

THE NATURAL ORDER IS DECAY:

THE HOME AS AN EPHEMERAL ART PROJECT

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Touchy Objects: The Ethics of Research

Although the 'linguistic turn' in the social sciences has been influential in North American sociology, the 'object turn' has had little impact other than in fields such as science and technology studies, and research on consumption. In general, sociology has always emphasized human interaction rather than human-object interaction. This has occurred even though the very term 'symbolic interactionism', which dates back to the late 1930s, should have sensitized sociologists to human-object interaction. People are almost always perceived among objects and in various degrees of association with them. In that sense we are never alone. Domestic artifacts are doubly important for the relationship between self and society, which was the focus of symbolic interactionists and dramaturgical sociologists. It is typical that no sociologist or anthropologist, to my knowledge, has written about the visual subtleties of objects as perceptively as the novelist James Agee (1941). Novelists were aware of objects as agents long before actant-network theory. Examples can be found, for instance, in Nathalie Sarraute's book

Tropisms:

Objects were very wary of him and had been for a long time, ever since, as a little child, he had begged their favor, had tried to attach himself to them, to cling to them, to warm himself, they had refused to 'play', to become what he had wanted to make of them, 'poetic memories of childhood'. They had been brought to heel, these objects had, being well trained, they had the unobtrusive, anonymous look of well-schooled servants; they knew their place and they refused to answer him....

Clinging to the wall, sidewise, through fear of being indiscreet, he would look through the clear panes into downstairs rooms in which green plants on china saucers had been set in the window, and from where, warm, full, heavy with a mysterious denseness, objects tossed him a small part – to him too, although he was

unknown and a stranger – of their radiance; where the corners of a table, the door of a sideboard, the straw seat of a chair emerged from the half-light and consented to become for him, mercifully for him, too, since he was standing there waiting, a little bit of his childhood (Sarraute 1963 [1939], 66–67).

Fieldwork in the Living Room: An Auto-ethnographic Essay (Riggins 1994, see also Riggins 1990) was an early attempt to provide a systematic methodology for gathering information about the relationship between the self and objects displayed in homes. The research was quite intrusive in the personal lives of participants, which was less problematic twenty years ago. Procedures which could be followed today in order to obtain ethics approval for such a project will be outlined in this paper. My early terminology will be updated in view of recent advances in material culture studies. In conclusion, the revised methodology will be illustrated with a case study of the apartment of a Canadian visual artist, poet and experimental musician influenced by the 1970s punk subculture.

My original advice was that researchers begin interviews by finding something in a living room which would seem to attract a visitor's attention and then systematically proceed throughout the rest of the room. I thought that skipping from wall to wall or object to object which were widely dispersed would complicate the interview. For readers to imaginatively reconstruct a room, decoration has to be described in the same systematic manner. Photography was considered an essential tool, although the photographs need not be of professional quality. No outside observer can produce a verbal account of a domestic interior which is both objective and subjective without the aid of photographs. It is not possible to immediately notice or to remember all the nuances which will eventually interest an investigator. David Halle's (1993) book about the display of popular and fine art in homes was abundantly illustrated. More recently, Annemarie Money (2007) and Rachel Hurley (2006) have made similar claims about the necessity of working with photographs. It is my insistence on sharing unaltered photographs with readers and my eliciting intimate personal stories from interviewees that can lead to hurdles in obtaining ethics approval.¹ Friends, family, and acquaintances can easily identify living rooms through photographs. (But let's also recognize that since decoration evolves – more rapidly for some people than others – not all living rooms are identifiable for a long period of time.)

Few people have agonized over the ethical issues of writing about private homes as much as James Agee in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. This did not stop him, some eighty years ago, from secretly itemizing the objects in drawers when poor Alabama farmers were out in the fields. That contemporary researchers investigating objects have reflected about ethical issues is clear in the way they have carefully chosen interviewees and topics. The most common solutions are to write about oneself (Fiske 1990; Lively 2002; Wood et al. 1994), to write about family members (Bourdieu 1984; Davidson 2009), to concentrate on the deceased (Saisselin 1985; Schlereth 1982; Ulrich 2001), or the poor and powerless (Agee 1941). Daniel Miller (2008) changes informants' names and characteristics. Annemarie Money (2007) blurs the faces in displays of photographs of family members and friends. Marianne Gullestad (1984) illustrates the chapter on living rooms in her book *Kitchen-table Society* with photographs of homes belonging to people who did not participate in her study. Sarah Pink (2004) does not share her video 'tours' of homes with the public. Ian Woodward (2001) picks interviewees who are culturally sophisticated and thus more sympathetic to the ideals of objectivity and detachment in the social sciences. It is safer to write the "biography" of a type of object than to document rooms because the former gives informants anonymity.

I will dwell on only a few details of the ethics policy which concern Canadian researchers because these guidelines resemble policies in other countries. The Canadian guidelines are referred to as the Tri-Council Policy because they were established by three agencies: the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (2010). Respect for human dignity is the founding value of the Tri-Council policy.

