Numerous studies have identified the importance of the household and social relations in the construction of taste (Putnam and Newton 1990, Atfield and Kirkham 1989, Gullesstad 1992). Similarly, Bourdieu’s sociological work *Distinction* fully established that choices among everyday objects involve aesthetic evaluations as aggregate class-specific expressions of taste (Bourdieu 1984). Using research taken from an ethnographic study of household consumption, this chapter reveals the actual processes through which taste is formed. Through observing the acquisition of an IKEA fitted-kitchen or a leopard-print patterned teapot, we see people negotiating and refusing aspects of potential relationships through taste. In this sense subjects and objects are not related merely by acts of representation, as though distinctions in goods just reflect distinctions between persons, but rather they work as a process of mutual objectification. Furthermore, the objects and images utilized in the contestation of relationships take on agencies of their own (Latour 1992). Rather than seeing them merely as markers of identity or reflections of aggregate values such as class, gender and ethnicity, homes and possessions are seen here as active agents in the construction of taste and social relations.

The consumption (acquisition and display) of art, design and artefacts in the domestic context is bound by complex webs of aesthetic discourse that are not merely representative of given dispositions (social class, gender, etc.). Unlike Bourdieu’s study, this ethnographic insight into contemporary homes shows taste in action as it shifts to constitute particular forms of relations. Similarly, social relations are observed changing in response to particular manifestations of taste. The ethnographic examples used in the latter part of this chapter will focus on the dilemmas of comparatively art-and-design-conscious households to show why the material evidence of choice (objects, interiors, etc.) generates so much anxiety. For even when individuals possess formal aesthetic knowledge, they must ultimately place their taste within the context of an immediate and intimate network of social relations with potentially hazardous consequences.

This chapter is an attempt to address the nature of the aesthetic by examining the process of aesthetic judgement within three contexts from which it is all too
commonly excluded: first by undertaking an analysis of aesthetics as applied to everyday objects rather than works of art, second by understanding aesthetics as a social process rather than merely an encounter between an art work and an individual, and third by considering not only the relationship between the persons involved but also the relationship between the objects involved.

The evidence is drawn from an ethnography of household consumption carried out in a single street (and some adjacent roads) in North London over a three-year period (1995–1998). The names of informants, areas and streets involved in the study have been changed so as to preserve anonymity. The very nature of ethnographic inquiry means that one is not studying specifically class or taste as discrete categories, but rather the intricacies, social relations and activities of often unconnected households. The intended study was not, then, of aesthetic processes but of the nature of provisioning.

The main street in the study, Jay Road, was selected because it lacked any outstanding features and defied any one definition, in terms of class or ethnic makeup, as a neighbourhood. One side of Jay Road is occupied mostly by a 1960s council estate (still predominantly tenant-occupied), the other side by owner-occupied and rented maisonettes and houses. Adjacent streets are comprised of larger Edwardian and Victorian family homes many of which are more recently occupied by middle-class inhabitants keen to take advantage of the lower than average price, in comparison to immediate surrounding areas, of such properties. In terms of ethnicity the study includes inhabitants of Greek Cypriot, West Indian, Southern Irish, Asian, Korean, Jewish and South American descent. In short the street is typical of North London in being cosmopolitan but manifestly ordinary. Although preliminary interviews were conducted with more than 150 households, 76 households formed the core of the ethnography.

One of the research techniques used in the study was to ask people to relay stories about how objects in the home were obtained and came to be in the place they now occupy. These ‘biographies’ and narratives provided detailed insight into how people came to own certain goods, but also highlighted subsequent issues over how these goods were consumed in the longer term. As with many material-culture studies, this topic was often more revealing about the relationships between members of the household than a study that asked directly about such social relations. At the same time this method proved highly revealing about the place of aesthetic judgements in the process of purchase and consumption. This chapter begins, then, with examples that used this method of object biography (Hoskins 1998; Appadurai 1986) and then goes on to consider a specific case study of neighbours on the street.

