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Rebecca Leach[1]

What happened at home with art: tracing the experience of consumers?

Introduction

This chapter is based on 18 in-depth interviews with people who have purchased one or more items from the At Home With Art (AHWA) range. All purchasers bought the primary item from Homebase. The interviews were conducted between March and September 2001 in London and 3 cities in the Midlands, North-west and North-east. This research was funded by the Arts Council and conducted by the Susie Fisher group in collaboration with myself. Respondents were recruited to represent a balance of age, gender, region and item purchased.[2] This piece explores some of the real domestic contexts of the pieces sold at Homebase, a snapshot of how these objects have been accommodated (and accommodated to). In writing this chapter, it is not my intention to claim generalisable findings about the purchasers – the research was qualitative and very small-scale – but to give a rich illustration of some of the accommodations that are made with things and the webs of meaning that transform them from things into belongings.

This chapter aims to document some of the ways people have incorporated these objects into their lives, and explore what enrichments of their visual culture occur because of this. There are some straightforward implications for projects trying to make such connections again but overall this piece recognizes the embedded nature of people's understandings of culture and, as such, does not attempt to divorce them from their settings. This piece celebrates the richness of everyday life. It is people's experiences and interpretations that make ordinary things extraordinary, and not the other way around: it is not for art to enrich people's lives since lives are already rich. Where this project has been most successful – in terms of these respondents – is where it has chimed in with their existing values, often in unspoken ways, and given a fraction more confidence with creative decision making. The findings indicate the embedded nature of things and cultural objects in peoples' lives: things in homes cannot be separated easily from families, financial circumstances, individual and broader senses of taste, cultural ideas and myths about how homes should be. There is one stance, discussed below, in which the AHWA objects are taken into the home in an explicitly aesthetically discriminating manner – as art objects carefully chosen because of their place in the art world. Such respondents treat their homes almost entirely like galleries, curating the space and carefully managing its displaying qualities. For most respondents however, the judgements are made more haphazardly, reflecting the multiple demands that homes place on us.

In the first part of this chapter, I take up Painter's idea of contagion and explore what it might mean, a compelling idea in our appreciation of objects. It is richly suggestive of a key dynamic in domestic taste – the idea that things simply speak to people without mediation. In the empirical discussion that follows, this theme is problematised. This unspoken dynamic is at work but such a process is neither fully transparent nor opaque. There are discourses and languages of home that are learnt, yet they are often experienced as immediate and unmediated by people: it is a fundamental mechanism of consumer success that objects appear to have objective qualities [Miller, 1987]. As the large edifice of work on consumer objects tells us this process is dialectical: examined at different moments, it can be both structural and phenomenal [see for example Appadurai, 1986; Douglas, 1991; Douglas & Isherwood, 1978; Willis, 1990]. What I am concerned with here is the experiential side of this dialectic: the significances determined by respondents as they include AHWA pieces in their lives. Cummings nicely describes this interaction as 'curating ourselves into being' [1997: 16] – this idea is fundamental to this chapter, reliant on a material culture that extends well beyond the gallery and the university. In discussing curation and accommodation, there are themes: functionality and inevitability, negotiation and singularity, transformation and obstinacy in the objects.

Giving house-room to contagion

In his introduction to the AHWA catalogue, Painter reminds us of the dualism between art-world and the domestic-world that excludes contemporary art from homes:

> To say ‘I wouldn’t hang that on my living room wall’ is thought to exemplify philistinism, a lack of regard for the intrinsic characteristics of the work as ‘art’[1999: 6]

He goes on to say that contemporary art might be appreciated through familiarity and contagion rather than ‘education’ or ‘knowledge’. Like ‘gardening or football… it begins at home – with family and friends – not seeming like knowledge at all’ [Painter, 1999: 7]. So was AHWA contagious, and have people begun to feel at home with (this) art?

What does contagion mean? Painter seems to imply a kind of social contagion – bits of information passed on in familial settings. We also have to evaluate this project in terms of incremental adjustments to the visual culture of home, interior décor, degrees of engagement with and response to artistic practice. In this respect, its micro-impact mirrors the minutiae in the ‘project of home’ for most people. A rollercoaster of emotional and symbolic attachment, perhaps tinged with violence or the desperate need to escape, perhaps with sentimental longing for the past, home is experienced with an eye on temporality. You might well feel at home now that you’ve discovered your style – as some respondents indicate – or because you’ve only just got somewhere you consider home, or feel not at home because you’ll never be as comfortable as your early childhood. You might well have things in your house you’d never have considered 10 years ago or have thrown away the thing that would ‘make’ your house today – if only you’d remembered the vicissitudes of fashion. However comforting it is to sink into whatever physical and social environment we call home in the immediate now, we all remake it: fiddle, adjust and reinterpret. The achingly smart and rich might well get someone else to do it for them every few years but even they will have a stashed closet of past or future dreams. This project's impact is, like much art, incremental and ripe for contagion – once you put the idea out there, it multiplies where it can.

Here, the objects have – in some cases – worked through a stealthy visual and domestic culture, transferring ideas between the object and the home, incrementally adjusting the vision and interpretation of their owners. They have rubbed off tiny bits of themselves onto other objects (and people) and this process has worked in reverse: connections are made in the stories that are told that – perhaps had not been noticed before they were asked to reflect but – on reflection, become significant biographies. The germs that then attach to other things multiply, for some as part of an ecosystem of visual and material themes that start from self, family and home and spread out to say 'here I am'. Contagion and ecosystem are good metaphors for how these things happen in homes: they do compete for survival against wallpaper, collections, mess, hoarding tendencies, children and animals; they do have relationships with furniture and knick-knacks that are more than their parts; they do have environmental and personal impacts that are unknown and evolving.

For some, this germ of contagion is a controlled experiment, a Darwinian natural selection – the best, latest example of a Thing that is fittest for purpose: the design purists in particular (discussed below) represent this. For others though, contagion is by way of a primordial soup: inevitable and excessive random variation, Things multiplying and falling in love with or threatening a war with other stuff. The hoarders and collectors, gripped by the physical inevitability of their stuff, chucked the Things in to see what happened. My co-researcher Shaku Lalvani said of one interviewee 'it is as if the things in her house have mated and produced the towel'. In these respondents texture is not only important (many of the purist minimalists find importance in texture) but abundant and rampant. The thing/home relation is still contagious whether you hold the things at arm's length and weigh them up with a glossy interiors or art magazine at your side, or whether you chuck them in and let them fight it out with the cat, the mucky old sofa you can't afford to replace and your embarrassing collection of random crockery.

The objects transformed into belongings once at home become part of an ordering system: belongings are one point on a continuum of objects in a classificatory scheme that marks out treasured things, decorative things, art world objects and so on. Where people place these objects, what they do with them and what they say about them tells us much about people's own classificatory schemes and meaning systems. However, it is important to recognize that this 'placement' that happens at the everyday level is not free of the baggage of social structure and symbolic system. Of particular importance in this case is the legacy of symbolic expectation and practical constraint that are attached to the idea of house and home.