Research based on "personal reflections and self-study" do not require ethics approval. "Auto-ethnography" is specifically cited as an example. Other exceptions include studies of individual politicians, artists, and celebrities; and "consultation to frame or develop the research." This latter exception is quite important because it is often not clear when a research project begins. Researchers are given the right to see if projects are feasible before applying for ethics approval. The following features of my early research on domestic artifacts are problematic in view of the Tri-Council Policy.

Privacy and Confidentiality. What does informed consent mean, when a researcher looks for the hidden dimensions of the self-object relationship? If privacy is impossible, what are my

obligations to protect the self of interviewees? Should I give interviewees ultimate control over my account of their home? What happens when we disagree about my interpretations or my “clinical detachment” is perceived as criticism or ridicule? What if my account makes social inequality seem even more painful? If I let my interviewees control my text, am I guilty of contributing to their impression management by allowing false claims or misperceptions to reach a larger public?

Benefits to Participants. My research was motivated by theoretical issues in sociology, more specifically symbolic interactionist theory. There was never a concern about its benefits for participants, although some of my observations may have had practical value to interior decorators or manufacturers. I did not even try to imagine what these benefits might have been. Perhaps interviewees experienced my visits as empowering or following the interview they had a better understanding of themselves. People are flattered when social scientists think their opinions matter.

Risks to Participants. The risks to interviewees are more obvious than the benefits. Tensions within families can be exposed. The same is true for 'deviant' activities and non-standard family forms. Could I formulate my project so that I secretly interview people about their homes? Covert research is possible if the ethics board is convinced the research topic is socially significant and that no alternative to covert research is available. But who in their right mind would actually think that the study of living rooms holds such significance for the public that it should be undertaken through covert means? Carrying on informal conversations in order to secretly interview people about their home is also time-consuming. It would not be possible to publish photographs. Crucial artifactual or biographical details would have to be altered. This is obviously not a solution.

Are there other options? The pessimistic conclusion would be no, nothing is left except for the discourse analysis of passages in realistic novels which depict character through material artifacts. I could now think of the public good of my research in terms of what I have to offer novelists. I can help them write more sociologically nuanced descriptions of domestic interiors. I won't be the first sociologist who has worked as a spy on behalf of novelists. I find this an appealing topic, sociology as a source of esoteric underground knowledge for novelists. Unfortunately, it is not the kind of symbolic interactionist study of lived reality that I had envisioned.

The practice I advocate is to allow participants to be co-researchers or collaborators. This is motivated by both ethical and practical considerations. The unfortunate aspect of this practice is that I will have to restrict the study of living rooms to people who are culturally sophisticated, although this is contrary to the socially inclusive research explicitly advocated by the Tri-Council policy. Again it must also be recognized that outsiders cannot master the factual and interpretive detail which is the goal of my analyses. Collaborative researchers should have fewer reasons to worry about the imagined reactions of their informants.

Analytical Categories for Describing Domestic Objects

My original terminology was based on general concepts in semiotics, Goffman (1951, 1959, 1963, 1974), Baudrillard (1988), Bourdieu (1984), Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981), Thomas J. Schlereth (1982), etc. The methodology was also a reaction against the informality of James Agee whose literary skills I admired, but who was, at best, an amateur sociologist even in the context of the 1930s. I will not argue that my terminology and procedures are a model for everyone. When so many academics compete for attention, diverse theories and methods should be encouraged. In this section I will define my terminology as succinctly as possible and then suggest additional terms derived from recent research.

Agency and Mode distinguishes between the active and passive use of objects, that is, between objects which are handled and objects which are contemplated.

Intrinsically Active Objects are created by designers/manufacturers so that they will be physically manipulated. For example, a corkscrew.

Intrinsically Passive Objects are created to be contemplated. For example, a painting.

Active Mode: Objects which are touched, caressed, or moved within a household regardless of the intended use by designers and manufacturers.

Passive Mode: Objects which are contemplated irrespective of intended use.

A small sculpture used as a paper weight would illustrate the *active mode of an intrinsically passive object*.

Normal Use: An artifact's intended use when manufactured.

Alien Use: Any non-standard or unanticipated use of objects. The concept includes 'found art'.

Status Objects are semiotically interpreted or manipulated as indices of social status. “Apparent cost” may be a more useful term than actual cost since the latter will often not be known with certainty.

Esteem Objects symbolize the personal self-esteem an individual has achieved in the intimate spheres of life such as parenthood or marriage. Displays of greeting cards, for example.

Collective Objects represent ties with groups outside the family. National symbols, memorabilia from social movements, etc.

Stigma Objects are associated with 'spoiled' identities. The most common stigma objects in living rooms are likely to be associated with aging. Tidying up a room often means removing stigma objects.

Disidentifying Objects make false claims such as exaggerating status. Fake antiques, for example. Disidentifying objects can be contrasted with what Baudrillard called “witnessing objects” which accurately reflect status.

Social Facilitators are used by groups of people to turn each other into temporary partners and opponents or to facilitate public demonstrations of skill and knowledge. Chess pieces, Rubic’s Cube, etc.

Occupational Objects: Displays of tools or some material reference to an occupation. In living rooms they tend to be somewhat atypical, antique, handmade or constructed in unusual dimensions.

Indigenous Objects: Objects made locally in contrast to *Exotic Objects*.

