

Master of Fine Arts Thesis

What can objects do

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[Abstract]

In the world of objects, our understanding is often limited to their functionality. I view this as a critical oversight and seek to explore the intricate relationship between objects and ourselves. Throughout this thesis I ask the question, “What can objects do?” by examining its tonal duality. Initially, this question is posed neutrally, suggesting an inquiry into objects' capabilities beyond their prescribed roles. I challenge the notion of “usefulness,” advocating for uselessness as a means to deepen our understanding of objects. This approach imagines objects with the agency, transcending their conventional function. Subsequently, I pose the same question with a sense of rhetorical resignation, acknowledging limits of objects and prompting a more profound inquiry into failure. Drawing from Jack Halberstam's concept of failure, I explore how my objects embody aspects of failure, disrupting conventional engagement to invite a more meaningful relationship with their users.

Through ambiguity, embracing failure, and challenging norms, I aim to reassess their inherent potential and their ability to narrate human experiences.

[Preface]

In the realm of objects, we often underestimate their capability by having a passive understanding limited to their function. Despite the influence objects can have over us, our comprehension tends to remain shallow. I propose this as a critical issue and aim to delve into the intricate relationship between objects and ourselves. By questioning, “What can objects do?” I aim to reevaluate the potential inherent in objects and their capacity to be a narrator of our experience as humans in the world.

First, the question, “What can objects do?”, is carried out in a neutral and observatory tone. It indicates an inquiry into the potential actions or capabilities of objects free from their given role seeking a way to subvert roles and systems. I hope to imagine the agency of objects that explores beyond the conventional role projected on them by questioning the idea of “usefulness”, which reduces objects to the mere utility by pragmatism. I advocate for uselessness as a catalyst for a deeper understanding of the complexity of objects through imagining objects’ agency and encouraging a more nuanced perspective beyond their assigned functionality.

After, the same question was carried out in a more skeptical and critical tone.; “What can objects do. What’s the use of asking.” It is a rhetorical question acknowledging the limit of objects and emphasizing a stronger sense of questioning. Drawing inspiration from Jack Halberstam's "The Queer Art of

Failure", I delve into the aspects of failure embodied in my objects. I aim to question norms and standards and embrace the subversive qualities of failure.

Through this exploration, my aim is to seek a fresh perspective and imaginative approaches to the objects that surround us. In doing so, I've come to recognize that my empathy for objects is connected to my own experience of objectification as a woman in Korean society. I hope to unveil a new lens through which we perceive not only objects but also women, by fostering a deeper understanding that goes beyond our expectations.

1. What can objects do?

I grew up in a society where pragmatism is prevalent, and the pursuit of usefulness is paramount. The pragmatism I encountered was both a discipline and a form of oppression; it valued the practicality of objects and stressed the importance of being useful in society as a good member.¹ This societal emphasis on usefulness has led me to feel compelled to constantly prove my own usefulness. It was a way for me to feel that I belong to the society. But my talents and interests that are not traditionally considered 'useful' are seen as completely useless in this society. Being objectified by social norms has led me to question whether I can simply live without the need to constantly prove my usefulness.

I believe my pragmatic upbringing inspired my empathy for objects being valued based on their practical use and functionality. I want to explore what can happen when objects are free from the constraint of “necessity” as its reason to exist. What can objects do when they are not meant to be useful? I am committed to discovering the untapped potential that lies within the realm of ‘uselessness,’ and reevaluating this potential as a catalyst to open new capabilities/understandings of objects.

My work opens a dialogue of ‘useful’ and ‘useless’ by creating objects that possess an opaque functionality. This obscurity of function makes us put more

¹ Frame of ‘being useful’, in other words “being good” is more oppressive for women. How women are playing their role to meet the expectation as ‘good wife’, ‘good daughter’, and ‘good girl’ becomes the measure for how useful and valuable they can be in the society. Therefore pragmatism, I believe, is strongly tied to patriarchy following its rule and logic because it ties people, especially women in the frame.

effort to identify the object's job and dismantles the role of an object in conventional relationship between user and objects.

