

Functionally Fine

Terminal Project Report

Kayla Thompson, 2019

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Table of Contents

The Object	3
Design Thinking	6
Language	8
On Value	10
On Space	11
Material	12
Do It Yourself	14
Art Furniture	15
Final Thoughts	19

A sculpture that looks like a chair *is* a chair but clearly it goes beyond its *chairness*. It questions the viewer's experience of a chair, be it delight, surprise, or uncertainty. Or, that sculpture is a chair and you can and should sit on it. My practice occupies a space of inquiry and production between art and design with an interest in function and the intersection of art-object and objecthood. I draw upon the ideas of "design-affordance", adhocism, use-value and the subtle manipulation of how functional objects are perceived. As I approach making, I think about everyday object interactions in my own life: what I take for granted in that interaction, what objects may be invented or reinvented to fulfill a specific need or install a ritual where one was not obviously involved. I want to highlight the presumptions that are afforded to furniture and the allowances given to space and practicality and the social norms of interior design. My furniture acts as a foil to typical furniture design, clashing with cultural and aesthetic trends while simultaneously inspired by them. I am influenced by the colorful and pop-art inspired furnishings of radical Italian design, the DIY movement, and concurrent philosophical underpinnings. All together, the works appear as a maximalist interior design display, considering each object individually in its making. My concerns touch on consumerism, embedded value, and humor in human interaction, highlighting the in-betweenness of art and design.

The Object

My research focuses on definitions of "the object" within philosophy, language, and the history of design. To organize questions about my own work, I compare my thoughts and methodologies to statements proclaimed by sympathetic design studios and philosophers. This is an attempt to avoid categorization and a conscious effort to position myself within the context of artists and designers who do not have a regard for the traditional dichotomy of art versus design.

There is currently a rise in popularity of the Netflix series and corresponding book, "Tidying up with Marie Kondo." This show makes apparent the normalized and socially acceptable collection of objects that is a byproduct of living within consumerist

society while simultaneously coaching families through dispossession. The method teaches empathy towards objects: that one should “live *with* objects instead of *for* objects.”¹ This ideology was proclaimed by the design group Superstudio in 1971, taken [slightly] out of context. In a “Negative Utopian”² speculation, the design studio imagined a world completely without things or architecture. The objects they were referring to were things “reduced to the condition of neutral and disposable elements.”³ They showed these speculative-design futures that imagined a world without objects while simultaneously producing odd fixtures and Pop-Art inspired furniture. Following a trend of refusal to work common to worker’s protest (they were an architecture association that produced no architecture), Superstudio made objects that were “so intentionally different” that they would disrupt patterns of behavior.⁴ “Evasion Design” was Superstudio’s reaction against the growing industrialization of Italy. These furnishings sought to upset the clean lines of modernism with illogic, complexity, and intentional bad taste, disrupting the banality of the quotidian object. Their intentions were to:

“introduce foreign bodies into the system: objects with the greatest possible number of sensory properties (chromatic, tactile, etc.), charged with symbolism and images with the aim of attracting attention, or arousing interest, of serving as a demonstration and inspiring action and behavior. Objects in short that succeed in modifying the container-unit and involving it totally together with its occupier...

“Our problem is to go on producing objects, big brightly-colored cumbersome, useful and full of surprises, to live with them and play with them together and always find ourselves tripping over them till we get to the point of kicking them and throwing them out, or else sitting down on them or putting our

¹ Lang and Menking. *Superstudio: Life without Objects*. “Inventory...” 2003, pp. 166.

² A negative utopia is speculative design for a speculative future or an alternative present. They do not address the political infrastructure that is typical of an imagined utopia, instead responding to architectural trends and axioms of their time. Archizoom’s main project, *No-Stop City*, imagined an all encompassing interior space based on super-markets, factories, and construction statistics. *Continuous Monument* was Superstudio’s foil to *No-Stop City*, a massive architectural symbol and satire of International Design, cutting across the landscape and existing cities. *Supersurface* removed both interior and exterior posturing, proposing an underground network that would take care of all of human needs, allowing mankind to think beyond their material world and return to nomadism.

³ Lang and Menking. *Superstudio: Life without Objects*. “Destruction.” 2003, pp. 120.