Time Indicators: Any sign of time in the decoration such as stylistic features of objects which date them.

Temporal Homogeneity refers to a room in which most of the objects have been made at approximately the same time.

Temporal Heterogeneity refers to combinations of artifacts from different historical eras. The category reveals information about the self’s position in time; attitudes toward history, tradition, change and continuity; and the active presence of several generations in the house.

Size and Proportions: The potential interpretation of objects is influenced by their size. Objects of non-standard size or proportion carry a different meaning than do those of customary size. *Miniaturization* and *Monumentality* represent the extremes of the category.

Way of Production distinguishes between handmade and machine-made objects.

Display Syntax

Co-location: The meanings of artifacts are influenced by the qualities of the surrounding or co-located objects. The same artifact may elicit radically different readings depending upon the setting in which it is displayed.

Highlighting: Displays of objects in any manner which attracts attention. Hanging objects at eye level, framing pictures or artifacts, putting plants on plant stands, setting something at the center of a mantelpiece, putting one antique in a contemporary setting, etc.

Understating refers to any technique of display which deflects attention away from an indented item.

Clustering: Artifacts are clustered if they are grouped together. This style of display may highlight a group of objects.

Dispersing refers to objects scattered in space. This display technique may highlight individual objects.

Status Consistency: Objects in a living room which convey the same level of status. All are apparently costly or inexpensive.

Status Inconsistency: Living rooms which combine the apparently costly and inexpensive.

Degree of Conformity: The extent to which a living room conforms to the current tacit rules of interior decoration.

Referencing: An interviewee's comments which are about the history, aesthetics or customary use of objects.

Mapping: An interviewee's comments in which displayed objects are used as a way of talking about his or her social network.

Flavor: All of the preceding categories should be seen as subcategories of flavor, which is similar to 'atmosphere' or 'character'. Flavor refers to taste, a sense which for most people is

less well developed than sight. Flavor also refers to a range of identifiable but elusive qualities whose reality is undeniable. Examples: cozy, conservative, impersonal, chaotic, formal, casual, deprived, bohemian, nostalgic, extravagant, etc.

Some of these concepts have appeared in research about living room decoration, artifacts in the bedrooms of infants and teenagers, the display of domestic artifacts in claiming an ethnic identity, objects highlighted on mantelpieces, and the spectacle of empty beer bottles in student residences (Hurley 2006; Mitchell & Reid-Walsh 2002; Pike 2004). Emmison and Smith (2000) ask their readers to look for examples of these terms in realist literature. However, to my knowledge, no one has methodically used these terms in their research. In his outstanding article about “epiphany objects” which symbolize an interviewee’s personal taste or experience, Ian Woodward comments on my methodology:

While (Riggins’) categories of domestic objects are useful and original, by their exhaustive nature they end up being restrictive and practically inflexible. Additionally, to reach the theoretical standards set by Riggins would seem to require granting the researcher near unregulated access to the domestic setting – this may be the reason why Riggins’ model is apparently based substantially on his family home (Woodward 2001, 131).

Indeed, my aim was to be exhaustive. The flaw in the original terminology is that it does not fully exhaust the dimensions of domestic artifacts. In my opinion, Woodward has to some extent misunderstood my methodology. These terms are flexible. The classification of an object depends on how it is used and on the narrative given by the interviewee. Thus one object can easily illustrate more than one category. My interviews do not require “unregulated access” to the home. They are admittedly more intrusive than asking about a few epiphany objects.ⁱⁱ Woodward (2006, 2007) gathers collaborating evidence from the narratives interviewees tell about their domestic artifacts. Narrative inconsistencies might tell us something about the anxiety of shopping, but my procedure concentrates on domestic objects themselves and I do not consider interviewees to be “the expert” on their personal lives or possessions.

Proof of Fate and Love

My original terminology was developed while writing about the last residences of two elderly couples. Not surprisingly, then, I underestimated the degree to which living rooms evolve. At the time I interviewed my mother, she had lived in the same home for fifty years. The size of the living room as well as the location of windows and doorways severely limited decorating options. The furniture was too heavy to be easily moved except for things like light-weight metal TV trays (or snack tables). Pauline Garvey (2001) has published an excellent study showing that rearranging furniture is an inexpensive way of redecorating for some people. Although my original categories included *time indicators* (temporal homogeneity), few things pointed to the future or to a distant past. A yellow armchair in the living room was actually a reupholstered wedding present to my parents. Since all of the furniture was old, *care and repair of domestic objects* is a topic which should have been pursued. If I were to repeat the interview today, I would also raise questions about the way the home allowed an elderly person to be independent but at the cost of social isolation.

To my knowledge, there was no *negotiation in planning the decoration* when the last major change occurred circa 1968. Mother made all the major decisions. Negotiation is more common in young families today. Conflict over planning a home is one of the most difficult topics to explore in interviews. Insight requires interviewing family members separately, but again ethical problems arise about how much of this conflict needs to be aired in public. Questions about *gifts displayed out of a sense of obligation* were never raised in my interview. The discussion would have been about my gifts. A couple of things were *gifts to one's self*. Mother bought for herself a German cuckoo clock, and a hand-painted teapot from Bavaria at a next-door neighbor's estate sale. I did not think of explicitly asking about the topic until much later when I read Annemarie Money (2007, 361). I should also have asked about objects as *signifiers of occasions* (Money 2007, 372). I was primarily concerned with objects as *signifiers of relationships*. The cut glass and china in a display case might have elicited stories about occasions. As I am not a cook, no questions were raised about family dinners. Another mistake. Sarah Pink (2004) is correct that we need to pay more attention to the sounds, smells, and tactile experiences of homes. But I am reluctant to add these dimensions except in rare instances for fear of overwhelming readers with too much detail.