**Aesthetic Encounters in North London Living Rooms**

Decorative choices, it has been well established, are most commonly made within the context of the domestic (Clarke 2001; Halle 1993; Chevalier 1998). As a preliminary aspect of the ethnography, the ‘object biography’ approach established a kind of informal inventory of objects according to the narratives of different members within the household. Considering the following excerpts from a discussion with Judith, a middle-aged divorcée living in a council flat on Jay Road, we are able to see how an informal inventory of her possessions is cast directly in the context of her relationships. This set of quotations is indicative of the kinds of response people typically make to an enquiry regarding the reasons and histories surrounding the presence of particular objects:

- I had to have a teapot but I don’t use it. My mother gave it to me, because when she comes over she likes what she calls a proper cup of tea. This was sort of our joke. (Figure 8.1)

- Well my painting [of a seascape], that was done by my father and I wouldn’t part from that for all the tea in China, it’s been everywhere with me since I was 21. (Figure 8.2)

- My children bought me that [floral china ornament] last Christmas because I left that space there available in case one of them bought a Christmas present for me. (Figure 8.3)

Most of Judith’s selections involve a relationship between herself and some other person, usually a member of her family. Typically informants’ ‘inventories’ would also include a scattering of objects that resulted from a simple personal choice. In this particular case such objects included a collection of china, the picture of the squirrel Judith finds restful, and some of her reproduction furniture. However, even though the last quotation clearly reveals the involvement of Judith’s individual presence, it is clearly mediated by the preference of others.

Although these short quotations substantiate an argument that most decorative selections involve a relationship, they cannot reveal the subtleties of such relationships. It is worth exploring specific relationships in more detail, in this case Judith’s relationship to her son who is still living at home with her. Judith’s flat is exceptional in that although set within an extremely dull, standardized and neglected block of state housing, it stands out as a clear expression of aesthetic transformation. Even from the outside, the front door and ornamentation tells passers-by that this is a household that has been consciously engaged in a continual act of appropriation from the state. Plant hangers, mock-Tudor door hinges and elaborate black heavy doorknobs contrast sharply with the uniform dull green doors of the surrounding neighbours. The entrance hall, panelled from floor to
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ceiling in dark varnished wood to match a stunning parquet floor, creates an impressive spatial transformation. When inside, it is impossible to separate the aesthetic decoration from the multitude of actual physical changes in the layout of the rooms.

Judith is quite explicit about this schema being an expression of the relationship between herself ("I was on a pink and grey theme at the time and that's what we went for") and her son. Her son, a professional builder, carries out all the structural changes in the flat transforming the space to make it utterly unrecognizable from the inside as one of the standardized council flats. Walls have been removed and ceilings lowered. Judith and her son have readily flouted regulations prohibiting the structural alterations of flats. The mother-son relationship is clarified as one moves through the range of their interactions. In acquiring furniture they pride themselves on their unity ("99 per cent of the time we agree"). On the other hand there are areas of acquisition in which the mother seems to take pride in the degree of their difference in order to assert her respect for her son's individuality: "when it comes to buying anything for John I have to usually ask his friends, he's very particular in his choice of clothes, rather than I go out and buy something for a man. Obviously John is in the age group where the type of clothes that he likes are totally different from my taste. You know, I'm old-fashioned".
The relationship to the son therefore comprises in equal measure a sense of identity and one of contrast; in both cases the mother shows considerable sensitivity and the son reciprocates in turn. Judith's close relationship with her son is contrasted with what she describes as her 'wasted years' bringing up her older daughters where she feels, due to the stress of work, she did not spend enough 'quality time' with them when they were growing up. In particular, she regrets not going on regular shopping visits with them or swapping mother and daughter tips on dressing. So the bland introductory statement that a choice involves a relationship should evoke the extraordinary complexity that can be excavated from the investigation of almost any actual family relationship. There is no reason to assume that everyday relationships encountered ethnographically are any less complex or contradictory than those represented in fiction; and this becomes most clearly visible through the negotiation of aesthetics and taste.

Judith's aesthetic, as expressed in the design and objects of her living room, is a combination of many factors. She is herself confident and experienced in matters of taste and in some cases she feels she does indeed 'know what she likes'. But even the objects she views as strong personal statements are integrated into an order of other objects that gain a patina of affinity because of how long she has owned them, or from whom she obtained them, or which particular gift relationship they expressed at a given time. These objects, once acquired, have implications for other or subsequent purchases. There is not even a desire for some free aesthetic choice here. Rather, Judith is concerned to match any new item to the order of things, which already embodies in its selection the history of previous relationships.

