

Domestic Things: Takashi Yasumura's interiors

This paper is concerned with the things that fill domestic interiors. Takashi Yasumura's photographs of banal ordinary things in his series (and book of the same title) *Domestic Scandals* provides an opportunity to think about the relationship between ordinary things, domestic spaces and photography.¹ This paper uses *Domestic Scandals'* foregrounding of domestic things to consider the insights of 'thing theory.' Thing theory is a term used to represent the various – and diverse – attempts by scholars across multiple disciplines to grapple with the representations of things, the materiality of things, the value and significance of things and a general focus on the world of inanimate objects. My attention to thing theory in this paper is primarily concerned with the work of Bill Brown, a cultural theorist whose approach to thing theory relies on a distinction between objects and things. I address thing theory here as a way to think about the distinction between objects and things as always in flux, depending on how they are framed and perceived. Yasumura's *Domestic Scandals* in its book form is examined here, as an example of how photography and the camera can reframe our attention to the interior domestic object world, and to ask what happens when we finally catch a glimpse of things, rather than 'looking *through* objects.'²

Attention to domestic interiors has a range of registers in the context of contemporary photographic art.³ Some photographers ask us to observe the overlooked – or the underside – of domesticity. For example, Moyra Davey photographs dust gathered underneath furniture and the mess of a work desk in her book *Long Life Cool White*⁴ and Anna Fox, focuses on the messes of daily home life, photographing, for instance, the cockroaches that fill her large London sharehouse in *Cockroach Diary*.⁵ Other photographers such as Bert Teunissen, focus on the history of a building's interior and the lives of its residents. Teunissen's thirteen year long photographic project *Domestic Landscapes* is dedicated to photographing occupants in domestic interiors that were built in the pre-electricity era when daylight was the only source of light.⁶ These examples speak to the need, as Colin Painter describes, to consider the relationship between contemporary art and the home,⁷ and specifically the relationship between the domestic interior and art photography.

Yasumura is a photographer who lives and works in Tokyo. His work is focused on the ordinary or the everyday. His photographs pay attention to the odd moments and unlikely juxtapositions that occur in daily life. His series *Nature Tracing*, for example, shows representations of nature that are combined with the

¹ Takashi Yasumura, *Domestic Scandals*, (Tokyo: Osiris, 2005).

² Bill Brown, "Thing Theory," *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 1 (2001): 4.

³ To be clear, my focus here is not on architectural photography's treatment of domestic interiors, but on photographic artists for whom the domestic interior is a key theme or focus. For work on architectural photography and the domestic interior see Witold Rybczynski, *The Look of Architecture* (New York: Oxford, 2001): 15; Michael Harris, *Professional Interior Photography*, Third Edition (Oxford: Focal Press, 2003); Claire Zimmerman, "Photographic Modern Architecture: inside 'the new deep'," *The Journal of Architecture* 9, no. 3 (2004): 331-354; Beatriz Colomina, *Privacy and Publicity: Modern Architecture as Mass Media* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1994) and Charles Rice, *The Emergence of the Interior: Architecture, Modernity, Domesticity* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

⁴ Moyra Davey, *Long Life, Cool White: Photographs and Essays* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

⁵ Anna Fox, *Cockroach Diary* (London: Shoreditch Biennale, 2000).

⁶ There are, of course, many other examples of contemporary photographic artists for whom domestic interiors are a key theme or a stage for storytelling. For a discussion of key contemporary photographic artists whose work engages with the domestic realm, see Charlotte Cotton, *The Photograph as Contemporary Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2009): 70-79.

⁷ Colin Painter, ed., *Contemporary Art and the Home* (Oxford: Berg, 2002).

Curtin University September 2012

mass produced or the built environment.⁸ *Nature Tracing* includes images of a framed puzzle of a forest scene hung on a wood-paneled wall; a decorative crystal in front of a painting of mountains and clouds; and a stuffed toy animal in front of a sliding door painted with a nature scene. *Domestic Scandals*, in a similar mode, asks us to *look again* at banal aspects of the domestic interior that we might normally take for granted (doors, heaters, table settings and so on), and to notice what might be odd or unusual or compelling about them.

