

Are We Worthy of Our Kitchens?

Christine Rosen

One of the best recent advertising campaigns is for a new line of high-end washers and dryers made by General Electric. A supermodel and a dorky scientist collide on the street, falling unexpectedly in love, uniting brains and beauty, utility and aestheticism. The fruit of this union is the household appliance of the future—sophisticated, sleek, an electronic image of domestic bliss for our times. The perfect washer and dryer create the perfect family.

Given the great range and power of our contemporary technologies, it is hardly surprising that our expectations for modern machines are especially high at home. We seek movie-quality entertainment with our oversized, flat-panel, high-definition televisions. We seek business-quality communication by installing satellite-powered Internet access in our home offices. We seek restaurant-quality kitchens with our six-burner stovetops and cappuccino-making machines. We want the latest high-tech contrivance or convenience, hoping that it will make old jobs easier, or that it will fulfill new longings we never knew existed.

At the same time, some of the most remarkable household appliances are now so mundane that we rarely think of them as technologies at all. Consider—or reconsider—the washing machine. In many homes, it is relegated to the basement or some other hidden corner. It is used often but not given much attention by its owner unless it breaks. Most households still have reasonably priced models, almost always in white, so loud and unattractive that they are kept out of public view. Despite its humble status, however, the electric washing machine represents one of the more dramatic triumphs of technological ingenuity over physical labor. Before its invention in the twentieth century, women spent a full day or more every week performing the backbreaking task of laundering clothes. Hauling water (and the fuel to heat it), scrubbing, rinsing, wringing—one nineteenth-century American woman called laundry “the Herculean task which women all dread.” No one who had the choice would relinquish her washing machine and do laundry the old-fashioned way.

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WINTER 2006 ~ 75

Today, technology aids us in performing even the simplest domestic tasks. We have vacuums, juicers, blenders, dishwashers, lawnmowers, leaf blowers, bread machines, coffee makers, ice cream makers, food processors, microwave ovens, and much more. Yet if our domestic machines are more advanced than ever, it is unclear by what standard we should judge their success.

Many people justify buying the latest household machine as a way to save time, but family life seems as rushed as ever. Judging by how Americans spend their money—on shelter magazines and kitchen gadgets and home furnishings—domesticity appears in robust health. Judging by the way Americans actually live, however, domesticity is in precipitous decline. Families sit together for meals much less often than they once did, and many homes exist in a state of near-chaos as working parents try to balance child-rearing, chores, long commutes, and work responsibilities. As Cheryl Mendelson, author of a recent book on housekeeping, observes, “Comfort and engagement at home have diminished to the point that even simple cleanliness and decent meals—let alone any deeper satisfactions—are no longer taken for granted in many middle-class homes.” Better domestic technologies have surely not produced a new age of domestic bliss.

Ironically, this decline in domestic competence comes at a time of great enthusiasm for “retro” appliances and other objects that evoke experiences that many Americans rarely have. We seem to value our domestic gadgets more and more even as we value domesticity less and less. Wealthy Americans can purchase an expensive, “old-fashioned” cast-iron Aga stove, but they cannot buy the experience it is intended to conjure: a cozy kitchen filled with the scents and signs of a person devoted to the domestic satisfaction of those who share a home. And middle-class Americans can buy machines that aim to make their domestic chores more pleasurable or efficient, but the ideal of transforming domestic labor into a “lifestyle” is a fantasy. The machines promise to restore peace and comfort to domestic life, but such nostalgia (whose literal meaning is “homesickness”) is not a recipe for domestic happiness.

The New Electric Servants

If we are nostalgic for the idea of old-fashioned hearth and home, a brief history of housework will quash any longing for doing things the old-fashioned way. It is difficult to overstate the extraordinary physical challenge household labor posed before the creation of modern domestic

technology. Cooking, cleaning, laundering, and caring for children—almost exclusively the lot of women—required considerable endurance, and exhaustion and injury were common. During her visit to the United States in the 1830s, the British writer Frances Trollope was appalled to find the country’s married women suffering from pallid complexions and poor posture that she attributed to their ceaseless domestic toil (although women’s lot was not much better in Trollope’s native Britain).