One cannot separate out here the implication of the materiality of things and the significance of relationships. In Judith's comment about leaving a space in case she was bought a Christmas present, we can see that she is working through a sense of the constraints of space, and of aesthetic order, in the hope that the received gift will be compatible within a previously constituted array of objects. She is equally showing her sensitivity to the obligations members of kin have to her. After a lifetime in this practice of the social construction of taste, she finds the isolation of individual preference wearing. She notes that she tries to bring along her ex-husband when she goes shopping, notwithstanding the fact that he actually hates shopping, because as she puts it 'well I suppose he's company more than anything else, but if you are buying any large article, I think its nice to have a second opinion'. She does not see this as a lack of self-reliance but, rather, as a positive appreciation of the sociality of choice.

Judith probably does not know that much about art, and she probably desires neither this nor an overly independent sense of taste. Rather, she desires above all a sociality which is best affirmed by the interdependence of her taste, a factor which is constantly objectified in the materiality of the living room and its decorative forms.

The example of Judith and her son's taste reveals the aesthetic construction of the home as a gradual and on-going process (see also Clarke 2001), formed through the integral relation of decorative choices and given relationships (past and present). However, it is in cases where a sudden rupture in this process takes place that the social nature of taste is brought most sharply into relief.

Mrs Holloway (Mrs H.), a seventy-year-old woman who has inhabited her three-bedroom semi-detached house on Jey Road since its completion in the late 1940s, has been mourning the death of her spouse of fifty years. After the recent passing of her husband, Mrs H. now shares the home with her 32-year-old daughter Ginny. In the hallway stands an oak veneered sideboard that Mrs H. bought from a local furnishing showroom with her husband when they first moved into the house. Through recalling the aesthetic choices made in moving into their first home it seems quite literally yesterday, for Mrs H., that she chose the wallpaper and matching carpet by looking at colour and fabric swatches at the kitchen table with her husband:

We wanted good furniture -- you know, the sort that would last a life time -- heavy and good -- and the carpet had lovely flecks that picked out the greys and reds of the wallpaper -- we really loved it. I remember walking into this room [the front sitting room] with Arthur and us barely being able to contain our excitement -- it looked so lovely.

Despite Mrs H.'s fond and vivid memories of her household's furnishings and interior design, in the course of the ethnography, she was in the process of eradicating all evidence of the material world she had shared with her recently deceased husband. Arthur had died suddenly and tragically in the marital home that Mrs. H. had previously anticipated sharing with him in his retirement. She was particularly bitter that his death had come only weeks after carrying out his final duties for the civil service and that, having worked hard all of his life, he was denied the pleasure of enjoying the benefits of a home and a fully paid mortgage.

Although still suffering from the loss of her husband, Mrs. H. had spent recent weeks desperately searching local furniture showrooms for a replacement set of sofa and armchairs which she considered of equal quality and aesthetic merit to those originally chosen with her husband in the late 1940s. However, despite failing to find adequate replacements she still insisted that the items of her early marital life be removed from the house and, in consultation with her daughter Ginny, she had begun to create a new interior scheme with stripped floors and modern fittings.
Together they perused contemporary interior design magazines finding just the right style for their new home. In several months the only household feature fully tied to the memory of her husband would be Drum the dog, named after her husband's favourite tobacco. Mrs Holloway and her daughter went through a similar process to that of the newly married couple that first inhabited the house in the late 1940s. But rather than swapping opinions with a new husband, Mrs H. now considered issues of taste and aesthetics, through the swapping of opinions and ideas for new pictures and ornaments, with her daughter. Through this process both occupants create a style that constitutes 'their' taste and the house itself takes on a new relationship to its inhabitants.

Mrs Holloway is worried that her daughter Ginny, a single woman in her 30s, who works as a florist, will never marry as she only 'ever gets to work with gay men'. Although Mrs. H. is glad her daughter works with men who have 'good taste', she laments that they will only ever be 'just friends' with her daughter and that Ginny needs to be self-reliant. The house then takes on a new role - both mother and daughter are conscious that this decorative scheme may outlive the remaining parent and become the sole domain of the daughter; certain chosen objects, such as china and linens from the original wedding list used to set up home in the 1940s, are reappropriated into the new aesthetics of the house. For the house has become agent of both of their pasts and futures.