⁴ Elfline, Ross K. “Superstudio and the ‘Refusal to Work.’” *Design and Culture*, vol. 8, no. 1, Routledge, 2016, pp. 55–77.

coffee cups on them, but it will not in any way be possible to ignore them. They will exorcise our indifference.”⁵

I find myself attracted to the sentimentalities of Superstudio’s Evasion Design along with their sister group Archizoom for their colorful, Pop-Art inspired aesthetics that challenged typical furniture forms; an aesthetic that is now closely associated with Memphis Design or 80’s interiors. They transformed the domestic space into a surreal landscape. Their clashing colors and kitsch materials pointed out the hierarchy of what was considered “good design.”⁶ Their furniture was clear in its use and had a visual dimension that went beyond function.

The Italian radical groups were making designs for manufacture despite their apparent disdain for consumerism. The “negative utopia” *Supersurface* envisioned a world without possessions while within Evasion Design, “to go on producing objects” was both their “problem” and solution.

An important criteria for the furnishings of Italian radical design is “cumbersome.” Their objects are unwieldy and overshadow the objects around them.⁷ The adjective also describes “slow or complicated and therefore inefficient.” My works take up a large footprint and over-complicate their own purpose. *Ladder partition* attempts to be practical- a sculpture that *could* be functional. Visually, it appears as a pile of interlocking ladders leaning against one another for mutual support and as an accordion space-dividing partition. The use of decorative ladders has been increasing used in minimalist interior design trends: the rungs act as display and storage for linen, quilts, and other fabrics. The tops of the ladders



⁵ Superstudio, “Evasion,” in Lang and Menking 2003, pg 117

⁶ The furnishings of Studio Alchemia, a combination of major players in Italian Radical Design, were self-proclaimed to be “anti-design,” or specifically an “anti-bauhaus design.” Bauhaus being the exemplar of “good-design.”

⁷ Described as Trojan horses by Archizoom in the architectural magazine Domus in 1965.

create a spot for you to conveniently hang up your coat. As a sculpture, it does little to inform its viewer they can do so; coat racks intrinsically block their own form through use. Its functionality as a partition is not necessary to understand it as a vehicle to separate space- sculptures inherently require breathing room.

Design Thinking

Design-affordance is a term coined by Don Norman in his 1988 book *Design of Everyday Things*,⁸ referring to the visual cues that indicate the operation, intended functions, or potential use of a product. A designer could emphasize these cues by understanding human tendency or cultural norms. Norman's affordance theory further develops a theory of direct perception by ecological psychologist James Gibson. In *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (1979), Gibson defined affordance as including all possible actions a human could perform upon an object being *already present* in the object. The possibilities for action may be perceived in the object's visual and physical attributes, derived from concepts by gestalt psychologists, who stated that the affordance is only present in the object if the subject *needs* it to be. This interpretation of affordances is left open for misperception, one example being quicksand- the surface may appear as walkable but proves deadly. Gibson's affordance explains that an object can remain an object and invite behavior depending on the subjects perception of the object.⁹

What even is a wall hook? is a collection of handmade ceramics wall hooks made during several successive sessions. The series explores the qualities of hook-ness limited through the ceramics medium. One could see the evolution of forms as this self-made assignment progressed. Keep the function, change the form (within some loose guidelines). Displayed together, clustered as a family tree and referencing contemporary ceramic wall-installation, their individual functions are both present and denied, real and imagined. The hooks *could* be used but the installation overlaps their

⁸ Norman, D. A. (2013). *Design of Everyday Things: Revised and Expanded*. New York: Basic Books.

⁹ Gibson, James J. *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*. "The Theory of Affordances." Classic ed. New York: Psychology, 2015 (1979). Psychology Press Classic Editions. Web. p. 119-135.

practicality. Knowing that the hooks are of a material traditionally perceived as fragile, one may be tentative in their use while consciously aware of an urge to test that limit. How much weight can a ceramic wall hook hold?