Daniel Miller (2001) and Tanya Davidson (2009) use the concept *haunting* to capture the way buildings are more permanent than their inhabitants. But the sentimental value of my

parents' home did not come from other residents. There were no markings from previous residents except for a nearly invisible child's name scratched on a window pane. The absence of signs of haunting in this house could be interpreted as indicating the relative social insignificance of previous residents. Haunting can also refer to standard stylistic features which date a building. The living room was more closed to the outside environment than is typical today, and in my eyes the overhead ceiling light resembled the lighting in old movie theaters. These are features which made the home less attractive. Haunting is certainly a topic that merits sustained attention in other research.

Death reshuffles the labels which give domestic objects so much of their meaning. Following death, some things disappear; new things arrive. The haiku poet and friend Richard Hendrickson (1999) writes: "family heirlooms / are passed down the line like genes / proof of fate and love." This particular home, however, was resistant to change. In retirement my father's hobby was making small wooden toys, model cars, and birdhouses, some of which could easily have been displayed in the living room. My father's presence in the living room is muted. I should have raised the question: Who or what was responsible for his invisibility? Is the answer his modesty, the power of social conventions – not many people have houses for wrens atop their coffee table (Attfield 1997) – or mother's domination? Why was I the person responsible for the two pictures of him which were displayed in the living and dining room? The *dispersal of domestic artifacts* is another process meriting attention. As Jean-Sébastien Marcoux (2001) shows so eloquently in his study of the Quebec ritual *casser maison*, the dispersal of domestic artifacts by the elderly can be seen as a conscious attempt to live in the memory of family and friends, and is thus related to the idea of a 'good death.' Not being able to give things away to the appropriate person can be distressing. Negotiation may have to take place because the appropriate person may not want the gift. Although mother was the kin-keeper of her family and 88 years old when interviewed, she showed little interest in 'placing things'. That was left to me and to nostalgic shoppers at my backyard estate sale.

The Random Nonsense of Existence by Adam Bradley and Stephen Harold Riggins

Riggins' partner enjoys speaking with strangers.ⁱⁱⁱ At a concert of contemporary music in Toronto, the volunteer selling refreshments struck up a conversation with him. The volunteer

was Adam Bradley. Although he completed a sociology degree at the university where Riggins teaches, they had met only once when Riggins signed an administrative form for Adam. Riggins had no recollection of this brief encounter. But Newfoundlanders in foreign places like Toronto, Ontario, have a tendency to associate with each other. Adam was later invited to participate in a twelve-hour poetry reading which Riggins' partner organized at a bar on Queen Street West. Adam stole the show because of the quality of his poetry and his acting ability. At some point Riggins learned that Adam lived in an eccentric apartment. Since this kind of dwelling is difficult to find, Adam let Riggins photograph his home. The basement apartment – at a location different from the one described in this article – was indeed very eccentric. The decor, the remnants of a friend's bankrupt antique store, included a dozen bicycles and old equipment related to making films and styling hair. Adam is presently an administrator at the concert society where he volunteered. Riggins systematically photographed the artifacts in the living room which will now be described and interviewed Adam on two occasions. Each interview was about two hours long. Adam also read drafts of the following account and, as will be apparent, corrected some of Riggins' misperceptions. Adam requested that one remark in the draft be removed. His request was honored.

Adam articulates a philosophy which is difficult for some people to hear. For Riggins, part of the appeal of research on material artifacts is that objects evoke the past. Of course, everything is eventually destroyed, forgotten, and recreated in different forms, but in the meantime passively accepting transitoriness seems inhuman. Adam, in contrast, embraces transitoriness while at the same time creating an environment that celebrates the self. Neglect and clutter give his version of transitoriness a shabby appearance. Riggins does not struggle with his personal biases in writing this description because he appreciates Adam as a visual artist, poet, and experimental musician. Adam is in his mid-20s but identifies with the 1970s punk subculture, although he is too young to have experienced the decade, and finds significance in the street address of his apartment which was a prominent year in the Toronto punk scene. The apartment, which is located in Toronto, Canada, has been named "Sally Rough" by one of Adam's friends. ("Sally Ann" is a colloquial term for the Salvation Army.) But nothing actually comes from the Salvation Army. To some extent the apartment is still haunted by its previous tenants.

I cured this place. When I moved in, it had a horrible smell from the previous tenants' cats. I think they were drug addicts and did not take proper care of the cats. I

turned this place around. Most potential tenants immediately rejected it. It was probably never meant to be a place to live in. It's weird and solitary. I fell in love with this place.

