From Laurie Ouellette, Lifestyle TV (Routledge 2016).

# 2

# THE SELF AS PROJECT

In June 2015, Fox News posed the question "Are TV makeover shows bad for us?" Although the makeover concept has been a staple of lifestyle and reality programming for some time, the debut of three new "style-centric shows," scheduled back to back on the TLC cable network, presented a timely occasion to revisit a trend that shows little sign of abating. The programs under discussion were *Love, Lust or Run* (2015– ), which claims to "help women who are lost in their style choices," *Brides Gone Styled* (2015– ), which revamps "worst-dressed brides," and *Dare to Wear* (2015– ), in which two participants swap wardrobes to "experience what life is like donning a totally different fashion style." Some commentators interviewed for the Fox story condemned the new shows for perpetuating a superficial obsession with fashion and style, and pointed out that the "shimmering final appearances" featured on makeover programs are unattainable for most people. Women and girls, they noted, are especially vulnerable to illusory standards of perfection because they are judged more on their looks than men. Other commentators were much more optimistic, claiming that makeover programs inspire and empower people to "feel better about themselves." The journalist concluded that, whatever critics think, the shows "resonate" with TV viewers, as evidenced by strong ratings. Tellingly, for a cable brand known for advocating free market capitalism, the takeaway was that makeovers are here to stay, because "style sells" (Johnson 2015).

Why does style sell? More to the point, why is so much unscripted television devoted to guiding and improving the way people dress—and eat, decorate, shop and even date—and what do these programs suggest about contemporary society? Fox News did not explore these complicated questions, implying instead that consumer demand is simply responsible for the enduring makeover trend. The assumption that TV viewers are in control of what we see on television conceals the profit-maximizing practices of the TV industry. As we saw in earlier chapters, popular nonfiction and reality programs are often cheaper to produce than news and fictional entertainment, and present ample occasion for product placement and integrated branding. However, commercialism can't fully explain television's preoccupation with stylizing and transforming people and their environments. We must also consider how wider social, economic and political discourses and pressures come to bear on programming trends. The simplistic debate over positive versus negative messages regurgitated by Fox News cuts short this type of analysis. This chapter does not resolve once and for all whether makeover shows are good or bad, but considers the presentation of the *self as project* across a wide range of lifestyle and reality television. The style makeover is one example of a plethora of formats that engage and assist with processes of self-making and lifestyle formation (Palmer 2004, 2008). To understand why these programs are so abundant now, I situate television's impetus to shape and transform the self within the conditions of late modern capitalist societies.

TLC's new slate of makeover programs may well perpetuate beauty and gender norms, but the shows also claim to solve problems arising from fashion "mistakes," reflect on multiple ways of dressing and living, and empower participants—and by extension TV viewers—to navigate a burgeoning maze of consumer options and lifestyle choices. In that sense, they convey the idea that the self is less a fixed entity than a self-made project that involves a high degree of reflexivity, strategy and attention. Social theorists explain the imperative to approach the self as project to intersecting factors, including the decline of traditional ways of life, the postwar expansion of the college-educated middle classes, the growth of therapeutic culture, and the shifting economic and political conditions of late modern capitalist societies (Bell and Hollows 2005; Lewis 2008). While scholars debate the

degree to which these developments have truly eroded traditional structures of identity and replaced them with an imperative to "choose how we construct our identities through lifestyle practices" (Bell and Hollows 2005, 3), the assumption that the self can—and must—be perpetually worked on, styled and transformed is perpetuated by popular discourse, the media, advertising and the self-help industry. The lifestyling of television is part of this mediated culture of the perpetually made, constantly reflecting self. With the expansion of popular nonfiction and reality formats in recent decades, television has become an especially visible "cultural technology" (Bennett 1998) for fashioning ourselves as subjects.