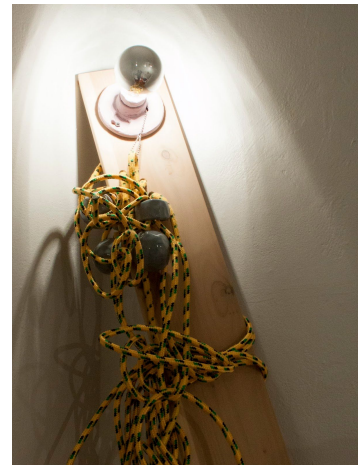
If design thinking solves problems on behalf of others, I am offering my objects as an alternative to the hierarchy of design. A designer invents norms and forms on behalf of other people. I use rapid iterations with self-imposed parameters to flush out forms with custom solutions. Simple engineering logic can be turned back onto itself, the objects referring to their own construction, both self-critical and aware of its object condition.

There is a common idiom following the word “assume:” “it makes an ass out of you and me.” Using this line of thinking, I have re-coded attributes of design-affordance to the term “ass-logic.” In context, the word “assume” is mnemonic. It can be applied to the definition of the word assumption as it pertains to miscommunication in relationships, though in doing so, one is referencing the spelling of the word. This visual breakdown of the word, or in my case, of the object, while referencing the subject’s own meaning/ function, is how I am applying “ass-logic” to design-affordance. “Ass-logic” imbues the concept with a sense of humor in its non-sequitur vulgarity. It implies the act of sitting but could be used to describe a variety of verbs and object interactions that will ‘work in a pinch,’ or assumption of function out of necessity. I appreciate the ad-hoc¹⁰ ‘ah-ha’ innovations and use of inappropriate materials but I do not want to make light of those in economic scarcity who use ad-hoc construction as means of survival. My

¹⁰ Jencks, Charles., and Silver, Nathan. *Adhocism: The Case for Improvisation*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT, 2013.

research leans toward “life-hack” construction. For instance, using a plastic CD case to store a bagel sandwich; the material choice is aware of itself or even pokes fun at its own desperation.

AfterGlow Lamp was originally part of a series of lamps using simple engineering logic. Each lamp has a vertical aspect, a humble wooden board, counterbalanced with a weighted, ceramic base, using faux ad-hoc construction based on temporary signs and fence posts. Later iterations forgo the counterbalance, boards leaning against the wall for support. The parts are logical and hastily put together, the result is whimsy: the garden hose and electrical cord both reference a “flow” of power. *Afterglow* is part material exploration of the novelty of glow pigment- this particular pigment supercharges to glow intensely for a few minutes, leaving an afterglow for up to 12 hours. During the day, the internal glow goes unnoticed. It is only as you are leaving, turning off the lights as you go, that this surprise greets you.



Language

Design-affordance could also be interpreted through semiotic study of signs and signifiers. Language and visual cues have assumptions and social norms attached to them that can be regional, dated, and oddly specific. The grammatical gendering of objects in romance languages impart cultural and gender stereotypes. In reference to time, English uses horizontal spatial metaphors and duration in terms of length, while other languages may use vertical metaphors (Mandarin) and duration in amount (Greek).¹¹ Verb-based languages change the

¹¹ Boroditsky, Lera. “How Does Our Language Shape the Way We Think?” Edge.org, 6 Nov. 2009.

perspective of action or interaction of objects. In Esperanto,¹² a bare-root-word is a verb or adverb before it is conjugated into a noun, verb (with tense), or adjective. Of particular interest is the concept embedded in the East German word “Sitzmöglichkeit,” or “possibilities of sitting down,” which separates the ownership of the object from its function. Jennifer Allen, a writer, critic, and contributor to the book *“It’s Not a Garden Table; Art and Design in the Expanded Field,”* recounts:

“I first heard the word “Sitzmöglichkeit” [*sits moog lish kite*] In 1995 in the former East Berlin. I was visiting a furnished apartment with a view to renting it, and the landlady asked if there are enough “Sitzmöglichkeiten” I thought understood the question-- or did I?

‘You mean chairs?’

‘Yes, “Sitzmöglichkeiten.”’

