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# Falling in and out of love with stuff: Affective affordance and horizontal transcendence in styles of decluttering in Japan

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## Abstract

The last decade has seen the rise of Japanese methods of decluttering, adding everyday stuff to the increasing number of things that the modern subject must manage to gain a sense of wellbeing. This article examines *Danshari* by Yamashita Hideko and the *Konmari* method by Kondō Marie. Using the ‘affective affordances’ of objects as an analytic lens, I will argue that paying attention to everyday practices of decluttering reveals a close connection between material landscapes, gendered subjectivities and competing ethics of personhood. These connections only become visible when we put the decluttering methods in the context of the gendered expectations regarding attachment towards objects and their care in domestic work. Objects serve as an integral part of the affective regulation of everyday life; their careful or wasteful treatment is closely linked with ethical consumption and moral personhood. Attachments to objects and injunctions against wastefulness make ridding a morally fraught task. By contrasting a close reading of the two methods with insights gained from fieldwork on everyday disposal, I will trace the ways in which affect is mobilized in order to get rid of things and put this in the broader context of consumer capitalism in twenty-first century Japan.

## Introduction: what do we manage when we manage things?

After several days of decluttering and getting rid of mountains of accumulated stuff, we came across three already packed-up boxes at the bottom of the slowly diminishing pile of things. When I asked Kaori what they were, she told me that a few years ago, she tried to declutter, but was not able to go through with it. ‘I didn’t know how to tidy up’ (*katazukekata wakaranakatta*). In my fieldwork with people who had difficulties with disposal in Tokyo (2006–2008) I came across many such cases. They described their rooms as being *mono-darake* (‘full of stuff’) or *chirakatteiru* (cluttered, literally ‘with things strewn around’). In the process of tidying up we would often find the remains of earlier discarding projects, and even though they were already packed up, these boxes would not be any easier to dispose. My interlocutors would say things like ‘I did not throw them away last time; there must have been a reason I kept them in the end’. This often created a vicious cycle in which the mere presence of stuff became the legitimation for it being there. If only there was a method to get rid of stuff!

In 2009, Yamashita Hideko<sup>1</sup> published *Danshari*, a self-help book that triggered a whole genre of decluttering literature, the most well-known of which is Kondō Marie’s *Magic of tidying up* (2010). Housework manuals hitherto had focused on tidying

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<sup>1</sup>Japanese names are given in the conventional Japanese order: family names followed by given names.

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(Iida, 2002), cleaning (Nakamura, 2009), saving money (Ogasawara, 2003), and time management (Aoki, 2002). Quite a few of them had sections on disposal, but the new wave of 'thing management' focused almost exclusively on decluttering and the sense of ease and wellbeing that could be achieved through it. At the time of writing, Kondō's books have been translated into 40 languages and her show on Netflix *Tidying up with Marie Kondo* has occupied the top spot in the non-fiction releases of 2019 (Lattanzio, 2019). There is no English language translation of Yamashita's book yet, but the Chinese translation has sold 1.5 million copies and there are over a million posts with the hashtag *danshari* on the social media site Instagram.

This article examines the rise of decluttering methods in the context of subject-object relations in contemporary Japan. My hope is that a close analysis of *how* decluttering is supposed to work will point us towards *why* these projects of ridding have become salient for so many people in Japan and abroad. Through a close reading of the two core texts, I will focus on the role that the things themselves play in these discourses of decluttering. My argument is that understanding what is at stake in disposal will shed light on the taken-for-granted ways in which everyday objects are embedded in social relations in contemporary Japan. While foregrounding these methods in order to critique them is an aim in itself, the approach taken here goes a step further and uses them to trace the contours of the background in front of which they become meaningful: the material landscapes of the everyday in which we live our more or less cluttered lives. Building on Ingold's use of the 'dwelling perspective' (2011: 153–156) that conceptualizes dwelling as an ongoing, interactive process rather than an encounter between a self-contained individual and a pre-existing environment, I will argue that mundane objects serve as an integral part of the affective regulation of everyday life. In her ethnography *Living with things*, Nicky Gregson argues that 'ridding, along with holding and keeping, is every bit as much part of identity work as acts of expenditure or acquisition' (2007: 165). Trying to get rid of things triggers feelings of attachment, resistance and conflict (Newell, 2014). In other words, paying attention to everyday practices of decluttering is not a frivolous 'devotion to the unimportant', but reveals a close connection between quotidian material landscapes, gendered subjectivities and competing ethics of personhood. What connects these different elements is the affective bond of subject-object relationships that I theorize here as the affective affordances of objects.

Yamashita's and Kondō's books arguably belong to the category of self-help literature, a genre that has been criticized for self-indulgence, self-importance and narcissism in the West (Irvine, 1999; Moskowitz, 2001) and in Japan (Miyazaki, 2014). While self-help for male public subjects tends to focus on a protestant sense of frugality and self-reliance, self-help books purportedly aimed at empowering women conspire 'to produce a female subject better suited to inhabiting a gender-asymmetrical society than to challenging its political and social basis' (Schrager 1993: 180). From a Foucauldian perspective, self-help discourses are technologies of the self that claim to emancipate the self while at the same time subjecting it to discipline and control (Makino, 2012). In his critique of self-help and self-development, specifically in the realm of tidying up, the social scientist Makino Tomokazu argues that people's attention is redirected away from larger social issues that they cannot control towards things that they feel they can. This, however, only pushes women deeper into conventional gender roles (2015). Underlying these feminist critiques is often an unspoken assumption that the domestic should not be a legitimate

source of self. But as Eva Illouz has shown, it was Freud who suggested that ‘the uneventful and banal realm of daily life is the most significant site where the self is made and unmade’ (2008: 38), for all genders. Furthermore, as bell hooks has argued in *Talking back: Thinking feminist, thinking Black* (1989), the commercial success of self-help literature is propelled by a wish for ‘self-recovery’ that has only emerged in the wake of the struggle for feminist liberation and for which the predominantly negative critique of feminism has failed to provide role models. While some of the promises that are made by Yamashita and Kondō – attaining a sense of wellbeing, accomplishment and control, for example – fit exactly into the mold of self-help criticized in these writings, I argue that any evaluation regarding the emancipatory or conservative effect of their writing can only be made after putting them into context. Yamashita and Kondō do not call for embracing a new authentic sense of self; their point is that you have to take concrete action. It all begins and ends with disposal.