The apartment is located in the basement of a two-story brick building, apparently built circa 1920, in a working-class neighbourhood which is slowly being gentrified. At this point in time, the class contrasts along the street are very noticeable. Adam has lived for the past fifteen months in a basement apartment which was probably intended to serve as a furnace room. On the ground floor of the building is a variety store that sits just above the apartment.

The door to Adam's apartment is at the back of the building. Entrance requires walking into a vest-pocket park accessible to the public at all hours. The park's attractions are a children's playground and a wading pool. The entrance to the apartment is down a few concrete steps which on a hot July day are slightly dusty and covered with a few dry leaves. The screen door has no handle. A hole has been cut in the screen which serves as a handle for opening and closing the door. Upon entering, visitors find themselves in a space Riggins calls a kitchen/bedroom. Since the tenant is from Newfoundland, it might be noted that the traditional way of entering Newfoundland homes was through the kitchen, which typically had a daybed. However, this kitchen has a queen-size bed near the stove, immediately giving the impression of someone living in an inadequate space. Modern kitchens have become multifunctional open spaces but they are not combined with bedrooms. Adam's art works are better displayed on the walls of the kitchen/bedroom than the casual treatment they receive in the living room. The art is coloured drawings, made with felt pens ("sharpies") and Crayola brand crayons, on sheets of cardboard and used pizza boxes.

In July 2011 when Riggins first visited, the shouts of children wading in the pool penetrated through the open door into the kitchen/bedroom and into the room we shall call the living room/closet. Little in the room conforms to middle-class conventions of interior decoration except for one characteristic. Living rooms tend to be a repository for handmade objects. Adam takes artifacts normally seen as stigmatizing because they are associated with poverty and uses them in alien ways that ironically convey high status. Here – with a bit of extravagance and egotism – they are also turned into disidentifying objects, collective objects, and occupational objects. In the interview Adam references the objects by associating them with

the philosophy of a youthful counterculture. The main display technique, clustering, makes it difficult to highlight objects and encourages understating. When he maps the objects in terms of the social relationships they represent, the talk is about marginal subcultures in new music and art.

Neglect runs through everything in this apartment. There is a rat bite on a cardboard pizza box in the kitchen. There are organic, damaged elements on a lot of the art I do. Blackberries smeared on one of my art pieces. Bugs buried in some of them. Things are mortal. I like the idea of impermanence. I don't like to glorify art, put it behind glass. I wouldn't do that. Whatever happens to my art is real and honest. Things in your life get degraded. I try to do that in art rather than falsely preserve things.

The living room is rather dark. It is windowless. The main light is a red Chinese lantern. The ceiling is uneven and low. At its maximum, it is only 6 feet and 2 inches high. There are so many objects crowded together in this room that it is not obvious which one might at first glance attract a visitor's attention. Maybe it would be the electrical service panel for fuses and electricity meters. It is on the wall to the left of the door, at eyelevel, and large with respect to the size of the room. The panel holds the meters for the entire building. Electrical service panels, always painted institutional grey, are normally considered utilitarian necessities and hidden in a closet. Here it is in full view. There is perhaps a certain irony in its prominence. The decoration of the living room is consistent with the "modernist project," as some sociologists call it, in that it is comparatively individualistic. But if the modern home is understood as a technical terminal (Putnam 1999), then it is not modern because the television is not the focal point of the living room and the apartment is not connected to the Internet. The room seems to be organized in a traditional manner with a central focus which facilitates conversation. The service panel is decorated with a few promotional cards for artists. Since they cannot be seen properly from the doorway, the art will be discussed later.

We do not discuss shopping because Adam does not buy many things. The furniture is second-hand, "snatched up things" discarded and left on the street for anyone who might want them or for the garbage collectors. He once carried a chair home on his back. His friends also sometimes help him carry things home. The red and orange shag rug comes from a middle-aged

friend, an audiophile fond of taking discarded things from the street, who was convinced to reduce his possessions. To the left of the doorway separating the kitchen/bedroom and the living room/closet are two grey cushions lying flat on the floor. Instead of a backrest there are three mismatched pillows, beige and brown. Adam brought a used couch from his previous apartment. But when he realized after two hours of struggling that it would not fit through the door, the frame was discarded. These are seats for the young because they are so low. Lodged high in the corner and barely visible above the Chinese lantern is a tiny staircase from a doll house. It was found in the parking lot of a nearby thrift store called Value Village. In the corner is a guitar modified by a local noise artist:

We don't really know each other. I was at a party and he brought tubs and filing cabinets full of junk and just threw himself on them and broke them. The acoustic guitar was functional. He played it. A mic cord was attached to it. But he smashed the back of it. Whatever he has done to it, it makes really crazy abrasive sounds. It was a violent noise show. There is a positivity which comes from expending energy. Listeners can vicariously live through the violence. Everything is so politically correct these days. We are not allowed to express rage in Canada. I am very fond of the idea of creation in destruction.

