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Practices of object maintenance and repair: how consumers attend to consumer objects within the home

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Abstract

This paper examines the practices of object maintenance in the home. Drawing on depth ethnographic research with households in North east England, the paper uses three object stories to show that ordinary consumer objects are continually becoming in the course of their lives in the home and that practices of object maintenance are central to this becoming. Located in a field of action and practice, consumer objects are shown to display traces of their consumption. The practices of object maintenance are shown to attempt to arrest these traces, not always successfully. A spectrum of practices of object maintenance is identified, ranging from routine cleaning, wiping and polishing, through quick-fix repair, to the more thorough-going restoration. The object stories show how restorative acts generally rekindle consumer objects; how other forms of repair (the quick-fix mask) are socially problematic, signalling the devaluation of objects; and how the failure of object maintenance can connect to the sabotage of objects. The success or failure of object maintenance is shown to have profound consequences for the social lives of consumer objects. More broadly, the paper highlights the importance of consumer competences (and incompetence) with respect to object maintenance, and argues that object maintenance works to integrate consumption, connecting home interiors with acts of acquisition, purchase and ridding.

Key words

practices consumer objects maintenance/repair competences value
materiality

This paper is a contribution to the growing body of work in both consumption and material culture studies that is responding to the challenge of taking materiality and practice seriously (Dant, 2005, 2008; Gregson, 2007; Miller, 2005; Shove et al, 2007; Watson and Shove, 2008). A noteworthy feature of recent research in both fields, materiality is now firmly on the agenda for both, if in various guises. In material culture studies, for example, recent research on cloth and clothing has begun to explore the depth to practices of wearing rather than the often imputed surface meanings of clothing (Hauser, 2004; Küchler and Miller, 2005; Gregson, Brooks and Crewe, 2001; Woodward, 2007). Elsewhere, questions of materiality have been pursued through a focus on object agency (see in particular the increasing number of studies that draw on Gell, 1998), whilst work on temporality has emphasised the ways in which objects work to materialise memories (Attfield, 2000; Kwint, 1999; Hallam and Hockey, 2001; Snyder, 1998), as well as their transience and ephemerality (Colloredo-Mansfeld, 2003; Dant, 2000). In Tim Ingold's work questions of materiality have been approached through a focus on the generation of artefacts (Ingold, 2000). Rather than think about artefacts in terms of the making of a pre-

determined, prior form, Ingold sees form coming into being “through the gradual unfolding of that field of forces set up through the active and sensuous engagement of practitioner and material [...] through the pattern of skilled movement and [...] the rhythmic repetition of these movements” (ibid: 57). This phenomenological approach to materiality is one that has affinities with recent advances in consumption research, in which the activities of consumption have been rethought through practice (Warde, 2005; Hand and Shove, 2007; Shove and Pantzar, 2005). Drawing on writers such as Reckwitz and Schatzki, we find here the same insistence on the importance of the non-human object world, of the conjunction of body and objects in actualising activities, of routine repetition and of skilled competence to both stabilising practices and understanding consumer investments in particular practices, be these as diverse as Nordic walking, driving or freezing food. One key distinction between the two positions, however, is in the treatment of form: whereas for Ingold form becomes through movements that entwine practitioners (human and non-human) and materials, form in practice-centred accounts is more a matter of object capacity. Thus, whilst attention is certainly paid to design in these accounts, here form is subsumed in the object, which in turn works to condense practice; it affords the capability and capacity to do an activity in a particular way and works to stabilise practices such that they continue to be performed in these ways. Less becoming, more become, a consequence is that the object in such accounts remains strangely unaffected by the practices it enables.

In this paper we move from this last point, taking Ingold’s central insight about the becoming of form to show that this has considerable potential both for advancing understandings of consumer objects within the home and in further developing practice-oriented accounts of consumption. The general point we want to make is that consumer objects are continually becoming in the course of their lives in the domestic. They are, then, neither finished nor inviolable forms at the points of production and acquisition, but rather are better regarded as continually evolving, positioned within and affected by an ongoing flow of consumer practice, as well as enabling of practices. In turn, what this means is that we need to acknowledge that consumer objects have physical lives, alongside and entwined within their more familiar social, cultural and economic lives (Appadurai, 1986; Kopytoff, 1986). These