As Katherine Sender points out, the presumed "unfixing" of the self in late modern capitalist societies reframes social identity as a proliferating array of individual choices about what to wear, how to live, what to eat and who to be. The purpose of lifestyle television, she suggests, is to assist TV viewers in navigating this "puzzling diversity of possibilities" (2012, 17). From cooking and home shows to makeovers and competitions, lifestyle-themed television presumes the freedom—and imperative—to create our own life trajectories and circulates resources (advice, instruction, templates) for aestheticizing, managing and transforming our wardrobes, bodies, homes, palates, psyches, behaviors and relationships. While the tutelary nature of much lifestyle and reality programming suggests that anyone can partake in self-fashioning, the templates and guidelines offered tend to reinscribe social hierarchies in the language of self-actualization, empowerment and individual "choice." As we will see, lifestyle and reality television has become especially useful to a governing logic that expects everyone to be "entrepreneurs of the self" (Rose 1992) who maximize their everyday choices, and manage their own fates and fortunes, regardless of circumstances. The paradox of lifestyle TV is that it tethers the promise of individual freedom to decide "who to be and how to live" (Giddens 2001) to the advice of lifestyle experts and the agendas of authorities.

## AESTHETICIZING EVERYDAY LIFE

The programming examined in this book contributes to what scholars call a shift from "ways of life to lifestyle" (Chaney 1996, 2000). According

to David Chaney, a way of life is associated with the shared norms, rituals and patterns of stable communities and institutions grounded in "distinctive and specifiable localities" (2000, 82). Geographical mobility, the decline of manufacturing in the West, and media and consumer culture are said to have "unfixed" traditional ways of life and fostered a self-conscious approach to identity and lifestyle. In the late modern era, the self has become a "reflexive project, for which the individual is responsible," explains Anthony Giddens. While critics contest the assumption that individuals—especially those marginalized by gender, race, class and sexual orientation—are free to determine their sense of themselves and place in the world, few would dispute the seductive pervasiveness of the message "We are not what we are, but what we make of ourselves" (Giddens 1991, 75).

Social theorists do not suggest that identity has become a "free for all." While everyone is called upon to participate, the pursuit of reflexive self-fashioning is constrained by "differential access to forms of self-actualization and empowerment" (Giddens 1991, 6). The demise of traditional ways of life has also occurred in tandem with the rise of mechanisms for shaping appropriately "self-reflexive" subjects. Ulrich Beck describes the "disembedding and re-embedding of industrial society ways of life by new ones in which individuals must produce, stage and cobble together their biographies themselves" as a process of *individualization* (1994, 15). Consumer culture and popular media are technologies of individualization, to the extent that they circulate a "repertoire of styles" that individuals are encouraged to "monitor and adapt" for themselves (Chaney 2000, 81). Lifestyle television plays an especially visible role in the process of individualization by offering TV viewers an assortment of customizable templates, models and resources for "choosing" and assembling their identities and lifestyles. The Food Network's cooking/lifestyle program *Pioneer Woman* (2011– ), hosted by Ree Drummond, exemplifies the disembedding and re-embedding of identity much as Beck describes.

Drummond is a college-educated, former city-dwelling career woman who adopted a rural lifestyle when she married a cattle rancher, quit her job and relocated to Oklahoma to become a full-time wife and mother. The show revolves around the everyday details of her chosen lifestyle: attending church picnics, riding horses, tending to her husband and family, preparing

"all-American" meals for the Drummond clan and workers on the ranch. While Drummond embodies an agrarian way of life and a traditional model of femininity based on the primacy of the nuclear family and the sexual division of labor in the home, however, her biography and lifestyle were not inevitable or predetermined—they are presented as the result of *her own self-stylization and reflexive choices*. As a rule, lifestyle television similarly constructs personhood and everyday life as a reflexive choice.

The chaos associated with late modernity, in which "identities are torn apart and made fluid," is channeled into new ways of fixing identity, argues Sam Binkley. Experts are crucial to this process. Tania Lewis argues that the "stylization of life" has required a visible expansion of cultural intermediaries. Drawing from the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, she traces the explosion of lifestyle guides, tastemakers and aesthetic gurus on television to the aspirational culture of self-expression and continual self-improvement associated with the expanding middle classes. Experts "offering (or selling) their own art of living as an example to others" are central to this set of skills and competencies, she contends (2008, 9). Recent decades have seen a proliferation of lifestyle experts offer templates for living and guide consumers on how to make choices in an expanding array of spheres, from food and fashion to travel and exercise (Binkley 2007b, 77). Lifestyle TV addresses


*Figure* 2.1 Ree Drummond demonstrates her rural lifestyle choices on *Pioneer Woman*.

a "DIY self" (Lewis 2008, 5), but it simultaneously offers expert instruction and advice to help alleviate the anxieties generated by the imperative to create oneself through acts of choice. The expansion of how-to lifestyle programming, enabled by the proliferation of cable channels, tethers individualization to perpetual reliance on experts.