Underneath the guitar is a black robe of fake fur, part of an ape-like "mogwar costume." (The costume also consists of a mask and a Newfoundland ugly stick which are not on display. An ugly stick is a traditional Newfoundland musical instrument made out of a mop or broom handle, bottle caps, tin cans, small bells, cymbals, and other noise makers.) Crypto-zoological circles are familiar with the mogwar, a mythical primate (perhaps a hoax) supposedly discovered by the Swiss oil geologist François de Loys in Venezuela in 1920.^{iv} The Shadow Ring rock band has a song about de Loys and this South American version of Bigfoot. The face is a Halloween devil's mask from Wal-mart turned inside out. It is hidden because he assumed it would frighten some visitors and Adam did not want to try to explain it. This is one of the rare examples of interpersonal negotiation in decorating the apartment. He talks about dancing around in this costume at happenings like Extermination Music Night, a clandestine mobile concert series, held in illegal locations such as industrial ruins and secluded beaches. The music may be free jazz or

conceptual noise, but it is generally “garage rock,” that is pop-tinged, high energy music. Adam calls garage music “very do-it-yourself music, usually sloppy but fun.”^v

Beside the guitar is a bale of hay coming from a neighborhood bar. It functions as a chair. A cushion makes it more comfortable. The back support is an old tire, with the rim intact, recuperated from the sidewalk. Next is a very old and by contemporary standards very thick Diamond brand television set. A friend gave him the television. It rests on a small table that has the traditional turned legs of antiques rather than clean modernist lines. Underneath is a DVD player. In the corner is a red padded armchair. Anyone sitting in the chair must occasionally shift positions because some of the springs are worn out. On the floor is a discarded cardboard pizza box. A painted sheet of cardboard leaning against the wall is one of Adam’s paintings. It is casually displayed in a shockingly understated and self-destructive manner. The remnants of a couch touch the painting; two cushions on the floor, two cushions as a backrest. Guests sitting here cannot comfortably avoid damaging his painting. Older guests who know little about contemporary pop art might see resemblances with the cartoons of Robert Crumb, but Adam’s art is less erotic. Any resemblance is accidental because Adam is not familiar with Crumb’s art.

The natural order is decay. The cardboard art I do is not going to last. The material is acidic. That’s the joke. It’s not going to last. That’s how I view everything. Everything is very temporary. It is not a malicious trick. Wealthy people who buy art should understand that. Preservation is a big thing for many people. But we buy things which break in a year or two. Accepting that is part of my desire for novelty. If they break, something new will come in. I feel in a lot of ways, to quote Kurt Vonnegut, “so it goes.”^{vi} Life is chaotic and a constant loss. Life is aleatoric, just random nonsense. I accept that. I’m not trying to be a prophet. It’s just what is in my head.

Riggins notes that Adam has a B.A. degree in sociology. The random nonsense of existence is not what sociologists typically see. We see the unjust social order.

The room is basically L-shaped. The extension to the side serves as a storage area stuffed helter-skelter with electronic equipment, amplifiers, turntables and speakers; some rest on blue plastic milk crates. Within handy reach of the audio equipment is a modest pile of records or

“vinyls” as Adam calls them. No curtain or door hides this disorder which is of such modest dimensions that Adam does not appear to be a hoarder, although he does call himself a “packrat.” He keeps odd things which might have a use later. The effect is a room Riggins calls the living room/closet. Adam points out that there is a glow-in-the-dark rubber snake on the back wall but it is barely visible. Another large drawing on cardboard is obscured among the clutter. It would have to be moved, if visitors got a good look at it.

I like the aesthetics of piled up electronics. They all did work once. I like rooms to be full. I like cluttered spaces. I feel I am a maximalist in many ways. I designed this place to be entertaining to me. Efficiency and utility is something I am not fond of. I feel like my home is an on-going art project. I have made all of my apartments into an art project out of whims that come to me, impulses, things given to me.

Among the electronic equipment is a drum kit which Adam cannot use. “I asked the landlord when moving in if I could play music underneath the corner store. He said "yes", but it turned out that the space was far from sound proof. I can hear the neighbours’ voices when they chatter, but I cannot understand what is being said.”

I sometimes like to destroy my possessions to remind me that things decay. I don’t do this in a fit of rage. Writing on the walls is part of that. I once sprayed a fire extinguisher around the apartment. I don’t like to be restricted by norms. You never get to use fire extinguishers although they are displayed everywhere, sometimes behind glass. Spraying the fire extinguisher was an impulse. I wanted to see the result and deal with the consequence afterwards. If you take risks, you get burnt a lot. But it makes life more interesting. If you actively engage trouble, you learn damage control, how to deal with problems.

There is an abstract crayon drawing (“just junk”) on a wall of the closet. Otherwise, scribbled messages and line drawings are confined to the door of the washroom. The drawings look like spontaneous doodles: caricatures of faces, messages, and a human head with octopus-like tentacles. Some are even partially erased. Tacked to the door separating the living room from the

kitchen is a humorous drawing by a friend. It might be an esteem object. The caption is descriptive: Toast Owl in a Sunset.