As mentioned, objects and their function are often tied to traditional requirements of its practicality. They are required to show clear indication of use, to demonstrate how much they are committed to this agreement of function and to be useful. "Affordance" is the value that is projected on objects in this framework, referring to the inherent possibilities for action that an object offers to a user.

'Dummies' (figure 1) twists this traditional meaning and logic of affordance. Through surface, color, and features like drains, what they afford is not the function but the ambiguity. Ambiguity is used as a clear accusation to provoke questions.² Therefore, it affords the question 'why?' And 'what?' and opens possibilities outside of fixed engagements. This set of objects requires more effort to identify than an exploration of a useful object with twisted affordance.

Drains, holes and wheels connote functionality instantly, and prompts the question 'What is this for?' But there is no way for us to find a good one way to describe what they do. Some will describe this very moment as frustration, the failure of the object. However, I think it as an intriguing entry into a deeper engagement with the sleek, sterile object in front of me. (figure 2)

² Malpass, Matthew. *Critical Design in Context : History, Theory, and Practices*. London ; Bloomsbury Academic, an imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2017. Print., p.116



*Stall of dummies(002, 008, 010, 012, 016),
stoneware, stainless steel, wood, 2024.*



*Detail of Dummy 002, stoneware, stainless
steel, 2024.*

Normally, we identify things in terms of their function. We see them, figure out what they can do for us and move on. It is a quick process because of good design. Given chairs, tables, pencils and myriads of things ahead of us, we don't usually give a second thought to them or wonder what it can possibly do: they are ubiquitous and symbols of culture. We don't have to make our brains work to find out what objects around us are there for. They are there, and we just take what is given. Ambiguity disrupts this passive engagement and becomes a catalyst to rebuild the relationship between objects and us. This challenges the notion that we are always able to define objects and be on top of them. The openness, inviting nature of these objects enables us to engage with them in a unique way. —leaving us confused and lost in curiosity.

My objects are not as kind as other objects around us. First, they rebelliously refuse to define their sole function to be used. Saying 'no' is an indicator of having agency but objects are seldom viewed or anticipated to have this capability. They have to be smart enough to follow the direction, but we don't ask them to be wise to go off their path. They are dependable workers, but not by their own will, and their work is never for themselves. Their functionality and value are assigned by how we use them, not by how they work. The use of their function signifies a lack of agency, suggesting that an object, in a sense, does not possess agency or the willpower to perform specific actions.



Figure 3. *Dummy 010, Dummy 012*, Stoneware, stainless steel, 2024.

Second is that they are rather hidden than shown. Their color and shape, that is like other functional objects in the world, and the fact that they are camouflaged on the same-colored wall, asks us to work extra to see their existence. (figure 3) They don't answer to us unlike its passive role in the traditional user-objects setting.

This traditional setting and the relationship also give a small room for us to understand ourselves in relation to the world. As users of objects, we are always

full of presumptions. Beyond presumptions of objects exist solely to serve us, a new level of relationship between objects and ourselves can emerge. Our existence goes beyond a simple user-tool relationship, guiding us towards unimagined forms of play.

We don't know how to use these objects. We can only imagine what it can do. It means that we have a wide-open window to imagine how it will enter our lives. These objects give us uncertainty and confusion rather than assuring us, they possess the freedom to function. And this freedom extends to us becoming a chance for us to step outside the fixed realm of objects and seek a broader understanding of the world that surrounds us.

2. What can objects do.

In our shortsighted thinking, failure is often seen as the opposite of success and as something unintentional. However, as far as I experienced, failure can encompass various meanings. The premise for my work is to embrace and value the failure of function.