I will first introduce the theoretical concept of ‘affective affordance’, before examining the role of objects in *Danshari*, followed by the *Konmari* method. I will then put them in conversation with my own fieldwork as free-lance declutterer<sup>2</sup> and compare the insights with research undertaken by Gretchen Herrmann on garage sales in the US. Finally, I will return to the questions of gendered subjectivity and ethical personhood that are at stake in decluttering and put these in the broader context of consumer capitalism in twenty-first century Japan.

### **Kawaii! On the affective affordances of everyday things**

In the study of material culture, everyday things are usually understood to be physical entities that act as carriers of social meanings (Miller, 2010). Possessions are shaped by their owners, but also shape their owners in turn, as can be seen in fashion, interior design and the conspicuous consumption of commodities more broadly. This corresponds to a cognitive model in which objects exist outside in the world as physical entities that are represented in the mind as meanings. From this perspective, the stability of the thing in space (its physical presence) and in time (its enduring existence) are taken to guarantee the stability of meaning. So far, so good, but what happens when the object is removed from the social sphere of exchange and representation? What occurs when it loses its individual aspect and disappears in a mass of other things? Here a more dynamic model is necessary. Rather than to describe personal objects as having meanings that can be elicited and remain constant over time, the term ‘affective affordance’ presents an understanding of how human perception and action work in relation to different environments. The environmental psychologist James Gibson (1986), who coined the term ‘affordance’, was keen to formulate a model of perception that did not involve mental representation and argued that the environment offers opportunities for certain actions that depend on both the capabilities of the subject and the characteristics of the environment: a tree may be ‘climbable’ for a monkey, but not for a human being. ‘The affordance of an object is neither solely an independent property of the object itself, nor is

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<sup>2</sup>My original intention was to undertake fieldwork at a *Danshari* workshop with Yamashita Hideko in spring of 2011, but the Great Eastern Japan disaster put a stop to that plan. When I tried to re-engage with *Danshari* while on sabbatical at Tokyo University of Foreign Studies in 2020, the pandemic struck. I thus rely mostly on written sources, and my previous fieldwork among hoarders in Tokyo (2006–2008) and the Kansai area (2011–2013).

it exclusively an intentional state within the mind of the person engaging with it, but a relational property shared between object and agent' (Knappett, 2004: 46). What the thing 'is' in the end is predicated not upon its attributed meaning or its normative function but upon the concrete acts and relations it 'affords' through its materiality. For example, a wooden chair affords sitting, leaning on, hiding under, or standing on (to change a light bulb), but it can also be used as a barricade, as a weapon in a bar fight, or as firewood. But affordances are not just situational invitations to action, they can also be conceived of as invitations to feel and thus appear to users in a particular emotional light (Fuchs, 2016: 196). Krueger and Colombetti argue that 'we perceive people, places, and things as affording regulative opportunities to amplify, suppress, extend, enrich, and explore the phenomenal and temporal character of our affective experiences' (2018: 224).

Affective affordances are thus properties not of objects but of relations between subjects and objects. This, however, does not mean that commodities cannot be created to foster affective attachments. Japanese material culture is abundant with engineered affect: from the ubiquitous HelloKitty branding that has metastasized over every surface of quotidian consumer durables (McVeigh, 2000), to cat cafés (Plourde, 2014), in which the affective affordances of cats are enlisted to create 'healing' (*iyashi*), and further to contemporary writing, a strand of which Paul Roquet characterises as 'ambient literature' (2009). All these commodified experiences are geared towards the creation of a particular mood. The paradigmatic case is the much commented upon notion of *kawaii* (cute). As any observer who has spent time among high school or university students in Japan can attest, the term '*kawaii*' is both a description and a spell. Even things that are not immediately recognisable as 'cute' can be transformed into something cute by a delighted squeal of '*kawaii!!*'. What we see here, then, is not just meanings that are deciphered, represented or inscribed into objects, but truly relational events in which orientations towards the material environment are activated and modulated by the 'cognitive stickiness' of things, in Alfred Gell's apt characterisation (1998: 86). The 'humility of [these] objects' (Miller, 2010: 53) vis-à-vis the larger questions of social theory, have made it difficult to bring into focus how these small affective affordances texture everyday life worlds. But it is precisely these small things, the minuscule discharges of affect against the depressive background of 'the lost decades', that have a disproportionate effect on the living quality of their owners or co-dwellers. Dismissed as trivial, low-brow and quotidian, their purported unimportance is directly tied to the gendered work of care and stewardship on behalf of others that is the main domain of housework and homemaking (Imamura, 1987; LeBlanc, 1999).

