

AN ANALYSIS OF DANA SCHUTZ'S SELF-EATERS SERIES IN THE CONTEXT OF CARNIVALESQUE THEORY*

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ABSTRACT

The focus of this study is to analyze Dana Schutz's Self-Eaters painting series in the context of Mikhail Bakhtin's carnivalesque theory in his book Rabelais and His World. The first chapter provides a brief introduction to carnivals and the carnivalesque theory, to establish a foundational understanding of the framework. According to Bakhtin, carnivalesque manifests in art as renewal, rebirth, and bodily waste, emphasizing the body and bodily functions while subverting established social hierarchies and norms. In the second chapter, selected paintings from Schutz's Self-Eaters series are analyzed in the context of carnivalesque theory. The Self-Eaters depict figures engaging in auto-cannibalistic acts with a vivid color palette, contrasting the horrifying content of the paintings, offering commentary on the relationship between body and self and the boundaries between life and death. This study concludes that Schutz's Self-Eaters series can be analyzed through the lens of carnivalesque theory, which emphasizes renewal, rebirth and corporeal with this contrast.

Keywords: Carnavalesque, Dana Schutz, Self-Eaters, Mikhail Bakhtin, Contemporary Painting

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Introduction

American artist Dana Schutz's *Self-Eaters* painting series consists of self-devouring figure depictions. The paintings in the series depict figures engaged in acts of auto cannibalism¹, either through the consumption of their own limbs or devouring their own faces. The individuals in the paintings consuming their own bodies in a paradoxical act of self-destruction and self-creation cycle which can be seen as a metaphorical representation of the cyclical nature of life and the constant process of renewal. To gain a deeper understanding of these paintings, this study employs the theoretical framework of Mikhail Bakhtin's carnivalesque theory, analyzing Schutz's *Self-Eaters* painting series through the lens of Mikhail Bakhtin's carnivalesque theory, providing commentary on rebirth, renewal and corporeal.

The carnivalesque lens allows to explore the tension between destruction and creation, as well as the fluidity of boundaries between subject and object. Schutz's *Self-Eaters* paintings also incorporate elements of humor and satire, which are characteristic of the carnivalesque. The juxtaposition of macabre and humorous elements can be seen as creating a carnivalesque effect, which can lead to challenging the viewer's expectations and inviting reflection on societal conventions. Through the analysis of Schutz's *Self-Eaters* painting series based on the carnivalesque theory, this study aims to highlight the significance of considering theoretical frameworks when interpreting contemporary art and underscore the value of the carnivalesque as a tool for analyzing art.

The findings of the study based on the analyses on the selected paintings, suggest that Schutz's *Self-Eaters* series can be interpreted through the lens of the carnivalesque theory, with its emphasis on themes such as rebirth, renewal, corporeal and the juxtaposition between the humorous and macabre aspects of the paintings.

The Carnavalesque Theory: Key Concepts and Background

Bakhtin's carnivalesque theory was built around the book *Gargantua and Pantagruel* by French writer and thinker François Rabelais and carnivals in the Middle Ages. *Gargantua and Pantagruel* is a tale of two giants who roam the French countryside and Bakhtin addresses that it overflows with farts, feces, piss, gluttonous feasts, adultery, geese used as toilet paper, sex, cannibalism and exaggeration, crudeness and indecency (Edwards & Graulund, 2013, pp. 23-24). Bakhtin believes that Rabelais drew his inspiration directly from the popular culture of the Middle Ages, which was organized around festivals held in conjunction with official culture, extended far back to Saturnalia² and probably beyond (Harpham, 2006, p. 99).

In Christianity, carnivals were a customary celebration that occurred prior to the fasting period, which typically lasted for a week or fifteen days. During the fasting period, individuals adhered to strict and disciplined practices, and many aspects of daily life were prohibited. In contrast, carnivals were social gatherings where excessive indulgence was encouraged. Burke notes that what was forbidden during the fasting period was specifically permitted during the carnival season. Carnivals were not only an event where everything was turned upside down, but they were also a popular trend in European culture (Burke, 1996, p. 214). Eagleton (2020, p. 142) defines carnivals as "a utopian freedom, community, equality, and excess area where all statuses, norms, privileges, and bans are temporarily suspended". This definition suggest that carnivals are a space where individuals can temporarily escape the restrictions of their everyday lives and engage in activities that would otherwise be forbidden or frowned upon. The reference to equality in Eagleton's definition is thought to be particularly noteworthy as it suggests that carnivals are a space where traditional power structures are suspended. Eagleton's reference to excess suggests that carnivals are a space where individuals can indulge in activities that would normally be considered taboo or inappropriate.