As we have seen in previous chapters, purely instructional, skill-oriented programs that teach TV viewers how to cook a roast or remodel a house have given way to formats that infuse lifestyle instruction with entertainment appeals and the pleasure of vicarious consumption (Newman 2013). Programs presented on cable lifestyle brands like HGTV and the Food Network often combine informal pedagogy with the display and expert discussion of sumptuous food, aestheticized environments and stylish furnishings. They mediate repertoires of styles and provide informal guidance, often embodied by the host and inscribed in studio and on-location settings, on questions of who to be and how to live. Identity is presented in part as the result of consumer choices that must be calibrated to match the person we think we are, or would like to be. A case in point is the property show in which experts (decorators, realtors) help ordinary people "aestheticize everyday home life in connection with distinct identities" (McElroy 2008, quoted in White 2014, 390). This can involve renovation, redecorating and landscaping an existing home, or buying a new one. As Mimi White points out, shows like *House Hunters* (1999– ) do not provide technical instruction on purchasing a home. Instead, they enable and guide a quest to match property with identities and lifestyles. In addition to exploiting the "appeal of looking at other people's domiciles and seeing what different kinds of property look like," these shows link the expression of one's identity to self-reflexive consumption. As White explains, "Whether participants are trying to buy a home or sell one and move to another, they are all looking for the place that is just right for them" (2014, 390).

The idea that a home should express the individuality and style of its owner speaks to the "aestheticization of everyday life" in postindustrial societies. Mike Featherstone (1991) argues that the postwar expansion of the educated middle classes upset traditional social hierarchies and put questions of identity into flux. From the upwardly mobile emerged a new consumer sensibility marked by an especially "stylized awareness" of the

process of consumption. As traditional class distinctions blurred, the new middle classes turned to consumer culture to convey their emerging social position (Lury 2011, 53). This was not about copying the cultural tastes of social elites, but to do with adopting a reflexive approach to consumption itself: "Rather than unreflexively adopting a lifestyle, through tradition or habit, the new heroes of consumer culture make lifestyle a life project and display their individuality and sense of style in the particularity of the assemblage of goods, clothes, practices, experiences, appearance and bodily dispositions they design together into a lifestyle," Featherstone explains (1991, 86). Like the nineteenth-century dandy who "makes of his body, his behavior, his feelings and passions, his very existence, a work of art," the new middle classes embraced an aesthetic approach to life, which has become pervasive within consumer culture as a whole (1991, 67). Lifestyle television illustrates and enables this aesthetic approach to daily life, translating the desire for distinctive identity into a never-ending process of conscious lifestyle design.

Lifestyle programs tend to address consumer clusters imagined as upscale or aspirating to upper middle-class identities and lifestyles. However, as Frances Bonner points out, even niche cable brands must appeal beyond this small population. For this reason, she argues, the "fantasies on offer are presented in as inclusive a way as possible" (2003, 131). The assumption that, because identity is flexible, virtually anyone can potentially achieve the models of the "good life" demonstrated on television, is part of this discourse of inclusion.

Another way to cultivate a broad audience for niche programs is to bring ordinary people (often coded as working or lower class) into the mix as subjects of transformation. Makeover programs like *Brides Gone Styled*, which operates on the premise that some bridal gowns are unquestionably "tacky," tend to perpetuate a social hierarchy of taste. As the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1984) has shown, aesthetic choices are related to the social structures of everyday life as experienced by different classes—what he calls the habitus. In other words, our social position shapes our "choices," which are not valued equally by society. Working-class aesthetic tastes, Bourdieu notes, are usually discredited as unsophisticated and vulgar. Makeover shows suggest that anyone can potentially acquire "better" taste

by consulting and emulating knowledgeable experts, thereby partially disrupting the notion that social hierarchies are inevitable or fixed. However, as Helen Wood and Beverly Skeggs point out, the idea that we can all choose to "better" ourselves and our daily environments is ultimately another way of perpetuating class hierarchies. "Choice mediates taste, displaying the success and failure of the self to make itself," they write, alluding to the extent to which those who fail to transform themselves using the templates and resources that television makes so widely available have no one but themselves to blame for their maligned class status (2004, 206). Even privileged consumers, however, cannot rest assured in their tastes when class identity is understood to require *ongoing* self-stylization and a permanent reliance on experts. As Featherstone points out, the aestheticization of everyday life speaks in part to the role of education in upward mobility, and a perceived need to be "continuously learning and enriching oneself" felt most acutely by the new middle classes (1991, 48). When this disposition extends into self-fashioning, taste becomes a perpetual project.