More recent ethnographic writing on Japanese housewives has drawn attention towards the ways in which the gendered dynamics of housework can become sites of meaning-making (Martin, 2007; Goldstein-Gidoni, 2012). Everyday drudgery can be turned into a creative enterprise, as Allison has shown in an important paper on the complex dialectics of social control, relationality and gendered agency in the daily preparation of lunch boxes (2000). The professional housewife (*senjyō-shufu*) emerges in the post-war years as arbiter of moral order, with jurisdiction over the domestic sphere in which her white-collar husband is more often than not a temporary guest. From the influx of a plethora of things into the household through gift-giving cycles and hand-me-downs (Daniels, 2009), to the material distribution of the goods that are created and bought by the extended family, to the many ways in which status

competition is discreetly made visible through consumption in urban neighborhoods (Clammer, 1998), housework emerges as a site in which physical order is translated into moral order. The aim is to create an ‘affluence of the heart’, in Eiko Maruko Siniawer’s felicitous phrasing. In her magisterial *Waste: Consuming postwar Japan*, she argues that both the waste-conscious attempt to keep things and the self-conscious attempt to get rid of things are part of what she calls the ‘dissonant decades’ (2018: 291).

The difficulty of articulating these conflicting attitudes towards objects in the mundane language of housework was a great obstacle in my fieldwork with ‘women who cannot tidy up’ (*katazakerarenai onna*) who found it hard to throw away things. They often felt they had nothing interesting to say about the banal chores of tidying up. Stuff just was there. But when it came to disposal, a different register kicked in: things suddenly became connected, beloved, irreplaceable and unique. Detaching the individual object from the anonymous hoard, it was immediately captured by networks of meaning which made it more difficult to discard. In other words, things were imbued with meaning to keep them from being thrown away, rather than because they had ‘carried’ the meaning attributed to them all along.

### **Mottainai! Disposal and the moral person**

The other obstacle was the notion of *mottainai*, an everyday expression that means ‘What a waste!’ in Japanese (Steger, 2021). In my fieldwork on hoarding in Tokyo (2006–2008), people would often lament that it would be a waste to throw away an object by using *mottainai* – but then would dispose of it nonetheless. The term itself, of vaguely Buddhist origin, was connected to ideas of trouble, harm or impropriety in the premodern period and only became associated with wastefulness in the post-war years (Siniawer, 2018: 241). In 1965, the act of turning an old kimono into a cushion could be described as *mottainai* by the younger generation, as a waste of time and effort (quoted in Siniawer, 2018: 73). The term only came to prominence in relation to things and waste after the asset bubble burst in the 1990s, a time when the value and the ontological existence of things suddenly appeared unstable (Gygi, 2018). The notion received a further boost when environmentalist Wangarī Muta Maathai, the Nobel peace prize winner from Ghana, visited Kyoto in 2005 and incorporated *mottainai* into her social movement based on the principles of ‘reduce’ (consumption), ‘reuse’ (things), ‘recycle’ (things again) and ‘respect’ (the environment and things). By 2008 the word had gained so much international attention – or rather, the Japanese press closely followed and reported on every instance the word was uttered – that it had become infused with a new environment-friendly moral ethos. When I returned to fieldwork in the Kansai area in 2010, research participants used *mottainai* no longer just as a lament, but as a justification for keeping the object in question. The moral dimension of the attitude of *mottainai* as thrifty, waste-conscious and eco-friendly was soon projected back in time to have its origin in Edo period society (1603–1868) and the popular press claimed that there was no word in any other language that could accurately convey the meaning of *mottainai*. In the dialectic furnace between international recognition and Japanese exceptionalism, a formidable weapon against ridding was forged.

Objects experienced as *mottainai* put demands on the self that in turn enable subjects to perceive their own actions as ethical and themselves as good persons. Different from *kawaii* objects, however, the object reveals itself in this particular way only when it comes to disposal. While *kawaii* objects are difficult to dispose of because they evince attachment and care from subjects, *mottainai* objects are difficult to dispose of because they afford a sense of ethical personhood to those who keep the object. This manifests itself as a sense of pity about its unfulfilled potential, regret about its trajectory cut short, and guilt about the potential other uses that it could be put to. Needless to say, it is widely assumed that the capacity to feel these particular emotions is more developed in women than in men. Methods of decluttering, then, have to overcome not only the affective attachment that everyday objects induce, they also have to address the greater danger of being perceived as an unethical, callow person. As Gregson puts it succinctly: ‘it is the conduits of ridding, as much as the things themselves that are used to narrate [...] identities and relations’ (2007: 165). The following section will address how both Yamashita and Kondō deal with this obstacle to disposal.

This is not to say, however, that the affective dimension is the only reason for the accumulation of objects and the only obstacle to divestment. Rules for everyday disposal in Japan are notoriously complex and regionally diverse, not only in terms of sorting (burnable, non-burnable, recycling, glass, aluminum, paper and cardboard being some of the categories) but also in terms of time: different kinds of waste are collected on different days and there is only a very narrow time window to put out the rubbish, usually before eight o’clock in the morning. If left out over night or for too long, the crows will tear up the bags that are often only protected by a net. Large volumes of rubbish, created mostly by packaging, and the strictly limited time frame means that in the anonymous suburbs of Tokyo, where I did most of my fieldwork, the only contact between the residents happened when everyone was bringing out their rubbish bags. This enforced sociality was not to everybody’s taste, and many of my interlocutors did everything they could to avoid bumping into their neighbors at eight o’clock in the morning. Succinctly put, then, sociality with objects is a source of self, while the ‘negative sociality’ with neighbors or co-residents associated with disposal was felt, by my informants at least, to be an intrusive means of social control.