Rapid changes occurred in the hundred years between 1850 and 1950. As historian Ruth Cowan notes, “Before 1860 almost all families did their household work in a manner that their forebears could have imitated”—that is, in a pre-industrial manner, with the benefit of certain simple tools but without the aid of sophisticated domestic technologies. By 1960, only those living in the poorest or most isolated communities lived this way. With minor modifications, improvements, and the addition of certain features, these early twentieth-century technologies are still the ones we use in the twenty-first century.

One of the first domestic technologies to influence the American home was the wood- or coal-burning cast-iron cooking stove, first patented and regularly produced in the 1830s and found in many American homes by the 1850s. Like many domestic technologies that would follow, the new stoves saved labor, but mostly male labor. Since stoves burned fuel more efficiently than the open fireplaces that Americans previously used to prepare food, the constant demand for fuel-gathering was reduced. But since fuel-gathering was traditionally a task for men and older children, the stoves did little to alleviate the demands on women’s time.

By the early twentieth century, many more new appliances were available. The first motorized dishwasher was exhibited at the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair, and by 1908, appliance manufacturers were offering electric ranges and electric dishwashers. Electric refrigerators followed in 1914. By 1920, electric sewing machines, electric irons, and the earliest vacuum cleaners appeared on the market. By the early 1940s, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, more than half of all American homes had washing machines and refrigerators, and nearly half had vacuum cleaners. The editor of *Common Sense in the Household*, an early aficionado of the vacuum, described this “miraculous” technology as follows: “It is like play to see ravelings, lint, feathers, and hair and other scraps drawn into the maw of the cleaner and vanish from sight.”

But as more appliances found their way into American homes, something else began to find its way out of it: servants. In the nineteenth century, many middle class homes employed a servant to help with laun-

dry and housekeeping, and advertisements for cleaning products often featured images of servants in starched aprons industriously polishing floors. By the early 1920s, far fewer Americans employed a servant, and they had all but disappeared from advertisements, replaced by pictures of ecstatic wives using their new “electric servants”—appliances. A Hoover vacuum ad from the 1920s featured a glamorous flapper in drop-waist satin dress and pearls, her wavy bob slickly coiffed and her eyes fixed on the floor as she enthusiastically vacuums.

Many advertisements were overt in pushing their products as replacements for paid human labor. A 1938 ad for Hoover vacuums showed a housewife slumped in an armchair, broom by her side, thinking, “It’s so *silly* to go on wearing myself out when I can have a maid at 4d a day”—a “tireless, dependable maid” called “the Hoover!” In their 1929 study, *Middletown*, Robert and Helen Lynd recorded the thoughts of one woman who found that “my labor-saving devices just about offset my lack of a maid.” But as the Lynds’ survey of Middletown housewives revealed, “a number feel that while the actual physical labor of housework is less... rising standards in other respects use up the saved time.” This claim was echoed by other domestic experts of the era. Writing in 1919, domestic efficiency expert Christine Frederick noted, “Increasingly high standards of sanitation in the home have made cleaning one of the most important divisions of housework.” Nevertheless, Frederick decreed, “there is no question of the economy in replacing the human by the mechanical servant.”

American enthusiasm for new domestic appliances remained high into the 1950s, as soldiers returning from World War II married, set up house, and raised the baby boom generation. The automatic dishwasher was even a highlight of the impromptu debate between Vice President Richard Nixon and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev in Moscow at the American National Exhibit in July 1959. When Nixon showed Khrushchev a model American kitchen, with its “newest model” dishwasher and a washing machine with a built-in panel of controls, Khrushchev responded quickly (and untruthfully), “We have such things.” When Nixon noted that such technologies made things easier for American housewives, Khrushchev said petulantly, “Your capitalistic attitude toward women does not occur under Communism.” (Other attitudes toward women were evidently universal: at one point during their tour, when Khrushchev noticed Nixon admiring a group of young women modeling bathing suits, he said, “You are for the girls too.”)

By the 1950s, as Cowan notes, new technologies allowed the American housewife “to produce single-handedly what her counterpart of 1850 need-

ed a staff of three or four to produce: a middle-class standard of health and cleanliness for herself, her spouse, and her children.” But her new electric servants did not easily translate into spending less time on housework, even if they reduced a great deal of the most back-breaking drudgery.

Object Love

During Khrushchev’s and Nixon’s “kitchen debate,” Khrushchev needled Nixon by asking, “Don’t you have a machine that puts food into the mouth and pushes it down? Many things you’ve shown us are interesting but they are not needed in life. They have no useful purpose. They are merely gadgets.”