There is a long history of meanings for display in homes which impact upon what gets allowed in and where it is put or what is done with it once it arrives. It is impossible to discuss this project without reflecting on this, although the broader debates are reflected elsewhere in this volume. Some of these constraints are related to the material realities of housing in Britain: the majority of us live in urban or suburban houses, separate from work and educational spaces, cohabiting with family members or partners. Within that framework, however, symbolic classifications further mark out the territory of home. There has been extensive debate on the mythological and idealized nature of the home [see for example Rybczynski, 1988:

Chapman & Hockey, 1999]. Such debate clearly identifies home as an ambiguous and multivalent idea which performs roles of privacy, security, entrapment, comfort, boredom, isolation, mythic idealization of the past, rural fantasy, the site for self-expression, the site for family centredness, family conflict and violence, the place of 'feminine arts' and women's primary oppression. There can be little doubt that the home has a highly salient symbolic status and the dominant mythic reality of British life is partially centred on ideas of home. Yet at the same time, home is the site and source of the familiar – the material reality of home blends into its sense as the everyday lifeworld.

When people live in or create ideas of home anew, they are inevitably informed by this mythic history – either using its motifs or actively rejecting or modifying them. Such a history is, then, hard to escape, and is embedded in our presumptions about what goes where, what is not done and what it all means. Even when there is a wholesale rejection of some of the more obvious fashions of bourgeois homemaking that dominate mid 20th Century Britain, the remnants of the discourse still remain. This legacy is vital in understanding the impact of this project, since it partially explains some of the hurdles that have to be climbed to get contemporary art out of galleries, public sites and into other less spectacular settings.

Who is at home with art?

There is evidence (albeit descriptive) of some incremental degrees of influence that this project contributes to but is not the sole cause of. It is more that it responds to something already there: a series of desires people did not know they had until they discovered them. The two key findings that I am most persuaded by are the contextual and changing nature of material practices in the home; and the way this project appealed to a scale and tactility that seems to have been much appreciated. Before I discuss these however, it is worth asking what relationship these respondents might have developed to more direct interpretations of contemporary art.

Many respondents discuss their sense of certainly having moved towards modernism in taste – for art and for home decor. Some directly talk about TV programmes, Habitat and IKEA, shifting fashions in interiors as factors influencing this change. But many don't – and discuss it in terms of their own transitions: getting older and wanting less clutter as they downsize, get busier, children grow up, have more money to spend or they simply want to see more space. And some discuss contemporary art – influenced particularly by the opening of the Tate Modern (and although many had not visited, they knew they wanted to or knew about it) and the relatively high publicity of BritArt and the Turner Prize recently. They don't categorically say they have been influenced to think about contemporary art by this project. But then they wouldn't, any more than an art critic or art historian would be able to admit to having Eames chairs because of magazines such as Wallpaper or Elle Decoration. Cultural influence just does not work like that.

Although many of the respondents were gallery-attenders, their relationship with art and contemporary art in particular was complicated. It was important to all respondents to tell some stories about their own history or values in relation to the art world. Although most had little background in art or art history, most had an interest. This ranged from an ex-students of fine art, now teaching sculpture; an architect; people whose partners or family members were designers, photographers or architects; people whose family produced or studied art; and people who produced art and craft themselves. A number of respondents referred to the buying process in terms of support for the artists or at least buying to support the idea of the whole project.

This was sometimes presented as supporting struggling or up-and-coming artists which in one sense might be considered a failure of the project to educate people about the artists themselves. However, I don't think it has to be viewed in these terms as this support had an important status for these respondents. It was a small myth of patronage and ownership – people conceiving of themselves as collectors, the sort of people who own art – and in terms of what gets the pieces across the threshold, this should not be underestimated. Interestingly, not only did most respondents not know who the artists were, they didn't care very much. There was a very slight hint of perhaps watching out for their name in future but not significantly. By contrast, it was those well-versed in art-world terminology who spoke most of 'my little Antony Gormley' or 'miniature Richard Deacon' – particularly the ex-art-student who had various things signed and packed away. On the one hand, this is obvious – arts followers types would know their names and follow their work. But that most respondents dealt with the objects in relation to their thingliness and their contextualisation in their homes; and the arty types dropped hints about future value indicated a pleasing inversion – even if ironic on the part of the art-literate – of the intrinsic value/commercialism divide.

Some respondents had read the catalogue or seen the TV programme, but most interpreted and used the pieces in their own way. One of the nice things is the ways people pick up something of the artists' apparent intentions, even when they are not aware of prior comments and processes.

> Colin Painter: Part of Cragg's reasoning was …droll and sound. He always loses his garden tools – so why not make tools that you can leave in the earth when you finish working? [Painter, 1999: 17]
>
> Tony Cragg: It is a modernist cliché that art has to be challenging or disturbing. That is not the point. Art is experiential. Art offers new experiences that give us a bigger, better framework of references and, at the

> end of it, makes us happier in our lives and therefore fitter to survive [Painter, 1999: 20]
>
> Barbara: …well, we were in Homebase looking around different things and Mike [laughing] picked this up and said 'now you're not likely to lose this on the allotment' – because, to be quite honest, I've lost two or three at least; you know, on the allotment its easy to put them down when you're reading and you forget, you don't see them in the distance… but this, it shows up! [Laughs] From a distance – doesn't it? So that was why… And erm we've got a number of friends who've got allotments around us and they all said the same thing, you know, that they'd never seen those before and it was the same idea as I had, that you wouldn't lose them. But I did think I ought to keep washing it so that it wouldn't go… dirty grey like it is. But they're very good, very strong. Oh I have left it in the ground. Sometimes we go for three or four hours and you know it's like a garden and you wander around don't you, see some weeds or you do a bit of work on a certain patch and move on and as I say I can always see where it is. Whereas the other small ones they just go into the ground or behind a bush… a currant bush or something and… [trowel]

It is hard to quantify it on the basis of this very small scale research but one of the crucial things in this project has been the ability to touch the pieces. A number of respondents were the sort who get into trouble in galleries for touching things, or who claim everything in the house should be handled, however precious. Handling the objects before buying them, being able to rearrange them and relocate them, even vicariously ('it could go there; but I haven't tried it yet') is a kind of curatorship that might be the thing that eases the gap between difficult abstraction and comfort. The touchability and scale of these objects is a winning success: not only do they fit in the home, they fit in the hand. It isn't an easy relation: kids fiddling with the ceramic sculpture, how to wash or display the plate, will the light get broken, will the trowel get dirty, does the sound sculpture work, what if I have to cover up the pegs with coats, does the metal sculpture look better this or that way up, I'll stroke the towel but I'm not going to use it on the beach, the shower curtain stiffly sticks out but at least it doesn't cling… But this tension and accommodation provides a nice contrast to the idea of art as a visual and intellectual reverie – at home, you might just sit and look and think; but then you might move it and fiddle around with it; and at other times, usurped by some other interest, it will fade into the furniture and familiarity, only brought to life again for ritual celebrations.