Featherstone acknowledges that this "new consumer sensibility" is contradictory, as it hinges on a conflict between self-actualization pursued through productive forms of learning and the pursuit of pleasure through "expressive and liberated" lifestyles (Lury 2011, 96). This mirrors an older tension between the Protestant work ethic (Weber 1992), which posited that "self-improvement is to be achieved through rational and disciplined work," and the "self-actualization, expressivity, hedonism, and aesthetics" associated with the Romantic ethic (Lears 1983; Campbell 1987; Maguire 2008, 113). According to Featherstone, this tension is managed through a type of "calculated hedonism" in which individuals move "into and out of control" of their choices, enjoying the clash between the pleasure of unconstrained consumption and the discipline required of self-cultivation (Lury 2011, 96). Lifestyle TV similarly negotiates the tension by fusing consumption and pedagogy, work and fun, fantasy and reflexive self-making. By combining entertainment and instruction, lifestyle programs are able to incorporate both sides of the new consumer sensibility.

The Bravo cable brand is especially synchronized to calculated hedonism. While Bravo reality shows are rarely didactic or overtly instructional, they do revolve around food, fashion, shopping and other lifestyle domains.

Moreover, Bravo programs often celebrate luxury and conspicuous consumption. The *Rachel Zoe Project* (2008–2013), which revolves around celebrity stylist Rachel Zoe, presents a revolving parade of designer dresses, jewelry and shoes, lovingly filmed and discussed at length by the participants. The *Real Housewives* franchise (2006– ) profiles the daily lives of spoiled wealthy women who love to shop. *Million Dollar Listing* (2006– ) takes TV viewers inside luxury condos and sumptuous mansions. The *Millionaire Matchmaker* (2008– ) caters to the dating needs of rich clients who drive sports cars and dine at trendy upscale restaurants. However, Bravo also encourages an ironic response to these characters and scenarios—what is sometimes called the "Bravo wink." The ironic sensibility associated with the Bravo brand allows TV viewers to simultaneously lose themselves in vicarious luxury consumption and distance themselves from the people on screen by poking fun at them. The Bravo wink doesn't exactly replicate the push and pull between the pursuit of pleasure and the perceived need for more productive forms of self-realization that a quasi-instructional or how-to program would. However, as a viewing disposition, the Bravo wink does alleviate some of the anxiety generated by conspicuous consumption and the presumably lowbrow pleasure of reality entertainment as a whole.

The aestheticization of everyday life also intersected with the intensification of niche marketing discussed in previous chapters. The fragmentation of the consumer market to create more specialized consumer divisions, as exemplified by the rise of gourmet food and designer goods, made stylizing and customizing everyday life through consumption more possible for people with sufficient economic resources. The desire to identify and target specialized consumer clusters also led marketers to commodify "authentic" experiences, such as international travel, as another aestheticized resource for identity formation. In the 1970s, according to Sam Binkley, VALS psychographic research identified a tension between two value systems, "one endorsing the individualism, competition and acquisitiveness of mainstream American society and another stressing the expressiveness, ease with oneself, and earnestness associated with youth and counterculture" (2007b, 98). The latter value system was associated with college-educated professionals of the postwar generation—members of the new middle classes discussed by Featherstone—who were deemed "self-expressive,

individualistic, concerned with people, impassioned, diverse, complex." To research this "vanguard group," marketers believed they must find a way to connect "deeper meanings" to consumer choices. The consumption of goods, however self-consciously stylized, was no longer enough: as "experiencers," the professionals of the new middle classes craved "intense transforming moments" and self-improvement through "indulging in new experiences." As this desire was commodified and sold back to "experiencers" longing for authenticity, it became part of the burgeoning culture of the self as mediated through consumer practices (2007b, 98). Television similarly trades on vicariously meaningful, intense and transforming experiences, as exemplified by a cadre of lifestyle programs on the Travel Channel and the Discovery Channel—including *Anthony Bourdain: No Reservations* (2005–2012) and *Survivorman* (2004– )—which take TV viewers to exotic places and extreme situations.