physical lives, we maintain, are of profound significance to understanding both consumption practices and the social lives of things. Thus, it is not just that objects vary in their capacity to disclose and display consumer competences – in the manner of Alan Warde’s examples of various types of cars, or of the differences say between a Colnago racing cycle and a hybrid bicycle – but that physical materiality matters to the performance of practices. Most obviously, as Graham and Thrift (2007) point out, consumer objects break down. They age; they stop working as well as they once might have done. Physical failure and deterioration have implications for actualising practice, disrupting and intervening in habitualised ways of doing particular activities. Such eventualities require object repair or replacement/substitution to ensure that capacities are reproduced and that particular practices might continue to be actualised appropriately. Given the changing economics of repair, for most consumers repair is now applicable primarily to high cost items, most notably cars and personal computers, as well as home infrastructure objects, for example: boilers, radiators, solar panels (Dant, 2005). Other consumer objects – think kettles, toasters and irons, cameras or radios – are, by virtue of cost economies, more likely to be jettisoned should they fail or deteriorate, to be replaced with a new(er) model. With such objects failure and/or deterioration connect frequently to the physical death of a particular object, its connection to the waste stream and transformation into other, sometimes constituent, materials. Socially, however, a routinised practice demands a replacement or substitute object (Gregson, Metcalfe and Crewe, 2007). The moment of replacement, whilst enabling the resumption of a temporarily interrupted practice, is nonetheless critical to consumer practice: for consumers it involves working out often subtle new ways of doing habitualised activities – think of a mobile phone upgrade, or of going from analogue to digital photography; of the arrival of a new washing machine or cooker, or of a new car purchase. All involve a sense of learning to do again and of experimenting with objects, in a way that disappears with familiarity, but which equally well may result in the neglect or abandonment of the new, precisely because of its initial unfamiliarity. Such moments mark the point at which practitioners and objects come together anew, forging subtly new conjunctures between body and objects, and slightly new routines and sets of competences, to reinstate and stabilise a particular practice.

Less obvious, perhaps, than commodified acts of repair and object replacement is the routine, mundane work of consumers on object maintenance. Less explored in consumer practice research – where the emphasis thus far has been on practices involving objects with designed/manufactured capacities to do and/or enable certain actions – object maintenance involves consumers in attending to objects as well as doing specific activities with particular objects. Nonetheless, maintenance is itself a practice. Indeed, maintenance practices centre object care: typically, they are about the conservation and preservation of things. Although they would include activities as diverse as defrosting the freezer, recharging phones and cameras, and checking and repairing the brakes and tyres on a bicycle, the types of activities we are thinking of here are largely cleaning related, dusting and polishing, washing and wiping. Involving substances and preparations such as soaps, detergents, bleach, furniture sprays and polishes, mediating materials (cloths of all permutations, brushes, gloves), and a human cleaner (often female), such practices, as enacted in the home, work to renew the appearance and often tactility of consumer objects, through the removal of substances that either adhere to or work their presence into objects, dust, spills, grime, bacteria, in short, social and physical ‘dirt’. Whilst undeniably related to discourses of domestic health and hygiene, cleanliness and respectability (Madigan and Munro, 1996; Skeggs, 1997), ‘dirt’s’ presence and removal through these practices is indicative of our general point: that objects are continually becoming in their lives in the domestic. Indeed, the practices of cleaning, wiping, polishing and so on can be seen as concerted attempts to arrest decay; to stave off the corrosive and contaminating effects of other physical substances on both people and things; to protect and conserve consumer objects.¹ In short, these practices endeavour either to keep consumer objects in or return them to their pristine state (as when new), to freeze the physical life of things at the point of acquisition and to mask the trace of consumption in the object.

The paper develops and illustrates the general point about the becoming of consumer objects in homes, focusing specifically on practices of object maintenance as enacted

¹ One of the ironies here is that the abrasive properties of certain cleaning substances may actually erode the surfaces of consumer objects, in the manner of things ‘biting back’ (Tenner, 1996). That they might do so is not the point however, for culturally such products are understood as working to clean.

by consumers within the home. Our primary vehicle here is three object stories taken from ethnographic fieldwork conducted in North east England in 2003.² The object stories illustrate four general tendencies with respect to object maintenance: restoration and preservation, the social limits to certain types of restorative repair, the difficulties certain materialities pose for restorative maintenance work, and the importance of consumer competences with respect to restorative practices. The restoration and preservation of the ‘as good as new’ or as ‘near to new’ is, of course, central to the curatorial tradition, and to museum and gallery practices of care and display (see, for example, Dean, 1994; and for a more critical literature: Kreps, 2003, 2006; Simpson, 1996). But, as we show here, it is equally applicable to what goes on in domestic settings. The practices associated with heirlooms, collections and mementos are all instances of a curatorial tradition in the domestic. Safely displayed and/or stored away from everyday activity in cabinets and display cases, these objects’ importance as purveyors of meanings is signalled by the care directed toward their protection and to the physical integrity of the object itself. To protect the object is to protect and preserve the meanings it carries. But not all objects are positioned thus in the home. Rather, many consumer objects are handled, used – as implements and/or tools – to do something else with, picked up, moved about, put down. In this way they can be dropped, knocked, fall. Other objects – consumer durables, appliances, furniture and furnishings – whilst less mobile are both repeatedly used and positioned in an on-going flow of action. They too encounter other forms and materials. As such, the physical integrity of ordinary consumer objects in home interiors can be seen as open and alterable, perhaps irredeemably, perhaps not, given the possibility of restorative cleaning and making good both damage and blemishes through repair.³ It is this restorative/conservative work with ordinary consumer objects that the paper addresses.