Khrushchev might have been describing the modern American wedding registry. A tour of a typical registry reveals an extraordinary level of acquisitiveness for odd or luxuriously impractical machines: espresso makers costing thousands of dollars, exotic waffle irons, “professional-quality” pasta makers and even tiny blowtorches that allow budding dessert chefs to brown a perfect crème brûlée. The Williams-Sonoma kitchen company reportedly sells a \$900 machine dedicated solely to the making of panini. Today’s in-the-know amateur cooks covet the Thermomix, a combination of mixer, blender, food processor, and miniature stove, unfortunately not available in stores. Purchasing one, as one *New York Times* food writer found, is akin to attending a series of bizarre, cult-like Tupperware parties.

Even practical technologies have become extremely fussy—and extremely expensive—in their modern incarnations. For \$460, you can buy a vacuum that attaches to your waist with a padded belt for ease of carrying and features a HEPA filtration system. “With the Euroclean Hip Vac,” the product summary notes, “you not only vacuum more efficiently, you clean more effectively with the hospital-grade power of HEPA filtration to eliminate 99.99% of particles 0.3 microns and larger.” This expensive, hospital-grade technology is advertised in a catalogue, “Gaiam Harmony,” whose motto is “Simple choices make a difference.”

Unsurprisingly, much of our desire for domestic technology is focused on the kitchen, and high-end kitchen appliances are one of the most sought-after features in a home. The Market Forecaster report from Kitchen and Bath Business projected that Americans would spend \$68.3 billion in 2005 to remodel their kitchens, and that “high-end [remodeling] jobs—those priced at \$15,000 or more—are expected to increase almost 6 percent from 2004.” Scanning the luxury home and apartment listings in any urban newspaper, one finds a familiar litany of highlighted

features: In Boston, for example, a “gourmet kitchen with granite countertops, Sub-Zero and Gaggenau appliances,” and in New York, “Sub-Zero refrigerators, Gaggenau appliances, granite countertops in the gourmet kitchen.” Similarly, the popular website Homeportfolio.com lists the brands of appliances considered desirable by design-conscious homeowners: Viking, Miele, Bosch, Wolf, Sub-Zero. A “coffee system” by Miele featured on the site—the price coyly “withheld by manufacturer”—likely costs more than a basic refrigerator and resembles a small spaceport.

One professional chef who occasionally cooks private dinners for wealthy patrons recently told the *New York Times* about the “spectacularly well-equipped kitchens I have seen, literally breathtaking. They’ve got these great big Viking or Garland or Aga stoves, gorgeous stone countertops... multiple dishwashers, sometimes two, even three Sub-Zero refrigerators... I walk into these kitchens and I just swoon.” This object love seems especially keen for those who seek the ultimate in modern domestic technology: “professional-grade” or “gourmet” appliances. Indeed, the word “gourmet” is now more frequently used as an adjective than a noun—to describe things in the home rather than the kind of person who might live there. Gourmet once meant a person who knew about and appreciated fine food and drink. Today gourmet is more likely to describe a state-of-the-art blender.

The Perfect Kitchen

One of the most popular professional-grade appliance purveyors, Gaggenau, offers sleek stainless-steel ovens and range-tops, some using the latest in induction-style heating elements, “the very best of today’s kitchen technology.” The company’s website even offers a movie depicting the illustrious history of Gaggenau, although it is too tasteful to provide prices for its stoves and ranges (if you have to ask, you can’t afford them). The history reads like a Grimms’ fairy tale: “Gaggenau is a small town at the northern edge of the Black Forest. Here, following the Thirty-Years’ War in 1683, Count Ludwig Wilhelm von Baden approved the establishment” of factories. (Left unmentioned in this history is the fact that the little town of Gaggenau was also the site of a Nazi concentration camp during World War II.) More popular (and somewhat less expensive) are Viking ovens and range-tops, which promise six-burner, restaurant-quality cooking experiences and the ability to boil water in a minute or two.