¹ Auto cannibalism, also known as self-cannibalism or autosarcophagy is a form of mental health disorder characterized by the compulsion that involves the practice of eating oneself (Eleesha Lockett, 2020).

² Saturnalia was an ancient Roman festival that was held in honor of the god Saturn, who was the god of agriculture and abundance. The festival was celebrated during the winter solstice, which typically was held between December 17th to December 23rd. During Saturnalia, the social order was temporarily overturned, with masters serving their slaves, and gambling and feasting being common activities. It was a time of gift-giving, merry-making, and indulgence and was considered as one of the most popular and enjoyable festivals of the Roman calendar (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2023).



Pieter Bruegel The Elder "The Fight Between Carnival and Lent," 118 x 164 cm., Oil on Panel, Vienna

Excrement, bodily fluids, and especially the lower parts of the body played a significant role in carnivals. Bakhtin emphasizes that scatological freedom was frequently seen in *charivari*³ rituals and especially *Feast of Fools*. For example, in the *Feast of Fools*, a head bishop was selected among the fools, and this head bishop would smoke incense while reading hymns at the same time. After the services, the priests would tour the streets with horses and carts filled with excrement and throw excrement at the watching crowd. According to Bakhtin, gestures such as excrement-throwing and urination have traditionally been used for humiliation and have been seen since Antiquity. He stresses that expressions such as "I will defecate on you, I will spit on your face", etc. are present in almost every language. Bakhtin argues that the basic relationship between death, fertility, renewal, and wealth can be expressed in visual metaphors of excrement and urine (Bahtin, 2005, pp. 173-175). He also says that it is unacceptable to try to modernize excrement imagery, and that "excrement was perceived as a basic element of life in the struggle against death and the world. The conscious part of the human being, related to the materiality of the world, the bodily nature, was part of excrement" (Bahtin, 2005, p. 251). In this context, Bakhtin interprets the emphasis on the lower parts of the body in Rabelais as a positive evaluation of richness and fertility, thinking of excrement as fertilizer. However, today, especially in the field of visual arts, such images do not have a positive connotation for the viewer. On the contrary, it can be perceived offensive by the viewer (Reisoğlu, 2022, p. 18).

Bakhtin defines the carnivals as a reversed world phenomenon where the body is exaggerated in opposition to official culture and individuals could escape the control of authorities and create their own carnival culture. Carnivals were characterized by the following themes: opposition to hierarchy and authority, reversal rituals, excess, bodily fluids and waste, renewal, rebirth, and humor. Bakhtin defines the literary manifestation of these carnivals as the carnivalization of the body and the carnivalesque. The term carnivalesque is used to indicate that social values and hierarchies have temporarily been inverted, taking on a carnival quality (Bakhtin, as cited in Rifat, 2013) or to refer to the manifestation of basic carnival-specific characteristics in a cultural element or the relationship of a cultural element with the carnival tradition (İlim, 2017, p. 155). Although the word was first used by the philosopher Ernst Cassirer, Bakhtin broadened the meaning of the concept in his book *Rabelais and His*

³ Charivari, according to Davis (Davis, 1971), was a form of rough music or popular protest in sixteenth-century France. It involved a group of people making noise and causing a disturbance outside the home of an individual who had violated social norms or broken the law. Charivari was used to shame the offender into conforming to social expectations and to reinforce community values. Individuals who engaged in extramarital affairs, married someone of a different social status, or otherwise behaved in ways that were deemed unacceptable by the community were often targeted.

World. The carnivalesque does not refer to a party or festival, but rather to an idea (Hyman, Malbert, & Jones, 2000, p. 14). It can be argued that the idea that the carnivalesque is not solely a reference to a physical event, but rather a broader cultural concept that can be seen in various elements of society.

According to Fanning, carnivalesque is not just a celebration, but also a literary and artistic element that represents a liminal space where the established order and laws are overturned. It is not merely a parody, but a true transgression that involves grotesque elements and brings together conflicting oppositions. The carnivalesque is a space where traditional boundaries between different concepts such as high and low, fine art and advertising (Fanning, 2009, p. 258).