The word made a big impression on me and immediately took on a life of its own in my head, generating further variations: possibilities for smoking, for eating, for thinking, for doing nothing. These possibilities for discussion, or even for argument, concern both the sitting and the chair itself..... [*this*] idiom corresponds with a restriction of private property and the shared values of the collective in a socialist state. Only *one* person can sit on *one* chair; but everybody has the possibility of sitting. In contrast to forms, functions exclude the issue of ownership, as functions are always shared and thus accessible to all.”¹³

By contrast, in Baudrillard’s *System of Objects*, the ownership of the object, or the desire of ownership, is analyzed together with its function. This builds on and critiques Marxist definitions of use-value (the utility of a physical commodity and its ability to fulfil human need) as separate from exchange value (the abstract idea of market value used in trade).¹⁴ For Baudrillard, part of the function of consumer goods is this *desirability of ownership*, which is hard to separate out from the object itself. He asks, “Can man ever use objects to set up a language that is more than a discourse addressed to himself?”¹⁵ There is a complacency in our participation in consumerism

¹² The constructed international auxiliary language invented by L. L. Zamenhof in 1887.

¹³ Jennifer Allen, “Sitzmöglichkeiten and Other Possibilities.” *It’s Not a Garden Table; Art and Design in the Expanded Field*. [Brackets my addition]

¹⁴ Marx, Karl. *Capital, Volume I*. “Commodities.” Electric Book Company, 2000.

¹⁵ Baudrillard, Jean. “A Marginal System: Collecting.” *The System of Objects*. 1996. Pg. 105

that is impossible to escape from. By making functional objects I am part of this system; as an artist (decidedly not a designer), using an excess of embedded time and materials, I too ask this question. The idea of access in Jennifer Allen's reminiscing of the word "Sitzmöglichkeit" is a utopian one: the verbs of interaction, real or imagined, can engage directly with a viewer and their lived experience. By making furniture and objects of utility, I can engage with my audience through different levels of access: personal interaction, material associations, design histories, and consumer displays.

On Value

Similar to the history of Italian design, I have conflicting feelings about my own work as it relates to value, concerns about making work that strains against capitalism while simultaneously participating in it. I am self-conscious about the object's acceptance into the home: how far I can push the allowances of practicality and economy of space. My work is politically and socially conscientious in a way that does not overwhelm the final outcome: the object *can* remain an object and at the same time be considered art. A functional object's practicality takes precedence over its own visual image. While mine may still recall the form of the original object, its visual complexity, uneasy practicality, and human-object interaction brings the work into the Art realm. The problem and blessing of an object being considered Art is that it is autonomous and complatitive. Design is not suppose to be purposely inefficient¹⁶ or alienating, just as Art is not thought of as functional. I am making functional objects about function, about the perception of function while challenging decor axioms. The work is architectural and Seussian/PeeWee House-ian in form, following a trend of designers that challenge norms in a similar way, including Misha Kahn, Katie Stout, Thomas Barger, Dawn Cerny, Ross Hansen, James Shaw, Jillian Mayer, Jessi Reaves, and the list can go on.

We vote with our purchases. It is a bold move to allow something of questionable functionality into one's life. A table with no solid surface must be collaborated with, one

¹⁶ Except for the "QWERTY" keyboard arrangement, which was designed to slow down type speed on a typewriter, preventing the letter stamp from overlapping and misprinting on the ink ribbon.

may deal with its setbacks as it brings more to the table than being a table. My work aims to occupy a middle ground. It is practical enough where the object may be assimilated into ones interior design and in the next instance be cumbersome enough where ones interaction with it becomes highlighted. We expect a table to look and act a certain way, I want to keep those perceived design-affordances while changing the form and practicality. Sometimes that interaction is playful or humorous like in using a bit-valve on a watercooler, or in using unnecessarily large nuts and bolts, or paracord rope that is excessive.

Woven Bookshelf is a fabric shelf system that must be connected directly into a wall for support. The metal grid structure is open on one side and relies on the wall for stability. A fabric shelf is already unstable and will stretch or warp over time. Requiring it to be fixed to the wall directly asks for commitment on the part of its owner- they must damage the wall and be dedicated to its arrangement. A normal bookshelf requires a wall and is often supported with hidden screws for stability; *Woven Bookshelf* takes that fact and highlights it. This shelving unit also has a perpendicular orientation to the wall, with shelves facing to either side, breaking up the logic of typical furniture placement.

On Space

Part of my inquiry about value is an issue of volume. “Taking up space” is a phrase common to gender equity that can also be applied to objects in our daily lives-making furniture that interacts or implies a body is inherently politicized.¹⁷ Furniture that acts like a sculpture, that is excessive in material, in care and footprint, that gives preference to ritual over practicality could be described as unconventional, particular, or queer.