While theorists like Featherstone seem optimistic about the aestheticization of everyday life, other critics are skeptical. As Celia Lury (2011) points out, the creative and stylized approach to consumption associated with the middle classes is rarely ascribed to working-class consumers. Makeover programs (which often target subordinated classes) suggest a ratcheting up of the demands of self-reflexivity—and an intensification of the expectation that "individuals respond to what is reflected back to them" (2011, 28). The long-running makeover program *What Not to Wear* (2003–2013) takes the creativity and pleasure out of consumption altogether, and deploys surveillance, shaming and strict fashion rules, which subjects are expected to master under the tutelage of experts and later enforce on themselves. After a harsh initial evaluation by the hosts, participants are offered advice for transforming their appearances—and their lives—through a wardrobe upgrade. They are sent shopping for new clothes to complete this mission, while hidden cameras capture their every move. Their purchases are then scrutinized by the hosts, who decide whether they are appropriate, flattering and conducive to the "better" self-image suggested by the experts and agreed upon in advance. For many of the subjects, the process is humiliating and stressful—not pleasurable or playful.

As Lury notes, the "mythical figure of the abnormal consumer" further reveals the white male privilege associated with the prototypical dandy and

legitimated forms of stylized consumption and calculated hedonism today. Reality shows about shopping addictions (*My Shopping Addiction*, 2012– ) and hoarding (*Hoarders*, 2009–2013; *Hoarding: Buried Alive*, 2010–2013; *Hoarders: Family Secrets*, 2015– ) often cast their female, working-class and African American participants as pathological consumers who are unable to navigate the competing ethics of productivity and pleasure, gratification and restraint.

Advice programs and interventions that claim to help people get out of debt often blame individuals for overindulging. When MTV launched its "Indebted" campaign to control massive debt accumulation among college students at the height of the financial crisis in 2010, it circulated images of conspicuous consumers who spent their student loan money on Spring Break vacations and designer lattes, implicitly blaming youth for the student loan crisis. Reality programs like *True Life* (1998– ) integrated similar messages into profiles of indebted young people, and classic rap and hip hop videos were replayed with "pop up" captions calling into question the spending choices associated with an African American "bling" lifestyle. And yet, as Diane Negra points out, when marginalized subjects pursue alternative consumer practices to survive unemployment and manage financial uncertainties, they are treated ambivalently (2013). The working-class women of *Extreme Couponing* (2010–2012), who amass and redeem large quantities of grocery store coupons, are not cast as clever, creative or heroic, but as obsessive and bizarre. As these examples suggest, the freedom and flexibility associated with the late modern self is not afforded to everyone equally: "The argument that all are much freer to acquire the lifestyle—and thus the identity—of their choice," Lury notes, "runs the risk of slipping into an imaginary world of equal appearances, and thus of becoming a rhetoric that all are equal, even if some remain more equal than others" (2011, 197).

## ETHICS AND CARE OF THE SELF

Lifestyle television's engagement with the self as project is not limited to the aestheticizing of identity through consumer choices. Everyday behaviors, habits, attitudes and practices are also examined, problematized and presented as reflexive *ethical* choices. The "loosening" of fixed identities (Binkley 2007b) has coincided with the growth of "everyday experts of subjectivity"

(Hawkins 2001, 413) and the proliferation of mediated resources (self-help books, magazines, apps, websites, TV programs) for monitoring, reflecting upon and cultivating ourselves across spheres of everyday life. From dating shows and makeovers to boot camps and rehab programs, lifestyle and reality television problematizes conduct with an eye toward ethical reflection and improvement. A large number of programs examine ways to live, offer tutorials in care and management of the self, and circulate techniques and regimens for everyday living that can be adopted and customized (Hawkins 2001, 412; Ouellette and Hay 2008). Competitions, docusoaps, life "swapping" programs and other forms of reality entertainment may not offer explicit instruction, but they do encourage TV viewers to "reflect on ways of being," and evaluate the lives and conduct of others (Hawkins 2001, 412). As Annette Hill points out, the practical and moral instruction of lifestyle programs is not limited to "external advice on how to improve our home, or our appearance." We are also presented "internal advice on how to improve our relationship with ourselves" (2007, 121). Putting this another way, Gay Hawkins argues that expert advice is never purely technical: it is also ethical because it privileges "certain conducts over others," and endorses techniques for relating to and cultivating ourselves in relation to "implicit moral problematizations" (2001, 418).