² The research was funded by ESRC (R000239972), 2003 – 5. The ethnographic field research on which this paper is based was conducted by Nicky Gregson. It involved 16 households and 38 individuals living in a former coal mining village in County Durham and in a suburban setting on the edge of the Newcastle conurbation (Gregson, 2007). It was supported by longitudinal depth interview work with 59 households living in Nottingham. The full research report is available at: <http://www.shef.ac.uk/disposal-and-consumerism/index.html> and via <http://www.esrc.ac.uk>.

³ The range of products available for attempting to repair damaged domestic objects and materials is considerable. In the UK, Vanish™ (a carpet and soft furnishings cleaning preparation) and Aruldite™ (a glue that repairs china, plastics and metals) are just two of the most common.

For comparative purposes the paper focuses on pieces of living or dining room furniture (see too Money, 2007). Located within a comparable field of action within the home and manufactured from relatively robust, durable materials, for the most part wood and/or strong fabrics, furniture tends to endure.⁴ Typically it is the focus of routine acts of cleaning including dusting, vacuuming and polishing; activities which are enacted weekly in many households. Further, our research showed that such objects tend to be the sorts of things people find hard to get rid of, or difficult to find reasons felt sufficient to justify their getting rid. Nonetheless, the three objects highlighted disclose contrasting stories and different trajectories. In all three instances, the type of care and attention directed at these objects proves critical to their subsequent social life. Our first instance features a dining room table that has been in the possession of Ted and June, a couple in their mid seventies, for nearly 50 years; our second is a TV-video cabinet belonging to Peggy and Harry, a couple in their early sixties and early seventies respectively; and our third is a cream leather three piece suite, owned by Clare and Nathan, a couple in their mid twenties.

2: Restoration and preservation: an Ercol dining room table

In 1956 ‘newly-weds’ Ted and June bought their first home, a semi-detached ‘end-of-terrace’, ‘newly-built’ property with a large garden on the edge of the London conurbation. Whilst the house was being built they spent much of their free time looking at furniture and furnishings. They went to the Ideal Home Exhibition, bought various home interior magazines and looked in the showrooms of numerous department stores, seeking inspiration but also searching for furniture that encapsulated both a look and their identity, as individuals and as a couple. Looking back, June emphasises the importance of utility furniture in shaping their ideals: what they sought in their furniture was not just durability and good design, but a design that escaped ‘the functionality of utility’, that had a ‘lightness’ to it, and that conveyed

⁴ It is instructive that many of the households in this research still had pieces of furniture bought (or gifted) at the time of marriage and/or partnership formation. This was particularly the case with older and middle aged households. Thus, whilst these were homes in the 2000s, they were simultaneously homes which, in material culture and design terms, had strong legacies in the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. Such tendencies were particularly apparent in relation to living and dining room furniture. Not only do they show that this type of material culture endures, they also complicate accounts that posit homogeneity between contemporary homes and contemporary design. The reality in terms of home interiors is historically far messier.

what they were aiming for in their lives. Amongst their purchases were an Ercol dining table, six chairs and a matching sideboard. These pieces were seen first as an advertisement in an *Ideal Home* magazine⁵, and then encountered in a department store showroom. Once found Ted and June looked no further, for this was the dining room furniture that they recognised ‘to be us’. They ordered the furniture, taking delivery of it three months later.

Constructed from beech and elm, this dining room furniture immediately satisfied Ted’s valuation of the material qualities of wood. Almost 50 years later this appreciation still infuses his understanding and description of these objects, which is paralleled by a lifetime of working with wood, making small pieces of furniture (tables and bookcases), constructing wall-hanging shelving, and carving small ornamental pieces. Talking about this table, carried with them through several moves and now located in a room in a house on the edge of the Newcastle conurbation (Figure 1), Ted describes the table top, ‘with the beautiful surface warmth and colour of elm’ (Figure 2), ‘hand-selected by craftsmen’, ‘machine-planed and waxed to finish’, contrasting this with the ‘lighter coloured, tapered beech table top legs’. The ‘machine curved back and lattice dowel supports’ of the chairs, ‘each drilled and glued into the seat’ (Figure 3), is contrasted explicitly to his mother’s Windsor chairs, the Ercol chairs’ good design working to highlight the inadequacies of these others that ‘were always coming unglued – poor design’. Underneath the table, the frame and flap mechanism (Figure 4) are demonstrated to work simply and smoothly, appreciated for the way they enable the table to reduce, taking up less space just as easily as it can accommodate a family around it.

Figures 1 – 4 about here

For June, the attractions of these pieces once encountered lay less in an appreciation of the quality of their construction and rather more in their conjunction of ‘delicacy’, ‘strength’ and ‘comfort’. Not only did this table and chairs look right to her, but the chairs in particular felt right to her. She appreciated – and still does – the ‘sensual sweep’ of the chair backs, ‘as you hold the chairs your fingers sort of sweep round’,

⁵ See Chapman (1999). For further illumination of this particular period in the history of British interiors, see: Attfield (1989), Partington (1989) and Attfield and Kirkham (1989).

and she likes the way in which the chair itself enfolds her sitting body; ‘coming round at the back, it holds you’.