Yasumura's project is distinct amongst various representations of domestic interiority in contemporary photographic art practice. There is no mess, or dust, or dirt in Yasumura's photographs. Unlike Davey's and Fox's emphasis on the daily mess of domestic life, Yasumura's interiors are flawlessly clean, and while two photographs (out of a total of thirty-six images) in the monograph feature people (*A Father* 1998 and *A Man* 1998) these portraits are far from the humanism of Teunissen's portraits in domestic interiors. Yasumura's carefully composed photographs are, as Shino Kuraishi describes, 'a space where the quirky qualities of 'things' are radically unfolded with shivering calmness.'⁹ The photographs feature simple daily things, including red and blue patterned slippers (Figure 1), a glass ashtray, a bright pink stapler, and floral curtains. Where the photographs feature humans, they are observed coolly, we are asked to look at them just as we look at the ashtray, or the stapler.



Figure 1: *A Pair of Slippers* (1998) Photographs (c) Takashi Yasumura, Courtesy of Osiris, Tokyo

⁸ Takashi Yasumura, "Nature Tracing," accessed February 20, 2012
http://takashiyasumura.com/site/nature_tracing_1e.html

⁹ Shino Kuraishi, "Family home, or the Stage of Representation: Takashi Yasumura's *Domestic Scandals*," in *Domestic Scandals*, (Tokyo: Osiris, 2005), 88.

Curtin University September 2012



Figure 2: *A Tape Recorder* (2002) Photographs (c) Takashi Yasumura, Courtesy of Osiris, Tokyo

Domestic Scandals was produced over seven years. Yasumura's photographs of domestic things against the backdrop of the wooden textures and printed fabrics of curtains, floors and tabletops of a middle-class Japanese home were made at his parent's house in the Shiga Prefecture of Tokyo, but the photographs are not autobiographical. The photographs don't ask us to look at domestic things as meaningful because of any personal attachment or historical importance – this is not a sentimental gaze. The photographs don't portray the domestic things and spaces as though they were saturated with personal memory. The title of each photograph is telling: for example, *A Father* or *A Pair of Slippers* (Figure 1), this is not a statement about Yasumura's relationship to his father, and it doesn't matter whose slippers are represented. This recalls Norman Bryson's argument in relation to still life painting as 'the world minus its narratives or, better, the world minus its capacity for generating narrative interest.'¹⁰ There is nothing confessional about these images and as a collective they do not generate a narrative. Yasumura's project is about asking us to view both people and objects as things and to attend to the materiality of the domestic realm.

Yasumura's interiors – despite the fact that he is photographing his parent's family home – represent a break from a nostalgic or reminiscent approach to home spaces.¹¹ My reading of Yasumura's photographs departs from approaches to domesticity and photography which understand the domestic interior through personal memory and autobiography. This linking of the domestic, photography and life narrative is exemplified by Kathy Mezei. In her reading of Gregory Crewdson's art photography alongside literary examples of domestic interiority she writes:

Interior domestic spaces (furniture, rooms, doors, windows, stairs, drawers – familiar, everyday objects) which have and could be perceived as banal and ordinary, and hence insignificant, are vital

¹⁰ Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting*, (London: Reaktion, 1990), 60.

¹¹ Kuraishi, "Family home," 89.

Curtin University September 2012

to the shaping of our memoirs, our imagination, and our 'selves.'¹²

Mezei's approach to domestic interiority is useful for its attention to how – seemingly insignificant – banal domestic things can influence the stories of one's life. However, her approach retains focus on the human's relationship to the domestic interior and its objects. Yasumura's project asks for a very different examination of the domestic – one that considers the domestic *outside* of the significance the objects hold for our 'selves'.