If Gaggenau is the preferred professional-grade appliance of those with a modern aesthetic, and Viking is the one for those who want pro-

fessional quality but can't quite afford to spend tens of thousands of dollars on a stove, then the enameled cast-iron Aga stove is the favorite appliance of those seeking an old-fashioned relationship with cooking. A Swedish physicist invented the Aga, which stands for "Amalgamated Gas Accumulator," in the 1920s, and until the late twentieth century Aga stoves were merely middle-class appliances, particularly popular in British kitchens. Today, an Aga is a financial and architectural commitment: Nearly five feet wide and weighing almost 1,300 pounds, a full-size Aga costs between \$12,000 and \$13,000, plus shipping, and must be installed (at additional cost) by a certified Aga installer, who often ends up calling in an engineer to insure that the kitchen floor is structurally capable of bearing the über-stove's weight.

The Aga is also an emotional investment. As the company's website notes, "Owning an Aga is more than just owning a range, its living a way of life." Powered by natural gas or electricity, the Aga can remain on all the time, and with no dials or settings, it requires learning how to cook by moving food items around a series of differently heated ovens and burners. Aga's marketing message doesn't emphasize this complicated cooking process. Instead, a recent Aga print advertisement shows a beautiful woman with tousled dark hair, a come-hither smile and daring décolletage biting into a piece of well-roasted chicken. Behind her rests a gleaming black Aga stove and the headline: "Aga: Cook better. Eat better. Taste better. Live better." Like other high-end appliance manufacturers, Aga plays on consumers' desire for retro appliances that remind them of the "good old days" when homemade meals were a regular part of family life. The advertisement also helpfully stokes consumer envy by noting, "For eighty years, the legendary Aga cooker has been the choice of serious cooks, celebrities and even royalty in Europe. Now, it is the heart of the most beautiful kitchens in North America."

If Aga has a rival, it is the La Cornue stove—"the Rolls Royce of stoves," as one owner described it to the *New York Times*. "Vikings are good, but this one has all the beauty you would associate with a nineteenth-century kitchen in Provence, and it's state of the art. It took us ten years to get it, and it has our names on it," engraved on a brass plaque. Even more rarified is the Bonnet, a stove the *New York Times* described as "custom-made by hand in France in solid cast iron with an installer flown over to assemble it on site." It can cost hundreds of thousands of dollars.

The desire to own such high-end appliances stems in part from that familiar impulse: envy. "I go to other people's houses and come home and gnash my teeth," one woman told the *Times*, describing her angst about her

Aga-free kitchen. As one interior designer put it: “People want what the kitchen embodies: success. It could cost \$100,000, \$150,000, \$200,000 in a minute.” The eager manipulation of this base emotion is nothing new, of course. Writing in 1957, sociologist David Riesman observed, “Americans resent being deprived of the things they are supposed to have, and advertising tempts us with the halo of association rather than with objects *per se*.” Appliance manufacturers are skilled at conjuring happy associations of home, hearth, and happiness, and print advertisements often feature images of convivial families and friends gathered in their well-appointed kitchen, surrounded by gleaming stainless-steel appliances.

The Aga and its kin are also clearly status markers. Commenting on stoves that looked like “nickel-plated nuclear reactors” and kitchens with vast “refrigeration complexes,” David Brooks skewered the pretensions of high-end appliance owners in his book *Bobos in Paradise*. The bobo (bourgeois bohemian) kitchen is a “culinary playground providing its owners with a series of top-of-the-line peak experiences,” Brooks wrote. And with this comes an undercurrent of the worst sort of reverse snobbery. “Spending on conspicuous displays is evil,” Brooks notes, “but it’s egalitarian to spend money on parts of the house that would previously have been used by the servants.”

Such high-end appliances promise to help us overcome our weaknesses. Whether our failing is sloth, inhibition, ineptitude, or simply lack of discipline, the technologies will make it easier to master our domestic vices and cultivate our domestic virtues. Don’t have time to bake bread from scratch? The bread machine will do it for you. Too busy to make a meal from scratch? Buy the Advantium, General Electric’s super-fast cooking oven, which costs around \$1,500. On its website, GE promotes the Advantium as a “revolutionary breakthrough in cooking technology,” although the foods it promises to cook quickly include prepackaged frozen meals such as pepperoni pizza and breaded seafood filets. As one press release notes: “Whether your schedule is slightly hectic, very busy, or out of control, there is a GE cooking product to fit your needs. The latest cooking products are so easy to use and give time-crunched consumers the ability to prepare and enjoy beautifully cooked foods fast, faster or fastest.” In other words: the right stove will help people get control of their lives.