Ted and June’s initial narratives about their dining table and chairs are classics of objectification: social and cultural meanings are imputed into the form of these pieces and the pieces themselves are seen to stand for the people Ted and June wanted to be in the mid 1950s. That there is far more to the relationship between Ted and June and these pieces however, is hinted at even in these initial narratives, particularly in how they talk about their respective embodied encounters with them. June’s holding, stroking and sitting, and Ted’s demonstration of the furniture’s fabrication both emphasise that objects such as tables and chairs are continually encountered– felt, touched, held and, as here, sat in and at and leaned on and over – in the course of domestic life.⁶ As we see now, this domestic life was of profound importance to the subsequent social life of Ted and June’s dining room table.

By the 1960s, Ted and June had three children and the dining room table and chairs had become a focal point in the household. As June says of that time, ‘So many tasks had to be performed on that table’. Not only was it the site for family meals, the place where the family sat around and was constituted through the practices of shared eating, but it was also where the children did activities such as painting, drawing and ‘model-building’ (‘trains and planes’), where June sewed clothes for herself and for her children, on a Singer hand sewing machine, and where Ted did work that he brought home in the evenings. Notwithstanding that newspaper was brought out to cover and protect the table’s surface, spillages occurred. Black and green model paint stained the table, penetrating its varnished surface; fountain pen ink had become ingrained in the wood grain and a series of deep grooves marked the sewing machine’s absent presence. For Ted, the appearance and accumulation of these stains and grooves in the table’s surface became increasingly problematic. Indeed, their presence in the table’s surface ‘made it look (to him) as if the table was being abused’. Allied with a strong sense of the normative, ‘that this table should be sat

⁶ An interesting aside here is that this furniture figured centrally in conducting this research. Visits to Ted and June’s home included meals at this table, and seated in these chairs, whilst recorded discussions invariably took place at the table, rather than in other potential areas of seating, such as their living room or their conservatory. That the table was the appropriate location for the research seemed to be very much taken-for-granted by Ted and June. As such, it is through sitting at and around this table that the importance of this furniture became apparent, insisting that its story be told.

round, not used for ...' Ted felt that his family 'had gone a bit far'. They had 'not treated the table with respect', a respect that he felt its design and material qualities deserved.

Of course, an academic observer could point here to Ted's apparent fetishising of this table. Others might question, as June still does, his valuation of this table over the familial activities it facilitated. More interesting, however, is what Ted then did with this (to him abused) table and the subsequent effect of these practices, both on what was then done around this table and on the location of other family practices. Some time in the 1970s – the couple cannot remember exactly when – Ted removed the polished surface from the table, stripping off the finish with various grades of sandpaper to 'get back to the natural wood'. He then worked at eradicating the stains, marks and indentations that had permeated the polished surface, 'a hell of a job'. Having removed these traces, he then set about restoring the table to the finish he remembered it having when he and June had bought it, applying a 'natural polish' of beeswax and turpentine, '*not Mr Sheen!*'⁷ Working successive layers of this preparation into the grain of the wood, Ted was satisfied only when he had both brought the wood 'back to life' and achieved a 'silk-smooth' finish to the table's top. Once restored, however, June recounts how 'everyone (then) had to do things elsewhere. We (she means her and her children) had been displaced'. So, June's sewing machine was displaced to being used in the kitchen, whilst her children had to do their activities (model building, homework) at 'makeshift desks' in their bedrooms. The dining room table itself was now reserved for family meals. In 2003 and several house moves later, its primary purpose was still precisely this, to hold and constitute the family through shared family meals. Restored and preserved, it was still being routinely cared for by Ted, using the same brand of beeswax polish that he had originally used to restore it, a preparation whose properties are understood by him to 'feed, preserve and nourish', 'to cherish it, not just keep it clean'. The table and chairs therefore carry a weightiness that is a duty of care. Whilst they enable the feeding of a

⁷ Ted's '*not Mr Sheen*' is itself an important positioning statement. Mr Sheen is a mass-market, spray-on furniture cleaning preparation, widely available in UK supermarkets. Its appeal is that it offers quick and easy furniture cleaning. By implication, Ted is saying here that such products (and such spray-wipe techniques) are not proper ways of caring for wooden furniture. Indeed, and significantly, Ted understands proper furniture care to involve 'natural' products (beeswax) and hard manual labour (working-in). His understanding of furniture care then is one that attends to an understanding of wood and its properties.

family, as objects too they are seen to require feeding. In being cared for, this furniture is seen by Ted to ‘come alive’, disclosing its grains, knots, and subtleties of colouration in different lights and shades, and a surface that he delights in; one so smooth that a cloth glides across the table top and then floats to the floor.

