts and arts education"*. When the statements above are evaluated, it can be argued that there is a consensus on conceptual arts and its education would develop the society. While the students explained conceptual art and/or conceptual art education in terms of individual and artistic development (2), they used the concept codes including "creativity, awareness, and experience in conceptual art, gaining different perspectives, novelty, extraordinary, addressing different senses, visual-perceptual development, informing, lifestyle, unique, producing new ideas and material diversity". In this respect, Student 16 stated: *"It may reveal individuals' unique characteristics. They would learn how to exhibit their individual differences."* Student 40: *"Conceptual art definitely broadens our visual and perceptual level. For that reason, it has created awareness in arts education. What attracts attention creates curiosity, and it then enhances knowledge"*. Student 42 said: *"Conceptual art is actually important to deliver our ideas and feelings freely. Individuals knowing conceptual art and its branches would also have a difference in their lives. Their lifestyles and perspectives could be more unique and creative."* Examining these themes including creativity, awareness, extraordinary, different perspectives and unique, descriptive words were used to describe both individual characteristics and perspectives to arts. The students' statements with respect to the effect of conceptual art and/or conceptual art education on awareness in terms of teaching processes (3) revealed the codes including "intense arts teaching program, insufficient physical conditions in arts teaching, contribution to learning processes, delivering information, and understanding/perceiving life, contribution to arts education, awareness and way of expression". Student 14 said: *"I don't think it would have much contribution. Our views may change if it is better explained and taught. However, the classroom space is not enough in spite of the intense courses. That's why I don't think it would be effective."* Student 28 stated: *"Due to the changing world, developing technology, interests and events, I think that conceptual art would have a great contribution to modern arts and arts education"*. Based on these comments, it can be seen that the students thought conceptual art and its education would positively affect individual development and awareness. On the other hand, considering the existing teaching conditions, they thought conceptual art education could not be conducted.

Finally, with regard to the theme 'the contribution of conceptual art and/or conceptual art education to awareness in terms of professional development' (4), the students' statements revealed the code of teaching subject area knowledge. Student 17 stated that the courses they took and especially art movements and approaches would *reflect* to their professional understanding and student lives by saying: *"Like any other art movements, conceptual art would also have a contribution to our teaching and studentship lives."*

1.4. Finding IV and Interpretation

"Would you like to include conceptual art in your artistic works? If yes, what kind of work would it be including which concepts and techniques?"

It was determined that 23 of the students stating views wanted to include conceptual art in their works, and 14 did not. In this regard, the themes consisted of "(1) art-society relationship, (2) technique-material dimension, (3) content and expression dimension, and (4) learning processes". The codes of raising interest and guiding were revealed under the theme of art-society relationship (1). In this respect, Student 42 stated: *"If I would like to produce artistic works, what I would like to do most would be installation technique. It could be making artistic and unique installations in a place. The society would find it different, be interested in it and with their interest, I would be able to reach what I want to express."* The students wanting to try new techniques as their conceptual expressions are related to popular trends, and through this, they think that they can impress the society. The theme 'technique-material dimension' (2) included the codes such as video art, installation, photograph and oil painting technique. About this theme, Student 35 said: *"I would use video art or installation. It is just...too boring to order the paintings."* Student 38 stated: *"I would like to use installation. It can be used to express a societal problem in photographs."* Student 14 said: *"No, I would be more interested in painting"*. Examining the students' statements, it was seen that video art and installation were the most wanted type of expression, and besides, instead of making any