### Thing management as spiritual practice: *Danshari*

*Danshari* is the brainchild of Yamashita Hideko, who describes herself as a ‘clutter consultant’. According to her publications, she started developing her method in 2000, after she encountered the philosophy of yoga, more specifically the three steps leading to calm and detachment called *dangyō*, *shagyō* and *rigyō*, the *gyō* suffix indicating that this is a form of ascetic practice or training (*shugyō*). *Dan* (断) means ‘to sever’, ‘to cut off’, ‘to renounce’, and is interpreted as the ‘cutting away’ of all unnecessary things at the stage of receiving; *sha* (捨) is understood to mean ‘to get rid off’ unnecessary things already in the house. The active processes of renouncing and ridding combined should lead to *ri* (離), a state of being that is removed from unnecessary attachment, in which the self is the principal actor. Getting rid of things is thus not merely a mundane act of tidying, but an unburdening of the self of surplus stuff and a method to attain a new, lighter, more spiritual and generally luggageless way of life.

This is the main selling point and also the difference between *Danshari* and other methods of tidying up. While *shūnōjutsu* 収納術, the technique of storing things (Iida 2009), and *seitonjutsu* 整頓術, the art of order, are still concerned with things and their proper maintenance (Iida 2002), *Danshari* makes claims to another level in two ways: if you have mastered the *Danshari* method you will not have to tidy up anymore, because things will automatically be tidy; and, the more radical claim that ‘*Danshari* is aiming for a society in which things are where they belong’ (*Danshari ha mono ga arubeki tokoro ni aru jōtai no shakai wo mesashimasu*) (2009: 45), implying that things will then stop infringing upon people, whose time, place and energy they consume (or waste). This is an interesting inversion of the standard definition of consumption, in which people use and, through use, destroy resources. Consumption here also destroys or rather absorbs human place, time and energy, all resources that have to be re-captured and redirected from things towards the self.

Passages such as the above veer dangerously close to a critique of consumer society, but the possibility of such a critique is immediately defused by refocusing the argument on what that self has to do in order to be leaner and freer. This is the reason why the things in this view are strangely disjointed from the relational matrix of sociality and desire. As in Marx’s notion of commodity fetish, they seem to move on their own: we live in a ‘society in which things come to us by themselves’ (*mono ga katte ni yatte kuru shakai*) (Yamashita, 2009: 48). Both ‘things’ and ‘society’ here appear as abstract, anonymous, objective forces. Although many of its basic tenets – for example that owning fewer things will have a positive effect upon the self – lend themselves to a critique of an excessively materialistic world view, *Danshari* does not question the origin of things and does not attack ‘materialism’ as such. No notion of consumer disobedience against large corporations is called for as is in the more politically oriented simplify-your-life movements, for example (Rodriguez, 2018).

The precondition for ridding, according to the *Danshari* philosophy, is the process of re-balancing our relationships with things. To illustrate this, Yamashita puts forward a linguistic argument: when talking about things, she asks, do we not use objects as subjects of sentences? Is this not proof that we allow objects to become more central than ourselves? In talking about things, we make the mistake of saying ‘such and such an object is useful’ where the object is the subject of the sentence. What we should be saying is ‘I am using this object’, or, preferably more often, ‘As I am not using this object, I can get rid of it’:

We are often prone to the mental attitude that only because things can still be used they are hard to throw away, that is, we are prone to feeling ‘What a waste’ [*mottainai*]. But originally the thing has value because ‘I use it’. Nevertheless, for the majority of people, things are the subject, like in the sentence ‘glasses can be used’. It is a state in which we surrender the place of the protagonist to things.<sup>3</sup> (2009: 97)

<sup>3</sup>This argument is obviously specific to the structure of the Japanese sentence that often does not need a subject to be intelligible. The subject can usually be inferred from the context. This makes for awkward translation and it is interesting to note that there has been no English version of *Danshari* so far, but translations into German, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Turkish and Chinese.



As soon as we revert to the use of the first person, a lot of uncertainty about the past and future uses of objects simply disappears. Whatever I am not using ‘now’ – and this now can have some duration – is ripe for ridding. Yamashita likens the accumulated stuff to a group of strangers that have taken up camp in your own house, a striking reversal in which humans stand in for things. As long as we do not have any close ties to these people, she argues, we can throw them out; after all we would do the same with actual strangers. Finding a useful object is like finding a Japanese person among foreigners in a foreign country. These metaphorical social others are swiftly reduced to purely instrumental relationships. Although the Dansharians, as they call themselves, are interpellated to look for a ‘living relationship’ with things, this merely means a relationship in which the thing can fulfill a necessary instrumental function in the ‘now’. People who cannot throw things away are either locked in a past of memories and mementos, or they are apprehensive about the future and try to prepare for every eventuality. Both these reasons for keeping things are illegitimate from the point of view of *Danshari*; the only things allowed to remain are legitimate carriers of memory, such as family photo albums.

Yamashita was one of the few critical voices against *mottainai*, because it provided a powerful ethical justification for people to cling to their possessions. *Danshari* uses an interesting rhetorical maneuver against the ‘self-defense’ of *mottainai*: Yamashita acknowledges the basic importance and the ‘correct’ feeling of *mottainai*, but adds that there are two different feelings involved when *mottainai* is evoked to not throw something away. One is the pure feeling of concern for a thing (*mono wo aioshimu*), in which case we will feel sorry for the thing’s eventual fall from grace and should therefore not have bought it in the first place. The other feeling is purely an excuse, which she calls *ushirometasa no menzaifu*. *Ushirometasa* means ‘feeling someone’s gaze behind one’s back’. The folklorist Komatsu Kazuhiko interprets this unpleasant feeling as a kind of guilt:

One has done something improper; anyone secretly watching would surely disapprove. The gaze implied by *ushirometasa* includes that of fellow humans, but traditionally it carried stronger connotations of the gaze of a divine spirit. When a utensil is discarded, the agent of the gaze is the spirit of the utensil itself. (1999: 1)

A *menzaifu* is what in Catholicism is known as an ‘indulgence’, an officially sanctioned excuse that one has paid for. In other words, things are kept because one can say ‘it would be a waste to throw them away’ (for environmental or spiritual reasons). This, however, does not mean that one has entered a caring relationship with the thing. In spirit, then, *mottainai* is a good idea, but it should not be used as an ‘indulgence’ to cling to the past or to prepare for unlikely future catastrophes.