In the book *The Grotesque in Western Art and Culture* by Frances S. Connelly, she states that the carnivalesque imagery provokes laughter as it mocks and subverts social convention. Carnavalesque is characterized by the tension between the high and the low culture and that it embraces crude, playful, hierarchical, and inverse images of social norms. The carnivalesque is the voice of the alienated and a strong representation of change through satire and boundary violations. Connelly argues that the issues addressed by the carnivalesque imagery is more about social and ethical rather than aesthetic (Connelly, 2014, p. 82).

According to Bakhtin, the carnivalesque imagery provides a new perspective on the world by allowing for "the liberation of creative freedom, combination and reconciliation of different elements, the liberation from conventions, fixed truths, clichés, banalities and universally accepted things that dominate the world view" (Bahtin, 2005, p. 62). It can be said that the carnivalesque theory is a broad theory based on the life cycle and celebration of this cycle, and still can be seen as that it is multifaceted and open to interpretation. It evolves with societies, individuals, and culture. Therefore, concepts such as renewal and rebirth, can be considered as fundamental themes of the carnivalesque.

Analysis of Self-Eaters in the Context of Carnavalesque

American artist Dana Schutz (1976-) is known for her style of combining abstract and figurative images to create complex narratives. Her *Self-Eaters* series, created between 2003 and 2005, features paintings of figures devouring their own limbs. Despite the disturbing and unsettling themes of the series, Schutz employs a warm color palette that contrast with the subject matter. This can also be seen as creating a sense of vitality and energy in the paintings, while the use of exaggerated gestures and dynamic brushwork adds to the macabre nature of the figures. Schutz's style is characterized by signature pinks and golds, flat areas of color articulated with jagged lines and smears, and spontaneous-looking marks that are carefully planned (Frederick, 2015). Additionally, the absurd expressions and facial features of the figures can be seen as further contribute to their unsettling quality. By juxtaposing a warm color palette with disturbing subject, can be seen as Schutz heightens intense impact of the paintings.

It can be argued that Dana Schutz's art has evolved towards darker themes, as seen by her *Self-Eaters* series. The portraits of disfigured figures, such as the *Face Eater* and *The Devourer*, depict plastic, malleable hybrids who are both destructive and regenerative. Schutz's work often depicts chaos and catastrophe by turning the body inside out, cutting holes in figures, or razing parts of their forms away. *Gouged Girl* from 2008, for instance, shows a half-eaten watermelon beside a decimated female form, with the woman's pinkish-red hands indicating either the masticated fruit or her own auto-cannibalism. It can be interpreted as Schutz's art exhibits a sinister sense of humor while exploring themes of self-consumption, auto-cannibalism, and destruction (Rooney, 2020). According to Belasco, *Self-Eaters* can be interpreted as serving as a metaphor for the artist's creative process and reflects her fascination with taboo, the language of painting, and the cycles of nature. Drawing inspiration from cultural myths and legends such as the Jewish golem, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, and Japanese kaiju monsters like *Godzilla*, the series embodies both fears and anxieties as well as a sense of liberation from constraints. Despite the characters' gruesome acts going against societal norms and logic, they display a defiant attitude (Belasco, 2011).



Dana Schutz, "Gauged Girl," 2008, Oil on Canvas

Schutz prefers to describe the series as breaking down the barrier between the artist and subject (Rosenberg, 2011). Curator Justin Paton characterizes Schutz's artwork as having a vibrant energy that emanates from the paintings themselves, with dynamic compositions that appear to move and spring forth towards the viewer (Boardman, 2018, p. 37).

According to Platow, Schutz's artworks are not pleasant, but rather horrifying, uncomfortable, and bizarre despite their beautiful colors and tactile surfaces that attract the viewer's attention. He explains that Schutz's work touches a nerve because it tackles political and social issues through the lens of fantasy and at the same time, visually appealing. Platow describes Schutz's work as an unconventional blend of the conceptual and the painterly, where she creates imaginative stories and instructions for herself that are expressed in a very expressive and gestural style (Platow, as cited in Litt, 2015). While Schutz typically avoids interpreting her work, she has suggested that the *Self-Eaters* may relate to the artistic process, in which experience is consumed and transformed into art (Tomkins, 2017). Schutz explains her creative process as being inspired by the idea of how her *Self-Eaters* could transform and recreate themselves if death was not a limiting factor. She viewed them as a site that constantly produces and consumes itself, which relates to other systems in the world, including painting. Schutz found a connection between the *Self-Eaters*' ability to produce their own parts and the idea of painting, which involves a great deal of repurposing. She also suggests that if the *Self-Eaters* were a society of builders or makers, they might create additional limbs to serve a specific purpose, such as long fingers for gripping (Levine, 2011, s. 15). Schutz sees the consuming and devouring in her work as a generative process that leads to self-remaking. She believes that her paintings carry on and remake beings out of their own stuff, and she intends to strike a delicate balance between the allegorical and the solipsistic in her art (Walsh & Enright, 2015).