We create complicated systems of organization to clear away “clutter.” Artworks on the wall need “breathing room” and so do coffee tables. I repurpose basic architectural forms among the collection of my work, from grid structures in ceramics that function as tables to toast holders or sets of stairs that act as seating and storage.

¹⁷ How does your coffee-table relate to you as a female identifying person?

Using architectural elements such as a staircase, ladder, scaffolding and grid structure necessitate the use of an empty open space. *Electrical Tower Lamp* takes up as much volume as a large chair while providing a light source too low and inaccessible to be considered a productive lamp. The form requires an interior negative space. It appears more as a sculpture than a typical lamp, needing room around the structure for appreciation of the shadows that it casts.

How objects relate to one another within a domestic space can inform the viewer of their function. When an object reads more as sculpture, how it is placed within the room can reveal its role. Furniture placed in a gallery may have multiple readings. A lone island bench invites use to contemplate paintings on the wall. Seating around an audio component allows one to sit and immerse oneself in the installation. A detailed living room set might be interpreted as a historical display. This differs from a design fair booth or furniture store, which contain wayfinding routes and absurd decoration devices. In a gallery, my furnishings and fixtures are assembled together to create a design showroom tableau or furniture store display, a reading that implies commodity. The relational aesthetics question of interaction is directed towards the viewer and the familiarity and quotidian ritual in the home becomes muddled. The viewer, too, is on display and that social pressure may prevent hands-on interaction, denying the objects of their experience. Within one's everyday life, my work could be assimilated into ritual, queer functionality accepted as an extension of the space's personality.

Material

My approach to making is biased by a history of working with clay. There is an order of operations in the process of ceramics that makes logical sense: making, drying, firing, surface, firing. I try to be true to a material's intrinsic properties while at the same time treating every material as if it were clay. Plastering walls and covering structures in a sawdust-paste is analogous to applying a glaze. Exposed fingerprints and rough surfaces leave traces of time and care on the surface. It might take just as long to sand something to a "machine-smooth finish," seemingly leaving no evidence of human touch

or time, often read as more attention to detail. The sloppy surface and intentional de-skilling makes the work seemingly less precious therefore more approachable. I see the evidence of process as an aspect of the final work, not as the sole language used. What is that object asking of you? Meeting an object halfway because it is only 86% functional, one would become more self-aware and intentional in their interactions.

Ceramic furniture has a deep history in the art and design worlds, more recently with artists such as Anders Ruhwald and Hun Chung Lee who both make furniture forms with divergent intentions. My functional art practice started off as ceramic versions of existing furniture forms like a garden-table made from self-glazing clay. I've realized that changing material is only an aspect of challenging the assumptions of everyday objects. I want to call upon the history of furniture, product design, and design theories along with the history of craft, materials and process. I work in series, making iterations on the same idea, collaging parts and pieces together or cheating of the order of operations. Innovation is realized through design solutions, in figuring out how to adhoc separate aspects so they make a logical whole using simple logic and construction puzzles. The step by step instructions of working with physical material is a logic that I use to my advantage. Once a construction plan is made then I could make multiple iterations with the same process-plan.

Associations embedded in certain found materials inspire new use. A garden hose might become a protective sheath for an electrical cord; now water resistant, instead of water encasing. Both objects are notorious for being difficult to store or hide from sight. Material and objecthood is understood through our previous interaction with it. The humor of being cumbersome and the juxtaposition of a garden hose *inside* of a house highlights its sleight-of-hand functionality as an electrical conduit. Another example is *Thermal Sail*, an experiment in response and in opposition to backyard shade-sails. Using the materiality of an aluminized emergency blanket, the sails reflect indoor lighting while also providing a placebo insulation effect. Synthetic in its operation, *Thermal Sail* intentionally breaches conventions of inside and outside, reflection and shade through associations of its materiality.

Do It Yourself

I appreciate the ideas of Do-it-Yourself, the maker's movement, and "make do and mend," because they lend themselves to finding quick solutions for everyday problems and skirt on the borders of consumer culture. It is defined loosely as making by non-experts or professionals, evolving with increased access of the internet age. DIY tends towards the nomadic: objects that can be separated into their parts (flatpack) or structures that encase multiple functions thus eliminating the need for more stuff. I am interested in multifunctionality but at the same time I am also interested in its opposite, a separation of functions or of functions negated. Multifunctionality doesn't necessarily free up function but limits it to a confined space or set of rules.