Perhaps this is why high-end appliance manufacturers use epic language to describe their wares: to fortify our belief in the technology’s ability to conquer life’s crises and unleash life’s pleasures. We live in an age when appliances have histories and legends, and when we are expected to value the domestic technologies we purchase for more than their practical merit. Buying a particular stove like the Aga is buying into

a particular “lifestyle,” complete with magazines and social networks. As a result, domestic tasks such as cooking and cleaning are not merely the drudgery of daily life, they are also extensions of the self.

Of course, buying these high-end products is beyond the economic reach of most middle-class consumers. But the ethos they embody—domestic technology as lifestyle—is not. This is why many lower-end brands eventually mimic the appeal of their more expensive counterparts. Even at Target and Wal-Mart, one is made to believe that buying the right machine can transform our domestic labors into domestic pleasures, and that we can enjoy the refined tastes of the wealthy at prices normal people can afford. Manufacturers of affordable appliances used to emphasize the reliability and practicality of their wares; today they are more likely to mimic the language of high-end appliances, with references to the professional-quality features and tasteful aesthetic of even the lowliest blender.

Interestingly enough, the most expensive, sophisticated appliances are often the least reliable. According to *Consumer Reports*, “Pro-style models [of ovens and range-tops] such as the Viking...were among the lowest scorers, despite their high-heat burners.” One Viking stove selling for \$4,000 was deemed to have a “smallish oven and [was] among the least effective at self-cleaning.” As for reliability, *Consumer Reports* survey data “show that Viking and Thermador gas ranges...have been repair-prone,” and that “more firepower doesn’t necessarily mean better cooking.” Same story for refrigerators: *Consumer Reports* gave the Sub-Zero 650/G model (which retails for around \$6,000) a rating of “fair” for ease of use, noting that it “lacks some features you’ll find on lower-priced models.” And like Viking, the brand has a poor record of reliability: “Sub-Zero has been the most repair-prone brand of top- and bottom-freezer refrigerators,” and Sub-Zero company’s overall repair history is 28 percent, compared to 7 percent for refrigerators manufactured by Whirlpool, which sell for \$800 to 1,000. The conclusion: “Price, styling, or the word ‘professional’ are no guarantee of excellent performance or durability.” The image of domestic perfection is sometimes far from the reality.

The Empty Kitchen

So what benefits do these appliances bring? Do more advanced domestic technologies save us time, make us happier, expand life’s pleasures, or liberate us from life’s drudgeries?

In a 2004 article in the *British Journal of Sociology*, researchers Michael Bittman, James Rice, and Judy Wajcman argue that most domestic appli-

ances “do not save women any time”—and women, alas, are still the ones who perform the bulk of household duties. The authors speculate that one reason for this failure is that the quantity and quality of what is produced in the home has increased—that is, families are enjoying “better meals, cleaner clothes, or more attractive gardens.” Our domestic technologies might make us more efficient, but they also impose higher standards of domestic performance.

In some ways, this is obviously correct. Even the hardest working homemaker and her fleet of servants in ages past could never match the cleanliness made possible by certain modern machines. In the war against dirt and germs, times are clearly better. But the modern kitchen, for all its progress, tells a far more ambiguous story, one that is deeply revealing about the relationship between domestic technology and domestic happiness.

“It must be remembered,” wrote Isabella Beeton in 1869, that the kitchen “is the great laboratory of every household, and that much of the ‘weal or woe,’ as far as regards bodily health, depends upon the nature of the preparations concocted within its walls.” Today, the laboratory is filled with the finest equipment, but there is often no one to use it. Despite purchasing more and better appliances, home-cooking and family dinners are both racing toward extinction. *American Demographics* reports that between 1985 and 1995, “the number of hours women spent cooking per week dropped 23 percent, and the number of hours men cooked dropped by 21 percent.” By 1997, the U.S. Energy Information Administration reported that more than one in five households used their (non-microwave) oven “less than once weekly” and only 42 percent “make a hot meal once a day.”

According to the U.S. Department of Labor’s Consumer Expenditures survey, the average family spent \$3,129 on food at home and \$2,211 on food away from home in 2003. Wealthier families (those with incomes of \$70,000 or above) spend even more on food away from home—nearly half (49.2 percent) of their household food budgets. Another *American Demographics* article noted the trend toward purchasing “home-meal replacement options,” such as the prepared foods one can buy at the supermarket. “Americans increasingly prefer meals they can make quickly and eat on the run,” the article noted. “Almost half of weekday meals today (44 percent) are prepared in less than 30 minutes.”

