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# **A Peeling Art**

Criticizing Consumerism Through Uncomfortable User Experience

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## **Abstract**

Action is greater than words, interaction is greater than viewing, and experience is greater than theory. So I came up with a way to make my art into an act of criticism toward consumerism. My art resembles colorful Pop Art on the surface but follows the defiant spirit of Dadaism at the core. It reveals the content full of dark humor and cynicism once the viewer “peels off” the appealing surface by interacting with it. The four artworks analyzed in the paper — Hole, The Twelephone and Alarming Alarm, Self-Destructive Ashtray, and Heavenly Cow — are designed to discomfort viewers by betraying the expectation that comes from how playful they look. So, let me introduce my set of absurd products that will help you actively experience the problem of consumerism and raise awareness about your consumption.

It all started with a banana — more specifically, with me staring at the banana. Bananas are closely related to my art both aesthetically, and symbolically.

### The artistic significance of bananas

Bananas have repeatedly appeared throughout the history of contemporary art, establishing themselves as one of the most famous, iconic fruit. Behind their publicity lie artworks like Andy Warhol's *Banana* which was used as the album cover for *The Velvet Underground & Nico* (fig.1),



Fig.1. Andy Warhol, Album cover *The Velvet Underground & Nico* for The Velvet Underground, 1967 (left)  
Fig.2. Maurizio Cattelan, *Comedian*, displayed at Art Basel Miami Beach, in 2019 (right)

and Maurizio Cattelan's *Comedian* (fig.2), an art piece that became a visual symbol to represent humor, absurdity, unexpected, and defiance. The establishment of the banana as a symbolic object of Pop Art and Dada guided me in defining my own art practice, which has been situated somewhere between the two realms of art. I liked how colorful and eye-catching Pop art is, and I appreciated the defiant soul of the Dada movement. Below is a mindmap about my art, and its relationship with pop art and the Dada movement (fig.3), and a Venn Diagram based on the mindmap (fig.4).

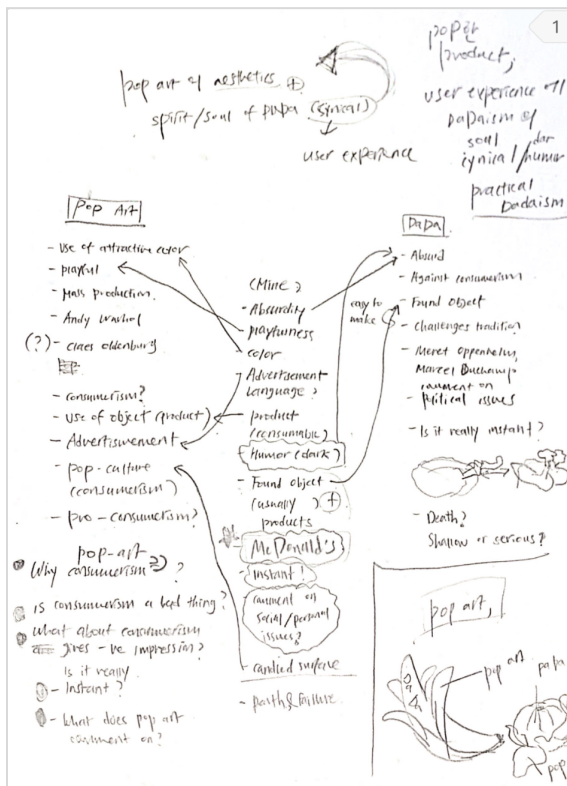


Fig.3. Brainstormed words and sketches (left)

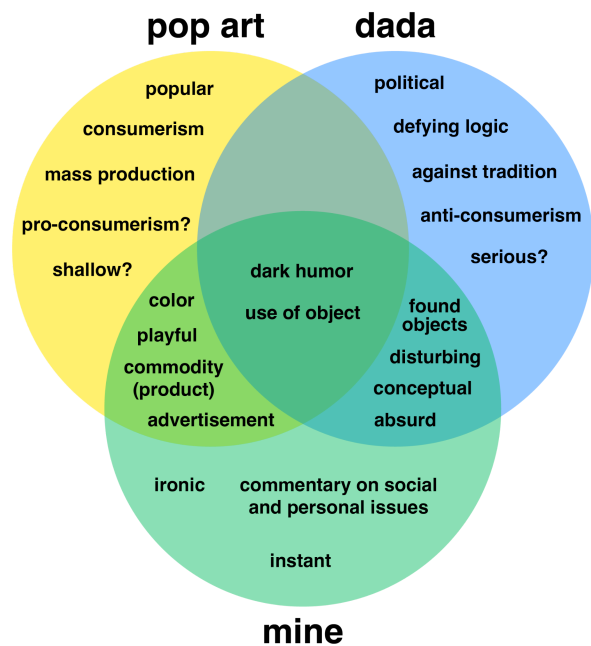


Fig.4. Venn Diagram that compares elements of my art, pop art, and dada (right)