> Alison Wilding: I don't think I've ever made something which can be used and displayed in so many different ways. Usually my work has a definite orientation. The nature of the project has brought this about. I like to think that my work rewards attention over time and has several layers to penetrate. This possibility is particularly strong in the home where people can live with the work [Painter, 1999: 62]
>
> Matthew: It does get moved around to different angles sometimes but that sort of shows its shape… to best effect. I'm not sure its ever been the other way up completely – flat, like a hat… the word that springs to mind is like a colander really… but I mean it's a bit like the millennium dome in retrospect… but I suppose you'd think of it as a sort of bowl really. I've never actually done it but I suppose you could… well, maybe you wouldn't… I can't imagine doing it but you might want to put pot-pourri in it. But not really – I don't think it's a pot-pourri sort of thing! I'd imagine it would be nice hung on the wall because its got that hole and it sort of begs to be hung on the wall. Possibly yeah, the thing that worries me is what to hang it on the wall with because you need something that's not going to chip it or crack it or… I mean one of the images that sticks in your mind with this, when there's multiples of them… I think there was a picture in a home magazine when it was launched… an enormous array of them. Anything in that sort of volume is quite awe inspiring really. But you wouldn't be able to do that in your own house unless you had a really big space… It's even –I'm not sure where it has gone – there was a bit of paper with a rainbow on it that the girls had done for some thing else [a local fair] – a rainbow from Noah's Ark got put inside the bowl… I think I prefer it plain! I think if you had enough of them you could try painting them different colours [ceramic sculpture – see figure 1].

Some respondents have a particularly rich tactile life, not only clear about their need to touch but also able to classify their horror at certain kinds of surfaces:

> Lucy: I think I'm quite an earthy person, quite a sensual person so they're often things that are nice to touch as well… So my Buddha is very shiny and just is tactile. I suppose I like the feel of things, I like to…
>
> …and I have things that I particularly don't like the feel of as well. This is probably going to sound bizarre but I have problem with things like card tables, the baize… I cannot bear that, or anything like that… peach skins. But then I do like things that often feel… cool actually, cool to touch.

I have written about this phenomenological love/hate relationship with objects elsewhere [Leach, 1998] but here it is important just to say that we need to begin, however difficult for critics and sociologists, to understand the material, unspoken relationships with things to really understand what people might learn – or catch, in the contagious sense above – from art. Where they can touch it, perhaps they fear it less. Where they can domesticate it and curate it in their own way, they have a chance to defend it in ways that would not be possible in a gallery. The key example of this is the way AHWA pieces fulfilled a very traditional domestic role: as conversation pieces. Categorically unlike interior design (upon which commentary is a serious faux pas and threat), these objects invited comment and respondents encouraged it. The incorporation of these things into the home lends itself to new boundaries being drawn around person and objects [Belk, 1988; Douglas, 1991; McCracken, 1990] – investing it with their own personhood, their own bit of art needed defence against family dissenters, thereby strengthening the relationship with it.

Perhaps the most interesting transformations were for those who knew nothing about the project before this research began. Two very interesting respondents had bought the AHWA products knowing nothing more than they liked them. They had not been aware at all about the project because the products were remaindered on sale and because they had not seen any of the display information nor had the items been sold with its packaging (which included an information leaflet). Both, however, admitted that it might have been available but they might have missed it. They had not even remotely imagined the pieces to be art but were delighted to find them part of this project when they were recruited for this research. It transpired that both women had a well-established sense of their material culture or even what they called an ‘artistic temperament’. Both were heavily engaged in home craft activities and had tried a variety of activities such as needlework, crocheting and knitting. Both homes reflected this with a rich variety of detail and colour: Daphne's glass collection like an Impressionist painting on her window sill; Barbara's attention to detail in changing her silk flowers as they came into 'season'.

They were both retired administrators, although Daphne, retired on health grounds, hoped to return to work. Barbara [trowel – see figure 2] was married to a photographer; Daphne [shower curtain – see figure 3], was divorced from an architect. Both humourously described their own negotiations with their aesthetically single-minded husbands in order to let in the chaotic scramble of crafty and pretty details to their homes. While both husbands seemed to be described as traditionalists, they were pared-down, almost modernist traditionalists, preferring white walls and wooden floors. Now divorced, Daphne had let her own style run riot, although this was tempered by a wistful recollection of her financially solvent married life compared with her economic hardship now she was on disability benefits. On the one hand she remembered the smart pared-down house of her marriage with fondness, yet on the other she relished some of the chaotic making-do of her current situation (struggling a little, about to sell up and move somewhere smaller closer to her sister). This making-do meant, in fact, that her things, especially purchases, meant much more to her: economy generated a sense of true desires for things that were hard-won. Making-do is a nice metaphor for Daphne in other ways: she was waiting for her son to move on, waiting to get back to work, waiting to move house, waiting to start her next craft project.

For these two women, the research process confirmed their instincts about the objects as something quite special: a shower curtain that had, to her relatives, confirmed her as childish and quirky, was vindicated as a purchase; a garden trowel, the talk of the allotment as a potential sex-toy, was even more a conversation piece as well as being tremendously useful. Moreover, the making and making do that these women have achieved - both working while taking full responsibility for homes and families, including foster children in Daphne's case – remind us of the tensions between 'keeping busy', homemaking and housework that many women face. The somewhat funny and frivolous purchases of the trowel and shower curtain – while both fully in use – are a damned good joke in this context. These two examples are so nice because they demonstrate how particular objects can intervene and stand out because of the social role they play. Daphne's attachment to her things was a relentless claim to identity, this research a vindication of her individuality. She expressed an interest in taking a degree in textiles as a mature student – nobody could claim that AHWA was causal in this move, but if it infected her further with the desire, all to the good.

A separate case reminds us of the transformations objects undergo in the battleground of domestic relationships. David, an architect, plainly links his own taste to his vocation such that it dominated his visual and material understanding: 'I think architecture school has quite a powerful effect on you. It does change your perception of space and buildings and objects an awful lot and you're much more critical'. He was quite strident in his personal model of good taste yet had a number of interactions which required negotiation with significant others. Defending himself against his mother's taste and her view of his tastes as a passing phase, unwanted presents were packed away, sold at carboot sales or argued over. David demonstrates considerable disattachment to certain objects that he does not value, for example, a canteen of inherited cutlery which he would rather sell but his mother wants him to keep. Although he values them in monetary terms, any sentimental or aesthetic value is absent. There is a pattern here that emerges with other respondents: an aesthetic certainty which is very inclusive and exclusive, almost rigid in its absolutism. However, this ideal type aesthetic scheme is, perhaps fortunately, modified by domestic circumstances in many cases: while David would prefer purist control over his environment, his partner – with quite different tastes – would not allow it [see figure 4].

> David: …I bought three and then Jo used 2 to hang the wooden tabletop on the wall. I bought the other two to make back up the original three which I'm not quite sure what I'm going to do with yet but I've still got them. We've got two on the wall, which are supporting this Malawian table top which is about half a metre diameter []. And we've got three left.

When David bought 3 pegs, he knew how they would be hung with an architect's precision: '…in a row, horizontally… about 300mm apart'. He had envisaged them in a number of places, perhaps to the left of the window in their front room which the main door opened straight on to and which was to be used as a dining room. He had fully intended to use them as coathooks, although he thought them a little expensive to do so. He also recognized an ambivalence in imagining such a cleanly presented arrangement and then messing it up with coats, especially as he liked to be neat and tidy.