Yau asserts that Schutz's strength lies in her ability to pose questions that challenge conventional answers, and she does so through her paintings. He notes that her works are not didactic or overt, and there is no need for a

specialized knowledge to understand them. Rather, the viewer must engage with the work and unravel it to reveal its meaning (Yau, 2012).



Dana Schutz, "New Legs," 152.4 x 167.6 cm., 2003, Oil on Canvas

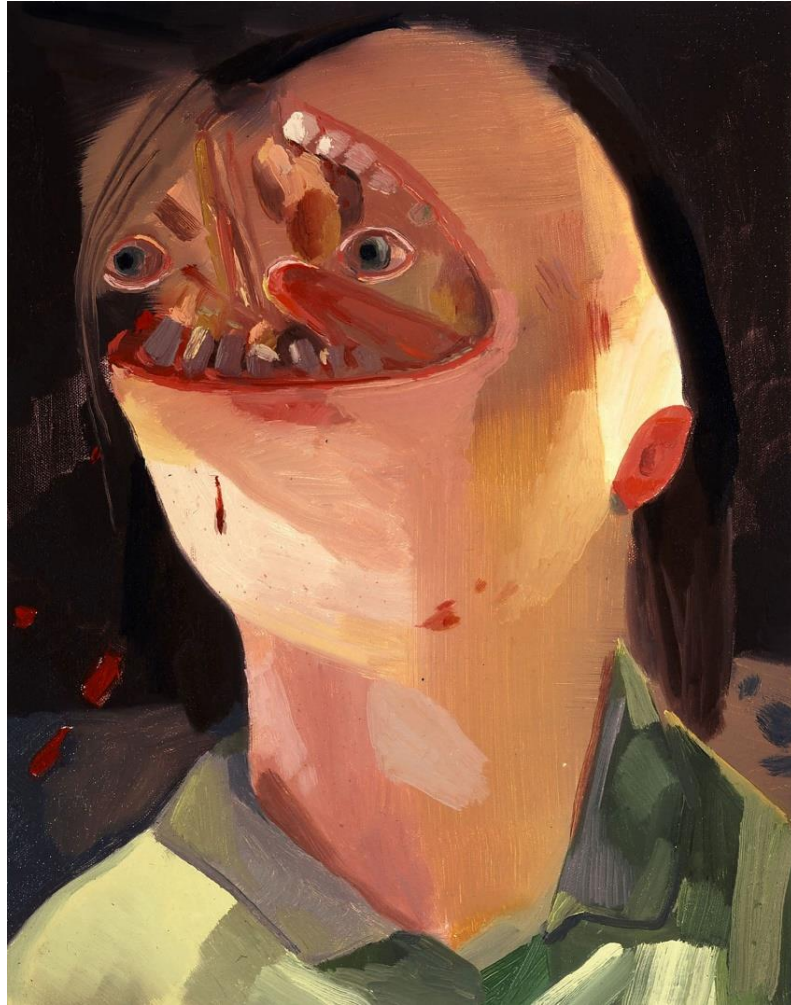
In Dana Schutz's 2003 painting *New Legs* the figure appears to be seated on a rock-like structure, with its⁴ legs amputated and a pile of excrement in shape of a pair of legs sits in front of the figure (Schutz, 2021). the figure attempts to construct new legs out of its own excrement. The painting depicts a nude figure with blonde hair sitting outside, seemingly a beach, with birds flying in the sky in the background. Schutz's use of a cold color palette can be seen as enhancing the somber atmosphere of the painting. This act of self-mutilation and rebirth implies a cycle of renewal, as stated in the first chapter is a common theme of carnivalesque, where one body part is destroyed to make way for a new one. This act of reconstruction and the transformation of excrement into functional limbs align with the emphasis of the carnivalesque on corporeal and renewal. Additionally, the use of humor and satire in the painting can be seen as further enhancing the carnivalesque quality of the painting.

⁴ The genders of the figures depicted in the paintings are seems to be ambiguous. Therefore, for the purposes of this study, the researcher has opted to use the pronoun "it" to refer to these figures.