Yasumura's photographs of the interior of his parents' home juxtapose the mass produced with traditional Japanese decorations and ornaments. In *A Tape Recorder* (Figure 2), for example, a silver cassette tape player sits in front of a fusuma sliding door – or room divider – painted with a nature scene, and on top of tatami flooring. For Martin Jaeggi, the scandal that the title of Yasumura's series refers to is 'the slow erosion of traditional Japanese ways of living, the global triumph of the trappings of Western middle-class lifestyle and its promises of modernity and convenience.'¹³ This idea that there is a pre-existing Japanese culture that 'borrows' from (the trappings of) the West is too simple and remains blinkered to the dynamic nature of what Goldstein-Gidoni describes as the 'constant shift of hierarchies of the "Western" and the "Japanese"' in Japanese contemporary material culture.¹⁴ Rather than focusing on the juxtaposition of Japanese tradition and 'Western' objects, my reading of Yasumura's photographs is much more concerned with the photographs' flattened attention to things in the domestic interior. I say *flattened* attention, because the photographs offer an equal attention to the human and the inhuman, to the plastic mass-produced and the traditional and to the decorative and the useful. The gaze of the camera shifts our usual patterns of recognition that positions humans as subjects and material things as objects. *A Father* (1998), for example, presents the human figure as an inanimate statue – the man appears stiff and gazes unaware of the camera. In the book that photograph sits between a photograph of a bright blue coat hook and a wood paneled wall (*A Coat Hook* 1998) and a photograph of a phone which sits – mysteriously – on the floor in the very corner of a room (*A Phone* 1999). A coat hook, a father, and a phone all appear to be as important and as elusive in meaning as each other. It is this flattening of attention that compels a reading of Yasumura's *Domestic Scandals* through the insights of 'thing theory.'

On 'thing theory'

The increasing attention to material culture, things and objects is regularly rehearsed in scholarship which tackles the nebulous nature of thing theory.¹⁵ While *things* have been the concern of sociologists, anthropologists, designers, and philosophers for many years, 'thing theory' is distinct in its attempt to tackle the 'thingness' of the material world without necessarily being concerned with unveiling the deeper meaning or cultural importance of a material object. Thing theory, therefore, is an umbrella term for the recent accumulation of critical work that engages with the 'the problem of where an object's "meaning" ended and its "materiality" began.'¹⁶

Bill Brown's essay 'Thing Theory' is a cornerstone of recent literature on things. Brown's discussion of

¹² Kathy Mezei, "Domestic Space and the Idea of Home in Auto/biographical practices," in *Tracing the Autobiographical*, ed. Marlene Kadar, Linda Warley, Jeanne Perreault, and Susanna Egan, (Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2005), 82.

¹³ Martin Jaeggi, "The Calm Surfaces of Scandal," in *Domestic Scandals*, (Tokyo: Osiris, 2005), 85.

¹⁴ Ofra Goldstein-Gidoni, "The Making and Marking of The 'Japanese' and the 'Western' in Japanese Contemporary Material Culture," *Journal of Material Culture* 6, no. 1 (2001): 86.

¹⁵ See for example, Julia Breitbach, "The Photo-as-thing," *European Journal of English Studies* 15, no. 1 (2011): 32; Steven Connor, "Thinking Things," *Textual Practice* 24, no. 1 (2010): 1-3; John Plotz, "Can the Sofa Speak? A Look at Thing Theory," *Criticism* 47, no. 1, (2005): 109-118.

¹⁶ John Plotz, "Can the Sofa Speak? A Look at Thing Theory," *Criticism* 47, no. 1, (2005): 118.

Curtin University September 2012

things rests on a distinction between objects and things. Objects are those things that we understand – they have a clear role in our daily lives and a circumscribed use and because of this we don't look at the material thingness that lies beyond the functionality of an object. According to Brown, objects are perceived according to their utility for human use, or for what they tell us about our own history or culture. This gaze at objects through the lens of what makes them meaningful for us, means that we 'look *through* objects . . . but we only catch a glimpse of things.'¹⁷ We only notice the materiality of objects when they become dysfunctional: 'We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily.'¹⁸ Objects become things when their relation to the human subject changes, when they no longer perform the role that the human subject has ascribed to them.

The distinction between objects and things, therefore, is not about essential qualities or properties, but is rather a question of framing and perception: an object becomes a thing, and a thing becomes an object. As Breitbach writes of Brown's approach: 'Things precede and exceed objects, and objects are what the human intellect makes of things.'¹⁹ This means that the difference between an object and a thing depends on how they work (or don't work) in particular contexts and in relation to the human subject that perceives it. An object becomes a thing when it is out of place, when it stops working or being useful, or when it sits outside our usual patterns of recognition.