However, his plans were changed when his partner put two of them up in the bedroom to use prop up a round Malawian table top. This was not his decision and he felt strongly enough to go back to Homebase to buy 2 more pegs to complete the set of 3. Although he conceded that in the end he felt this arrangement worked quite well, there was some ambivalence and it was clear that the purchase, placement and modification of material objects was present in the negotiation of his relationship with his partner, as indeed it is with many people. The tension between the couple's taste and their claims for independence in choice, purchase and placement are evident in David's account. This is instructive, since it reminds us that setting up home with a partner can be a challenging material process in which partners use the material environment to stake out relative power and control. The pegs here transform into a compromise, an accommodation of the other, although the decision to use them for this purpose, without his knowledge, seemed in his account almost like a challenge, a territorial claim.

David comes round to the arrangement – unsure at first about the scale of the table top with the pegs, he gets used to it (though he still buys two more – a return challenge perhaps?). Steve and Mary [see figure 5] on the other hand, older and perhaps longer established in their relationship, had tastes that were convergent:

> Mary: Cos we had wanted something to put Jackson on hadn't we?
> Steve:Yes, it's to do with that difficult picture, pictures that shape don't hang on a string very well, they tend to flop off he wall so we had it screwed to the wall and didn't like the look of that. I had the things already and then the penny dropped.

It is interesting then, in such different circumstances and neither recalling reading the catalogue, that both pairs chose to use the pegs as props for art or decorative things, much as Gormley suggested in relation to the household he worked in:

> Antony Gormley: Their flat was full of things hanging on walls that might not have been thought of as belonging on walls – a leather bag from Morocco or a piece of embroidered clothing from Baluchistan – relating to experiences in their lives. In the end I made this thing that supports that desire to hang things on the wall. I've reinvented a nail. …My nail, or peg, (…) act(s) as a support for the isolation of objects which could then be looked at in a different way [Painter, 1999: 31]

It is not only the physical and symbolic legacy of home that needs engaging with: the social relations within and without the home affect fundamentally the objects and visual cultures within them. Homes are territories for family battlegrounds, not least for space and control over objects. Matthew was not just railing against style tyrannies but negotiating the complexities of two daughters, a textile designer wife, a number of guinea pigs and stick insects and an evaporating budget. Matthew would have preferred 'minimalist' but family prevented it and the whole family were touchingly attached to the paper rainbow their elder daughter had placed in the bowl, even though he would have preferred it without. In this light, the 'extravagance' of his purchase of the ceramic sculpture was all the more significant: an expensive contemplative piece, heavily invested with unmet ideals, yet modified into sentimentality by the domestic setting. Most say publicly that they agree, yet many compromise for the sake of their partner and children: thus material family histories are made. David acquiesced to the Malawian table top though was put out to find the pegs had been used without his consent; Sarah came to terms with her husband's golf-course photos and being so in charge of her environment, she didn't allow it to matter that he hated her ceramic sculpture; Daphne, now divorced, could have almost whatever she wanted, but could not fully shake off her abundant past. These negotiations are a crucial factor in understanding the object world of the home.

Curating homes 1: custodians of housing style

While family negotiation is crucial, there are wider discourses of homeliness that both limit and demand certain symbolic practices in certain types of homes. It turns residents almost into museum curators, custodians of heritage rather than radical gallery installers. This operates on three levels: first the constraints imposed by the physical buildings and organization of space – the majority of British housing conforms to similar styles and patterns, dominated by vernacular Victorian, Edwardian and Georgian architecture and patterns. Modern housing constitutes less than a tenth of housing stock in Britain [Brindley, in Chapman & Hockey, 1999: 35] and the majority of that is council housing. The characterful and desirable Victorian ideal, reinvented in 1980s Britain, remains a powerful influence partly because of its spatial organization (front room, back room, kitchen) and partly because of the dominance of Victorian ideas of homeliness in British culture [Hepworth, in Chapman & Hockey, 1999].

The tyranny of character is evident in some stories that are told by respondents: because character refers to the limited number of referents outlined above, people are reluctant to break away from it. This, allied with the concern for having things that 'go' with the style of the house and with each other, is part of the history of the bourgeois home that retains an influence on people's choices. The consequence of this is that choices of objects for the home become part of a decorating scheme that seeks to preserve the character of the house. This leads to a kind of curation, more museum than gallery curation, custodianship of things that are 'in keeping' with the house – often with an eye on resale value. AHWA offered a challenge to this ethic, although some respondents had not fully managed to break away from this tyranny of Victorian character. Having moved to a newer house, this woman found herself liberated:

> Lucy: I really thought this would not be the sort of house I would ever want to live in because it's kind of modern. We lived in a big Victorian place and I come from the countryside in big old houses, but actually I do like this because it's like a blank piece of paper, so you could actually do much more modern and contemporary things with it. Which you could never have done in our old place which was Victorian and you just… I felt very constrained by a particular style whereas here, you can actually do what you like which is great, we like that. [plate]

The limits placed on choice are not necessarily undesirable: as Oliver et al point out in their seminal book on suburbia [1994 (1981)], giving people what they want is always a bad thing, and we ought not to succumb to the snobbery of assuming that if only they knew better they'd want the same as 'us'. Bentley [in Oliver et al, 1994] reminds us of some of the rules that the British house came to expect, crystallized in mid-Century suburban design but having a much wider impact. The functional separation of rooms, a hangover from Victorian ideas of a family sitting room and dining room, with a separate parlour for 'best', leads to clear ideas about what goes where. These ideas are still with us, however dated they seem and however modified by multipurpose living spaces. One woman in our study has her old furniture in the 'kids' living room, another stores away her best things for ritual celebrations.

Further constraints are offered by the ability to display objects in the average British house. Put simply there are not many opportunities and with limiting requirements on scale. Oliver et al [1994] discuss the hearth, mantel and bay window as classic sites for display – natural plinths, they are often designed and used as focal points for decorative things; you might add the sideboard and a variety of walls and tables. Some people have dressers and displays cabinets: for three women in our study the dresser was an aspirational item, either that they had used or wanted to; for three separate respondents in our study – self-described as 'arty' types – the glass vitrine, either made or salvaged was the preferred display method. It was rare for people to stand or lie cherished/decorative things on the floor. There were some exceptions: two women, both collectors, used the floor as display areas. Both seemed to make the space more gallery-like: one shone a special light on her instruments in the corner; the other laid out her collection around the perimeter against gallery-standard décor of stripped wooden floors and white walls. The lamp was the exception to the AHWA objects which were generally not placed on the floor and in one case a bounded floor (in the form of the hearth) was deemed suitable for the metal sculpture [see figure 6]. The lamp in particular shows up the nice combination of domestic and arty expectations in this placement: on the floor it fits the living room model of floor or standard lamp; yet it was also placed – in both cases – in corners, isolated from other things, better to appreciate its form.