Dana Schutz, "Mulch," 55.9 x 71.1 cm., 2004, Oil on Canvas

In Dana Schutz's 2004 painting *Mulch*, a hunched figure is devouring its own leg, which is depicted as severed in half. The figure dominates the majority of the painting, making it challenging to discern the surroundings. Schutz employs a warm and vivid color palette creates a heightened energy and movement and can be seen as a contrast to the morbid and unsettling nature of the painting. The figure's posture and the dismembered body contribute to the overall sense of chaos and distress. Schutz's technique of using vibrant colors to illustrate grim subject matter can be seen as creating an unsettling atmosphere, contributing to the overall sense of disorientation in the painting. The figure is portrayed with exaggerated features and contorted pose can be seen as amplifying the absurdity of the scene. While not overtly comical, the juxtaposition of the grotesque elements and the absurdity of the composition can be seen as a form of humor and satire. It can be said that this exaggeration and contrast, as stated in previous chapter, are common themes of carnivalesque.



Dana Schutz, "Face Eater," 58.4 x 45,7 cm., 2004, Oil on Canvas

Another painting from the *Self-Eaters* series by Dana Schutz, *Face Eater* features a portrait with a dark background. The figure is depicted wearing a green shirt and has a strikingly large mouth with big teeth and appears to be devouring their own face. The painting elicits a visceral and unsettling feeling, a characteristic of Schutz's *Self-Eaters* series. *Face Eater* illustrates Schutz's artistic language that emphasizes the absurd, the excessive, and the corporeal. The painting provokes questions regarding the consumption of oneself, both metaphorically and, and its implications. The act of auto-cannibalism portrays a transgressive and transformative potential that relates to renewal aspect of the carnivalesque. Also, it can be seen in the juxtaposition between the absurd and the grotesque aspects of the painting. The figures' exaggerated facial expressions, the distortion of their features, and the chaotic composition create a sense of carnival-like reversal and excess. The use of humor and satire is also present which as it was stated in the first chapter, is a common theme in carnivalesque, as the macabre subject matter is approached in a playful and exaggerated manner.



Dana Schutz, "Devourer," 2004, Oil on Canvas

In the painting titled *Devourer*, a figure is portrayed with a blue T-shirt, big round, dark eyes, and a large mouth with massive teeth. The figure appears to be devouring its own fingers in the painting. Schutz has employed a warm and vivid color palette in this painting as she did in the other paintings in the series, which can be seen as contradicting the macabre nature of the painting. The vibrant color palette juxtaposes with the disturbing imagery of the figure eating its own fingers similar to the other paintings in the series. The self-consuming figure and the morbid scene in *Devourer* align with the carnivalesque as it employs themes such as renewal and rebirth with satire and humor.

The process that the figures go through, which may seem extraordinary to the viewer but ordinary to artist, suggests a carnivalesque transformation. In the Middle Ages, carnivals challenged all boundaries, taboos, hierarchies, and the status quo, dismantling and renewing the society. In Schutz's paintings, the individual is tearing down and rebuilding the only boundary of its body. Schutz's colorful style, and her approach that can sometimes be seen as humorous, also reinforces this carnivalesque approach. Through the carnivalesque lens, the *Self-Eaters* paintings address themes of bodily transformation, the fluidity of identity, and the temporary suspension of rationality. They challenge societal norms and invite the viewer to question established boundaries and conventions. The acts of the figures in this series evoke themes of self-consumption, death, and auto cannibalism. However, the artist disputes the notion that the series is related to self-consumption. According to Schutz, "They are creating themselves; they have no origin and are constantly transforming. They are defined solely through their personal production" (Wilson, 2015, p. 328). It can be argued that Schutz sees the auto cannibalism in her works as an ordinary creation process. She expresses this ordinary process through an extraordinary act of auto cannibalism. The plasticity of her works also reflects how she views the topic as an ordinary event. The expressions of the figures who have lost body parts seems to be not in pain. They are composed as if they were enacting a daily routine like preparing meal. The juxtaposition between the absurd and macabre elements that are present in these paintings, along with their evident exploration of common themes related to the carnivalesque theory such

as renewal and rebirth, supports the argument that they can be effectively analyzed through the lens of the carnivalesque. As discussed in the first chapter, the carnivalesque emphasizes themes of bodily excess, inversion of societal norms, and the temporary suspension of hierarchical structures, all of which can be said that prominently present in these paintings.