The story of Ted and June’s dining room table and chairs is a story about the restoration and preservation of consumer objects. This Ercol table emerges here as an object that is continually being generated in the conjuncture of people, activities and materials within this household, that is, in a field. Further, what is generated is shown to be as much about blemishes, imperfections, traces and additional presences, as it is about the restoration of the idealised original and its preservation. What we also see in this story however, is how consumer objects are both the medium and the means through which social relations (in this case of family) are worked out, indeed performed. Specifically, it is through what Ted does with and to this object through the practices of restoration and preservation, that he impresses his valuations of things on his family, displacing the activities of other family members through the threat that they are known to pose to this particular object and the labour of love that restored, and continues to maintain, it. The story of Ted and June’s dining room table, then, works to highlight that consumer objects are continually becoming in consumption practices and that their becoming enacts key social relations, for what is done on and at this table, the physical trace of these practices, and the subsequent practices of restoration and preservation disclose entirely the social dynamics of Ted and June’s cohabitation.

Practices of restoration of the type performed by Ted highlight the importance of attending to and caring about ordinary consumer objects in the home. As illustrated by Ted, they connect to value systems that work to preserve and protect the resurrected, pristine object, and they resonate closely with other sites of curatorial working, notably the gallery and the museum. There are, however, other ways in which consumers work with repair. These involve the use of various preparations and materials that make good through masking particular blemishes and flaws. It is such activities – and their limitations – that feature in our second story.

3: The social limits to quick-fix repair: a TV-video cabinet

Like Ted and June, Peggy and Harry are an older couple, with adult-children and grandchildren. They live in a one-bedroom bungalow which they rent from the local authority. On moving to this rented bungalow from a larger house, they had to get rid of much of their existing furniture and furnishings, replacing these things with others that would fit in to the far smaller dimensions of their bungalow. In order to furnish their new living room, Peggy and Harry bought a large mahogany-veneered pine display cabinet, three matching upholstered chairs and a mahogany-veneered pine TV-video cabinet, the latter from Argos (Figure 5).

Figure 5 about here

The living room at Peggy and Harry's is always immaculately tidy and spotlessly clean, for – like the majority of women living on this street - Peggy vacuums and dusts on a twice-a-week basis and polishes the furniture at least once a week. However, during the course of the ethnographic fieldwork, the street on which Peggy and Harry live underwent a programme of modernisation work (Gregson, 2007). Valuing their furniture and anxious that this should not be damaged, the couple moved all the small pieces in their living room to a secure outdoor shed. The larger pieces of living room furniture, however, had to remain in situ, for Peggy and Harry had nowhere else to store them. Instead, they moved these pieces to the middle of the living room, constructing a large pyramid from their furniture and covering this with layers of old cotton and plastic sheets. The one exception to this was the TV-video cabinet, which was declared by Peggy as 'having to take its chance with modernisation' because of the importance of TV viewing in this household.⁸

Come modernisation and the inevitable happened. One morning when the window fitters were replacing the living room window, and when electricians and plasterers were working simultaneously in the bathroom and kitchen, traipsing backwards and

⁸ Watching films is a key part of Peggy's daily life: largely confined to the house and garden by her increasing immobility and ill health, afternoon films are one of her few opportunities to escape life in the bungalow and on the street. For Harry too, the TV schedule provides a key rhythm of daily life. Regular day time news broadcasts, which he invariably watches, signal the mid-day meal, and his evening entertainment is largely provided through the TV or video, particularly on those nights when Peggy is out playing bingo.

forwards through the bungalow via the living room, the TV-video cabinet got damaged. Somehow – although none present admitted any knowledge – a small but noticeable slice of mahogany veneer had been spliced off, disclosing the pine wood beneath (Figure 6).

Figure 6 about here

Peggy and Harry's response to this discovery, beyond their immediate anger at the lack of care and the dishonesty displayed by the council workmen, is instructive. Getting down on his hands and knees to inspect the damage closely, Harry pronounced that he could quite easily repair this, using filler and stain to make good the gouge. For Peggy, however, this response was sufficient to precipitate an explosion. Maintaining that the repair would be a waste of time and effort because she would always be able to see it, and that it was just as easy to go out and get a replacement from Argos⁹, Peggy made it clear to Harry that he was not to waste time and energy in effecting the repair but should instead 'just get rid of it'. Used to such explosions as part of living with Peggy, Harry eventually shrugged and retreated outside to his greenhouse, whilst Peggy carried on ranting (to the researcher) about Harry's inability to see that her view about what to do with this TV-video cabinet was self-evidently the right one.¹⁰

For approximately another two weeks the TV-video cabinet remained in situ in the living room; modernisation work carried on and so did daily life. One day, though, Peggy returned from one of her numerous shopping trips armed with a box from Argos. She had purchased what she described as an identical TV-video table, for £12 – 'a bargain'. Placing the box in 'the pyramid' of protected furniture, stating 'there's no point getting it out to be ruined', Peggy simultaneously instructed Harry to 'sort out getting rid of the old one'. Without a car, Harry typically draws on three main

⁹ Argos is a mass market UK catalogue retailer appealing to value shopping.