For those reasonably well-versed in visual culture, buying from AHWA was a confirmation of the refreshing approach of this project and reflects a sort of relief that such things should be available. This is highly evident in one man's account of what is available in home cultures, dragged down by mediocrity. This mediocrity operates on a continuum – incorporating household objects as well as architecture and design:

> Matthew:…I bought that picture because I wanted to support the artist. I thought, you know, everyone's buying other stuff. And I thought, here's Sainsbury's, a commercial enterprise, supporting something artistic or whatever… (…) But you want to say, yes, there are people out here that are interested and don't just want rubbish all the time, cheapened things.
>
> …you know, people who normally have got good taste bring out the most appalling Eternal Beau dishes – nothing personal! – the sort of wheat-coloured pots…
>
> …this house is a mock-Tudor design and given the chance I'd rather have had a brand new one that wasn't mock-anything. I think that epitomizes the general availability of domestic products – there's so much mock-this and mock-that, it's all in the Tudor style or the Mexican style… (…) I just wish there was something available that wasn't Eternal Beau! Why do we have to have pretend things? It really does bug me…[ceramic sculpture]

AHWA stood – for Matthew at least – as an escape into something liberating, a visual culture to take him away (just a little) from domestic chaos.

Curating homes 2: home as gallery

In contrast to the somewhat chaotic curation of home described above there is another register of curation, somewhere between managing a gallery and a galley. In such stories, the chosen objects have special status within a home which is designed and arranged with much consideration and deliberation. In fact, in some cases, it is as if this arrangement of home is itself the priority, not children, nor relationship nor anything socially domestic. The home-making and preserving is carefully managed and policed and objects are thus allowed to be properly revered. This reverie is visual: placed appropriately as in a gallery space, without distraction – in fact the design of the home is often chosen to support this curatorial activity. Plain white walls, plain wooden floors, absence of knick-knacks and clutter predominate [see for example, Jenny, figure 7].

There is a connection – as you might expect - between this sort of home-making and concern for knowledge and provenance of the objects staged. In such homes, objects are mostly bought because they fit in to the scheme of taste alongside other valued objects – names are important and things that don't fit are deliberately excluded. Or at least packed away. Yet in such cases, objects are talked about with art-worldly confidence: that things 'work' in certain places, that materials have particular qualities, that certain producers and artists can be defined and understood. This is significant because while on the one hand such homes appear almost gratingly staged, on the other the protagonists retain a belief in their own ability to choose pieces because of the qualities of the piece rather than some abstract symbolic fashion. Whether this is affected more or less consciously does not matter: the idea that the piece speaks directly for itself allows the illusion of a free choice.

For some respondents, this process is less curatorial, more design orientated, relating to product design and architectural design in particular. This is the galley mentality as opposed to gallery mentality: the beautiful, superbly functional kitchen implement stands as the key motif here.

The AHWA objects for respondents in this mode fitted in to a clearly defined category of good design. For one such respondent it is particularly absolute. Brought up in an architect's household, always kept very tidy, when she tells of longing for something pink and plastic one wonders what desirous dangers pink plastic might hold for her. Self-confessedly conservative she discusses at length how she always 'knows what she likes'. This is an interesting way of putting it and she says it over and over as if in fact, she is reminding herself that she knows [see figure 8].

> Sarah: I was just very comfortable with it… it was part of what I surround myself with now. I also have… I'm quite lucky, I suppose, I don't know, when I see something I know whether I like it or not […] when I see something I know whether it's me or not. And I knew – when I saw that – I just knew that I liked it. I mean I didn't for instance like the gardening fork and trowel. I thought the idea was great you know stick them in your garden and leave them there but that whole ethic isn't really me – I don't like leaving things there… and I didn't like those. I didn't like the beach towel particularly. Because I thought maybe that was where they were beginning to sell out a bit. But maybe that's because when I see something I like I know I like it. And I don't… and I'm very sure about that, I don't have to be persuaded into something so when I have chosen something I don't worry about it from then on. I don't keep coming back and thinking now 'do I like that?' because I know I do.
>
> I like really well designed kitchen utensils, I like well designed knives. I don't have stuff on show and then have a load of tat in the cupboard that… I like to use… I like things that work well.
>
> If you've got to make dinner for 5 people, 365 nights of the year, you might as well do it with something that's nice to use and nice to look at. And I do work pretty much full-time, not completely full-time and I've got a very very busy life and I like to do things well, I like… I enjoy cooking, I like to have a nice knife, I do bone chicken, I do do stuff that requires good utensils, I don't buy ready meals and shove them in the oven. You know I cook on an Aga because I like it, I love it, I've always wanted one… (…) I knit. If I knit a jumper for my sister's kids – mine are too big to do anything for – I'll use expensive wool

> because I want to use… if I'm going to be spending that amount of time doing the knitting I want to be using a wool that feels nice when you're doing it.
>
> I think people ought to pay for design, for well designed items. And I think that I will pay £30 for a corkscrew if it works and won't pay £30 for an Alessi corkscrew that doesn't work. You know I don't like to buy things because they look designer, if their function doesn't… I suppose it's one thing I've just bought is that I do absolutely love and it's a fantastic potato peeler, which I saw in a magazine as being… And I actually went all the way to Harvey Nichols to buy it… And you can imagine it… it cost me about 25 quid to buy it and it's brilliant! I love to use it, every time I peel potatoes with it I think its great, it's a really nice thing to use! [ceramic sculpture]

The device of function here is letting her off the hook, as for a number of other respondents. She talks in terms of only having things that are beautiful and functional – and if only others would wake up to it. This is dissembling somewhat – the excuse of functionality allows the conservatism to reign without interruption. A few key rules about colour and texture mean little danger; a few key shops and brands mean a comfort zone she does not have to think about: everything in the house comes from Heal's, the Conran shop, Habitat or IKEA 'depending on how much money we have at the time'. She cherishes most her Global knives and her £25 potato peeler from Harvey Nichols; following in her father's footsteps, she would not dream of having a toy box in the living room. The visual culture is calculated and riddled with brand and social hierarchies, and although finally recognizing the social judgements being made by her position, the interviewee is nevertheless maintaining an absolutist version of taste that relies on the apparently intrinsic qualities of good, beautiful design.

Moreover, as well as 'knowing what she likes', another key feature in her visual culture is the constant moving and rearranging of things. As for many respondents who do this it indicates a creative responsiveness. Yet at the same time there's a kind of anger or at least rootlessness in it and indeed in the ownership and use of the objects themselves: ‘if you have to cook dinner for 5 people 365 nights of the year, you might as well have things that feel good while you’re doing it’. In this case, there was a sense of the respondent really not feeling at home with things, but if she stuck to a code, it might be a little more comfortable. Decorative rearranging in this case did not seem like idle pleasure but fidgeting, like having a stone in your shoe, never quite getting it right - for all the claims of ‘knowing’ what you like.

Functionality operates on other levels also. At least one respondent, Steve, uses the terms use value and exchange value, to discuss his ambivalence about the pegs – not having much money, beautiful objects are legitimate consumerism if they’re also useful. Propping up a print of a Jackson Pollock painting [see figure 5], he says that he no longer thinks of the pegs as special – they’re just things now although he has kept one in the box, which still has ‘exchange value potentially’. This is quite significant as it shows up the sometimes contradictory meanings that objects hold for people: while valuing the pegs because they do a job and are beautiful, Steve keeps the box for their future value on the market, just in case. It also shows us the complex ways objects become accommodated – on the surface they have habituated to the house and just blended into the background yet in fact all the pegs are rendered special in different ways: one is saved with its packaging for posterity; the other two are revered nails (as Gormley suggested).