Michel Foucault refers to this concern with how to live as *ethics*. Ethics for Foucault does not refer to a strict moral code (thou shall not do this or that), but to the "relationship one ought to have with oneself," and the guidelines one sets for "conducting oneself in the world of one's everyday existence" (Rose 1996, 135). Theorists use the term "care of the self" to refer to the ethical process of attending to ourselves as subjects, which entails reflecting upon and accounting for our thoughts, behaviors, experiences, actions, habits and relationships, often through personal writing, mentorship, tutorials and practical exercises. While Foucault focused on the ethical practices of privileged white men in Antiquity, scholars have extended his framework to make sense of how individuals in the late modern era constitute themselves through self-conscious ethical processes (Ouellette and Arcy 2015). Foucault (1980, 1984, 1997) has been helpful for developing an understanding of subjectivity that accounts for the active and ongoing involvement of individuals, while also recognizing that identity is socially

constructed within uneven societal contexts. Foucault's concept of "technologies of the self" is especially relevant for understanding the self as project. Technologies of the self, he argued, are practices, or methods, that "permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immorality." The details of these actions and practices are the basis of the self, Foucault suggested, because "they are you—what you thought, what you felt" (1988, 29).

Technologies of the self are never practiced in a vacuum. As Foucault explained, if the subject constitutes himself in "active fashion, by practices of the self, these practices are nevertheless not something that the subject invents by himself." Rather, they are "patterns that he finds in his culture and which are proposed, suggested and imposed on him by his culture, his society and his social group" (1997, 291). Today, we are bombarded with all manner of advice about who to be and how to live through advertising, film, magazines, digital media, and nonfiction and reality television. Institutions and experts also play a role in "making up" people. Fields like psychology and social work—what Nikolas Rose (1998) calls the "psy complexes"—help construct normative models of healthy personhood and everyday living, and provide techniques for assessment, evaluation and modification.

Lifestyle TV is flooded with psy experts, including psychiatrists, therapists, self-esteem gurus and counselors. Some of these authorities, including Philip McGraw (*Dr. Phil*, 2002– ) and Robert Drew (*Celebrity Rehab*, 2008– ) have become TV celebrities who parlay their exposure into lucrative self-help brands. Many makeover programs borrow from the psy complexes to cast experts and hosts as pseudo-counselors who diagnose and fix alleged problems of self-esteem and crises of the will lurking beneath the surface of external concerns (Sender 2012). Programs like *What Not to Wear* (2003–2013), *How to Look Good Naked* (2008–2010) and *Mission Makeover* (2009– ) draw from the psy complexes to problematize and improve the relationship that participants have with themselves, in addition to teaching them how to improve their physical appearances. The burgeoning self-help industry, geared to overcoming inner problems and achieving health, romance,

happiness, wealth and professional success, is also well represented on lifestyle-themed programming. The self-help authorities who circulate on television may not have formal membership in the psy complex (many are not credentialed professionals), but they popularize its techniques and translate the project of the self into step-by-step plans for reflecting upon and altering self-perceptions, habits, behaviors and choices. Self-help experts sometimes adopt the detached and authoritative demeanor of psychologists and social workers, but more often than not they forge intimate connections and emotional alliances with the subjects they claim to assist and empower. The OWN Network, operated by Oprah Winfrey (who launched the careers of many TV psy experts), is branded as a channel for self-actualization and features a large number of programs that combine psy expertise with a more intimate approach to self-care, including the signature show *Fix My Life* (2012– ).