¹⁰ Throughout the fieldwork, Peggy would engage in routine bouts of what can only be described as 'ranting' or impassioned moaning to the researcher about life with Harry. Indicative primarily of the frustrations of cohabitation in a very small dwelling structure, these outburst were invariably short-lived, resolved normally by cups of tea and biscuits. Yet they were undoubtedly facilitated by the presence of an adult female researcher, whom Peggy regarded both as automatic unconditional support for her views (against Harry's) and as a conduit to release her frustrations. That the support was not always there is evident in this story, in which – down on the floor – the researcher was engaging with Harry in discussing the possibilities of repair!

conduits to move along Peggy's 'rubbish' declarations, wheelie bins (theirs and a neighbour), the council bulky waste collection service and a single elderly male neighbour. Too large to be fitted in the wheelie bin, and – according to Harry's valuations – insufficiently damaged to be declared 'rubbish', Harry organised the passage of the TV-video cabinet to this elderly male neighbour, in so doing both accommodating to living with Peggy and subverting her value declarations. With the completion of the modernisation work, the table was duly carried along the street. Peggy and Harry then set about restoring order to their living room, finally assembling the new TV-video cabinet. They accomplished this with no glitches. But, after placing the cabinet in 'its place' and putting the TV on top and the video on a shelf, they realised that this object was no identical replacement. In place of one space – for a video recorder – were two spaces, one for a video recorder, the second for a DVD player/recorder. Laughing about her 'mistake', which left them with a piece of furniture 'staring at us obviously missing something', Peggy used this as an opportunity to go out and buy a DVD player.

Aside from the lived frustrations and tensions of everyday domestic life, which it discloses so vividly, the story of Peggy and Harry's TV-video cabinet, like that of Ted and June's dining room table, shows the importance of a field to the becoming of consumer objects. Moreover, as with Ted and June's table, the TV-video cabinet discloses how the social relations of cohabitation are enacted in ordinary consumer objects. Unlike Peggy and Harry's other pieces of furniture, which tellingly remained covered by cloth and plastic for the duration of the modernisation work, being positioned in the flow of the activities of modernisation exposed the TV-video cabinet to accidental damage. In turn, damage exposed the pale colouration and rough, splintered texture of spliced pine wood. Harry's response to this – noteworthy in that it is similar to Ted's – is to suggest physical restoration. But in this case repair is seen to involve the use of manufactured preparations (imitation wood filler i.e. plastic). What this suggests is that, for Harry, consumer objects can be restored by attending to line. To restore the edge using fabrications of an approximately matching colour will suffice, for him. That they will not for Peggy is, we suggest, about three things: because this restored object would be known by her to be inauthentic; because the presence of the repair would testify to a temporary lack of care for their things; and because to retain the repaired would be to suggest that they either could not afford or

were too thrifty to go out and buy a (known to be cheap) replacement. This is worthy of comment. As the person who cleans their home, routinely spraying and shining-up their furniture using Pledge¹¹, Peggy knows that a restored filler will not ‘come up’ like the former veneer surface; that its dullness will advertise the presence of a different substance in the wood, disclosing the edge as a fake. Further, for Peggy, as for so many of the other women who live on this street, to keep things looking like new, through care and cleaning, lies at the heart of social respectability (Skeggs, 1997). Preserving consumer objects as new is critical in this endeavour. So, to hold on to and to continue to clean that that has deteriorated through (a temporary) lack of care is potentially a source of shame for Peggy, particularly since she knows that she can restore her respectability (and therefore social order) at a stroke, through purchasing a new and cheap replacement from Argos. Indeed, not to go out and buy the new replacement would have been both to contest the valuation placed on the new/just-as-new on this street and to challenge prevailing understandings of the bargain, in which spending (rather than making-do i.e. repair) is the means to saving (Miller, 1998). Harry’s suggestions, then, whilst they made perfect sense to him, were ones that threatened his wife’s identity, going to the heart of her identity as a consumer, as well as a woman living on this street; hence her ire and invective.

Peggy and Harry’s TV-video cabinet tells a story that shows the social limits to repair. Nonetheless, it is a repair story, albeit a failed one in this household, and one that was initiated by exactly the kind of accidental damage to objects that results from co-presences and over-lapping consumer practices in home interiors. In this respect it is very similar to Ted and June’s dining room table. Our final story, however, moves to an altogether different register, highlighting that consumer objects in homes are not only restored and repaired but also intentionally and irrevocably damaged by consumers. Such deliberate acts of sabotage are a key means by which the social life of things in particular homes come to be terminated.¹²

¹¹ Pledge is a brand of furniture cleaner not dissimilar to the Mr Sheen discussed in footnote 7.