This is not uncommon and even people who have them carefully and artistically on display sometimes keep the box. Some claim that ‘oh yes they’ve still got the box somewhere’, often because they might need to put it back in if they decorate or move – a casual, offhand and cool denial of acquisitive tendencies. And others are excited and amused by this, self-conscious but slightly thrilled at entering this game: an art collector, stimulated by reminders on the Antiques Roadshow that provenance matters and the immaculate item in the box, with the bag and receipt, might be more valuable in years to come. One woman in our interviews, Jenny, had bought virtually everything in the series and had more than one of some: 2 lights, 12 coatpegs, 1 ceramic sculpture, 1 sound sculpture, fork and trowel, two metal sculptures, sound sculpture, a towel and 12 plates, though she'd like another 8 'so they can be used at a dinner party'! This has a number of implications: keeping the box is a nice human reminder of our acquisitiveness; buying the full set has some other connotations including stories of collecting discussed below and indeed the domestic symbolic nexus as discussed above. After all, the garden tools might be considered incomplete without each other and as for the plate, one is for sweet things or celebrations, or more problematically, to put on the wall like your granny did; 6 or even 12 count as a dinner service and make it quite a different thing.

The collector mentality is often divided up [Pearce, 1995] into those who collect randomly, picking up curios that entice the eye or hand (much like Lucy and Laura below) or those who collect rationally, filling up the space with categories and aiming for completion: either the best and latest, as in the case of Sarah or having the 'full set' as in the case of Jenny. This is an extension of functionality as the mediating principle that gets things through the front door: even if it doesn't actually get used, the veneer of rationality counters the sense of reckless consumption. Recklessness, humour and abundance however, for another group of respondents, form the threshold mediator. Humour is a key principle in mediating the move of these pieces from an imaginary gallery into homes. In fact in the more accidental cases, it is that which gains the pieces entry. For Barbara, the trowel enters stealthily and hilariously and although she hadn't conceived of it as art, it was clearly an object to be discussed:

> Barbara: Mike picked it up and said ‘now you’re not likely to lose this on the allotment!’ – because to be honest, I’ve lost two or three at least; you know, on the allotment it’s easy to put them down when you’re reading and you forget, you don’t see them in the distance. But this – it shows up, from a distance, doesn’t it? [laughs][trowel]

Humourous functionality wins Barbara and Mike over: they weren’t looking for a trowel but when they saw this one on sale – for £1.99 – they could not resist. This interview is a joy: Barbara and Mike spend most of it looking at me with incredulity and laughing at my questions because, although they laugh at it with their friends and joke about whether it might be a sex toy, they simply think of it as a trowel for their allotment and little else. Humour and fortunate functionality won them over.

Cragg’s garden implements – more than the other items - provoked most discussion (coming a close second were the pegs, partly because people liked them and partly because Antony Gormley was one of the few artists they’d heard of or seen work by). The garden tools are loved, hated or laughed at/with and little in between. All but one respondent either used them as garden tools or intended to use them, as well as sticking them in the ground for functional or sculptural purposes. The exception hung them on the wall. The people who had bought other pieces often mentioned them as incomprehensible or even offensive, ridiculous and – crucially – they perceived them as unusable, something owners reject. The combination of humour and usefulness gave them an easy passage into some homes, although those who perceived them primarily as sculpture were concerned about their whiteness getting dirty and might just leave them on display in the house. Barbara on the other hand was concerned with what I would think about her trowel, normally hung up in the shed when not stuck in the ground as she worked and covered in mud. Overall, these qualities – functionality and humour – have worked well in this project as important mediators in the anxiety provoking process of purchases; they are the persuasion factor that repels a surfeit of doubt that an art object alone might induce.

Transforming meanings and accommodating art

Respondents expressing doubt over the purchase of the object contrasts with the stories of what happens when they become belongings – things ‘accommodated to’ within homes. This process is the most intriguing since it is the dynamic that most challenges the art-world’s hold on the value of things – if and when people reuse things and reconstruct meaning, hierarchies of value become insignificant.

> Richard Deacon: The souvenir is an interesting class of object. It contains memories or associations but it doesn't necessarily resemble them. It's a reminder rather than a representation. I found a burnt out car in a wood. It was a shocking experience because it was a pleasant piece of woodland and a very violent act had taken place. [Painter, 1999: 25]
>
> Bob: Well, on top of the Malvern hills there used to be a little café, and we always used to walk to the top… It's just a shed really, an old quarry shed that had been converted into a café in the 1930s and when my sons were small we used to go up there, walk up and the café was the destination. And then I think in the late 80s or early 90s it burnt down and they never replaced the café, they just cleared the site so the terrace and everything was still there. And we went up there and although it had been cleared and grass had kind of grown over it, there was still this little bit of melted lead that I think one of my sons picked up and we brought it home to my mother's. And it was only… it was years later, well last year, when I saw this, that it reminded me of that piece of lead… but a different version.

One respondent, Bob [see figure 6] reminds us of the transformation that purchase affords the consumer of the mass-produced artwork - it is not unique until you take it home:

> Bob: In the store, it's in a box, and there's lots of others in there, I mean it's not sort of unique is it? There's lots more of them. I think when you've taken it out of that context, you've brought it home, it's on its own then and it's… I think you can appreciate it more for what it is. I accept it's mass produced to an extent, or it's limited or whatever, that didn't really come into it, I think it's just that when it's on its own, you know you can pick it up, you can think about it, you can analyse it, you can ignore it and it's…

This is the move that makes the object thrilling, a work of art: once home, it does not matter if 3000 other people have them, it has become owned and contextualised. Much as consumerism in general requires this switch to be made for objects to be added to a catalogue of identity-markers, to become absorbed from a mass object into a 'me' object, the metal sculpture described here is appreciated in its originality only once in its unique setting of home. For some respondents, especially those least involved with different art worlds and their hierarchies of value and interpretation, a very familiar scale of meanings comes into play. These, at face value, are meanings borrowed from consumer-centred models of self-identity and difference. As with many choices in matters of taste, the desire – even if unsubstantiated – to be different or to have ‘quirky’ things is strong. These two words became a short-hand for purchasers in their explanations and justifications. Often such claims were made as a challenge to the imagined interpretations of others close to them, either to say how different they are from an old self or to confirm their status as different from other members of their circle or family.

In this scale of meaning, the originality of a work of art is crucial but it is interesting how this has been modified to adapt itself to modern consumer culture. It is not originality in the sense of an original production, nor a limited edition reproduction. But nor is it originality in the Baudrillardian [1988] sense of a hyperreal interpretation of meaning - it is not about irony or an original interpretation as has been discussed endlessly in postmodern interpretations of culture. This originality is much more mundane and sociological in the sense that if it feels original, then that is what matters. This absorption of a sense of personalization and difference in ones home is crucial in most transfers of mass produced items from fashion into identity and the move is very simple. People claim a thing for their own, they tell others about it and the others either confirm their membership of a group of likeminds, or they establish the continued sense of extra-ordinariness.