My art adopts characteristics of both Pop Art and Dadaism. The colorful, candied, and playful appearance is in line with pop art. That it contains a twist to create absurdity

resembles Dada art. Simply put, I embrace pop art for the surface of my works and follow the spirit of Dadaism in terms of meaning, which is where the banana analogy (fig.5) comes in □ the peel that decides the form of the banana is pop art, and the core (the flesh) is dadaism.

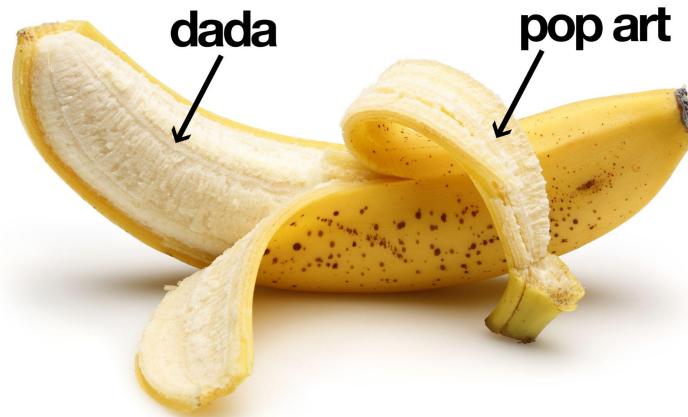


Fig.5. The banana analogy that visualizes the nature of my art practice

I was looking at the yellow skin, and imagining the white flesh underneath when the idea of double-sidedness entered my mind. To me, a banana is an intriguing fruit because what you see is not what you get. You need to peel it to reveal the content. You need to actively engage with it for the fullest experience. The “peeling” part, or the active engagement is what enables my artworks, which have an appealing appearance, but reveal darker humor and cynical statements once “peeled”. These ideas constitute the concept “A Peeling Art”.

### **The symbolic significance of bananas**

Yesterday, I bought a hand of large bananas. I was expecting to pay something like \$3. But when I scanned it, the price shown on the checkout screen was only \$0.64. Every time I purchased bananas, I was surprised by their unexpectedly low price. “Sweet” I muttered, as I slid my card into the machine. Then I thought, “Perhaps what is really sweet about bananas is that they are easy to get, and so cheap.” This led me to experiment with using bananas as an analogy for mass consumerism. Their price, their universality, and their uniformity: these characteristics are also the traits of consumerism.

Banana is a fruit of consumerism, and consumerism is the fruit of transactions between consumers and companies. It is not only the companies who play a part in it by hyping up their products and advertising with wild claims but also the consumers allowing themselves to be blinded and opening their wallets without much critical thinking. The consumer shares some responsibility since there need to be two parties — the seller and the buyer — for consumption to function.

It is 2023, now consumers have a more refined, elevated level of taste. The latest trend in consumerism has been to tailor marketing strategies to these tastes.<sup>1</sup> In this context, my exhibition space and works borrow the function of appealing aesthetics that open the wallet and trigger the visceral desire to purchase. It is not new to see artworks point out that consumerism exists, that we are all victims, and the phenomenon is omnipresent. However, the art world is saturated with artworks that (only) speak, but do

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<sup>1</sup> In 2023, consumers will blend newly gained digital fluidity with old-fashioned familiarity. Consumers will reconcile their fiscal caution with their spending impulse by being highly selective about which brands and experiences to patronize. The goal: Squeeze maximum value out of each outlay (for example, consumers do have become much pickier about which streaming subscription to keep). In 2023, consumers will continuously curate experiences, selecting those that deliver high value while abandoning those that do not (Chatterjee)

not act. I believe that after a certain point, for criticism to be really effective, it shouldn't stop at simply pointing out. Art should be a hands-on experience, which viewers can realize through interaction. My approach to criticizing consumerism is a level above consumerism and dadaism, which brings the experience to consumers who are equally responsible for bringing consumerism to life. Unexpected, disturbing experiences will enable the viewers to feel the lurking consumerism with their skin. The entire phenomenon is buying and selling. So I make them want to buy it, and when they buy it, they realize that this isn't what they thought and expected. And that is what I believe the true criticism of consumerism is.