I was in my studio, my face nearly buried in the computer. I spent countless hours designing the perfect form for 'Farty Buddy'(figure 4) which is a nick name for a new sanitary ware made for a person to relive gas (we have ones for liquid and solid but not for gas). Researching the ideal height for the stool, making mock-ups of iterations, and measuring my own body curve to get the ergonomic design. I was serious and very committed to the design process, but at the same time, I knew that I was putting in effort for nothing. It was pointless. Who is going to need a stool to fart on?³ I always said that one of these days, I am going to be on Shark Tank, get the deal to be rich and successful. But I knew this could only be a joke. There is no way for me to be successful with my objects in that setting. The realization that success in that world seems unattainable prompted me to question the prevailing criteria for success, leading to a reflection on the values and expectations within this landscape.

³ I was asked that there could be people who need this and a market for them. I agree to some extent, but strongly believe that most people will choose the typical way to release gas even when this stool gets released in the market.

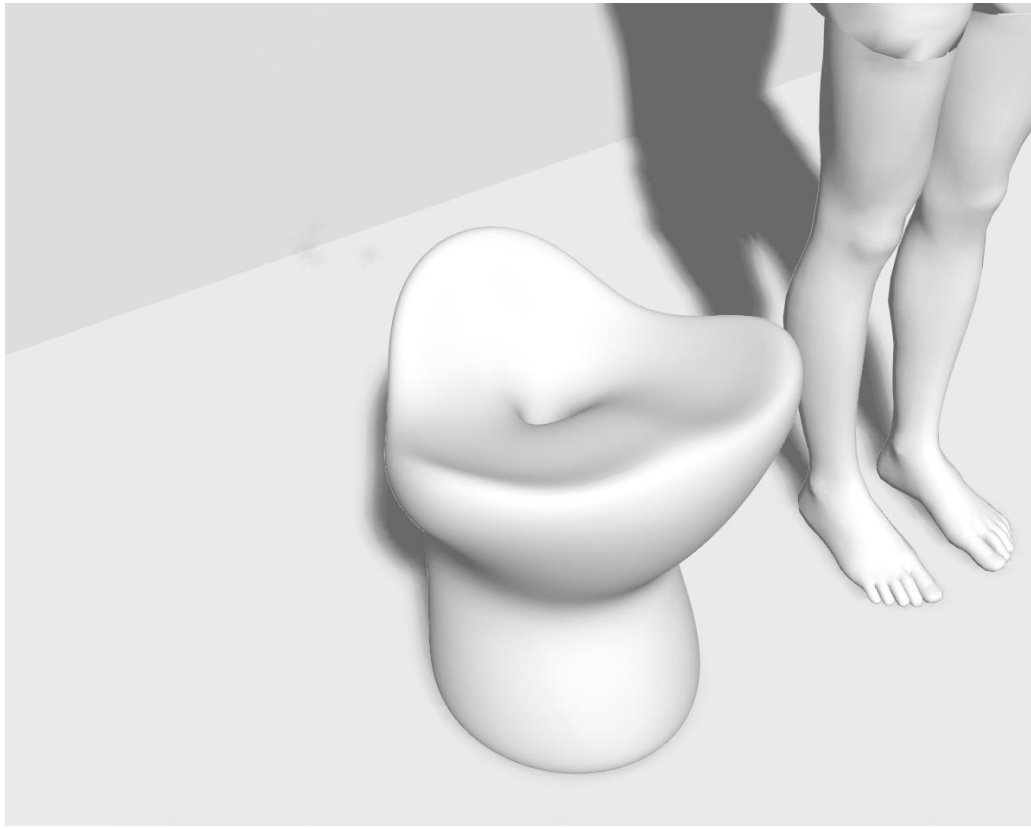


Figure 4. *Stool(for gas)*, image from Rhinoceros7, 2023.

A society shaped by capitalism, success is often narrowly defined by achieving certain life milestones and accumulating wealth. However, we must critically examine these fixed notions of success and failure. Failure can be more than mere lack of success—it is a subversive and transformative force. Failure challenges normative notions of success and presents alternative perspectives on life, society, and culture. I encourage us to reframe failure not as a lack of success, but as a refusal to conform to conventional and often oppressive standards. Through these means we can resist and subvert societal norms.⁴

⁴ Halberstam, Jack. *The Queer Art of Failure*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011. Print.