The preceding example lends a somewhat idyllic sense of taste as an expressive practice within sociality whereas in most cases it is exemplified by tension and a strong sense of ambivalence. Miriam and her husband Ivan, for example, live in a three-bedroom house adjacent to Jay Road with objects neither of them would admit to liking. Miriam is a solicitor in her early forties whose husband accuses her of having the same naïve 'pre-Raphaelite' taste she displayed as a student when he first met her. Ivan is a freelance illustrator of Eastern European origin who specializes in 'dark' depictions for fantasy and science fiction publications. As the couple have such opposing tastes in art and aesthetics they have numerous pictures leaning against the skirting boards, which have yet to make it to the picture rail of their living room (see Figure 8.4). The objects they do have decorating their home (including modern glassware, ceramics and a textile hanging) are tolerated because they have been given as gifts or bought as travel souvenirs: criteria which circumvent the need for an overtly aesthetic justification. Although they might by all conventional accounts be described as 'happily married', in Miriam and Ivan's case their shared taste works as an absence rather than a presence, in which objects and images entering the home are rendered instantly problematic. After twenty years of marriage they are resigned to this aesthetic 'stalemate' and use it in the ordering of new objects and images which enter their home.

While Miriam and Ivan's situation may appear extreme, conflict and tension over decorative choice is of course a typical feature of domestic relationships, though this is more usually confined to specific objects or images. Bill and Pam, who share a rented maisonette on Jay Road, regularly argue over the presence of a dining table and matching bentwood chairs (Figure 8.5), positioned in their living room bay window. Bill salvaged this set of furniture from a relationship with a previous 'live-in' girlfriend. Despite Pam's protests, Bill refuses to throw them out, stating triumphantly 'it's the only thing I ever got out of that relationship'. Similarly, Pam refuses to get rid of a Mickey and Minnie Mouse plastic ornament proudly displayed on the top of a shelving unit, that she received from friends in Taiwan. (Figure 8.6). Despite Bill's protests over its 'bad taste', Pam insists that it reminds her of the fun times and friendships she had as a single woman prior to her cohabitation with Bill. However, there are other objects, such as a spiral chrome fruit bowl purchased from the Guggenheim Museum in New York, over which they proudly come together as a couple, telling friends and guests how they came across it in the gift shop and 'just couldn't resist it'.

Homes, Objects and Neighbours as Agents

People, then, to put it rather crudely, have active and ongoing relationships with their possessions and, in turn, their possessions operate as agents within them-
selves, as illustrated in the next case study of neighbours Chris and Joy, and Eric and Jane. Unusually for Jay Road, these informants not only visit each other’s homes regularly, but they share a history in that Eric and Chris went to art college together in the late 1970s. Although they were not particularly close friends during that period, they shared an allegiance with left-wing political groups and were involved in a radical busking group, known as the ‘Moaning Minnies’, which specialized in performing anti-consumerist songs. They took part in anti-apartheid and anti-capitalist demonstrations together and studied documentary photography and fine art. As well as having shared histories, Chris and Eric share a similar taste in late Victorian houses. Their newly purchased houses are mirror images of each other designed to the exact same room dimensions and original details and are separated only by a few hundred yards on the same street adjacent to Jay Road.

Now in his late thirties, Chris is the first within this peer group to take on a full-time job and buy a house with his wife Joy. Eric followed suit several months later and purchased a house on the same street with his girlfriend Jane. Chris and Joy moved from a low-rent flat, in a state of major disrepair, to a house kept in near immaculate order by its previous owner and decorated in a style that could be broadly described as contemporary and simple. This transition from low-rent urban flat furnished with discarded and second-hand goods has marked a broader life change and suddenly opened up ambiguities in the relationship between Chris and his wife Joy which, expressed as cultural and personal ‘values’, have been focused on the acquisition and maintenance of certain types of goods and their aesthetics.

