

It is not difficult to understand why someone with seven-year training in design major finally choose FUNCTION as her research subject. What is FUNCTION? In the region of manufacturing, FUNCTION is the projection of human needs on objects. FUNCTION is the mission of any product. FUNCTION is a prophecy: 'A cage went in search of a bird.'¹ Objects with FUNCTION indicate a possibility of something to happen. FUNCTION leads to a potential story, thus FUNCTION is indeed a narrative.



[fig.1] *Cardcaptor Sakura Movie 2: The Sealed Card*, 2000

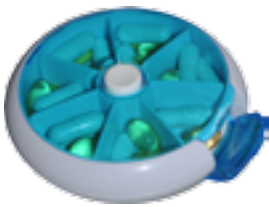
I always imagine that each man-made object is surrounded by a 'Magical Circle', just like those radiant Circles in Japanese Magical girl anime [fig.1]. Imagine a stool silently unfolds its 'Magical Circle', urging people nearby to sit in it. And a chair, with a back, is a bit different then, whose structure imposes the limit of space and direction on its 'Magical Circle'. It determines a particular direction faced by someone, while sitting in it. Those long resting benches, set in galleries and museums, normally without any back or arm, expand their magical realm in all 360 degrees, therefore people can feast their eyes on art pieces set on the walls, floor, and ceiling... People can easily observe every corner by simply turning their bodies while sitting in the same place. In a future project, I will change all the long resting benches in a museum into conference tables, or dining tables. I will name this project as 'Back to Art'.

To research FUNCTION as a narrative, I create products/objects myself. 'Man-made products certainly change people's lives' – this can be a maker/designer's arrogant assumption. But it is very possible that 'man-made products indicate potential changes, or tell pending stories.' To elaborate, I will explain with the examples of take the first two of my works series researching FUNCTION.

My first series are based on the notion of 'container'. There already are too many annotations and explanations of 'container' in the world. My favourite one comes from a gospel tract: 'Just as a glove is made in the image of a hand, so man is made in the image of God to contain God and express God.' Container is made in the image of another object, to contain and express the object. In the empty center of a container always exists the image of content, and that is why 'container' is the first specific subject in my research. Compared to making something without any clue or reference, making

containers is easy because I can at least refer to something tangible and available in real life, as its content and reference. If a object narrates by its FUNCTION, a 'container' narrates by quoting other objects.

The first object I made is a container for medicine. I once saw my mother use a small case [fig.2] to organise her pills and capsules in order. This is a specially designed plastic box with seven sections marked Monday to Sunday for carrying tablets with her. I was touched by that. Human needs are categorized delicately into certain chemical compositions: calcium, vitamin and ferment, etc, they are also divided by weeks as certain periods of taking them. In this way, taking pills becomes a ritual, from which we get both physical and spiritual satisfaction. Then I decided to make a container to express this holy and accurate rite. The final product I accomplished is a container for cold remedy named 'ContacNT'. These capsules was split into four parts and separately fitted in different part of this container. Orange and transparent 'capes' are in two rows of holes set on this object, while pink and yellow powdered ingredients are loaded in two shallow grooves. This object can hold a whole pack of 'ContacNT' capsules. People can encapsulate drugs with a tiny steel spoon placed in front of it. I named this container as 'Help yourself' [fig.3]. It makes the whole process of eating drugs to be even more fussy, delicate and ritualised. After I finished this piece, Chinese Government suddenly forbid selling this flu remedy 'ContacNT' in mainland because police found that drug makers used 'ContacNT' tablets as a key ingredient to produce methamphetamine. This seems to add a new layer to narration of this piece.



[fig.2] 7-day travelling pill box



[fig.3] 'Help yourself', Container series

The second piece I made is a template. My inspiration is a 'ring sizer' [fig.4], a template for people to determine his/her correct ring size. A 'ring sizer', a small piece of acrylic board with several cut-out wholes, allows people to try his/her fingers into it but it is not made for holding fingers. A template is a very special kind of container that holds abstract data and scales instead of physical objects. I measured all perimeters of body tips of a close female friend of mine, and made my piece 'Cinderella' [fig.5]. This template records minimum sizes of circles that can just fit different tips of her body parts: fingers, toes, nipples, tongue, nasal tip, eyelashes, etc. 'Cinderella' is a template containing contradiction. Normally a template is a condensation of common standard or predefined form. In contrast, 'Cinderella' documents very specific and private data from a woman's body. It also can be seen as a physical infographic work.