¹² It is important to note here that researching what happens to objects in home consumption can be a difficult type of fieldwork, as risky for participants as for researchers who find it necessary to tell difficult stories, such as the one that follows, about people through what they do with and to their things. Ethically this poses major dilemmas. What we have done here therefore is to mess this story up, to use not just pseudonyms but also to muddy the composition of this household and its history. What we cannot change however, is the object, for this is what our story is about, and changing the object changes the story, to a degree that the story no longer makes sense.

4: The failure of maintenance and subsequent sabotage: a cream leather three piece suite

Living on the same street as Peggy and Harry are '20-somethings' Clare and Nathan, and their five year old daughter Abigail. Unlike Peggy and Harry, Clare and Nathan used the opportunity afforded by modernisation to get rid of all their furniture, furnishings and appliances, replacing these with new purchases. Throughout the modernisation work, however, they held on to a cream leather three piece suite, as this provided them with their only form of seating at the time (Figures 7 and 8). The story of this three piece suite is as follows.

Figures 7 and 8 about here

Having lived together initially in a small one bedroom flat, Clare, Nathan and the then toddler, Abigail, moved to a three-bedroom council property with a large living room. At the time (the end of the 1990s), cream furniture was the height of mass-market fashion in furnishings, and cream leather in particular filled the display areas of all the major out-of-town mass-market furniture retailers. Like many women living on this street, Clare wanted a cream suite for their new living room. As with Ted and June's dining room furniture, this suite appeared to her at the time to say everything about her and Nathan as a couple. It was fashionable, modern and up to date, and buying it was seen to impute the same qualities to them. However, whilst the suite was infused with these meanings at purchase, living with it started to become rather more troublesome, particularly for Clare. As we have already seen with Peggy, the appearance of things is critical to social respectability on this street. And what Clare began to find was that keeping a cream three piece suite to (socially) appropriate levels of cleanliness was practically impossible. Try as hard as she could, wiping, washing and vacuuming, the cream started to assume shades of grey, and the more visibly grey it looked the more her female relatives openly criticised her standards of cleaning and capacity to clean. As a consequence, and fairly understandably, Clare found herself starting to hate this suite. Telling this story amidst the chaos and mess of living in a structure that was in the throes of being modernised, both Clare and Nathan emphasise how the surface of the sofa and chairs have not only 'turned grey' and

‘sagged’ but developed a feel that is ‘sticky and cacky’ to the touch. This is no exaggeration: sitting in it, the sofa feels adhesive, adumbrated by unknown, invisible substances. Sitting in it is not a pleasant tactile experience. But what is also noticeable about this sofa is that its arms are criss-crossed with red and blue biro and felt tip pen doodles, etching the lines, creases, seams, buttons and puckerings of the sofa’s fabrication in leather. These doodlings are Abigail’s work. Reasoning that they have already bought a new leather three piece suite, this time in black, ‘to hide the dirt’, Clare and Nathan admit that allowing Abigail to doodle on the surface of the cream leather during modernisation has been their way of legitimating their decision to get rid of the cream suite. Risking a different, but equally censorious, set of moralities around appropriate parenting, such desperate acts disclose how imperative it is for Clare and Nathan to get rid of these things. Whilst grey-ing, sticky and cack-filled surfaces might suggest that all that is necessary to rekindle this suite is a thorough clean, the presence of permanent inks in cream leather is sufficient to propel it from the category ‘dirt’ to the less contentious category of the ‘irredeemably trashed’, thereby rendering it indisputably of rubbish value. Knowing that the surface of this suite is insufficient of itself to legitimate its discarding – looking dirty as opposed to damaged – Clare and Nathan draw on the social innocence of their daughter, and their position as parents, to enact the sabotage.

As with the previous stories, Clare and Nathan’s cream leather three piece suite exemplifies the general point that consumer objects continue to become in their consumption within the home. It also shows the importance of signs of over-consumption to the subsequent social lives of consumer objects. Furthermore, like Peggy and Harry’s TV-video cabinet, it shows that restorative practices – involving in this case cleaning – are not always successful. Indeed, in this instance it is Clare’s inabilities as a cleaner that are highlighted, exacerbated further by the suite’s fabrication in cream. Where the story departs from the previous two, however, is in its disclosure of how people work negatively, and not just positively, with objects, not to effect restoration but to enact the sabotage that legitimates the ridding and/or the destruction of consumer objects. Clare and Nathan’s suite was eventually carried away from their house by the local authority bulky waste collection service. Journeying thus, it will have been broken, crushed and swallowed-up by the giant jaws that bar the entrance to the collection vehicle; turned to waste by its positioning

within the socio-technical management systems of the waste industry. In allowing their daughter to enact the sabotage, however, Clare and Nathan also demonstrate that consumer objects not only become but are the medium for the enactment of the social relations of cohabitation, in this case of parenting. In this, their three piece suite is no different from either Peggy and Harry's TV-video cabinet or Ted and June's dining room table.