Joy originates from Indonesia and has what she describes as ‘a non-Western taste’ and sensibility. She jokes, for example, that Westerners spend an enormous time caring for their objects and houses while they are quite willing to put their elderly relatives in nursing homes, rather than look after them themselves. She also has strong views about credit and was brought up to never desire what she could not immediately afford or acquire. As Chris and Joy have not yet decided how long they will remain in Britain, or indeed if they will move permanently to Indonesia, so far their home-making has been orchestrated around a notion of transience. Consequently, the furniture salvaged from skips to furnish their previous low-rent flat perfectly suited a shared aesthetic constructed around Joy’s thrifty anti-materialism and the anti-consumerist politics of Chris’ art-student days melded with a shared notion of transience. Their kitchen was furnished with objects borrowed from friends or obtained from car-boot sales, and everything from lampshades to bedspreads were purchased from charity shops or jumble sales.

In the move to their new home, however, Chris has discarded some items, such as battered saucepans and soiled arm chairs, in preference for a taste more in keeping with the style of the new house. For the first time in their eight-year marriage the couple have acquired brand new household items, as Chris in particular has begun to mark his new-found acceptance of stability and domesticity
through the coherence of a contemporary design style. Despite an arguably functional requirement for certain items of furniture, such as a kitchen table and a refrigerator, Joy intermittently opposes purchasing decisions by taking on a role as the thrifty money manager. In contrast, Chris describes himself mockingly as a ‘born again consumer’. This is not to suggest that one of the partners is predisposed to functional economic decisions and the other to aesthetic decisions; rather, that each object acquired for the house is undergoing a series of fluid taste processes in which such dualisms operate simultaneously.

Having never formally shopped together for their home, Chris and Joy’s mutual taste is on a par with that of a newly courting couple’s (Miller 1998) in the sense that it is largely uncharted and, despite their previous approaches to ‘materialism’, open-ended. They have, for example, never purchased an item from a formal retail store such as Habitat or IKEA, and in the course of moving into a new house have to negotiate their relationship, shifting values and new taste as well as finding themselves ‘learning’ new consumer skills and knowledges. In many instances the necessity to negotiate ‘their’ taste is alleviated by the prior decisions of the previous occupant: an IKEA fitted kitchen is already installed and, despite Chris’s antipathy toward globalized superstores, this comes as a happy relief.

Unlike previous informants mentioned so far, Chris and Joy only have an ‘anti-taste’ through which to frame potential purchases. Even a simple household white good, then, can pose a dilemma as to its appropriateness when neither individual is willing to take responsibility for the choice of type and style. In the case of selecting a refrigerator, which even Joy grudgingly admits the household needs, the couple reluctantly strive to formulate an aesthetic and functional criterion through which to make their shared choice. After a several-week delay in making a decision (Chris initially decides he wants a silver metallic mid-range priced model and Joy finds nothing to suit her taste or price range), the couple find a damaged white fridge/freezer made by a known brand in the ‘bargain basement’ of a high-street electrical shop. Despite the overt consumerism of their purchase, Chris and Joy feel vindicated in that they are paying only two-thirds of the manufacturer’s recommended price. As they cannot reach a shared aesthetic around refrigerators, the house and its previous owner’s decorative scheme is incorporated as a third party in their relationship as both partners agree that the new item ‘best suits the style of the kitchen’. In the course of the ethnography it is the house and its preordained style, rather than the taste of the couple, which develops as the consistent means by which purchases are framed and justified. For example, the contentious selection of a half-price beech and laminate folding table is made solely on the premise of its ideal relation to the decor of the kitchen.

For the house, then, acts as an agent both in pacifying contentions and amplifying them. This is not only enacted in a conceptual sense, but also in a literal sense whereby objects are taken on loan from stores to be ‘tried out’ in the setting of the house. For several weeks Joy and Chris could not agree on appropriate chairs to best match their ‘bargain’ kitchen table. Despite using utilitarian guidelines, such as comfort, height and durability, to make their choice the couple failed to reach a harmonious solution. In taking a range of single chairs home, posing them beside the table and against the backdrop of their kitchen decor and inviting their neighbours Eric and Jane to comment, the couple eventually came to a decision.

Even in the absence of the couple’s contra-dynamic, the house acts as a stimulus and legitimation for certain types of choices. Chris, despite (or indeed because of) his anti-consumerist past has, since purchasing his house and furnishings, become increasingly savvy in his understanding of brands. During an extended absence of his wife from the household, as she visited relatives in her native Indonesia, Chris requested a housewarming present from his parents of a Krups electric coffee grinder. This particular brand matched perfectly the streamlined weighing scales incorporated already into the fitted kitchen installed by the previous owner. Furthermore, as a gift the expensive Krups appliance circumvented the need to justify his unmediated choice (see Figure 8.7).