Figure 3: *Rolls of Toilet Paper and a Plastic Flower* (1998) Photographs (c) Takashi Yasumura, Courtesy of Osiris, Tokyo

¹⁷ Bill Brown, "Thing Theory," *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 1 (2001): 4.

¹⁸ Brown, "Thing Theory," 4.

¹⁹ Julia Breitbach, "The Photo-as-thing," *European Journal of English Studies* 15, no. 1 (2011): 33.

Curtin University September 2012

Photography, according to Kuraishi, 'deprives things of their uses.'²⁰ Photographs allow us to look at things outside of their use-value and to re-frame the quotidian outside of our normal modes of perception. It is this ability of photography to draw our attention to the qualities – textures, shapes, forms, surfaces – of domestic things that Yasumura practices in *Domestic Scandals*. Yasumura's photographs ask us to meditate on the thingness of a stapler, a fan heater, a cupboard, toilet rolls and other daily materials beyond their mere functionality for human purpose. Yasumura's attention to the material presence of the quotidian seems to ask us to look *at* things, rather than look *through* objects.

Domestic Scandals draws attention to the dysfunction of objects through their careful arrangement. *Rolls of Toilet Paper and a Plastic Flower* (Figure 3), for example, shows twelve stacked rolls of toilet paper next to a plastic vase containing a fake red rose. The tongue-in-cheek positioning speaks to Yasumura's habit of juxtaposing the banal and useful with the decorative. And, as with all of the images in *Domestic Scandals*, the photograph draws attention not just to the quotidian things featured, but also to the texture of the domestic interior walls: the green and beige checkered bathroom tiles are in focus as is the surface of the painted wall. But most importantly, the deliberate arrangement of the toilet rolls on the bathroom floor next to the fake rose adds to the odd sense that these things have their own purpose that is unrelated to the functions of the human world. Ordinary domestic things, when they appear in Yasumura's photographs, begin to seem strange. As Akihito Yasumi describes,

Under the meticulous direction of the photographer they even begin to show humorous and sometimes grotesque qualities, as though they had long forgotten about a 'nature' that might have existed sometime somewhere; and thus they make us feel as if they existed according to their own logic, in a world without humans and out of touch with any functions related to humans.²¹

This 'logic' or quality of a vase, or a cupboard, or a curtain is a logic of 'things' – one that is completely unconcerned with having a functional relationship to humans.

The unsettling quietness of the photographs – or what Kuraishi describes as 'shivering calmness'²² is akin to the sense of strangeness that is achieved through still life paintings' representation of everyday materials such as food. Bryson highlights how the deliberate arrangement of materials and the careful use of light in still life paintings can make ordinary objects appear 'radically *unfamiliar* and estranged.'²³ Playing with the conventions of the still life, Yasumura's *Japanese Oranges* (Figure 4) features a plastic strainer bowl atop a table that is covered with a green and white striped tablecloth. The photograph is framed to exclude the surroundings in the room: the surface of the table meets the background surface of a wood-paneled wall and the oranges glow from the centre of the image as light hits the dimpled skin of the fruit. The careful manipulation of light and the arrangement of the fruit in the plastic latticed bowl defamiliarises the bowl of fruit. Estranged from their function as food, the oranges instead become extraordinary forms to admire.

²⁰ Shino Kuraishi, "Family home, or the Stage of Representation: Takashi Yasumura's *Domestic Scandals*," in *Domestic Scandals*, (Tokyo: Osiris, 2005): 89.

²¹ Akihito Yasumi, "Friendship with the World of Things," in *Domestic Scandals*, (Tokyo: Osiris, 2005), 86.

²² Kuraishi, "Family home," 88.

²³ Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting*, (London: Reaktion, 1990), 87.

Curtin University September 2012



Figure 4: *Japanese Oranges* (2002) Photographs (c) Takashi Yasumura, Courtesy of Osiris, Tokyo



Figure 5: *A Fan Heater* (1999) Photographs (c) Takashi Yasumura, Courtesy of Osiris, Tokyo

Japanese Oranges makes a feature not only of the oranges, but also of the gridded texture of their container and the slightly rippled surface of the tablecloth whose stripes lie adjacent to the (fake-looking) panels of wood. *A Pair of Slippers* (Figure 1) pays similar attention to the texture of the domestic interior. The photograph features a red and blue pair of (Spiderman-esque) slippers that sit just inside a door (we see a stripe of curtain), and atop wooden floorboards. The slippers seem to be on their way somewhere, they appear as if caught mid-shuffle across the wooden surface.