5: Conclusions

Our primary aim in this paper has been to show how consumer objects are continually becoming in the home and how consumers work with a range of restorative and conservative practices to maintain consumer objects; to arrest the traces of their consumption. By way of conclusion we make three points, highlighting the range of practices of object maintenance and their connection to value regimes; the competence and incompetence of consumers with respect to object maintenance; and the importance of object maintenance to the meta practice of consumption.

The range of restorative/conservative practices has been shown to be a spectrum. At one end is routine cleaning and care – Peggy's spraying with Pledge, Clare's washing and wiping, Peggy's dusting, Ted's polishing with beeswax. This connects through minor repair (Harry's presumption to use filler) to – at the other end – full scale refabrication (Ted's restoration of the table surface). In terms of the emergent debate on repair (Graham and Thrift, 2007), these findings suggest two distinctive modes of domestic repair. The first is the type of restoration performed by Ted. Grounded in practical knowledge of working with and in wood, with particular tools, and an appreciation of both materials and tools, Ted's rekindling of this ordinary consumer object is in the manner of the craft consumer (Campbell, 2005). The second type of domestic repair is the quick-fix mask, in which further goods (e.g. glue, filler) are used to make good. Critically however, such materials are either visibly present in the repair itself or cannot fully erase the trace of the damage to the object. Further, whilst working with such products requires a degree of skill – think of working with ceramic glues – these acts of repair are neither fully restorative of the object nor do they require the type of knowledge and skills displayed by Ted. In turn, both types of repair connect to different value regimes within the home. Thus, as has been shown,

refabrication not only restores the object to its pristine state, it places the object in a frame that preserves and protects. In so doing, refabrication has moved this table from being an ordinary consumer object and the focal point for a range of consumer practices to becoming a higher value object, reserved exclusively for practices perceived to pose no threat to its form. If not quite in the spatiality of the collection, this table certainly has aura. In contrast, the presence of the quick-fix mask form of repair in an ordinary consumer object works to devalue it. Indeed, in the case of Peggy and Harry's TV-video cabinet, this type of repair cannot be effected, precisely because in this particular home it would highlight the object to be of rubbish value. That such repairs can be enacted in other homes however is indicated by the object's passage out of this home and into another, moving seamlessly as it does so through devaluation, rubbish and revaluation (Thompson, 1979). Correspondingly, domestic repair emerges from this research as a means by which consumer objects move between value regimes within the home; as a means to both object devaluation as well as revaluation; and as a thoroughly situated social practice.

A second point made forcibly by the three object stories is that consumers have different competences with respect to the practices of object maintenance. Whilst this is clear in the actions of both Ted and Harry, it is in the third object story that competence – or, more precisely, its lack - emerges most strongly. Clare is not a skilled cleaner. Her female relatives tell her this to her face, and the object she bought discloses this too. The effects of incompetence in this case are that what began its social life in this home as an object of desire morphed into an object of hatred, with serious consequences for its future social life. Clare and Nathan's cream leather suite, then, belies accounts that focus on the stability in meaning of consumer objects, as these are bought and/or acquired. It shows that the location of consumer objects in particular homes and within particular sets of consumer competences has profound implications for the meanings of these objects and for their transience/durability within particular homes. Furthermore, it shows the potency of consumer incompetence, which emerges here as critical in the engagement of subjectivity and object. More than this though, we see here how the effects of particular purchases endure. Thus, Clare's choice of a black leather suite as a replacement is not the fashion statement it might seem. Instead, bought expressly to hide the dirt, its presence bears the trace of the cream predecessor, of competence's lack, and hints at

how consumer purchases connect up and are shaped by everyday practices beyond the point of sale.

Our third and final point is that the seemingly mundane world of consumer-enacted object maintenance and its associated constitutive practices is of considerable importance to the meta-practice of consumption (Warde, 2005). The restorative and conservative practices illustrated in this paper show that object maintenance is not only constitutive of the social lives and biographies of consumer objects – a classic position within material culture studies – but that object maintenance itself holds consumer objects in homes. It is therefore central to the stability and order of particular homes in things. In practice terms, then, object maintenance works to integrate: it ensures that particular objects remain home possessions, freezing particular rooms in certain configurations, even – as with Ted and June’s dining room furniture – transcending house moves. Equally, the failure of object maintenance has been shown to be disintegrative. Whether we take the instance of Clare and Nathan’s cream suite or Peggy and Harry’s TV-video cabinet, consumers’ failure to maintain objects introduces social disorder. Further, and that order be resumed, connects to the expulsion of the over-consumed object from the home (its ridding) and insists on the purchase of a replacement object. In this way the failure of object maintenance in the home emerges as a key driver in consumer acquisition/purchase, whilst its success is seen to mitigate against such acts. In 2001 Daniel Miller challenged consumption research to cross the threshold and properly enter the home. Doing this through depth ethnographic research we encountered home interiors that were seemingly frozen in terms of their furniture, at the time of their formation as a household. What is now clear is that the practices of object maintenance are critical in accounting for such stability. More broadly, we would argue that in a very real sense object maintenance drives the consumer world, much as Graham and Thrift have argued that it constitutes the city.

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