(From the top) Figure 5. *Watcher*, image from Rhinoceros8, 2024.
Figure 6. *Pillow for lazy readers*, image from Rhinoceros7, 2023.

The success in South Korea is measured by what they can afford. Being raised in Korea, I was taught that success can be measured by money. And I am living far from what I was taught. I am such a failure by Korean standards. As I shared my decision to pursue my career as an artist, many of those around me told me it is “stupid”. They said there is a reason why others don't do it. So, in the society the stupidity is going against the flow.

In other words, being stupid can be

a handy tool of rebellion. When my father told me that I should make something useful instead of making sculptures, I started making objects with a “function”. Which led to the creation of numerous items such as a watcher (figure 5), a book reading pillow (figure 6), and so on. It was clearly a misinterpretation (or rebellion) of what my father suggested but gave me a subtle sense of liberation as my good friend stupidity always did for me.

While they present themselves as problem-solving tools, the issues they tackle are rather peculiar. Take, for instance, the notion of creating a device to watch Netflix for someone — it seems absurd. And laying the head down on a book cannot help someone learn what is in the book — it won't accomplish the mission. The very premise is somewhat foolish, and the way these objects carry out their functions is even more imprudent. The effort I have invested in bringing this to life only serves to amplify the humor in their actions.

Stupidity plays a big role in the process of invention of function to play with usefulness.⁵ I remember when hidden cameras in Korea arose as a social issue. The cameras were hidden in private spaces mostly restrooms but not the urinals, it only occurred in the stalls mostly used by females. In the following days, I could find a card from the store with rectangular hole punched and inside the hole there was red transparent film to detect the light of camera lens. Someone was watching us pee, but we are the one who had to be careful so that they won't peek. On the plastic wrapping that was protecting the card, it had a catchy phrase along the lines of "Don't worry!" Soon, it became a commodity and handed out as flyers of businesses that are popular amongst women. Now that I think of it, they were making band aids for gunshot wound. Instead of pointing at who shot the gun, we were asked to pick up the band aid fix from the store. Good thing was that there were some color variations.

⁵ I think of the mindset of materialism that posits every problem can be solved by products you buy.

'Poopy Buddy,'(figure 7) designed to cover one's feet in stalls, not only speaks about my struggle to fit into new environment, but also delves into the societal pressure instilled in me to be secretive about bodily function growing up as a girl. However, it says, not seeing the whole context and complexity behind the problem, and handing out another band aid, "It's okay!"



Figure 7. *And no one couldn't know that it was her*, image from Rhinoceros 8, 2024.

On the contrary to its baseless optimism, its function never solves the problem. We all know that the frustrations that we face throughout our lives are complex. What can an object do about it? My work is not about solving the problem but finding them. It is a deliberate failure that functions as a needle to poke a hole into the inflated positivity that materialism posits.

Another form of stupidity is inefficiently mechanized processes. I design using CAD programs and employ digital tools such as CNC routers to fabricate taking every inch into consideration. Needless to say how laborious the process

is⁶, I always feel mischievous when thinking what comes as a result of using this serious machine. I remember my mom's eyes glistening when I told her I am learning CNC. On the dinner table that day, my dad told me about factories that use CNC routers to make machine parts and how amazing it is that I am learning that process. I couldn't tell him that I made 'Poopy Buddy' but laughed alone in my room thinking about the absurdity.

⁶ The labor and craftsmanship of using digital tools are often overlooked. Employing machines in the making process seems like it is a shortcut to get something fabricated, but the machine is not as smart as we expect which makes the process even longer, complicated and tedious.

3. Sneaking into the system.

I want my viewer to take two steps; 1. engage with objects in a way that they do with products. 2. Wonder what they can do. These two steps are to subvert the role of design and dismantle the system of objects.

