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DIY projects: active consumers, tools and materials.¹

Arguments that social analysis of consumption should pay more attention to ordinary consumption have been well made (Gronow and Warde 2001). Against a recent history of approaches to consumption which have focused on consumption as symbolic, and on moments and contexts of acquisition, an agenda prioritising understanding of pragmatic consumption of mundane commodities and the ongoing processes of use is increasingly well established. Within such a framing, fundamental figures of consumption analysis – the consumer, products, consumption itself – are challenged. First, the contrasting models of the consumer which dominated debates over the twentieth century – the neo-classical rational hero, the dupe of market forces of critical approaches, or the self-conscious manipulator of symbolic resources which emerged after the cultural turn – are each inadequate to approaching the detailed dynamics of consumption as everyday practice. Second, products themselves are recast, from passive carriers of productive labour, market or symbolic value, to be also pragmatic means to accomplish everyday life and as active in enabling and shaping the practices from which everyday life is constituted. Finally, consumption itself is reshaped as a topic of investigation, from moments and contexts of acquisition to ongoing processes of active appropriation and integration, and the mutual shaping of assemblages of objects and collections of practices.

In this new terrain of consumption studies, new questions necessarily emerge. I frame this presentation within one foundational such question: how do products, the very stuff of consumption, relate to the practices of consumption? I address this question through consideration of the activity of DIY – do-it-yourself home maintenance/improvement, based on semi-structured observations and 18 in-depth interviews. Around 62% of the UK adult population claim to participate in DIY, and the market, currently worth around £12 billion per year in the UK, has been growing at a steady rate of around 7–8% per year since the late 1990s (Intel 2003; 2005). DIY has received some attention from social science, but with an overwhelming focus on the role of the *effects* achieved through DIY in mediating and maintaining relationships between people, whether it is in family relations within the household (Nelson 2004), construction and maintenance of self-identity and self-esteem (Clarke 2001; Woodward 2003), or broader constructions of space and identity (Miller 1995). What is noticeably missing is the *doing* of DIY. It is the work, sweat, dust and frustration of coordinating tools, materials, competence, confidence, body

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and the fabric of the home, which gives DIY its potential as a means to explore the complex relations between materials, products and practices.

To begin with, DIY demonstrates the obvious but still relatively neglected point that the acquisition of products generally has less to do with status, distinction or identity, and more to do with achieving particular ends. At the most foundational level, we can see that the acquisition of a tool is with the purpose of bringing it together with a human body to form a human–nonhuman *hybrid* (Latour 1993) – a term which in this context takes hold of the character of alignments, relations and interminglings of humans and nonhumans. Theorisation of hybridity and related concepts has often been carried through with relatively spectacular hybridisations between human bodies and advanced technologies; but amongst the most transparent examples of hybrids, perhaps the most basic hybridisation, is that of person and hand tool. Simply, a human with a tool – whether it’s a rock, a hammer or a power drill, is an entity with different capabilities, different capacities for engaging with world, than a human without a tool.

However, if hybridisation is seen as a union between human body and a single technology it breaks down in the face of DIY. The majority of purchases for DIY are driven by the exigencies of the given project planned or underway. Screws, rawlplugs, fillers, abrasives, surface preparation products, electric cable, tap washers – whether in a store or in the mess of a tool box, most of the commodities visible are entirely useless unless brought together in appropriate relation with other artefacts in an active process of assembly. The hybrid of person–tool only has useful capacities when brought into combination with other materials and the fabric of the house in the context of a project.

The analytic unit of the project has obvious significance for understanding consumption in the context of DIY. Understanding how projects emerge as ideas, plans and in execution demonstrate how consumption largely makes sense only in the context of an ongoing process of active integration and transformation. Insights on the emergent, iterative character of DIY projects include that:

Projects emerge from ongoing ‘conversation’: Some DIYers can, retrospectively at least, articulate the history of the work within their home as the realisation of a Grand Design. However DIY projects often emerge from the *ongoing conversation* between a changing household – its composition, routines, accumulation of possessions, etc – and the fabric of the property. Apparent here is the active role played by the fabric of the house itself, providing limitations, affordances, inspirations and attachments on its side of the conversation with the household.

Projects take shape through iterative practices: However, it is not only at the level of planning a project that the emergent character of DIY practice is apparent. DIY is almost inherently exploratory, the complexity of coordination requiring that contingencies will have to be dealt with along the way. Here, the active role of tools and materials in enabling and shaping the project comes into focus. At least since

the power drill entered the home in the mid-20th century, there has been an accelerating development of tools and materials available to the DIYer. Developments in the capacities and affordability of DIY tools and materials change the basic terms from which DIY projects emerge, and play an active role in their realisation.

Doing DIY changes the terms for future DIY: DIY work and projects can also emerge from the very process of DIY. Working to realise one planned effect, once commenced, so often reveals jobs that need to be completed before the next step of the planned project can be undertaken. But also, once completed, the realised effect can prompt new work. Firstly, this can take the form of matching to the new fabric of the building. Secondly, the very unpredictability of what a DIY task will involve, and the inherently exploratory nature of an amateur tackling a range of jobs, means that DIY practitioners are frequently developing skills and confidence, and perhaps also extending their range of tools and stocks of materials, through taking on projects. Consequently, the process of realising a DIY project can change the conditions of possibility for the DIYer in ways which can enable new possible projects to emerge.

This limited exploration of DIY of course only forays down a few of the potential paths of inquiry in relation to the grand question in which I have framed it. But it casts some striking light on the relations between products and practices in the context of DIY. First it highlights how specific acts of acquisition make sense only in relation to ongoing projects of often complex and necessarily active assembly, integration and transformation. Secondly, it shows how those framing projects can themselves be iterative and emergent from the processes of integration *etc* of which they are composed. It is ultimately only in the *doing* that the diverse range of entities propelling restlessness congeals into the means to effect material changes.

DIY is clearly a very particular context of consumption, leaving the question of how far insights generated from its investigation can be translated to other contexts. There are some very clear parallels with DIY in terms of the complex and skilled assembly required to effect the material transformations desired, such as cooking or car maintenance. However the question remains as to whether or not insights from DIY, highlighting that active role of both consumer and products in shaping processes of consumption and related practices framed within emergent projects, can be usefully applied across any other, or all, fields of consumption.

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