### Horizontal transcendence: the *Konmari* method

Kondō Marie and her method have overtaken the earlier *Danshari* technique in international exposure. Both *The life-changing magic of tidying up* (*Jinsei ga tokimeku katazuke no mahō*, 2010, English in 2014) and its sequel *Spark joy* (*Jinsei ga tokimeku katazuke no mahō 2*, 2012, English in 2016) became bestsellers in Japan and abroad, and have spent considerable time on the New York Times bestseller list. Kondō herself has been nominated as one of the most influential people by Time magazine and has had

great success with a Netflix show, in which she, sprite-like, skips through overwhelmed American homes and sorts them out. Quite a bit of the ‘magic’ can be attributed to Cathy Hirano’s translation, especially the inspired choice of ‘spark joy’ for *tokimeku*. Kondō’s own claims to magic are much more modest and, unlike Yamashita’s, refrain from allusions to yoga altogether. Instead, there is a refreshing directness with which Kondō describes her own early obsession with tidying her own and others people’s possessions. The core of the *Konmari* method is deciding what to keep and what to throw away. Take a thing into your hands. If it brings you joy, if it excites you or gives you peace of mind, then keep it. If not, throw it away. The Netflix series capitalizes on the seemingly exotic nature of the Japanese method, lingering on Kondō when she greets the house at the beginning of a clean-out project, so much so that some commentators have speculated about whether the indigenous animistic religion of Japan, Shintō, had anything to do with it, a claim refuted with panache by the scholar of Japanese religion, Jolyon Baraka Thomas (2019). Things do occasionally appear anthropomorphically as ‘pitiful’ or ‘exhausted’, but this is usually based on a moral rather than an animist stance: ‘Just imagine how you would feel if you were forced to carry a heavy load for hours’, Kondō admonishes someone who keeps books in tall towers on the floor (2014: 169). Many ideas about ‘energizing your wardrobe’ or the act of folding as transferring your energy to your clothes are clearly twenty-first century New-Age rather than ancient tradition.

The Japanese version of the book is almost entirely devoid of transcendence, apart from a few general gestures towards more esoteric ideas (that tidying your house makes you slimmer, for example, or that book titles with negative associations will bring negative energy into your home). While there is a distinct transcendental element to the *Danshari* method, the *Konmari* method is strictly worldly; or rather, the transcendence is experienced in and as the communion with the object: ‘While not exactly a meditative state, there are times when I am cleaning during which I can quietly commune with myself. The work of carefully considering each object I own to see if it sparks joy inside me is like conversing with myself through the medium of possessions’ (Kondō, 2014: 67). With reference to Kondō’s insistence that things should be stored horizontally as vertical stacking makes access difficult,<sup>4</sup> we could call this ‘horizontal transcendence’. The experience does not point to a spiritual ‘beyond’, but neither does it refer to the larger social network of relations that objects are part of, or the complex cycles of giving and receiving that mass consumption entails. Rather, the allure of the object is found contained within the relationship of owning. In that sense, Kondō embraces an almost solipsistic position in which the self becomes present to itself through its possessions:

When deciding [what to discard], it’s important to touch it, and by that, I mean holding it firmly in both hands as if communing with it. Pay close attention to how your body responds when you do this. When something sparks joy, you should feel a little thrill, as if the cells in your body are slowly rising. When you hold something that doesn’t bring you joy, however, you will notice that your body feels heavier. (Kondō, 2016: 8)

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<sup>4</sup>This is somewhat complicated by the translation: when the English translation says ‘vertical’ it means ‘standing things up’ rather than have them piled one on top of the other.

This embodied sense of the affective affordance of the object is what limits the temporal horizon of possessions. Like in *Danshari*, it is the here and now that counts, the experience of the thing in the moment, a presence that is unencumbered by history, utility or potentiality. Other people, otherwise so important for Japanese sociality, are simply not part of this happy dyad. Kondō never asks where a thing came from or who it belonged to or what memory it triggered; she is aware that entertaining such thoughts is inimical to ridding. This focus on the individual self is also apparent in the strong suggestion that the process of ridding should be concealed from one's immediate family:

[I]t's extremely stressful for parents particularly to see what their children discard. The sheer volume of the pile can make parents anxious about whether their children can survive on what's left. In addition, despite knowing that they should rejoice at their child's independence and maturity, parents can find it very painful to see clothes, toys and keepsakes from the past on the rubbish heap, especially if they are things they gave to their child. Keeping your rubbish out of sight is considerate. (2014: 55–6)

The gendered nature of this work is muted, but ever-present; it is there in the description of how to tidy underwear and bras, or how to organize overflowing make-up bags. Mothers and sisters loom large, as do recalcitrant husbands whose clutter is described as a thorn in the side of long-suffering wives. Those embarking on decluttering journeys are exhorted to dress snappily and in a feminine manner; Kondō herself always wears a blazer and pantsuit even to the dirtiest of jobs. But the method also contains a perhaps counterintuitive recovery of (female) agency through housework. Kondō gleefully describes how she secretly tidied up her family's storage against the will of her parents and her brother; she went ahead anyway, curious as to how long it would take them to find out and whether the possessions lost like this were really so important. It took several months for this to come to light and her mother indeed missed a jacket that was discarded. Kondō, however, was far from apologetic and was banned from tidying anywhere outside her own room. What this episode shows is that there is considerable executive power in tidying: honing your tidying skills means honing not only your receptivity to joy, but also crucially to hone your ability to make decisions and act upon them, often on behalf of others and quite frequently in a ruthless fashion. The magic that she touts is thus not of the esoteric variety, but based on the clearer view of yourself that you develop by understanding what gives you joy and by acquiring the skills to make these difficult decisions. This clarity is attractive to others and has a contagious effect. There is also a competitive aspect that becomes clear when one looks at the social media presence of the *Konmari* method. People who have adopted it proudly pose with mountains of rubbish bags and detail just how much they have thrown away. Clearly quantity and efficacy matter, just as they would in an executive boardroom.