Book-lounge touches on multifunctionality and moveability. The black and white striped signboard is my take on flat-pack furniture, functioning as book display and a backrest for the lounge. The sandwich board is set into a large bean-bag cushion: the opposite of flat-pack as its volume cannot be changed. Seen as a whole, the combination of objects is simple, creating a corner in which the booklover might hide.



Furniture stairs is another work that explores multifunctionality. Stairs themselves are multifunctional in a home: we sit on them, store things on or under them. As an extension of the floor it is only logical to cover them completely in carpet, apart from sets of stairs the only other object acceptable to carpet completely are cat-trees. My *Furniture Stairs* then are a human-tree offering multiple suggestions for use. Though a life-sized set of stairs, this piece is both as-big-as and

too-large-to-be practical furniture; stairs typically exist as architecture or as product display, not as an article of furniture themselves.

Andrea Zittel works through multifunctional furniture and structures for living. She exams her own object interactions through a lens that questions societal conventions and human need, then designs her own environments and life accordingly. Her structures both complicate and encourage living simply. Ken Isaacs is a designer who made “living-units” long before Zittel. In 1974, he wrote the DIY instruction book, “How to build your own living structures.” All modified from grid structures and frameworks, his theory of building derives off of the modular grid, or “matrix,” but breaks with the tradition of modernism that was prevalent at the time. His designs range from micro-houses to furniture structures that enveloped the room, “reimagining furniture as a system that ‘adjust[ed] to people rather than people to it.’”¹⁸ He shared all of his designs in instructional magazines, empowering his audience through the growing DIY movement. Zittel’s work is subjectively radical while utopian and Isaacs helped pave the way for nomadic and ‘tiny’ living, simultaneously stretching definitions of architecture, design, and cultural norms. Both use the term ‘living structures’ as well as an approach to making that can be considered DIY.

Art Furniture

The Bauhaus school sought to totally intermingle the dichotomy of art and design. Bauhaus originally started as hand-craft oriented but evolved, with a growing emphasis on functionalism, into a more industrial design model. The applied arts were in the service of architecture, orienting around the idea of the building as a “total work of art,” or the German term “Gesamtkunstwerk.” Furniture and applied arts were an

¹⁸ Baker, Mark. *Culture Breakers: The Living Structures*. Cranbrook Art Museum, 2014. [Brackets my addition.]

extension of and in service to architecture, including all of the objects that would fill the home.¹⁹

Years later, minimalism would encompass this dichotomy between art and design through the artist Donald Judd and critique surrounding the movement. In tandem to minimalist sculpture to which he is famous for, Judd also designed and produced furniture, keeping it strictly separate from his art practice. I use Donald Judd as an example of separation of the Art-Design dichotomy. Bauhaus sought to blend them using an architecture based hierarchy. Italian radical design used disruptive products to shake up the system (modernism, architecture, consumerism, etc). Judd expresses his feelings on applied arts through story of his first table in the essay “It’s hard to find a good lamp”:

”In the middle Sixties someone asked me to design a coffee table. I thought that a work of mine which was essentially a rectangular volume with the upper surface recessed could be altered. This debased the work and produced a bad table which I later threw away. The configuration and the scale of art cannot be transposed into furniture and architecture. The intent of art is different from that of the latter, which must be functional. If a chair or a building is not functional, if it appears to be only art, it is ridiculous. The art of a chair is not its resemblance to art, but is partly its reasonableness, usefulness and scale as a chair. These are proportion, which is visible reasonableness. The art in art is partly the assertion of someone’s interest regardless of other considerations. A work of art exists as itself; a chair exists as a chair itself. And the idea of a chair isn’t a chair. Due to the inability of art to become furniture, I didn’t try again for several years.”²⁰

Judd’s use of the phrase “visible reasonableness” in relation to the identity of a functional object seems to be at odds with his original plan of altering a coffee-table shaped sculpture. It “debased” the sculpture, made it mentally “less,” (or possibly too

¹⁹ *Furniture* refers to a new wave of designers making furniture that responds to or intermingles with architecture. It is “furniture that transforms space,” made apparent by Anna Yudina who compiled a sourcebook under that term for Thames & Hudson.