As I delved into disciplines related to product design, I pondered and resisted categorization of my objects being products. The idea of 'Bads' emerged when I struggled to find an existing classification that encapsulated my objects. "Goods" typically refer to tangible products that are manufactured, produced, or acquired for the purpose of exchange or consumption. These items are physical, touchable entities that satisfy a human want or need. The name "goods" reflects the attribute of being "good", in other words "useful". "Bads" refers to the objects who cosplay products and go on an alternative path to usefulness. With "bads", I imagine the world that has comprehension of us as human not just a consumer or a user, and the industry that designs to ask questions about how the world is and imagine how the world could be.⁷

As "Bads" are role-playing as goods⁸, the white and sterile surface and shape of them becomes a costume that they wear to accomplish the mission. The white surface reminding of porcelain aligns with the default commodified industrial ceramics, blending into the established industrial norm. This choice of color is not

⁷ Dunne, Anthony, and Fiona Raby. *Speculative Everything : Design, Fiction, and Social Dreaming*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2013. Print.

⁸ As a maker, I feel like I am role-playing as a designer at the same time.

merely for aesthetics but serves as a commentary on the standardized nature of industrial production and its impact on our perception of ceramic objects.

Secondly, the white color's sterile quality evokes associations with cleanliness and purity, reminding us of 'Kohler white' often found in restroom fixtures. The restroom stall is one of the most private and intimate spaces. Even when it is placed in public, it provides sense of safety. It is a space that assures you can have a private moment where you won't be bothered and be most human. By referencing this color, my pieces invite contemplation on personal experiences and says "it's okay.", you can be human here.

Lastly, a toilet is an object that everyone interacts with, but no one expects much from it. With table wares, their form and function can vary depending on culture and they always surprise us with what they can hold. But, for toilet, what we expect from them to hold only ranges from liquid to solid. And the way that they are fixed in the restroom is another point to assume how little we expect from them. It is an object that should never leave that space. What happens in the stall stays in the stall. But in my work, things in the stall leave their space and recontextualize the boundaries of public and private by sharing the most or too personal.



Figure 8. *Collection of Bads*, porcelain, stoneware, stainless steel, size variable, 2024.

Like this, using the language of industrial design acts as subverting expectations and challenges the notion of functionality and questions the standards by which we define utility and purpose. Through the deliberate choice of materials, forms, and colors, I aim to create objects that not only engage aesthetically but also prompt reflection on our relationship with the material world and the societal constructs that shape it.(figure 8)

My design process not only engages with the form as the conventional perspective on design that often revolves around aesthetics but also with the function. Unlike the conventional role of function, the understanding of function in my work is expanded as its ability to reflect and respond to our experience in the world. The function states my experience and conflicts being in the body of Korean woman living in Korea and United States, or anything I could be described as in relation to my surroundings. And my work delves deeply into the personal narrative by brooding, venting, and reflecting on it.

The following is descriptions of selected Bads.

<And no one couldn't know that it was her.(Figure 9)>



Figure 9. *And no one couldn't know that it was her*, stoneware, castor wheels, 2024.

As coming to US, amongst numerous things that are different to where I came from and I have to get used to, the gap between the floor and toilet stall was the one thing that I couldn't bear. I used to walk 15 mins to use restroom in my apartment for first few weeks of the school because I was worried that people are going to see my shoes through that gap and find out I am sitting on a toilet.

'Poopy Buddy', the nickname for this portable guardian, is invented to cover the feet so that everyone can be human without being found out that they are human.

<Stool(for gas)(Figure 10)>



Figure 10. *Stool(for gas)*, stoneware, stainless steel, 2024.

What are the three most basic states of matter? Solid, liquid, gas. However, when looking at given sanitary wares, we can find out that we are overlooking the danger of gas. This is a new sanitary ware designed only for gas so that there won't be any unexpected smell in the air.

<Furinals(figure 11)>



Figure 11. *Furinals*, porcelain, 2024.

We don't spend enough time to wonder why there are no urinals for female body. It is unfair that we get only one option for peeing—sitting down. It could be the limitations of certain body structures, but before that, what if it is because we all didn't question that female bodies can't use urinals and just sat down? No matter what, it is unfair that men get two and women get one. This gender neutral urinals, starting from fury of this inequality, imagines an equal world where all human beings get same options to choose.