The one elephant in the room is the enormous waste that decluttering generates. Kondō is unsurprisingly silent about re-use, repurposing and recycling. Discarding is presented as the solution, not the problem. There are some explicit warnings not to hand down things, especially when the person receiving (always a younger sister, more rarely a mother) is reluctant. Kondō implies that this is just passing on the problem to a different person. Like Yamashita, Kondō has found her own, rather convenient rhetoric to address qualms about throwing away so many things:

Everything you own wants to be of use to you. [...] I have never encountered any possession that reproached its owner. These thoughts stem from the owner's sense of guilt, not from the person's belongings. Then what do the things in our homes that don't spark joy actually feel? I think they simply want to leave. (Kondō, 2014: 222-3)

## The luminous now and the temporal horizon of possessions

The shared emphasis in both approaches on the here and now of 'affective resonance' draws our attention to the underlying divergence between subject and object. The joy sparked by the object unfolds in the present and has temporal limits, but is theoretically repeatable until the affective charge of the object is exhausted. Two methods are used to draw the subject or owner into the affective moment. One is conceptual, the other sensory or haptic. Both Yamashita and Kondō emphasize that a sentimental focus on the past and the memories embodied in objects is inimical to decluttering. An attention to memories invariably recenters the object at the cost of the subject. Cutting off the past is therefore an important prerequisite for disposal. A similar argument applies to the future: the potentiality of everyday objects to become useful in the future is unlimited. Disposal is only possible when both the past and the future are cut off. The potentially endless unfolding of the object is limited and interrupted; the underlying permanence of the object that creates both stability and connects the past and the potential future must be denied.

The second method is to focus the attention of the subject on the unfolding affective experience. This is achieved by highlighting the sensory, especially the tactile dimensions of the encounters. Kondō describes being affected in physiological terms: the pupils dilate, the pulse quickens, a general state of arousal marks the moment of sparking joy. Emphasis is put on touch, especially when it comes to clothing. Kondō suggest that folding is not just a traditional way of creating order, it is also an aesthetic practice with its own sensory pleasures and the advantage of actually getting to know one's possessions. Initially skeptical, I tried this during lockdown in London and despite myself found it a soothing experience. I also noticed many details that I had not paid attention to in the texture (different kinds of cotton can be easily identified by touch), patterns (the pattern of my favorite shirt is actually a photonegative, upside-down image of a palm tree) and color (the midnight blue of another favorite is indigo, as attested to by a very delicate prickly sensation on the skin). This haptic experience provides a powerful link between the present moment in which it happens, the sensory quality of the experience (textures, sheen, surface, colors, patterns) and the meanings associated with a particular thing. Touching an object is a means of taking possession and a privilege of ownership, but it is also reciprocal: touching also means being touched, from the physical sense of contact to letting oneself be affected by the object. This is in striking contrast to what Katie Kilroy-Marac describes in her ethnography of professional organizers in Canada, where 'tactile sympathy' is avoided to facilitate decluttering:

By putting physical space between clients and their stuff and disallowing touch, POs attempt to shift them away from a tactile, sensuous mode of being with things and into a visual mode, thereby imposing a supposedly appropriate distance between subject and object that will ostensibly loosen their clients' attachments to and identification with the things in question. (2016: 449)

Both methods together create the sense of a luminous now, in which the person communes with the object in a moment of self-forgotten pleasure. Affect's potential for connection and attachment is both heightened and contained and through this limitation is kept from extending in time. Thus, the limitless potential for affective contagion is carefully controlled by the manipulation of temporal frames. This focus on the luminous now addresses the tension between the duress of the moment and the stubborn permanence of objects. By identifying the object, its value, utility and potential functions only with its momentary affective affordance, the temporal horizon of possessions collapses.

### Mobilizing affect to deny the social?

What is most striking about both methods of decluttering is that they are based on a radical denial of the social. A comparison between the processes of ridding described above and Gretchen Herrmann's ethnography of garage sales in the US is helpful here, especially as two very different notions of affect emerge from it. Based on observations and interviews at over 3,000 garage sales, Herrmann argues that affect constitutes a 'sort of relational "sticky goo"' (2015: 173) that connects buyers and sellers:

In the garage sale, transmission of sentiments related to objects is the most salient manifestation of affect. Sellers' orientations to both mundane and special objects are discursively and extra-discursively transmitted to shoppers in a kinetic matrix of contagion among bodies, who, in response, generate their own affective orientations to the objects. (2015: 179–80)

The conspicuous contrast here is that the affective affordances of objects play almost opposing roles. In Herrmann's work, affective atmospheres become conduits for the transmission of things that enable and enhance nascent relationships. Here a useful distinction can be made between *syngénophilic* (relation-friendly) forms of ridding – giving away your things in a way that fosters new relationships between sellers and buyers, but also new relations of possession – and *syngénophobic* (against relations expressed in things) practices, which work only if the relational aspect of objects is denied. It is striking to note how these findings go against stereotypical images of both American and Japanese society. In a sense they are reversed: the commercially minded, capitalist Americans turn out to be deeply invested in exchanges that create and extend new social ties, while the other-oriented, self-effacing Japanese manifest as ruthless individualists who only accept their own affective response as measure of value. The *Konmari* method, which owes a lot of its international success to a certain orientalist *je-ne-sais-quoi*,<sup>5</sup> is actually going against many of the tenets and pieties of sociability that otherwise sustain social life in Japan. But why should this be the case?