Similarly, in Chris’s absence Joy would re-apply a range of novelty fridge magnets, sent as gifts from friends in Indonesia, to the front of the refrigerator as a challenge to Chris’s sought-after modern and clean aesthetic. In this way, the fridge became a focal point of the kitchen and a parody of the couple’s style battle
as Joy periodically moved the kitsch items back to a prominent and provocative position.

The contentiousness of items such as the refrigerator is better understood if we consider the relationships between, not just Chris, Joy and their house, but of Chris and Joy and their neighbours’ house. For Chris, in particular, the DIY and decorative schemes of his friend and neighbour Eric offered a direct point of comparison to his own aesthetic choices and vice versa.

While Chris’s home had been entirely modernised by its previous owner, Eric’s house (identical in proportions and lay-out) required complete refurbishment. Previously a family home owned by a 76-year-old Jamaican grandmother, the decor of the house (unlike that of Chris’s) could not easily be appropriated into the age and social group in which Chris and Eric were in the process of positioning themselves. While certain types of late 1960s wallpaper could lend themselves to a retro-irony indicative of a self-consciously ‘designed’ style promoted by contemporary magazines such as Wallpaper, the extreme brightness and wear of the interior design decided Eric to completely ‘gut the place’ and make it more in keeping with the simple style of Chris’s home.

The process of making-home then, was not only shared with their respective partners. In fact, through a series of reciprocal exchanges, including the lending of tools and the swapping of DIY tips, the principal relationship in terms of taste and its negotiation resided with Chris and Eric (see Miller 1998 re gender relations and DIY).

Objects such as the fridge or a Habitat table, as well as the house, became sites of direct comparison. While Eric’s refrigerator also featured kitsch magnets, unlike those placed provocatively on the fridge by Joy, Eric’s were self-consciously kitsch juxtaposed as they were with knick-knacks displayed on the top of the appliance in the manner of an art school ‘collecting for inspiration’ project. Unlike Chris, Eric had inherited his kitchen table from a great-uncle, and had it sanded and refinished.

Acting as the initiator (being the first of the friends to ‘settle down’ and choose to buy in that particular location), Chris felt that he was disadvantaged in the sense that Eric always managed to benefit from his risks and hindsight. While Chris himself stumbled to find the most appropriate kitchen table in the context of an entirely new set of life circumstances, Eric sat back, took note and then positioned himself accordingly. Notably, the semi-amicable conflict between Eric and Chris manifested itself directly in the style decisions each made, and compared, over his house and its contents. Both friends had also been brought together by their endless reading of IKEA and Habitat catalogues and joked to themselves about how their agit-prop days had been replaced by cappuccino-fired shopping sprees.

While Chris tried to circumvent full-price branded goods through the acquisition of bargains and sale items, Eric maintained an ethical superiority, for example, by buying appliances refurbished by a charity intended to help homeless teenagers. These individual gestures were consistently mediated through certain class dispositions rooted in the friends’ histories as students. Whereas Eric studied fine art, Chris studied a more vocational degree in documentary photography. Whereas Eric was set to eventually inherit a substantial amount of property, Chris was entirely dependent on his monthly salary; in this way the project of homeownership also took on different meanings.

Conclusion

It is a well-established point that choices among everyday objects involve aesthetic evaluations as expressions of taste, an idea fully established by Bourdieu in his well-known book Distinction (Bourdieu 1984). It is hoped that the above snapshots have shown that the process is most commonly dependent upon the immediate social relations of the persons undertaking this act of choice, and most importantly that the relationship between the objects themselves – the houses and possessions – have a major role to play in our understanding of aesthetics as a form of practice. In observing these choices we can watch people coming together in their taste, defining their differences through taste, negotiating and refusing aspects of a potential relationship through taste. Both subject and object are the consequences of relationships to other subjects and objects and these in turn have consequences for others.