Major characteristics of my art include absurdity, playfulness, bright color, use of found objects and branded product, advertisement language, social commentary, (often dark) humor, and candied surface.<sup>2</sup> Candied surface<sup>2</sup> is what I use to lure and appeal to viewers, deceiving my work to be a childish and harmless piece of art. This makes the viewers susceptible to the shocking factor — absurdity, discomfort, uncanniness, and darkness — hidden beneath the surface. Such susceptibility effectively converts the viewer's enjoyment into mild discomfort and irresistible repulsion, breaking the expectation of the viewers who assumed my work to be humorous and shallow based on its playful appearance. The experience of interacting with my work is like peeling, getting to discover the unexpected side. The works are displayed in a way that contradicts gallery settings. As opposed to how white cube galleries allow viewers only to 'view' the works they have carefully displayed, my works are displayed to form an

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<sup>2</sup> "Candied Surface" is a term that I use to describe the playful appearance, often achieved through the use of bright colors, lighthearted description, and cheerful imageries.



environment that gives a store experience. Like how customers scrutinize, touch, and smell products at stores, I encourage the viewers to experience, use and interact with my works.

## Hole



Fig.6. Terry Rim, *Hole*, inkjet-printed stickers attached on bananas, 2023

It is a proven fact that bananas are great. According to the U.S. per capita loss-adjusted fruit availability data in 2019, bananas were the most consumed fresh fruit in the US (*Apples*). They are not only delicious and convenient, but also cheap and abundant. Behind its accessibility lies many struggles and sufferings of the people of the

banana republic<sup>3</sup>. But such exploitation is not really visible in bananas with colorful little stickers attached. Perhaps, in complete disregard of nearly a century of pain Dole had inflicted on the banana republics, they still have the audacity to brand these (bloody) fruits with a rather cute sticker that carries their name. I recreated an existing fruit sticker label from the Dole company. The 'D' of Dole was replaced with 'H' to make 'Hole', and the sunshine illustration of the Dole logo was altered to look like an anus.



Fig.7. Close-up image of the Hole sticker placed next to the original Dole sticker

I took these stickers to Costco and attached them next to the existing Dole labels (fig.6 and fig.7). It was an intervention or even sabotage that clearly interferes with the business of Dole company. Such a subversive act of altering a popular (or at least what consumers are familiar with) artifact is a verified tactic called “détournement”.

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<sup>3</sup> The term “Banana Republic”, coined by American author O.Henry, refers to politically unstable countries that are ruled by a small wealthy class often through corrupt and exploitive practices. Such countries are often economically unstable, relying on the export of a single commodity like bananas and agricultural products. Examples include countries like Costa Rica, Honduras, and Guatemala.

Translating to overturning or derailment, this French term refers to a technique that spreads subversive ideas by reappropriating artifacts drawn from popular media and injecting them with radical connotations (Boyd, 28).

American conceptual Artist Barbara Kruger often incorporates “détournement” in her practice to convey her critical views on sociopolitical phenomena like feminism and consumerism. She edits found photographs and layers phrases in provocative ways. Her work *Untitled (I Shop Therefore I Am)* (fig.8), is especially in line with my practice of altering a known artifact to express subversive ideas. The phrase “I Shop Therefore I Am” is borrowed from the phrase “I think therefore I am” by Rene Descartes - meaning that provided someone is simply thinking, they are livening a meaningful existence, proving that they exist.<sup>4</sup> By equating the rather profound philosophy of existence with shopping, Kruger sharply points out how consumption these days are granted too much meaning. It provides viewers an opportunity to reflect if they are overvaluing “shopping”, and examine if shopping is a truly appropriate, meaningful move to prove our existence. The seemingly innocuous yet potentially insidious statements infiltrate daily life by means of the mass media<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Publicdelivery. “Barbara Kruger's I Shop Therefore I Am - What You Should Know.” *Barbara Kruger's I Shop Therefore I Am - What You Should Know*, 21 Sept. 2022, <https://publicdelivery.org/barbara-kruger-i-shop/#:~:text=The%20phrase%20means%20that%20provided,rather%20by%20what%20they%20own>.