Conclusion

The carnivalesque, as theorized by Mikhail Bakhtin, emphasizes themes of rebirth, renewal, and bodily excess, which are effectively illustrated in the *Self-Eaters* paintings. It can be said that the analysis of Dana Schutz's *Self-Eaters* painting series through the perspective of carnivalesque theory provides valuable insights into the themes of rebirth and renewal. The carnivalesque often explores themes of reversal and the subversion of high and low tension. In the *Self-Eaters* paintings, this tension is created by the combination of absurd and macabre elements. The use of humor and satire in carnivals is also evident in the paintings, as they address hypothetical, impossible situations a sense of playfulness and absurdity, challenging the established norms. The individuals depicted in the paintings consume themselves and, in a sense, recreate themselves from their own being, aligning with the themes of carnivalesque theory renewal and rebirth. The artist investigates the chaos within the characters, exploring the fluidity of the boundaries between subject and object. The characters are shown as consuming and reconstructing themselves. Additionally, the figures in the paintings do not seem to have any visible genitalia or breasts, indicating a lack of gender distinction, which can be seen as an attribute of the fluid boundary aspect of the carnivalesque. Schutz's approach to portraying the self-consuming figures in a colorful style, with a touch of humor, reinforces the carnivalesque transformation in her paintings. The act of tearing down and rebuilding the boundary of one's body in the *Self-Eaters* series can be interpreted as a subversion of societal norms and a redefinition of the self, which aligns with the themes of carnivalesque. The carnivalesque emphasis on transgression and the temporary suspension of societal hierarchies can also be seen in Schutz's portrayal of the figures consuming themselves, challenging the boundaries of what is considered acceptable and rational behavior.

Using Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque, the *Self-Eaters* paintings by Dana Schutz can be understood as exploring themes of rebirth, renewal, and bodily excess. By employing a bright and lively color palette to depict the macabre topic such as auto-cannibalism, Schutz creates a contrast that can be seen as creating a carnivalesque effect. Specifically, the emphasis on themes of rebirth and renewal in the carnivalesque aligns with the *Self-Eaters*' exploration of the cyclical nature of life and death, making the carnivalesque framework a particularly apt lens through which to analyze these works. Through the use of this theory, the paintings offer valuable insights into the ways in which contemporary art can engage with and challenge traditional notions of bodily boundaries and societal norms.

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DANA SCHUTZ'UN KENDİNİ YİYENLER (SELF-EATERS) RESİMLERİNİN KARNAVALESK KURAM BAĞLAMINDA İNCELENMESİ

Deniz REİSOĞLU

ÖZ

Bu araştırmada Dana Schutz'un *Self-Eaters (Kendini Yiyenler)*⁵ resim serisinin, Rus filozof Mikhail Bakhtin'in *Rabelais ve Dünyası* kitabında kuramlaştırdığı karnavalesk bağlamında analiz edilmesi amaçlanmıştır. İlk bölümde, araştırmaya temel bir giriş oluşturması amacıyla karnaval kültürü ve karnavalesk kuram kısaca tanımlanmıştır. Bakhtin'e göre karnavalesk, sanatta yenilenme, yeniden doğuş ve bedensel atıklar olarak tezahür ederek yerleşik sosyal hiyerarşileri ve normları alt üst ederken bedeni ve bedensel işlevleri vurgulamaktadır. İkinci bölümde, Schutz'un *Kendini Yiyenler* serisinden önem teşkil ettiği düşünülen resimler karnavalesk kuram bağlamında analiz edilmiştir. *Kendini Yiyenler*, beden ve benlik arasındaki ilişki ve yaşam ve ölüm arasındaki sınırlar hakkında yorumlar sunan, oto-yamyamlık eylemlerinde bulunan figürleri, resimlerin dehşetengiz içeriğine zıtlık yaratacak biçimde canlı bir renk paleti ile tasvir etmektedir. Araştırmada, Schutz'un *Kendini Yiyenler* serisinin içinde barındırdığı bu kontrastla yenilenme, yeniden doğuş ve bedensel temaları vurgulayan karnavalesk bağlamında analiz edilebileceği sonucuna varılmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Karnavalesk, Dana Schutz, Kendini Yiyenler, Mikhail Bakhtin, Çağdaş Resim Sanatı

⁵ Sanatçı resim serisine İngilizce *Self-Eaters* adını vermiştir. Araştırmacı tarafından Türkçeye *Kendini Yiyenler* olarak çevrilmesinin uygun olduğu düşünülmektedir.