Many people today may feel that they are relatively knowledgeable about the formal aesthetic values ascribed to art. Many more have other equivalent specialist knowledge, around areas of design, style and fashion, which can be equally scholarly and esoteric. Clearly, such knowledges are obtained through an individual’s education and socialization into collective values. Yet, despite this, in the daily world of practical aesthetics where most aesthetic judgements become matters of taste, this knowledge, whether gained formally or informally, often proves an insufficient guide. In daily life the assertion of an aesthetic judgement is not simply that of the autonomous agent but most commonly part of a social context in which the expression of aesthetics is intended to be part of relationships. These may be relationships with others who are present, others held in mind, or those more complex internalized constructions of other subjects which psycho-analysts have called ‘inner objects’ to whom we relate our judgements. In this context, the lack of predictive ability with respect to the sense of the other and their aesthetic assessment makes it difficult to know what the effect of the opinion will be.

Whether it is walking out of a film or choosing a set of chairs, each individual is often left hoping that his or her companion will be the first to express an aesthetic
evaluation. This is not necessarily an expression of deference where a dominated partner waits to be informed by a dominant partner. Rather, the individual may remain uncertain as to his or her own preferences, simply because of being aware of several possibilities. It is only when the implication of the preference for the relationships becomes clear that the individual knows for him- or herself what the preference actually was. This is because it is the consequences of the act that may determine what the act should have been. The phrase ‘do we like this?’ may have more experiential validity than the question ‘do I like this?’; or alternatively, an individual may only realize how much he or she likes something when it transpires that the individual’s child or partner does not.

This implies that the aesthetic judgement is itself the creature of social rather than merely individual agency. Without the security in our sense of the other with whom the relationship exists, we find that we constantly do not know ourselves what our aesthetic opinion actually is. Our opinion is a partially formed set of possibilities that is only concretized as clear preference through its relationship to other such opinions during its formation. To that extent the question of aesthetics may shed light onto an existential problem of modernity – the sense of uncertainty about the location of the self. This uncertainty rests in the larger problem posed by a dialectic of objectification in which the subject is itself constituted by the cultural forms in which it recognizes itself, which therefore makes the very materiality and history of the objects in question an active player in this process. There is a burgeoning literature on ‘reflective modernity’ (e.g. Beck, Giddens and Lash 1994), but this tends to assume an individual wrestling with his or her own angst in the face of perceived risks. This is the problem of constructing a consistent auto-biography that can be found in some of Giddens’s (1991) work on self-reflexivity. Even where there is a clear concern with mediation in such studies (e.g. Lash and Urry 1994: 48), these mediations tend to be institutional – as in the industries of cultural and fashion production – rather than social. It becomes very difficult to discern within that literature something approximating the ethnographic focus upon the sociality of the domestic.

Bourdieu is properly credited with establishing the academic refutation of this idea that taste as a form of aesthetic preference is merely an idiosyncratic individual choice. In Distinction, Bourdieu clearly demonstrated an overall relationship between individual taste and the workings of class in French society. The implications (which one could also have drawn from marketing research) is that taste is a much more predictable and contextualized phenomenon than most people had wished to acknowledge.

There may, however, be a complementary role between the sociological determination of this point and the anthropological. Bourdieu’s Distinction continues the more sociological branch of his many research studies, being based on statistical readings of questionnaire data. In that respect it is quite different from his more anthropological forms of inquiry as carried out among the Kabyle. If it constitutes a critique of the colloquial idea that ‘it’s all a question of individual taste’ then that criticism is founded on the evidence that the individual may be relatively predictable when given the proper sociological description of his or her social position. This is confirmed in Bourdieu’s more recent work on art where, for example, he claims that it is ‘the history of social space as a whole, which determines tastes by the intermediacy of the properties inscribed in a position, and notably through the social conditionings associated with particular material conditions of existence and a particular rank in the social structure’ (1996: 256).