work related to conceptual art, there were students wanting to continue traditional art such as painting and sculpture. As for the theme 'content and expression dimension', the codes were "emotional expression, new ideas, Turkish culture-tradition and societal problem". Student 1 stated: *"I don't think that conceptual art would reflect our emotions."* Student 11 stated: *"Yes, I would like to try. I would like to produce such a work to make people adopt figures, images belonging to Turkish culture or Turkish traditions"* Student 38 said: *"I would like to use installation. It can be used to express a societal problem in photographs."* Student 39 asserted: *"I don't think that our emotions would fit into conceptual art."* Based on these statements, it was identified that some students thought this kind of art was not enough for expressing emotions; those who wanted to use conceptual art in their works preferred subjects and contents which they thought functional in terms of attracting attention to cultural and societal values and delivering information. Finally, under the theme 'teaching processes' (4), the codes included "factor of faculty member, passing the course, level of knowledge, acquiring information and delivering information". Regarding this theme, the students' statements are as follows; Student 2: *"If I learnt it, I could want."* Student 20 said: *"Since there is the understanding of only passing the courses, based on my four year education and the faculty members' views, I can say that it's unnecessary."* Almost half of the students wanted to know more about conceptual art, however the views that it would not support the teaching process were in the majority. They expressed their discontent regarding this situation.

1.5. Finding V and Interpretation

"Do you think that a course related to conceptual art should be included in art teaching undergraduate program? Explain why."

5 themes were revealed from the students' statements. These were (1) teaching processes, (2) professional development, (3) art-society relationship, (4) emotional approach and (5) individual/artistic development. For the theme teaching processes (1), the codes included "free thought, art movement teaching, acquisition of knowledge, different perspectives, elective courses, intense course program, technical knowledge and permanent learning". Student 3 said: *"I've just thought that it should be included because it would not be fair if I couldn't answer such a question after 9 years of art education."* Student 19 stated: *"Yes, I think it should because most students have a lack of knowledge on conceptual art."* Student 22 asserted: *"I think so, but it should be elective because I don't think everybody has a broad perspective of art. A course that the students take unwillingly would not have any benefits for anyone."* Based on these answers, it was determined that the students thought conceptual art education is necessary, but should be included in the program as an elective course. As for the theme 'professional development' (2), the codes included "teaching perception and having subject area knowledge". Related to this theme, Student 2 said: *"Yes, I think so. Although we study at this department, it is a pity that we don't know anything about it. I think we should be equipped with the necessary knowledge about art after we graduate."* Student 12 asserted: *"I think it should because we didn't have any idea about this concept when you first distributed these question forms although we were art teaching students. It is not a desired situation as we are about to start the teaching profession. For this reason, at least the concept of conceptual art should be taught in a course"*. These statements can be interpreted that the students wanted to know more about art in their pre-service education. In our age of technological development, the students need to follow developments in their area and be far-sighted individuals, especially in the areas like visual arts, going beyond the mere theoretical and clichéd information. It is clear that the students participated in the interviews were aware of this situation and wanted to complete their undergraduate studies more knowledgeable and qualified. With respect to the theme 'art-society relationship' (3), the codes included "art perception of the society, the effect of cultural environment, technology and periodic conditions". Student 20 stated: *"I think it not necessary because we live in Denizli, even when you make a nude painting, people's look towards you changes. It is difficult to create something extraordinary with conceptual art. Besides, since this is the education faculty, the most students' only concern is being a teacher. That's why we don't have any painter or sculptor. Regards!!!"* Student 28 said: *"I definitely should be because the art moves to that direction due to our age of technological development, and it would also contribute to our technical knowledge and art practices."* It is evident that some students had negative views for including conceptual art as a course due to the art perception of their environment. Besides, some students do not see conceptual art as a qualification for the teaching profession. Others thought it was necessary to have new ways of expression using developing technologies in art works.

Finally, the theme 'individual-artistic development' (5) included codes such as creativity, currency, different perspective, freedom and being unique. In this sense, Student 4 stated: *"If it would be a course beneficial for me and others, it definitely should be. Why not, if new ideas and creativity are developed in art works?"* Student 7 said: *"There should be a course for conceptual art in the undergraduate programs. The reason is that I think we don't know enough about modern art."* Student 27 asserted: *"It is certainly necessary. Students knowing all art movements would change their ideas about art and raise awareness. It is necessary for students to have knowledge of the subject"*. These statements revealed that the students thought a course on conceptual art in the undergraduate program would develop different perspectives and creativity in terms of individual and artistic development as well as understanding modern art trends and producing unique products.