²⁰ Judd, Donald. “It’s Hard to Find a Good Lamp.” (1993). *Design [Does Not Equal] Art*, New York: Cooper-Hewitt Museum, 2004. Pg. 85.

“considerate.”) It is important to note that critic Clement Greenberg at the time was arguing that minimalism looked closer to furniture than to art and should be viewed as nothing more than “good design.” Predictably, Greenberg would never consider function and design as being equal to art. “He systematically suppressed the ‘decorative arts’ in his pursuit of purity in abstract painting. He used the term ‘decorative’ as a critical device to distinguish ‘high’ abstract painting from ‘decoration’ defined as a form of surface attractiveness masquerading as art.”²¹ Furniture relates to the viewer as a lived experience; it is concrete and participatory and thus cannot be considered abstract. My works of functional art risk and embrace the kitsch: commodities and products consumed by the masses, masquerading as art, lacking in narrative, feeding emotion and desire. For Greenberg, kitsch shortcut to the answer without the audience needing to think about the deeper questions.²² Much like the “intention to act unintentionally,”²³ the kitsch I use is self-aware, using the language of design, craft, DIY, and intentional deskilling. I can let the object be the object while pointing out our assumptions and imbuing the object with touches of my personality and aesthetic. For example, *Happy/Sad Tuft Chair* may easily be dismissed as a DIY craft, upcycled lawn chair. The fact that it can reference those things and be easily dismissed as a bad chair is powerful and kitschy. The ability for an object to produce a reaction in the viewer, be it delight, empathy, or uncertainty,



²¹ Author, Elissa. “The Decorative, Abstraction, and the Hierarchy of Art and Craft..” Oxford University Press. 2004. Pg. 339

²² Greenberg, Clement. “Avant Garde and Kitsch”. *The Partisan Review*: 34–49. 1939.

²³ Scruton, Roger. “Kitsch and the Modern Predicament.” *City Journal*, vol. Winter, no. 43, 1999.

proves that the object has a form of agency and narrative.²⁴

Keeping with Greenbergian thinking, Judd makes distinct his opinion of art furniture, separating it from his own design practice:

“I am often asked if the furniture is art, since ... some artists made art that was also furniture. The furniture is furniture and is only art in that architecture, ceramics, textiles, and many things are art. We try to keep the furniture out of the art galleries to avoid this confusion. And also to avoid the consequent inflation of the piece.”²⁵

Judd was concerned with his furniture and design work being sold as a “less expensive artwork.” This seems to be the same problem as the Memphis group but with a different mindset (Memphis furnishings were being collected, not used). Note his alignment and dismissal of Bauhaus design: architecture and applied arts as art but with a lowercase ‘a.’ In Judd’s lifetime it was incredibly rare for his furniture to be viewed



alongside of his sculpture, the exception being his own home. After his move to Texas, Judd began making more of his own furniture as he could not find any in the local furniture stores to his liking, describing them as “cheap knock-off antiques or that with laminated prints or flowers.”²⁶ His resurgence to designing furniture stemmed from a need for furniture in his own life, or a DIY approach.

Tuft Cube is my reaction to minimalism, turning the minimalist metal cube into soft seating. The tufted yarn surface has connotations towards

²⁴ Tilley, Christopher Y. Janet Hoskins, contributor. *Handbook of Material Culture*. “Agency, Biography, and Objects.” London; Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2006. P 74-84.

²⁵ Judd, Donald. “It’s Hard to Find a Good Lamp.” (1993). *Design [Does Not Equal] Art*, New York: Cooper-Hewitt Museum, 2004.

²⁶ Memphis design played off of the use of chrome and laminated, printed surfaces common to fast food restaurants and “bad design.” The work of Memphis was eventually accepted into the mainstream and the group (predominantly Ettore Sottsass) lost interest in continuing the project.

Judd, Donald. “It’s Hard to Find a Good Lamp.” (1993). *Design [Does Not Equal] Art*, New York: Cooper-Hewitt Museum, 2004.

craft and “feminine arts,” with tufting relating to 70’s kitsch, rainy-day crafts and unseen, cheap labor.²⁷ A cube of a certain size may be considered an ottoman; overly large, the soft-sculpture cube dwarfs over its furniture counterparts. It is not comfortable as a seating device for long spans of time instead inviting playful interaction as a giant die or toy.