This certainly constitutes a situating of art choice within the social space. Nevertheless the actual act of claiming an aesthetic preference remains throughout the work of Distinction, an entirely individualized activity. That is to say, Bourdieu is creating maps of social space based on the statistical manipulation of data based entirely on the statements of individual preferences. Bourdieu’s method, so far from challenging this trait, actually concretizes this individualism by using a technique based on asking individuals to make choices in relation to questionnaires. It is clear that if aesthetic preferences were other than an individual encounter it would be impossible to discern this on the basis of such a methodology, since the method itself precludes any social contextualization for the stating of aesthetic preferences. Bourdieu’s sociology fixes the individual as an aggregate within a social field. If this model of aesthetics is going to be challenged then this is most likely to come about as a result of ethnographic work where aesthetic choice is understood as a practice that can be studied directly in the contexts within which it is taking place (see Clarke and Miller 2002). It is also likely to move out of the art gallery to the place where most aesthetic judgements are made by most people, namely the field of shopping and the dressing and decorating of persons and homes. Similarly, while there is research (see Halle 1993) which is highly critical of Bourdieu’s analysis of the domestic selection of art, it gives little attention to the social dynamics of that selection other than in aggregate terms.

The point made by the evidence of this chapter is not simply that aesthetic judgements are founded in social relations, but that the actual process of aesthetic adjudication is most commonly a social rather than an individual process. Aesthetic and social relations are both created in the same act of objectification. This extends Bourdieu’s achievement in determining the social contextualizing of aesthetic choice. His sociological perspective where individuals are defined in relation to aggregate social fields is fleshed out by an anthropological involvement in the dynamic creation of the individual within a network of intimate social relations.

The second point made by this chapter is that it is not just the relations between persons as a field of practice that is crucial to understanding aesthetic acts, but also the relations between the objects themselves. The key aesthetic unit is rarely a single object any more than it is a single person. Mostly it is the ‘wardrobe’ or the
'room' within which a whole configuration of objects is found that together constitutes a relationship to taste as a social phenomenon. As McCracken (1988: 118–29) argued in his discussion of the 'Diderot Effect', it is most often the consequences of one choice for subsequent choices that renders a single choice most significant. So we found earlier in the chapter, for example, that Judith had already prefigured an empty space in the decorative order of her living room to add an anticipated gift from her children. This 'space' related both to her ongoing gift relations with her children but was also inseparable from a whole decorative scheme constituting her history of taste. Similarly, Chris and Joy are seen to use the agency of their house as a neutralized but active point of reference to counter an otherwise fraught aesthetic relationship, typified more by disjuncture rather than by a 'coming together', between the couple.

The point may be considered in relation to a more traditional anthropological investigation of material culture. In chapter three of his book Signs of Recognition, Keane (1997) has undertaken an examination of material culture in contemporary Ankalarang, on the Indonesian island of Sumba. He notes that objects have a plurality of attributes which may or may not be significant for a specific occasion. They may be related back to their origin in trade, or in labour, or they may imply permanence or impermanence. Other potential attributes may include their value as cash, their past history of transaction and many other historical and material facets of their existence as objects. The object itself does not prioritize the relevance of its various attributes. One of the effects of formalization in exchange, therefore, is to mark out and limit those attributes which should be pertinent to that particular exchange.

Keane rejects the idea that this simply manifests the desire to unambiguously reflect the intentions and agency of any one individual. Instead, he argues that formal exchange focuses upon the event itself whose consequences transcend the intentions of individual participants and may end up expressing conflict and revealing aspects of both the relationships and the objects involved that participants would not have chosen to bring to light. The very durability and facticity of material culture means that objects may transcend the desire to control them; as, for example, when an object is torn or dropped and people read major consequences into those events, or the receiver of a gift highlights an attribute of the object which was not particularly that which the giver had intended to draw attention to. The implication of Keane's discussion is that objects are not merely the passive vehicle of communicative or semiotic intention, since their very materiality may act to create unintentional consequences to which agents have to respond.

The tensions revealed by Keane in his case may be greatly exacerbated when we turn to modern consumer culture. In a world where aesthetics gains the temporality of fashion, we are even less in control of our objects as forms of expression. For example, unless we are prepared to 're-do' our kitchen every year,
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Note

1. The preliminary stage of the research was constructed as a joint ethnography with Professor Daniel Miller, Department of Anthropology, University College London. Miller studied formal modes of acquisition (such as supermarket shopping) as part of a broader ESRC study (Miller, Holbrook Jackson, Thrift, et al. 1998; Miller 1998), whereas my extended research concerned the ‘alternative’ means by which households acquired goods (e.g. gift-giving, second-hand, home-made, catalogues, etc.) (see Clarke 1997; 2000; 2001; Clarke and Miller 2002).

References