My argument is that processes of ridding and decluttering are ways to address deeply embedded social and relational assumptions regarding the ownership of objects. Both the garage sale and the Japanese decluttering methods aim for a restorative effect that rebalances what implicitly is seen as the 'excess' of cultural norms. In the garage sale it

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<sup>5</sup>Kondō's books were clearly influenced by British clutter consultant Karen Kingston's 1998 *Clear your clutter with Feng Shui*. Translated into Japanese in 2002 it became a bestseller partly due to the reference to Feng Shui, the art of Chinese geomancy. While there are striking similarities, Kingston has recently published more critical takes on Kondō. See <https://www.karenkingston.com/blog/spark-joy/> (accessed on 6 March 2022).

is the ‘the fungible, antiseptic commodities entombed in layers of plastic’ (Herrmann, 2015: 171) that form the background in front of which the knick-knacks come alive with memories and emotions. In decluttering, it is the thing that comes fully embedded in a matrix of obligations of care and connections to close and remote others that needs to be ‘disinfected’ from the traces of memories and emotions. In the former case, the garage sale becomes an anti-alienation device, in the concrete sense that things are envisioned as having a future life with new owners who will remember you (and thus the things themselves are not entirely alienated). In the latter case, it is precisely the alienation – the throwing away of possessions and the cutting off of relationships that this inevitably entails – that enables a socially overdetermined existence to center itself. This is why the affective affordance of objects has very different effects: in the garage sale it is the public affect that circulates; in decluttering it is private affect that constitutes the relationship (Kondō, for example, always leaves people alone to figure out what they really feel about their things).

But there are two other dimensions that I think are difficult to grasp with the notion of affect alone. The warm feeling that people have when selling their things at a garage sale is conditioned by a particular fantasy of the future trajectory of the object. They are happy to part with emotionally charged objects because they envision how they will be used in the future, and perhaps how the people using them will remember the previous owner. But this is by no means a ‘social relationship’; or at least the fantasy of connection has nothing of the ontological ‘heaviness’ that the concept has in Japan. There is no implication that such an imagined relationship comes with obligations, duties, future exchanges, return gifts and the general consideration that all these operations require (Rupp, 2003). The other aspect is ‘contagion’, which in Herrmann’s case propels the transmission of affect between people (or bodies, as the affect literature usually has it). I imagine that the otherwise carefully controlled public persona of Kondō Marie would not be able to suppress a shudder of revulsion at the thought of contagion. In many ways, contagion, affective or otherwise, is precisely what has to be avoided at all costs. In other words, in the first example the public affect is deliberately mobilized to induce the social, while in the second, private affect obliterates the social origin of things.

## Managing gendered selves

It is interesting to observe that although this is never specifically mentioned, thing management, unlike time management, is implicitly thought to be women’s work. All the examples in the *Danshari* books are of women and one of the great burdens is precisely that they must look after not only their own stuff, but also the things of their husbands and children. This notion is intimately connected with the rise of housewifization and the post-war standard family model (Ueno, 2009; Goldstein-Gidoni, 2012). The confinement of women to domestic space and the duty of care to their husbands and children is further extended to include nurture and care towards their objects.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>This gendered division of labor does not only apply to Japan, of course. Gregson describes how in the former coal-mining village in north-east England, where she undertook her fieldwork (2007), mothers kept their children’s clothes and toys in order to pass them on rather than to waste them. Such trajectories of ridding expressed thrift, care and generosity to others and were crucial in constituting ‘good motherhood’.

The great irony of the *Danshari* seminars is that those attending often *show* care and nurture towards things and therefore perform things in a ‘correct’ female manner. The difference is that this care is ultimately not directed towards others, but towards one’s own possessions. These act like a mirror and reflect the investment people make in them back to them, so that this form of care appears as a care for the self, in other words, as pure selfishness. The desired inverse ‘normality’ would be selflessness, the care for others and their (not one’s own) possessions which requires of women to make things absent (garbage, excess, bad accumulations) or to contain them. It is in this context that the radical divestment advocated by Yamashita and Kondō becomes salient in a different way: cutting through the purported emotional ties of care and nurture goes against these gendered expectations and affords a sense of agency that is unencumbered by thinking of others’ needs.

A conspicuous feature of these decluttering methods is that they are written by women implicitly for other women. Appeals to femininity as virtue and strategic tools clearly situate them in a broader self-help literature that is – at least superficially – meant to augment gender-role conformity. Even when written by men, the audience is still implicitly understood to be women. Take for example the ‘prince of laundry’, Nakamura Yūichi. While Yamashita and Kondō can afford a more informal tone sharing their personal stories because their expertise is based on these experiences (hiding to a degree the innovation of their methods), Nakamura’s expertise is framed in very different terms. In his case, appeals to tradition and authority are counterbalanced by a rather more fanciful claim to artistry. On his website he introduces himself as the third generation of a family of cleaning business owners and describes his background in terms of apprenticeship (*shugyō*): how he decided not to go to university and to devote his life to laundry, eventually taking over his parents’ laundry business and becoming a best-selling author and frequent guest on daytime television. He called himself ‘laundry advisor’, but no doubt due to his youthful, boyish looks he is known since 2008 by his media moniker ‘prince of laundry’ (*sentaku-ōji*). After 2011 he started using the term *sentaku-ka*, which is translated as ‘laundry artist’ on the homepage. At the same time, his *sentaku-kyōshitsu* (‘laundry studio’) has been renamed *sentaku-atelier*, further emphasizing the aspect of artistic practice. In his appearances, he combines the humility and calm of the seasoned craftsman with the flourish of the artist. He thus addresses his audience as an expert and artist and is swooned over like a *matinée* idol.