[fig.4] Ring sizer



[fig.5] 'Cinderella', Container series

If FUNCTION does tell stories, then form and material probably are words and phrases for people to read. In the movie *Objectified*², Alice Rawsthorn, design editor of *International Herald Tribune*, said, “‘Form follows FUNCTION’³ has been annihilated by the microchip.’ She gave an example: ‘We now have a new generation of products where the form bears absolutely no relation to the FUNCTION. Look at something like the iPhone and think of all the things it does.’ In my opinion, this example can only illustrate evolution of FUNCTION, or evolution of human needs. Man-made products no longer function simply based on their physical appearance since we live in this era of Internet. Products like the iPhone may not be as easily understandable and acceptable as a fork or a cup. But the relationship between FUNCTION and form never goes away. An obvious example is iPhone’s screen, with growing size, for people to watch larger sized videos or eBooks. The earphone hole and buttons on the iPhone also respond to certain FUNCTIONS. Specific forms of man-made products have become a learned symbol system, a language we can read. The finger hole [fig.6], a half circle cut in paper box, is a perfect example. Anytime we see a finger hole, we know it is the opening of a box, a place for us to use our hands and fingertips. I used this finger hole as form language in my third container. ‘To make up’ [fig.7] is a container for a broken mirror. Compared with the first two containers, it cannot be duplicated at all. I took a folding mirror and the finger hole as my formal language. Finger holes, as tiny little words, hint that the mirror fragments can actually be taken out. If the fragments are taken out and put in sequence, that means this cracked mirror can be fixed as before. ‘A broken mirror made whole again’ is a Chinese idiom, and it is used to refer to the reunion of a couple after they lose touch or break up. This probably can be a perfect gift for a lover. Compared with a completely whole mirror, this object offers a possibility instead of a solution.



[fig.6] Paper box with a finger hole



[fig.7] ‘To make up’, Container series

However, ‘Form follows FUNCTION’ is still one-sided determinism, only from designer or maker’s perspective. But they – designers and makers – never know how users will use their products. When I was living in Shanghai, I saw a pedlar using an umbrella as a show shelf [fig.8]. Italian designer *Ettore Sottsass*⁴ once said, ‘Everyone has different “FUNCTION” or necessities... Maybe a young man wants to put his rolls in a container, whereas a young woman wants to put all her books there... There is no generic FUNCTION. FUNCTION is life. I cannot foresee FUNCTION.’ Form follows FUNCTION predefined by designer, but user can accept, reject or develop this prefabricated FUNCTION. I am interested in those objects that can be used with totally different FUNCTIONS and narrations relative to them. It is like using same words to make different sentences. Or maybe there is just one single sentence, and different readers receive different information from it. That’s the original idea of my second series.



[fig.8] A pedlar used an umbrella as a show shelf, Shanghai

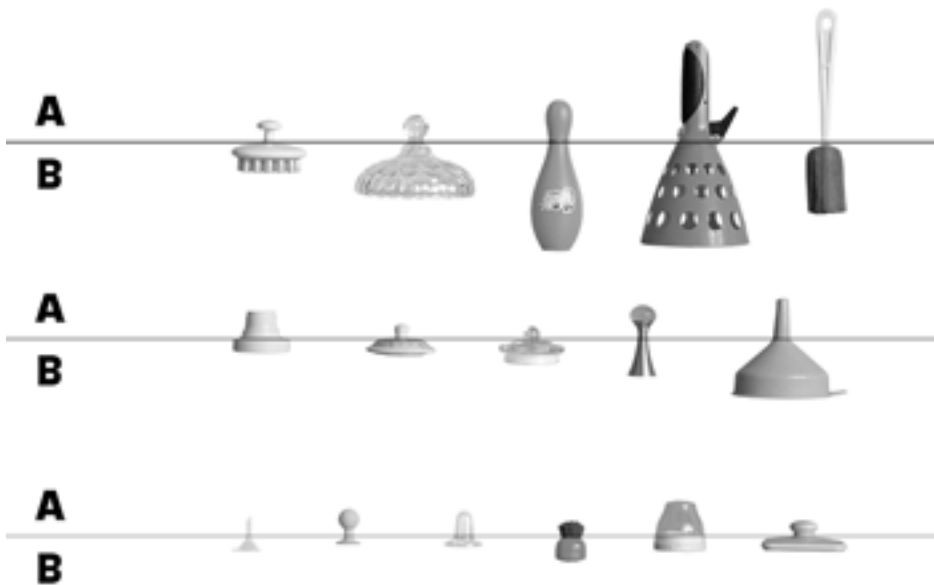
My second series is actually my ‘collection’, rather than my ‘design’. Because I didn’t make the objects in this series. Instead I sort and collate objects, from a user’s perspective. My first collection is ‘Stamp Collection’ [fig.9]. I was inspired by my teacher *Karel Martens*⁵ works. He made many prints using ready-made objects as stamps. All those objects are flat, at least on one side, allowing them to be used as stamps. Compared to Karel, I focus more on stamps, the tool, instead of its final product, the prints. What does a stamp consist of? If we follow Heidegger’s example of analysing a jug by splitting it into several parts⁶, then a stamp can be taken apart to at least two sections: a flat surface, and a handle [fig.10 - 11]. These two parts anchor each end of the object for people to exert force while stamping. Most objects in my teacher’s collection are just thin, flat metal pieces without any handle. I guess he has to use them with other tools to do stamping. Thus they are not TYPICAL stamps. A TYPICAL stamp is an object with one end attached to paper and the other end a handle, held in someone’s hand. From this perspective, I collected many objects, all of which can be used as stamps, with a flat surface and a handle: bowl cover, toy spare part, kitchen funnel, etc.