<sup>5</sup> “Barbara Kruger. I Shop Therefore I Am. 1990: Moma.” *The Museum of Modern Art*, MoMA, <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/64897>.



Fig.8. Barbara Kruger, *I shop therefore I am*, screenprint on vinyl, 125 x 125 cm, 1987

Although Kruger's work is based on a well-known philosophical phrase, my appropriation of the logo "Dole" parallels her practice in that I altered something "familiar" to people, injected critical message, and let it spread.

Détournement works because humans tend to rely on habits, familiarity and comfort as the final arbiters of truth. Rational arguments and earnest appeals to morality may prove less effective than a carefully planned Détournement that bypasses the audience's mental filters by mimicking familiar cultural symbols, then disrupting them (Boyd, 28).

*Hole* was my first attempt to expose my art to the public, and the success of the project lies in its ambiguous identity of being a prank and sabotage at the same time. In addition, the alteration of a famous logo based on wordplay even opens up the possibility of its recognition as a meme. The shallow and humorous identity of memes

and pranks — concepts that are already familiar to us — enables the piece to infiltrate the public and intervene in people’s daily lives without causing antipathy and repulsion. Thus, the seeming shallowness of the entire project has facilitated the spreading of my idea of “raising awareness of what we consume.”

### The Twelephone and Alarming Alarm



Fig.9. Terry Rim, *The Twelephone and Alarming Alarm* displayed on a shelf, 2022

*The Twelephone and Alarming Alarm* is a set of absurd products invented to solve people’s problems. *The Twelephone*, a telephone with its cord replaced with Twizzlers (fig.10), allows users to get rid of annoying phone calls and relieve stress by biting and chewing the cord. The copy “Annoying phone calls? I’d rather chewse to hang up.” (fig.11) adds a sense of ‘pop’ and pushes the work to a commercial level. In

addition, the relatively high price of \$69.99 compared to the simple manufacturing process of replacing the cord with a Twizzler on a mass-produced telephone, and the mechanism of display with an advertising poster all mimic commercialism.



Fig.10. *The Twelephone* displayed with its poster (left)

Fig.11. The advertisement poster for *The Twelephone* (right)

The *Alarming Alarm*, an alarm clock with sharp nails attached around the snooze button, resolves the problem of unconsciously snoozing the alarm clock and falling back to sleep — what a lot of us commonly do. The absurdity comes into play when the intention to ‘solve’ doesn’t help but rather harms, yet shows the audacity to claim itself to be an innovational product that can bring so much value to people’s lives. The

showcasing and advertisement of such absurd products darkly criticize the downside of consumerism where companies build trust through advertisement and the actual products betray consumers. It is absurd that even though the product can potentially harm us, it deceives people with its playful and childish appearance and pretends to be friendly. Such absurdity is also found in the project “Kids Toys, Adults Issues” by Andy Sahlstrom, which is a set of recreated “Little Tikes” toys into adults’ collectibles. While maintaining the aesthetics — bright colors, rounded shapes, and simplified forms — of the brand’s kid’s products, the purpose for each item was adjusted to meet adult’s needs or treat adult’s problems. For example, the original “Turtle Sandbox” (fig.12) which is meant to put sand for kids to play with was turned into a “Turtle Ashtray” (fig.13) to hold ashes from smoking.



Fig.12. The original “Turtle Sandbox” from Little Tikes Company (left)

Fig.13. Andy Sahlstrom, *Turtle Ashtray*, 2023 (right)

Preying on the idea that smoking is a harmful action that adults do not want kids to learn about, Sahlstrom muddles the boundary between what is ideal for kids and what needs to be contained within the realm of adults. Such penetration of

corruptedness to the realm of kids is also evident in “Cozy Hearse”, which is an elongated version of the original “Cozy Coupe” from Little Tikes.



Fig.14. The original “Cozy Coupe” from Little Tikes Company (left)

Fig.15. Andy Sahlstrom, *Cozy Hearse*, 2023 (right)

Unlike how the “Cozy Coupe” is meant to give only the taste of the driving experience for kids — the pure joy of driving without having to concern about safety and rules — Sahlstrom injects unenjoyable portions of reality that kids need not face. He introduces the idea of death and the inevitable need for someone to transport dead bodies, creating an unmoderated and unfiltered experience. The discord between appearance and purpose, the disparity between what is for kids and what is for adults, and the juxtaposition of innocence and corruptedness all contribute to generating an uncomfortable viewing experience. Although these items are miniatures and could not be used in reality, the idea of transforming a friendly product into something uninviting and unpleasant, but still keeping the inviting appearance is similar to how I treated the telephone and alarm clock to make them absurd and menacing.