What about men addressing men about tidying and cleaning? It is after all the boyfriends and husbands whose slovenliness and resistance to cleaning and tidying are pointedly referred to by both Yamashita and Kondō. There is indeed a ‘male’ version of *Danshari*, a comparison with which may be helpful to understand the gendered dynamics at work. In 2018, Hagiwara Tetsu self-published a *Danshari* guide for men, in which the ideogram for *sha* 捨 is replaced by the homonym 射, referring not to throwing away but to ejaculation (*shasei* 射精). Hagiwara, an advocate of the no-masturbation movement in Japan (for the American counterpart called ‘NoFap’<sup>7</sup> see Hartmann 2021), argues that to change your life you need a combination of restraint – no masturbation, in Japanese *ona-*

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<sup>7</sup>The term ‘fapping’ has its root in the onomatopoeic word ‘fap’ representing the sound of a character masturbating in manga. It is a translation of the standard onomatopoeia for male masturbation, *shiko-shiko*, and was first used in the English version of Kikuni Masahiko’s manga series *Kizudarake no Tenchi-tachi* (Heartbroken Angels). This inspired the American manga artist Clay who popularised its use through his series of webcomics called *The Thin H Line* (1999).

*kin* (short from *onani-kinshi*) – to increase your level of vitality. Once you manage that, your excess energy will help you to sort out your mess and to be in control of your own life. Anthropologically speaking, there is an interesting parallel to be drawn here between ridding on one side and retention on the other. By hoarding the bodily substance that is most strongly associated with masculinity, bodies become more vital, more imbued with the capacity to act. This regained agency is then used to break through the wall that objects have besieged men with. While Hagiwara is perhaps not as serious as other purveyors of self-help, the fact that masculinity (which is, according to him, endangered by loss of energy through masturbation) and control are at the center of his argument highlight the ways in which decluttering is transformed into a gendered activity. While Kondō's declutterers imagine a world in which they enjoy aromatherapy and listen to classical music as they practice their weight-loss yoga, Hagiwara's men hope that restraining themselves sexually will increase their potency and their attraction to the other sex (no fappers are notoriously heterosexual) and that tidying up will bring them success at work and a competitive edge over their opponents.

## Conclusion

My theoretical instincts initially led me to frame these popular decluttering books and workshops as a form of re-enchantment of housework. By giving the mundane, banal and repetitive tasks a spiritual veneer, decluttering could be interpreted as a gender-specific form of false consciousness, in which housework appears as the managing of invisible (thus spiritual) energies and the creation of order out of chaos, thus as a cosmological endeavor. Putting the material in conversation with my own fieldwork among hoarders and a comparison with the working of affect in the context of the American garage sale, however, reveals quite a different picture. Despite the New-Age-infused vocabulary, the transcendence evoked is very much of a secular kind. Both the recentering of the self in *Danshari* and the exclusion of the social in the *Konmari* method are actually a means of reclaiming subjectivity from the imperatives of selflessly caring for and looking after things, often for others. Limiting the affective affordances of things to only the here and now and only to oneself, helps to unmake a gendered habitus of care inculcated over a lifetime.

This re-centering of the subject is antagonistic to the project of ethical personhood based on ethical consumption. In her long-term ethnography on Russian immigrants, Golovina (2021) for example shows how her informants construct themselves as good people by distancing themselves from the mindless consumerism that many of them were initially attracted to when arriving in Japan. What is subversive about decluttering is that it implicitly focuses on well-being rather than on ethical consumer behavior. From the perspective of the Anthropocene, of environmental degradation and wastefulness, this appears as selfish egoism and carelessness. In a context, however, where ethical goodness and moral personhood are tied to gendered expectations and closely policed by social others, ruthlessly throwing things away instead of caring for them becomes a small act of rebellion.

Decluttering subjects, then, stand in a complex tension to the vagaries of consumer capitalism. On one hand, they are exhorted to get rid of things because they can always be easily replaced. The sense of safety derived from Japan's nationwide infrastructure of



convenience stores is based on the assumption that commodities are fungible and can be easily accessed (Whitelaw, 2016). This argument is obviously consonant with the demands of capitalism to consume even more in ever quicker circles of use and waste. On the other hand, the discourse about recycling and *mottainai* that has dominated waste consciousness since the late 1990s draws people in the other direction: frivolous disposal before an object has fulfilled its duty – that which it has been made for – is not only unethical, wasteful, but also, it is insinuated, un-Japanese. Here then the circle closes in on itself: one hallmark of late consumer capitalism in the Anthropocene is that the population is interpellated to be more avid consumers and at the same time exhorted not to waste anything. The result of this contradiction is the *gomi-yashiki* ('rubbish house'), in which objects start to accumulate, because there is no future trajectory for them. What the decluttering self-help literature does, then, is to open a conduit for disposal that allows subjects to legitimately discard objects.

Using the affective affordances of objects as an analytical lens has revealed two very different ways of putting affect to work: as sticky goo of public, contagious affect that produces new relationships in which the commodity becomes a vehicle for affect on one hand; and the private dyadic experience of affect in the luminous now, in which the cherished possession becomes a container for affect. In the first case, affect unfolds its kinetic potential to breach out and connect random people; in the latter, affect is contained by the manipulation of temporal frames. Rather than as elementary, precognitive force connecting bodies, affect here is deliberately mobilized to open up the vacuum-sealed nature of the object, or, conversely, it is mobilized to enable the radical disposal of anything that does not spark joy.

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