3. Results

Based on the findings, it can be seen that the students' answers in the interview form were gathered under common themes although the concept codes were different from each other. Briefly, there were 7 themes including knowing about conceptual art, having interest, resources of information, its relationship with teaching processes, sociocultural context dimension, examples of technique and expression, its relationship with individual-artistic and professional development.

- It was observed that almost 40% of the students did not have knowledge of conceptual art, and 10% had wrong knowledge. The remaining 50% interpreted conceptual art with partial information. In general, their statements included expressions such as free, reformist related to the nature of art. There were also statements featuring meaning and ideas, which was discussed in finding I and interpretation.
- In the group of teacher candidates participated in the study, those interested in conceptual wanted to learn more about it and produce art works in this respect. There were also candidates thinking that conceptual art was thought-centred and was not sufficient in emotional expression. This situation is the result of common perception that art is emotion-centred.
- Regarding the resources of information, it was seen that the teacher candidates learnt about conceptual art from their faculty members, museums-galleries and exhibitions, internet, books and magazines. Although art books and magazines were expected to be the main source of information, it was the internet mostly preferred. Despite internet is a resource which is easy to access, it is not reliable since it is not controlled except academic publications. Therefore, it has the disadvantages of acquiring wrong and biased information. It was seen that educational visits to see important art events would be effective in learning about conceptual art (Example: 2013 Istanbul Biennial)
- In the findings explaining teaching processes of conceptual art, the students emphasized that they had a lack of knowledge during their art education although they stated that undergraduate courses were a source of information for conceptual art. The fact that half of the students did not know anything about it supports this finding. It was understood that since there are not any independent faculty members for conceptual art and its practices, only those practice could be conducted only if a faculty member wants it. A group of students thought that due to the intense teaching program and lack of physical conditions, conceptual art education was not the priority and necessary. Those who had positive views pointed out that it should be an elective course. This issue depends on various variables such as program development process, faculty member qualifications, and the adequacy of the teaching environment.
- In the findings explaining the contribution of conceptual art to individual and artistic development, expressions such as being different, creativity, extraordinary, different perspective and being unique were frequently used. As can be understood from these expressions, there was a supportive connection between the individual and artistic development of the teacher candidates who were still in the process of acculturation. Individual development made a difference in perspectives to art. The students thought that their creativity would develop as a result of the awareness raised by conceptual art and they would produce more unique works. It was observed that seeing and knowing conceptual works would have a positive influence on the students' thinking processes and artistic understanding. The students' views on professional development are discussed under finding V and interpretations. Based on the statements in this finding, it was found that the students wanted to know more about conceptual art to be able to be a more qualified teacher. The objectives of art education include developing visual and artistic expression. The teacher candidates being interested in modern art movements would reflect on their teaching at elementary and

middle school level. This would contribute to the society's art culture by making students meet conceptual art at early ages.

- Examples of technique and materials in conceptual art mostly involved installation and video art. These are the kind of works usually seen in galleries-museums and biennials. Various gallery-museum events included in visual and written media ads was observed to be effective in the students' preference for technique. It was seen that most of the students found conceptual art works different and interesting, and as for content, they preferred cultural and societal elements.

- One of the themes emphasized more than once was the relationship between conceptual art and society-environment. Negative views revealed that conceptual art would not be understood in the city where the students lived. Besides, there were also views that traditional art education reinforced this situation. It was stated that social awareness can be raised through conceptual art, and the role of art teachers in making conceptual art understandable and acceptable by different sociocultural groups. Therefore, visual arts teacher candidates are expected to master conceptual art and new approaches in art during their education process.

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