The living room is characterized by little temporal depth, as one would assume from Adam's remarks, and by status consistency. There are a few exceptions, however, pieces which convey a more orthodox notion of status. One is a bentwood rocking chair. It reminds him of a chair at his parents' home in Newfoundland. If exotic objects are understood as referring to geographically distance places, this is the only potential exotic object. However, it is a manufactured chair of unknown origin, certainly not from Newfoundland. Only in Adam's referencing does it appear to have exotic connotations for a Torontonians. The two levels of seating in the apartment, cushions on the floor and chairs of standard height, have the effect of introducing some visual diversity into a small space depending on where one is seated. The other high status object is the colourful hand-painted table top which Adam made. This is certainly the most marketable art in the room. In another setting it might be referred to as a coffee table. Although it is a standard table top, the legs have been discarded. The support is an apple basket.

The painted tabletop took me ten to fifteen minutes to make. No thought went into it. I don't see any value higher than aesthetics. All of this stuff is junk. I value it because I put it together. I feel that it really keeps me from getting too attached to material goods. I have some things I treasure.

I don't like artists who make something and then make a grandiose statement about it. I have fun with bizarre things, odd juxtapositions, playing with geometry. Not grand statements. The motto "Offend thy self" does not apply to the table. The table is only for aesthetics.

My work is very selfish. At an exhibition my artist statement was written backwards on a pizza box beginning from the bottom. If you find value in my art, I won't disagree with you. Some things have tons of values. Other things are just squares and nonsense. Sometimes I realize in retrospect that a piece is more valuable than I had anticipated. Some friends suggest that I take just one image and make art. I like images with too much information.

Despite Adam's claim of being self-centered, he does not sign his art works. Instead the identifying symbol worked into the image is a stoplight of non-standard colors. Until this statement Riggins had interpreted Adam's message as: I do not treasure anything. But Riggins misunderstood. Memories and stories are what Adam values. However, he has a suitcase full of "tidbits," which are the objects he truly values. Some are from his childhood. He keeps adding things to the suitcase. It seemed inappropriate to inquire about the contents of the suitcase in the kitchen/bedroom but there was no indication from Adam that the contents were actually private. As a musician he also treasures his "vinyls, although I abuse them." He does not revere objects. It is the ideas associated with them which he treasures.

Adam talks about young artists in Toronto, some of whom are collaborators. "Friends, people in my atmosphere," he calls them. He says they do art based on somewhat disturbing and violent material. The content may be humorous, abrasive, and offensive; but the people are "really nice." He refers to the Toronto-based video/art collective called Exploding Motor Car, the White House art collective in Toronto and the music-community message board called Stillepost.

Above the electrical service panel is the exposed heating system and insulation. The electrical service panel displays a stylized drawing by Patrick Kyle of a man defecating evil spirits. There is also a small promotional card for an art exhibition on the "theme of death, psychedelic and self-indulgent fantasies" (to quote part of the text on the back of the card). There is a three-dimensional miniature tombstone decorated with something like runes. Nothing but the date 12 BC is legible. It is described as "simply a weird gift" from a friend. The other things are a sticker showing the face of a musician from the band called The Bicycles, a sticker with the message "Fuzzy Logic Recordings," and a real drum stick. But Adam was more interested in talking about another gift, a band button that reads "Gimme Teenage Head." This is the slightly naughty name of a popular Toronto band from the 1970s. Adam talks enthusiastically about its authenticity – scratched in a mosh pit. Actually, the scratches from the frenetic dance scene are hard to see.

Adam suggests that Riggins needs to learn about pataphysics in order to understand his home. This is a sort of intellectual Dadaism which was the invention of the French artist Alfred Jarry. "I don't know tons about pataphysics," Adam confesses. "I haven't figured out how to fit

it in my life yet.” Riggins’ impression is that pataphysics might help understand a future apartment rather than the present one.

Addendum

In conclusion, this apartment supports some of Daniel Miller’s ideas about the social determinants of decorating strategies. It is certainly consistent with a masculine aesthetic. But in the absence of comparable apartments inhabited by members of different ethnic groups, it is not clear how Adam’s aesthetic reflects ethnicity. Adam’s aesthetic does seem to be a variation on the “biographical cover-up” strategy. Miller (1988, 364) claimed that domestic artifacts in government-subsidized housing in Great Britain sometimes function to attract attention away from the low social status of the dwelling. Adam’s aesthetic is both consistent and inconsistent with this practice. Physically, his cheap things reflect the status of his apartment house; the intellectuality behind the objects might be understood as a cover-up.

Dick Hebdige’s (1988) ideas about style in the British punk subculture might also help to understand Adam’s apartment. Some similarities are unmistakable. Riggins employs the term “alien use” rather than “bricolage,” which Hebdige borrowed from Lévi-Strauss; however, the terms have similar meanings. Alien use is a basic characteristic of Adam’s living room as well as punk style. In Riggins’ opinion, Adam’s examples of alien use are less shocking, less provocative, than punk practices with respect to clothing in the 1970s. Adam has rejected the conventional expectation that the home is a site for conveying signs of affluence and conspicuous consumption (Chapman 1999, 56). His philosophy, however, turns poverty into a sign of success. The apartment is characterized by subversive practices, sometimes humorous, with respect to the dominant ideology of capitalism and consumerism. The differences with British punk are due to the compromises everyone makes in furnishing and decorating a home because they have to acknowledge gifts from friends; differences are also due to accidental acquisitions, and concerns about comfort and practicality which literally “domesticate the Other.” The result is to undermine the consistency of the political messages conveyed by the living room. Forty years ago punks may have been seen in conventional British society as 'folk devils', but this is certainly not the apartment of a folk devil. The anti-consumerism of the decoration is not a 'spectacular subculture' that escapes analysis. Anti-consumerism is relatively common today. Ian Woodward (2001, 117) utilizes the continuum *beauty to comfort* to represent the underlying

philosophy of decorating schemes. If the concept is adapted to be more accurate in this case, the continuum would be *self-identity to comfort*. Adam's apartment is near the self-identity point. There was no talk of beauty or comfort in the interviews. Riggins suspects that to some extent the living room/closet functions as a parlour. When a few guests are present, they are more likely to sit around the dinner table in the kitchen/bedroom, on the bed or in a plush kitchen chair.