## Self-Destructive Ashtray



Fig.16. Terry Rim, *Self-Destructive Ashtray*, foam board and paper mache, 2022

In a similar context, the *Self-destructive Ashtray* (fig.16) is an object that generates an uncomfortable experience for the user in two ways: triggering a sense of guilt, and functioning in an undesired way. The ashtray is made with paper mache, a paper powder that turns into a clay-like form when mixed with water. Knowing that paper mache adopts the characteristics of paper when it dries, I intended the paper surface of the ashtray to get stained and burnt when reacted with heat and ash. The choice of white paper mache was to clearly exhibit the process of deterioration, and maximize the

contrast of stain against its initial pure-white state. The more the ashtray gets used, the more the whiteness will fade away. The more the object serves its function, the clearer the corruption becomes, which is what the user will inevitably encounter.

“Though the United States started the trend of labeling cigarette packages with warnings, today the country has one of the least restrictive labeling requirements on their packages (Dumas)”. With a small typeface and color that resembles the cigarette pack, the warnings are not distinct from the rest of the cigarette package. This paper Ashtray, unlike common tray-shaped ashtrays, takes a shape of a generic human face since an “object must be given just enough face to enable it to empathetically return our gaze” (Ngai). The user’s empathy towards the ashtray functions like a mirror, reflecting the viewer. The active visualization of the fact that smoking causes degeneration and poses health hazard — which smokers are aware of but effortfully neglects to acknowledge — puts the users in a position where they have to ‘face’ the plunge of the object and feel the discomfort. Thus, I have turned an ashtray — a complementary product of cigarettes — into an anti-complementary good.

## **Heavenly Cow**

America is the country with the second-highest beef consumption rate in the world<sup>6</sup> (OECD). As a foreigner, I was surprised how meat, especially beef, was so abundant, accessible, and cheap. Besides their flesh, we consume their milk in dairy

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<sup>6</sup> The USA came second in global meat consumption in 2013, with 25.318 kg of beef/veal consumption per capita. Source: OECD (2023), Meat consumption (indicator). doi: 10.1787/fa290fd0-en (Accessed on 04 May 2023)

products and use their skin to make leather products. However, it has only been a century since cows started to be raised and used to be “consumed” by people.

Animals first entered the imagination as messengers and promises. For example, the domestication of cattle did not begin as a simple prospect of milk and meat. Cattle had magical functions, sometimes oracular, sometimes sacrificial. And the choice of a given species as magical, tameable *and* alimentary was originally determined by the habits, proximity and “invitation” of the animal in question (Berger).

Considering how deeply cow products have penetrated people’s lives these days, I thought it would be meaningful to provide an opportunity for viewers to consider cows’ lives — being raised, fertilized, butchered, and skinned for our consumption, which is the reality we often forget to see when we buy cow products.

The work *Heavenly Cow* began with the absurd idea of placing an object where it doesn’t belong. As most of my inspiration comes from wordplay, the driving motive of the idea was to place a “ground beef” in the sky, deliberately misinterpreting the ‘ground’ in the phrase “ground beef” as the surface of the earth instead of the original meaning of meat that is made by grinding with a special machine. The work has two modes of presentation: a flag and a bag, depending on the environment. The image below shows the cow displayed at Forest Park as a flag (fig.17 and fig.18).



Fig.17. Terry Rim, *Heavenly Cow* (in the form of a flag), 2023 (left)



Fig.18. Close-up image of *Heavenly Cow* (right)

The cow is attached to a pole with its head facing the sky. The dislocation of a cow from the ground to the sky, ascending the pole, is the act of freeing the cow from its obligation and confinement as a cattle. The construction of a cow into a flag is based on a Korean poem 깃발 (*Flag*) by Chi-Hwan Yu. See the table below for the original poem and the translated version<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> Yu, Chi-hwan. "Flag." Translated by Whon-il Park, *Koreanlii.or.kr*, July 2022, <http://www.koreanlii.or.kr/w/index.php/Flag?ckattempt=1>.