A Fan Heater (Figure 5) shows a heater, complete with wooden surface, sitting solidly in the centre of the image. A white electrical cord crawls out of the heater's side and out of the side of the image. Beneath the Domestic Things: Takashi Yasumura's interiors

Curtin University September 2012

heater is a red-brown carpet, and behind the heater are wooden panels to the left, and to the right pale yellow flowered wallpaper. According to Kuraishi, it is these surrounding domestic interior textures that are crucial to Yasumura's photographs:

Yet more important than the 'objects' situated at the centre of the image and the emphasis on their surface appeal are the 'things' in the 'background,' such as wallpapers, screen doors, linoleum-covered floors, tiled walls and curtains. In contrast to the 'objects' whose position is easily changed, these backgrounds are basically immovable and can only be photographed as they are.²⁴

Yasumura's photographs draw attention not only to the things featured in the title of each photograph but also to the materiality of the interior setting of each artifact. In Yasumura's photographs the focus is not only on the bowl of oranges or the heater, it is extended to the patterns, textures and qualities of the surrounding surfaces.

While Yasumura's photographs highlight the qualities of things, the very act of *looking* at the domestic things in the photographs – the toilet rolls, the plastic vase, the fake rose and so on – means that they might shift from being things to objects. For Brown, our attention to things turns them into objects. He makes this point by drawing on Vladimir Nabokov, who writes in *Transparent Things* that 'When we concentrate on a material object, whatever its situation, the very act of attention may lead to our involuntarily sinking into the history of that object.'²⁵ This means that our ability to perceive things in their full thingness is always a slippery one. As Brown writes: 'We don't apprehend things except partially or obliquely (as what's beyond our apprehension). In fact by looking *at* things we render them objects.'²⁶ If 'Objects and things are really two sides of the same coin – with either face up, depending on their reception by an interpreting subject'²⁷ then Yasumura's photographs move between both sides of the coin: offering a glance at things while at the same time we perceive them as recognizable objects. *Domestic Scandals* reframes what we see, recognise and notice in the domestic interior and in doing so, allows us to catch a glimpse of domestic things.

Of course all this attention to things *in* photographs sidesteps the point that photographs themselves *are* things.²⁸ As Yasumi writes 'if there is something we should find in Yasumura's photographs, it is not to the meanings behind his subjects, but the "photographs themselves" that have become invisible by overlapping with their subject matter.'²⁹ While the bright domestic surfaces, interiors, and things *in* Yasumura's photographs compel a thinking about the material existence of those things, the physicality of the photographs themselves (either on the wall or on the pages of the book), and the photographs' ability to mediate our relationship to things are further questions to be considered in the light of thing theory. If thing theory opens up more questions than it does provides answers, then Yasumura's photographs with their flattened attention to the animate and inanimate, the useful and the decorative, the traditional and modern, and the alive and the inert, provide us with a visual tool for thinking about the thingness of the domestic object world.

²⁴ Shino Kuraishi, "Family home, or the Stage of Representation: Takashi Yasumura's *Domestic Scandals*," in *Domestic Scandals*, (Tokyo: Osiris, 2005): 89.

²⁵ Vladimir Nabokov, cited in Bill Brown, "Thing Theory," *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 1 (2001): 4.

²⁶ Brown, "Thing Theory," 4.

²⁷ Julia Breitbach, "The Photo-as-thing," *European Journal of English Studies* 15, no. 1 (2011): 34.

²⁸ For a recent discussion of the 'photo as thing', see Julia Breitbach, "The Photo-as-thing," *European Journal of English Studies* 15, no. 1 (2011): 31-43.

²⁹ Akihito Yasumi, "Friendship with the World of Things," in *Domestic Scandals*, (Tokyo: Osiris, 2005), 86.

Curtin University September 2012

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