Adam might have made a more convincing claim that he identified with the punk subculture. But as Riggins is a classically trained pianist, he would not have understood any of Adam's references other than the most obvious ones. In general, punks revealed their identity with the subculture through music and clothing rather than interior decoration. It is typical of the differences between interviewer and interviewee that when Adam referred to his "vinyls," Riggins never inquired about his collection. Adam could have displayed more band paraphernalia and logos. However, if he had purchased too many for display purposes, some visitors might ironically interpret this as a sign of inauthentic over-identification with the subculture (Force 2009). Punk style is supposed to be spontaneous and always oppositional. Adam has carried this idea even to the extent of resisting the tendency of turning the living room into a gallery. His subversion of the conventional middle-class styles of decorating has a long history among artists that Christopher Reed (2002) dates back to French Impressionism. For nearly a century and a half avant-garde male artists have scorned conventional symbols of domesticity. This is another reason why Riggins did not think it was necessary to further pursue the topic of punk subculture when interviewing Adam. Riggins describes the flavor of Adam's apartment as virile, slightly chaotic, playful, and symbolic of anti-consumerism. It is definitely not homey.

Adam agreed only in part with Riggins' analysis. He agreed that he strongly identifies with material poverty, and with Riggins' impression that he is not very provocative. As Riggins suspected, Adam does not think of himself as a militant or an activist. He attributes the status diversity in the living room to his appreciation of randomness and contrast and to his "fear of commitment." He wants to feel free rather than hounded by people. However, he states that Riggins was wrong in thinking he radically rejects consumerism. On those rare occasions when friends give him something that is expensive, he makes use of it. He thinks the pursuit of money to buy consumer goods interferes with his priority, the "creation of stories." Redecorating, rearranging the furniture, acquiring new stuff is always tempting. Moving is one of Adam's

favourite experiences. In his words, “there is something neurotic about my apartment but it makes me happy.”

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ⁱ I agree with the following statement by Daniel Miller (2001, 15): “An anthropology that thinks that sensitivity about being too intrusive is demonstrated by remaining outside and respecting the distance of-conventional social proxemics is a dead anthropology, that loses its humanity in the very moment that it asserts it in this claim to sensitivity.” Although talk about one’s home is always a sensitive topic, not all studies of vernacular interior decoration are as intrusive as the model I propose for my own research. I think that Ian Woodward somewhat misrepresents my methodology, but I emphasize that Woodward specifically rejected my procedures because he thought they required “near unregulated access to the domestic setting” (Woodward 2001, 131).

ⁱⁱ For me, there were several epiphany objects in my parents’ home in hilly and forested southern Indiana, but few were in the living room or dining room except for my maternal grandfather’s mustache cup. On top of the cedar chest in my parents’ bedroom were two albums of Kodak photographs. One records the early years of their marriage. The second holds my baby pictures. Both albums are incomplete. My parents’ album ends when I was born. As a child, I thought I learned some profound knowledge from these photographs: marriage changes fundamentally, and for the worse, when children arrive. It is best to be voluntarily childless. I thought it was such dangerous insight that I did not share it with anyone. The idea strikes me now as hopelessly naïve. That aging plays a role in people’s desire to be photographed never occurred to me. Viewed this way, the album says little about marriage as an institution. I also never gave a thought to why my album ends when I was about the age of 14. I still don’t have an answer for that question.

Aesthetics was never the photographer’s concern. The photographer always thought that the best angle was to capture a person’s image from head to toe. This resulted in mid-distant shots which convey little intimacy. There was no effort to document local life. Most photographs depict visits to nearby towns and tourist sites, like French Lick. Thus the album poorly records the socializing which tended to be restricted to the extended family. I now interpret these features as evidence that, like many in the working class, the Riggins and Ledgerwood families were not well integrated into mainstream American culture.

ⁱⁱⁱ Note to readers: For ethical and practical reasons, I made it a point to cast my informant as a research collaborator. Therefore, I will refer to myself in this section in the third person.

^{iv} The mogwar is known by a variety of names depending on the South American country: shiru, sisimite, vasitri, didi, xipe, and tarma.

^v See eyeweekly.com, 20 August 2008. <http://www.eyeweekly.com/features/article/36773> . *Toronto Star*, 11 July 2009. <http://www.thestar.com/news/gta/article/664502> .

^{vi} “So it goes” is a refrain in Vonnegut’s novel *Slaughterhouse Five*. It could be understood as meaning that’s the way things are.