I loathe bugs. The following three are objects to deal with them.

<Humane bug trap for avoidant cowards (figure 12, 13)>



Figure 12. Humane bug trap for avoidant cowards, porcelain, stainless steel, 2023.



Figure 13. Humane bug trap for avoidant cowards in use, 2024.

I don't know what to do when an insect is in front of me, and especially when they are in my space. So I just grab a cup and cover them as if they didn't exist. If I were in Korea I would've waited till someone came to save me, but here, I am all alone.

This is for cowards who are waiting for their knights to come.

<And finally, she could sleep without the weight of paranoia(figure 14)>



Figure 14. And finally, she could sleep without the weight of paranoia, porcelain, 2024

The worst thing about BBs (bed bugs) is there is no way to find out whether I have them or not until you see them. All I could do was to check for bug bites on my body — and everything looks like bed bug bites at this point.

This is a fixer for this paranoia. The trunk-like cylinder is a container for the liquid that creates carbon dioxide, which we emit while we are asleep and which bed bugs love, and the round top/lid distributes the gas. Bbs lured by the gas will climb up the edge and be trapped in the slot.

Sleep well, till the next morning.

<That one fly couldn't bother anymore (figure 15, 16)>



Figure 15. *That one fly couldn't bother anymore*, stoneware, fringe curtain, 2024.



Figure 16. *That one fly couldn't bother anymore in use*

The whirring sound of wings is enough to break the peace of the night. And though cracks of broken peace, all kinds of worries rush in. It's all because of that one fly that flies without knowing what it has done. This is a compact refuge for that one fly.

[Technical statement]

My research was focused on getting perfect white surface. Below are recipes for glaze, underglaze and clay body and some notes.

1. Glaze

I use stoneware for hand-building. And found it problematic that the glaze that I use is not opaque enough to cover the color of clay body and grogs made black speckles popping out after firing. Therefore, I used white underglaze to cover the whole piece and applied white glaze on top. Another advantage of using underglaze was that I could sand the surface to make it porcelain-smooth after applying it thick. (3 coats of spray)

Cone 04 underglaze recipe

Talc 40

Nepheline syenite 10

OM4 40

Silica 10

Cone 04 white glaze recipe

Frit 3124 91

EPK 9

Zircopax 14

2. Clay

I made large molds of models that I milled with CNC router. Making a big mold was painful. But rolling out slabs in big size and smoothing out the seam line made after quilting the pieces were even more painful.(I didn't even think about slip-casting.) I wanted to find the way to put clay more easily and fast. That is when I tried using 'Plemp body.'⁹

It is a slurry that is in between slip and clay with a lot of fillers such as grogs, flax fibers and paper pulp. I just scooped handful out from the bucket and spread it on the mold. It made seam lines after releasing, but all I needed to do was just get a little bit and fill the seams. After that, I sanded out bone-dried clay with 80/120 mesh sanding block and wet-sanded the surface after bisque firing at cone 012.

* The clay has to be in the mold for at least 24 hours. The longer the better. Small parts can be attached without problems even when they are bone-dry.

Plemp Body

Base clay 30

Med Grog 10

Fine Grog 30

⁹ Reijnders, Anton. 2005. The Ceramic Process : A Manual and Source of Inspiration for Ceramic Art and Design/ Anton Reijnders ; European Ceramic Work Centre. London: A. & C. Black., p.32.

Super fine 10

Nepheline Syenite 10

Macaloid 0.25

Flax Fiber 0.25

Paper pulp 1

Darvan 7 0.01

Water 30% of dry material mix

*Base clay-I used recipe of Jr.tile Red without grogs. Any type of clay can be used but take the grogs out from the recipe.

**Grog-For larger casts, at least 10% of medium grogs should be included. Other grog sizes can vary according to preference.

***Darvan 7-Can be adjusted as mixing.

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