Bob is equally eloquent about his own found-objects: he was reminded of a piece of lead which he found with his children at the site of a burnt-out café on the top of a hill where they used to walk. His mother has it at her house but it remained his, along with pieces of wood collected on the beach, an old Minton tile and a screenprint from an organization he used to work for which is interestingly reminiscent in design of the Deacon sculpture. The screenprint was also found, in a drawer when the organization closed down. Such findings, he said, would be valued more highly than contemporary art because of the discovery and uniqueness of the experience.

Bob particularly liked the non-functionality of the piece. This is someone happy with the ambiguous character of such objects and his interview shows that the qualities he admires in this piece are partly based on his grasp of and delight in the process (a man-made thing destroyed and re-made) but also upon its unspeakable and undecidable qualities. The passage above shows this: hanging 'it's…' at the end of descriptions, showing the something else that he can't quite vocalize. This object, perhaps more than all the others, is most mute although some perceive it, perhaps from the discussion in the catalogue, as a trivet. Its thingliness wins over this man, not least because he particularly appreciates such things.

The combination is a winning one for him: a thing found in the woods, like his own lump of molten metal, texturally thingly; and a thing made unique by finding amongst all the others, and rescuing from the mass into the singular home space. This extra layer of confidence he already possesses to make his own ready-mades from souvenirs is validated by the discovery of AHWA. He explicitly says this when asked by the interviewer. There you have it: no need for hordes tramping past singular masterpieces; instead an audience of one (well, four in his family plus a few friends) for an object rescued from the horde.

Once the object is found or rescued, however, it continues to live and not always comfortably. Alice's metal sculpture [see figure 9], so proudly displayed on the toilet cistern had to be packed away once its additional meanings began to reveal themselves to her. The metal sculpture's mute qualities began speaking through her son:

> Alice: And about 6 months ago… something about it caused me a problem, and I couldn't work out what it was. And my son came round one day and being a man he was standing facing it… And he said 'Why have you got a representation of the swastika on the cistern?' And I said 'it's not a swastika' and he said 'Look at it'. And it was, it was close, he was right and then I couldn't have it there. So I moved it. I know exactly where it is but I haven't put it back. …It's sitting in another room. I haven't got round to seeing it differently yet. And I didn't see it when I bought it. You know to me, it had all kinds of different things in it… I guess in my peripheral vision I'd seen what he was seeing but…

Alice has just about accommodated to this new meaning although she is waiting for it to speak again. At the moment it is out of the public eye, in her study where she knows it will be reinterpreted. Where at first it joked, for the men visiting her toilet to smile at, now it broods a little. Lucy likewise broods herself over her plate, packed away with her other best things, 'it needs to come out' she says but she's uncomfortable about how to display it. These stories – of objects having a power over the space – link to another key theme: the idea of the inevitability of certain things, only evident once they've arrived.

Inevitability

Some respondents speak of 'not being able to help themselves' – they have to have particular objects. Sometimes the connection to the object was not very well articulated, although often this silent speech is instructive. The objects' hidden, opaque, material or mysterious qualities become important in such stories and the tales are told as if some unspoken communication is going on between the thing and the 'real' self.

A couple of respondents couldn't help themselves but buy things they loved, even when poor. In fact, the less money they had, the more they felt the impulse to buy things they loved rather than needed. Not shopaholics, it was more about surrounding yourself with wonderful things to remind you of life and to reward the struggle: harder to purchase = greater symbolic reward.

Laura, trained as a sculptor, had to fight back the stuff, although it seemed to be her boyfriend who did most of the battling. Not only her but one half of her whole family were junk-monkeys, pressing things on each other, never throwing away bits of machinery and metal that might come in handy or be fixable. As an artist, she had an excuse for keeping things, modifying found objects being the main practice in her art. Yet the moral weight of all the stuff was overwhelming in the interview: boxes stored in garages, cupboards filled with broken hi-fis and 4 or 5 kettles, grandparents' farm with scrap metal piles in the yard. She had two crispy squashed frogs that she'd found on a roadside and a spare washing machine defunct in the back garden. It was all from her dad's side she said. And her mum, long separated from the dad and the family, would sell anything, dispose of things easily to make a bit of money. Us/them; we have stuff/they sell it. The stuff comes from somewhere (stories of belonging(s), gifts, inheritance, sentimental value show us this) and is then used to mark out and re-interpret relationships. Hoarding and collecting have a strong moral and relational weight, an underbelly (of other people's ghosts still clinging to the stuff) that is difficult to escape.

She had been tempted to use the tools in the garden but they remained on the wall because she wanted them to stay shiny… art works rather than tools. She is contemplating moving them from the kitchen to the bathroom 'because they'll work very well there'. This is a crucial phrase for people who place items, especially art pieces, or pieces that could be considered art, within the context of their home. It is as if the home has become – not a gallery, curated carefully, the background a blank canvas better to show off the pieces, as with some other respondents – but the source almost for a site-specific sculpture. The idea of the Tony Cragg tools 'working very well against yellow' in the bathroom or kitchen almost devolves responsibility from the person and places it onto the house and the objects.

It is as if the setting and object partly bypass the will. Laura's house was full of things she couldn't help but have, not least because as well as her own hoarding instincts, she had to deal with the sculptures and components that belonged to her partner – when I attended to interview her, the living room was dominated by a large scientific installation with a metal stand, large glass flask and various pipes. Things were everywhere – pipes, glass things, lumps of wood. There was no mess here; it was just that their house was dominated by stuff, run by it. Yet, despite this rule by matter, Laura's own material ordering process was evident with innocent harmonies between her choices of favourite objects and the garden implements: dried puffer fish, cacti and the tools were discussed at quite separate points in the interview and she seemed genuinely surprised when I pointed out the physical relationships between these objects: bulbous, spiky/perforated and a little problematic (the cacti caught on the net curtains in the kitchen, the puffer fish were an endangered species and she really didn't want to dirty the tools). It is as if she 'spoke' directly to the stuff without mediation.

Mara exercised a similar kind of 'material determinism' in which the objects have an inexorable effect upon her life. Her language is vivid and fruity, rich and tactile and there is a clear sense of her material connection with things. In particular, she discusses colour with a kind of inevitability, as if colours just have to be together or apart, and as if once you have a piece, others inevitably follow [see figure 10]. This is engaging and confident. Co-ordination here is more than matching, it is a law of nature that she taps into. She herself is ‘brown’ as she puts it and the beachtowel looks good against her skin.

Her Verner Panton chair ‘was responsible for everything’ as she put it. There’s a sense of epiphany in her acquisition of this orange plastic wonder since it creates her and her home from then on. There is a rollercoaster of things that ‘go’ with the chair. She had seen it in an exhibition and then her husband had bought one for her from a second-hand shop ‘…and that was it, all this stuff started coming’. She describes the chair as her child, and what is particularly poignant is that she is trying to get pregnant and even considering IVF treatment: her creative courses, furniture, art and house purchases are later described as substitutes for children. She also has some Panton hangings: removing the staples from them ‘…was like removing it from my body’. Her tactile appreciation of things is evidenced in her adjectives: crushy, crusty… She prefers the ‘soft luxurious side, the velour track suit side’ of the towel, she ‘caressed it in the shop’.