<p>깃발</p> <p>이것은 소리 없는 아우성.</p> <p>저 푸른 해원을 향하여 흔들는 영원한 노스텔지어의 손수건. 순정은 물결같이 바람에 나부끼고 오로지 맑고 고운 이념의 뜻대 끝에 애수는 백로처럼 날개를 펴다.</p> <p>아! 누구인가?</p> <p>이렇게 슬프고도 애달픈 마음을 맨 처음 공중에 달 줄을 아는 그는.</p>	<p><b>Flag</b></p> <p>This is a silent cry.</p> <p>An eternal handkerchief of nostalgia Waving toward that vast blue ocean. Pure love flutters in the wind like waves Hung on a post of only clear and straight ideology. Sorrow spreads its wings like a white heron.</p> <p>Ah! Who is the person,  Who's got to know to hang the mind of heartrending sorrow In the air for the first time?</p>
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*Flag* by Chi-hwan Yu, original (left) and translated (right)

The poem uses the flag — an object with the inherent property to fly into the sky — as a symbol of the desire for freedom. The wind here is a vehicle that facilitates the flag's movement toward the sky. However, despite the presence of wind, all the cow can do is flutter, because its legs are tied to the flagpole. The ironic idea of a 'silent cry' is manifested through the dynamic shaking movement of the cow flag, a movement that reflects the longing for freedom that is disregarded by consumers.

For indoor display, the cow is made into a nylon bag with a pocket attached inside to enable folding (fig.19). The pocket has a print of a "ground beef" packet, the massed-produced products found at supermarkets. Imagine how uncomfortable it will

be to take the cow bag to the grocery store — to unfold the ground beef pocket, to shop for cow products at a grocery store, and to put them in a cow bag.



Fig.19. *Heavenly Cow* in the form of a foldable bag



Fig.20. *Heavenly Cow* folding process

Fig.21. Folded form of *Heavenly Cow* — a pack of ground beef

To be used as a bag, the flag must be detached from the pole to become a cow bag, which then can be folded into a “ground beef” (fig.20 and fig.21). The return of the flag to a foldable bag, from a symbolic object to a utilitarian object symbolizes the fate of the cow as a practical commodity, ready to serve meat and milk and be useful. The fate of the cow is passively communicated through the ultimate form of the cow — the “ground beef.” The cow’s ‘silent cry’ is a central idea that triggers the viewers to think about the meat they consume on a daily basis from a different perspective, making this flag/bag a metaphorical object that visualizes the freedom and right taken away from the animals that we consume through the language of paradox.

Andrew Boyd, the author of *Beautiful Trouble* suggests that “People who have the luxury of not seeing uncomfortable truth often simply won’t”, which is why it is important to visualize the ignored truth and let people see it.

Injustices made invisible by ideology can be brought to light by judicious reframing. A frame defines what is part of the story and, more importantly, what is not. Actions that target the point of assumption can focus attention on what was previously “outside the frame” (Boyd).

This reflects my intention to reframe the consumption of cows, not framing the brilliant finished products that are for sale in the market, but instead bringing light to the unpleasant process that needs to be done to deliver meat to our table.

My art is an action against consumerism, not just a critique. It is called “능동적 비판” in Korean, which I achieve through making my art into a commodity that people can interact with, experience, and purchase. The idea of commoditizing works of art seems like an embracement of consumerism, which I deliberately push further using elements like colors, fonts, forms, tone, and language. It is like sprinkling glamor on top to make the outcome that is seemingly appealing and attractive to consumers. When the consumer actually encounters and experiences the product, it is something unexpected and unfamiliar that challenges the comfort of buying and betrays the consumers. I bring my criticism to the market in a form of a product so that consumers can take it to their table. So, welcome to the shop of absurd products. Feel free to browse, purchase, and have fun.



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- Fig.15. Andy Sahlstrom, *Cozy Hearse*, 2023
- Fig.16. Terry Rim, *Self-Destructive Ashtray*, foam board and paper mache, 2022
- Fig.17. Terry Rim, *Heavenly Cow* (in the form of a flag), 2023
- Fig.18. Close-up image of *Heavenly Cow*
- Fig.19. *Heavenly Cow* in the form of a foldable bag
- Fig.20. *Heavenly Cow* folding process
- Fig.21. Folded form of *Heavenly Cow* — a pack of ground beef