Eating together is now so unusual that the Nickelodeon television network teamed up with the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse (CASA) and declared the fourth Monday in September to be “Family Day—A Day to Eat Dinner With Your Children.” Families pledge to eat

together and turn off their television sets in the hope of sparking spontaneous dinner conversation (the irony of a television network urging families to turn off their TVs and have dinner together was evidently lost on organizers of the event).

Changing family structure has something to do with this transformation of domestic life. Most women now work outside the home, and working parents with children find they have little time to prepare regular meals. Instead, we eat on the run, with one-fifth of all meals now consumed in a car. Commercial food purveyors are responding to the demand for car-friendly convenience by creating handheld products, such as scrambled eggs and macaroni and cheese that come in push-up tubes. Supermarkets have set up triage-like “meal solution centers” that offer precooked meals “just like Mom used to make.” Meals have become modern problems in need of solutions. As historian and designer Vicki Matranga aptly put it, “Americans now want convenience. The kitchen is a showplace where you heat up your food in the microwave.” The perfect kitchen is also the empty kitchen.

Insuring Domestic Tranquility

In an earlier era, domestic doyennes like Catharine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe, authors of *The American Woman's Home* (1869), encouraged women to view housework as both science and art, and emphasized women's moral responsibility for keeping a clean and well-functioning home. They were willing to criticize American women—sometimes harshly—for failing in their domestic duties: “The American table, taken as a whole, is inferior to that of England or France,” they wrote. “The management of food is nowhere in the world, perhaps, more slovenly and wasteful.”

If there is a modern heiress to Beecher and Stowe, it is Cheryl Mendelson. “Although a large, enthusiastic minority of home cooks grow more and more sophisticated,” she writes, “the majority become ever more de-skilled.” This is echoed by the kitchen-design website, Homeportfolios.com, which reports that “despite a deluge of cooking programs, celebrity chefs, and state-of-the-art appliances, on average, we're preparing fewer meals than generations past.” But instead of lamenting this fact, it stays upbeat. “No matter,” reassures the site. “The kitchen still draws us in with its irresistible charm.” This is like saying the bedroom is a comfortable place for insomniacs.

The result is a great disconnect between our domestic fantasies and our domestic reality, between the high-tech façade with its image of home

and hearth and the kind of lives we actually live. We have fancier kitchens but fewer family dinners. We have gourmet cooking machines that sit largely unused and oversized freezers filled with microwave dinners. We have high hopes but limited energy for performing domestic labor, and we tend to devalue unpaid labor in the home despite its positive effects on family life. We purchase increasingly specialized, professional-quality domestic appliances at a time when our desire to use them regularly is waning.

Wealthy Americans in particular buy Viking stoves hoping that the right machine will make them want to cook, failing to recognize (or admit) that it is not the technology they lack but the will. By spending so much money on machines, they seek to buy domestic happiness on the cheap. And the makers of these machines ingeniously appeal to this longing, evoking both nostalgia for a lost era of domesticity and the dream of automating all our domestic labors.

Of course, neither cultural nostalgia nor technological progress can restore the domestic tranquility we feel we have lost. What is necessary is a sober defense of the worth of domestic life, including those labors—chopping vegetables, sweeping a floor, setting a table—that are hardly glorious in themselves but essential parts of the domestic satisfactions we still seem to want. “As people turn more and more to outside institutions to have their needs met (for food, comfort, clean laundry, relaxation, entertainment, society, rest),” writes Mendelson, “domestic skills and expectations further diminish, in turn decreasing the chance that people’s homes can satisfy their needs. The result is far too many people who long for home even though they seem to have one.”

Unlike some feminist critics of domesticity, who argue for the lowering of domestic standards—Cowan wants to overthrow the “senseless tyranny of spotless shirts and immaculate floors,” for example—Mendelson and others seek to elevate the domestic sphere in a culture that too often denigrates or neglects it. They hope to appeal to the deeply-felt yearning most people have for a comfortable and well-functioning home life. And perhaps, in a strange sense, they want to make us worthy of our fancy machines, which means recognizing the permanent limits of domestic technology to produce domestic happiness. Not a brilliant way to sell the newest appliances, but a recipe for learning again how—and why—to use the ones we already have.