Final Thoughts

Through metamorphosed functional objects, I am able to call attention to particular moments of interaction. My work is playful and at times overwhelming. In one seating instrument, the form is geometric, using architectural line-work of a non-determined material and a surface that is rough, lumpy, and



covered in polka dots. Aesthetically, the hand-painted dots visually compete with the geometric lines, relating to patterning common to the 80’s and Memphis design. Topped with a sheepskin cushion, it is at a height that affords sitting. Its placement in a gallery opposite the *Happy/Sad Tuft Chair*, which is more immediately identified as a chair, allows the possibility of sitting on the first stool more agreeable. This polka dot stool does not have an official title like other objects within my practice and is referred to as whichever object it more closely identifies with, in this case a stool. The same object has acted as a planter stand or book storage, containing the possibilities for these alternative actions within a form that does not advertise a correct method for use. It can remain a stool, be taken for granted or cherished for its playfulness, its otherness and indeterminacy.

²⁷ I do not ignore that the fiber industry, including rug making, contained/contains forced and child labor.

Returning to the question set out by Baudrillard, “Can man ever use objects to set up a language that is more than a discourse addressed to himself?”²⁸ Using variations of this question directed toward my practice, I ask myself “Can one ever use objects to set up a language? Can one ever use function to discuss objecthood? To discuss and question our presumptions of interaction?” Individual objects within my collection start to address these avenues of exploration. Leaving purposefully open ended questions will further inspire my ongoing practice of functional art.

²⁸ Baudrillard, Jean. “A Marginal System: Collecting.” *The System of Objects*. 1996. Pg. 105

“The study of objects through the prism of art, and through the words of artists, allows one to see how complex the world of ordinary and less ordinary objects and things truly is.”²⁹
-Antony Hudek, *The Object*; Documents of Contemporary Art

“Recognizing that the object in our society often serves as a fetish, some designers underscore that quality by assigning to their designs an explicitly ritualistic quality. The object is given sculptural form and conceived as an altarpiece for the domestic liturgy. For some designers, the object can be stripped of its mystique only if it is tamed, if it is made to assume the role of a house pet. Reduced to a graspable size, the object no longer intimidates us; endowed with the stability of inert matter, and created for no specific function, such objects can be allowed into our homes in the certainty that they will never make evident the passage of biological or social time. Confronted with the erosion of the simplistic doctrine of functionalism, some designers produce objects whose function is not evident from their form, and whose structural properties, in fact, contradict the behavior one would expect from that form. In such cases, no longer does ‘form follows function’ but, on the contrary, it aggressively conceals it.”³⁰
-Emilio Ambasz, *Italy: The New Domestic landscape*

“We observe that the object, precisely because it rejects the role of traditional sculpture, contributes to our realization of a vital space, transforming itself into a kind of stage property for the mise-en-scene of our daily existence. Well, the object finally locates itself not only within the real and inhabited space, but incorporates and keeps within itself a portion of space. The work transcends the discontinuous boundaries of the object and transforms itself into environment, into a space that encloses it.”³¹
Filiberto Menna “A Design for New Behaviors.” Italy: The New Domestic landscape. pp 408

“What I dream of is an art of balance, of purity and serenity, devoid of troubling or depressing subject matter, an art that could be for every mental worker, for the businessman as well as the man of letters, for example, a soothing, calming influence on the mind, something like a good armchair that provides relaxation from fatigue.”³²
-Henri Matisse, “Notes of a Painter, 1908.” 1972.

²⁹ Hudek, Antony. *The Object*. “Introduction.” London: Whitechapel Gallery; The MIT, 2014.

³⁰ Ambasz, Emilio. *Italy: The New Domestic Landscape*. New York, 1972.

³¹ Ambasz, Emilio. Menna, Filiberto, Contributor. *Italy: The New Domestic Landscape*. “A Design for New Behaviors.” New York, 1972. pp 408.

³² Matisse, Henri, and Flam, Jack D. *Matisse on Art*. “Notes of a Painter, 1908.” New York: Phaidon, 1973. Print.

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