‘It took me quite a while to find my style, …I’ve had a good few tries’. This statement sums up her comfort in having found herself in these objects. But having waited all these years, again she is waiting: until the IVF is paid for, they can’t finish the bathroom, where the chair and the towel will go. It is Mara’s things that seem to have mated to make this towel: orange, pink, yellow, plastic, fur and shiny – this is the most obvious sensual relation to objects of all the respondents, although many of the women do talk about texture and touching things in this way. In these respondents, compulsive collectors and hoarders, the AHWA objects fight for space, yet they make complete sense in a sensate way. One wonders where they will stop – unlike some of the more measured collectors, where the transformations that occur as things are accommodated are paced and careful, for the compulsives, the things may need rehousing…

Conclusion

I have presented different interpretations of how things come to be curated and accommodated in homes. These processes demonstrate differing degrees of confidence, comfort, involvement, conflict and influence from wider discourses. The experiences of respondents show that rich visual cultures, embedded in social experience and structure, exist within home settings.

Art should perhaps work to challenge perceptions and open up thinking. The domestic – typically – is conceived of as a place and a mythology which closes down thinking, the backstage zone which supports the 'outside' work of thinking and doing (of course it is conceived differently for men and women). Comfort produces ennui and stasis [Teyssot, 1996]; danger produces change and thrill. This is at the heart of the antithesis between home and art; between comfort and gallery… The mistake then is to allow the myth of home to continue, as if it really is static. Our own thinking – and the artworld's - is closed if we allow ourselves to believe homes are conservative, stifled, soft and suffocating.

The myth of home beautifully mirrors the myth of art practice: homes containing stultifying history, parental and patriarchal power and the ennui of ageing and ticking carriage clocks. Yet who believes the myths of great auteurs, producing works of art from grand traditions out of the air? Sculpture, for those who know and do it, is mostly about practice, making-do, working the materials round an idea, failing and trying again. It is not that it is the same as interior design: trying a colour next to your sofa, not liking it and repainting; but it is similar in its modest humanism:

getting pleasure in arranging things and finding small epiphanic thoughts in the middle of it – ‘oh yes, that works!’

Yet if these processes (home making and art making) are more or less angst ridden, more or less qualified by knowledge systems and expertise, more or less visible and conscious, more or less validated by others, they are essentially the same. Playing to different audiences, the creative work of home speaks in the same register as contemporary art. It is just that both sides, each knowledgeable of their own territory and fearful of the other’s, don’t want to believe it. Contemporary art and the home *are* diametrically opposed, and it might well be that protagonists of each stand laughing and mocking the other side. They can each say with confidence ‘I wouldn’t allow *that* house-room’. Home by virtue of its mythical solidity and stultification appears to be closing down the creative imagination involved in appreciating and indeed making art. But scratch a person interested in wallpaper and Changing Rooms and you will find an artist. We invisibilise work and practice and mistakes and training in artists as in most professions: those who appear born auteurs are of course made themselves but they and we sometimes forget this. This is quite a simple argument: value and meaning exist on a continuum. At one level, the art-world, they are propped up by institutional structures and intellectual investments; at the other, they are consumed and re-interpreted by practices of everyday life. Somewhere in between are discourses of taste, consumer fashion and art practice which mediate. Yet the processes of judgement are fundamentally the same: as Cummings reminds us ‘careful attention to material practices has made it possible to question lazy distinctions between art and tool, good and bad or priceless and rubbish’ [1997: 13 & 16]. Contagious contact between categories is a welcome antidote to absolutism.

Table 1: Summary of respondents & interview details

Details & pseudonym	Main purchase discussed [interviewer]	Location/purpose	Other purchases Aware of artist Y/N
1. Man 25-44 Professional **David** (&Jo)	Pegs 3+2 [RL]	2 in bedroom, supporting wooden table top	3 still in box, intended for front room Y
2. Man 25-44 Retired public sector **Steve** (& Mary)	Pegs x 3 [RL]	2 in sitting room propping up Pollock print; 1 in box	Also trowel and fork, boxed/in flowerpot with lights in Y
3. Woman 65+ Retired admin **Barbara** (& Mike)	Trowel [RL]	In shed in allotment	N
4. Woman 45-64 Cultural industries professional **Jenny**	Trowel and fork [CP]	Packed away but to go in flowerpots outside?	Bought everything else but shower curtain, including 2 lights, 2 ‘trivets’,12 pegs, 12 plates Y
5. Woman 16-24 Education **Laura**	Trowel and fork [RL]	On wall in kitchen near door	Also metal sculpture on staircase shelf; towel in bathroom Y
6. Couple 65+ Retired	Trowel and fork[SL]	In flowerbeds in garden	Y
7. Man, **Bob**	Metal sculpture[SL]	On hearth in main sitting room	N
8. Woman [SL] **Alice**	Metal sculpture	Put away in study but had been on toilet cistern in bathroom	N
9. Man 25-44 GP	Sound sculpture[SL]	On wall between windows in sitting room	N
Man 45-64 Education	Sound sculpture [CP]	On wall near door in study	N
11. Man [RL] 25-44 Technical	Ceramic sculpture	On sideboard in quiet sitting room	N

Matthew			
12. Couple 25-44 Sales	Ceramic sculpture[SL]	On table in sitting room	Y
13. Woman 25-44 Director **Sarah**	Ceramic sculpture[SL]	On top of bookcase in informal sitting room	Also pegs for hanging kids coats on in porch and plate amongst other plates N
14. Woman 45-64 Retired admin **Daphne**	Shower curtain[RL]	Around shower in bathroom	N
15. Woman 25-44 Local authority	Lamp[SL]	On floor in corner of sitting room	N
16. Man 25-44 Education	Lamp[CP]	In corner on floor of sitting room	Y
17. Woman 25-44 Nursing **Lucy**	Plate[SL]	In box waiting to come out but unsure how to display; occasionally used only for sweet things	Also bought plate as gift for mum Y
18. Woman 25-44 HR **Mara**	Towel[CP]	Packed away waiting for bathroom to be finished	N

List of figures:

Figure 1: Matthew
Figure 2: Barbara
Figure 3: Daphne
Figure 4: David
Figure 5: Steve
Figure 6: Bob
Figure 7: Jenny
Figure 8: Sarah
Figure 9: Alice
Figure 10: Mara
Figure 11: Lucy
Figure 12: Laura

Figs 13-18 show images from other interviews used in the research but not directly quoted or discussed.

Footnotes

1. I would like to thank Shaku Lalvani, Claire Panter and Susie Fisher of the Susie Fisher Group who contributed extensively to the ideas within this piece. The Susie Fisher group was contracted by the Arts Council of England to evaluate the AHWA project. Shaku Lalvani authored the interim analysis based on interviews conducted by Shaku, Claire and myself, and some of Shaku's findings are reworked here. The research was conducted with the aim of evaluating the AHWA project and to provide an academic interpretation of the findings: the latter was my remit and any misinterpretations or errors in this article are mine alone. Anne Painter supplied the lovely photographs that help to convey some of the texture of people's lives.

2. All names of respondents have been changed. Because of the nature of the research and the photographic information, it is possible that respondents could be identified but we have taken pains to anonymize as much as possible.

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