[fig.9] 'Stamp Collection', Collection series



[fig.10] Two parts of a typical stamp: handle (A) and flat surface (B)

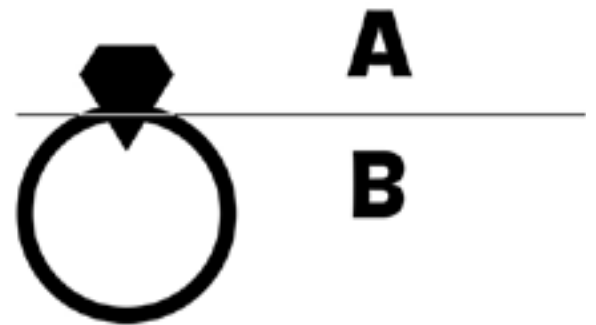


[fig.11] Charts of whole 'Stamp Collection'

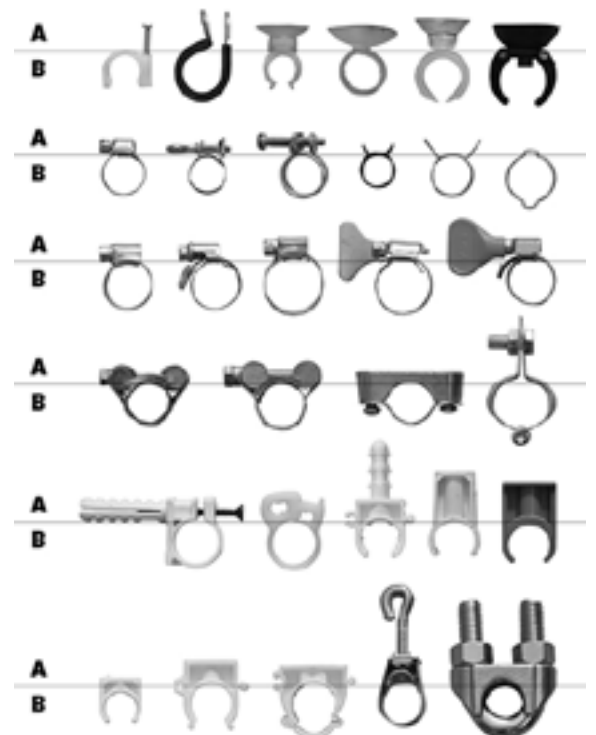
My 'Ring Collection' [fig.12] is based on the same concept. I collected objects which formally can be considered Rings. I regard each ring as a composition [fig.13 - 14] of two parts: one part for wearing on a finger, and the other part for decoration (or showing off). This methodology of disassembling object is inevitably limited by my personal way of thinking, which is probably arbitrary. This is why I didn't choose a single object to misread it. I did not randomly name any tiny piece of metal fitting as a ring. Instead of doing that, I was trying to find out a series of objects, 'misunderstand' and 'misuse' them over and over again. I was trying to tell a lie one thousand times to make it true. I didn't change any of the existing objects. On purpose, I misread their formal language. I am selling these two collections in my online grocery named 'Currently Available' (<http://currently-available.com/>). This is a small attempt on business, rather than design, because the idea is to simply sell one thing as another thing.



[fig.12] 'Ring Collection', Collection series



[fig.13] Two parts of a typical ring: decoration (A) and finger encasement (B)



[fig.14] Charts of whole 'Ring Collection'

In the process of making those objects, I always ask myself: What am I doing? How can I define these objects? Are they art pieces, or daily expendables? My answer is: From one aspect, they are not things set on a pedestal or in a pure white space, and they should not to be kept behind glass, stanchions or ropes only for watching without touching. They are not about representation or performance. Instead they are more about FUNCTION. Their narration expresses only in the context of daily life. Their value can only be recognised when someone uses it, or at least, knows how to use it. They need to be purchased, they need to be clenched in a fist, they need to be passed from one hand to another. That is why I am running an online grocery to display and sell them, instead of a gallery. This online grocery is an accomplishment of a narrative. From another aspect, if *Roland Barthes'* words⁷ are still correct, if art is still about being perverse and fetishistic, then you can absolutely name these objects as art.

Weiyi Li, 2014

¹ *Franz Kafka. Reflections on sin, suffering, hope, and the true way, The blue octavo notebooks.* Cambridge, Exact change, 1991, p.88

² *Gary Hustwit. Objectified.* United States, 2009, IMDb:tt1241325

³ *Louis H. Sullivan. The tall office building artistically considered, Lippincott's magazine,* Philadelphia, 1896, p.403 – 409

⁴ *Ettore Sottsass* (1917 – 2007), Italian architect and designer

⁵ *Karel Martens* (1939 –), Dutch designer and teacher

⁶ *Martin Heidegger, The thing, Poetry language thought.* New York, Harper and row, 1971, p.67-76

⁷ *Roland Barthes, To detach, Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes.* California, University of california press, 1977, p.68