Even more than psy experts, lifestyle TV relies on a plurality of lifestyle experts who open up the intimate zones of daily life for ethical reflection and make recommendations on everything from sex to body image to mental and physical health. Lifestyle experts are often personable figures whose authority is based as much on their private experience as their diplomas. The ordinary people who appear on many lifestyle and reality shows also reflect on personhood and everyday life, and share technologies of the self in a wide range of settings, from high-stakes competitions to docusoaps. The lifestyling of television has created a mediated platform for an intimate approach to *care of the self* to unfold. Foucault uses the term care of the self to refer to ethical frameworks for "living a beautiful life" and caring for the self as a matter of pleasure, autonomy and self-mastery that flourished in ancient times. The self was not "given" nor governed by universal laws, but cultivated and regulated through daily choices and practices that received endless reflection and attention. In this milieu, everyday life took on an "aesthetics of existence"—the individual was akin to a work of art, to the extent that care of the self involved a "principle of stylization of conduct for those who wished to give their existence the most graceful and accomplished form possible" (1985, 250–251). This was not about consuming goods, but about reflecting upon everyday practices involving food, sexuality, exercise, the body and relationships with others, keeping

meticulous records about these matters and consulting with mentors, with the goal of living the best way possible. While Foucault realized that ethical judgments (e.g. what is considered "best") are historically bound, he envisioned affinities between ancient technologies of the self and the cultivation and care of the self in late modern societies. With the declining influence of traditional ways of life, and the waning of institutions and rigid rules governing sexuality, morality and everyday life, the twentieth century opened up new "freedoms and challenges" for subjects to fashion themselves and their lives in ethical ways (Gauntlett 2008, 142).

Sam Binkley traces the mainstreaming of the care of the self to an "intimate discourse of lifestyle" that gained currency in the 1970s. In the wake of the social movements and youth countercultures of the 1960s, new lifestyle experts appeared to mediate "personal becoming." The search for alternatives to mainstream society and mass culture gave rise to an alternative lifestyle print culture through which mediators circulated ethical advice and resources for creating new ways of everyday living. The new lifestyle experts, who were part of the alternative cultures they advised, published pamphlets, catalogs, books and articles on topics ranging from solar energy and organic food to sexuality and yoga. Unlike traditional experts, whose authority hinged on university credentials and "abstract pedagogy," they spoke in a "warm and personal" voice, and guided others on the basis of "intimate knowledge, the kind that can only be gained from direct experience, learning and personal growth in one's life" (2007b, 79). They developed an ethic of care in the sense theorized by Foucault, Binkley suggests, in which new questions about who to be and how to live were paramount.

As marketers devised ways to target nascent lifestyle clusters who valued "authentic" ways to develop themselves to the "fullest extent of their capacities" (Binkley 2007b, 93) over stylized consumption, the new model of "caring expertise" was folded into mainstream media and consumer culture (2007b, 78–79). In the process, what had been a collective practice of ethical reflection and self-making became individualized. By the 1980s, this privatized version of care of the self was evidenced in the rise of commercial lifestyle experts like Jane Fonda, whose instructional voice collapsed "knowing, doing and personal being into an intimate mode of address," and who claimed to care about the women she advised (2007b, 81). Many

of the lifestyle experts we see on television today are cut in the same mold. Claiming intimate knowledge, and speaking to participants and TV viewers in an affective and encouraging way, these modern-day guides bring an ethic of caring into a strand of television pervaded by stylized consumption, consumer hierarchies, sales pitches and brands.

Gay Hawkins points to TV chef Jamie Oliver (*The Naked Chef*, 1999–2001; *Jamie at Home*, 2007–2008; *Jamie Oliver's Food Revolution*, 2010–2011; *Jamie's 30-Minute Meals*, 2010) as an example. Frequently filmed at home with his family, and constructed as passionate about improving the quality of everyday eating and educating the public on issues of nutrition, Oliver connects everyday ethics to an intimate mode of expertise. On his shows, cooking is more than a skill or a way to express identity; it is a site from which to explore "modes of living and self-cultivations." Learning "how to fillet a fish, or scramble an egg is not just a lifestyle matter, it is about the production of . . . personal habits, attitudes and rituals that are informed by ethical values and principles," says Hawkins (2001, 418). The (now defunct) Planet Green cable network is another example of how the ethical dispositions and alternative self-care regimens discussed by Binkley are mainstreamed on lifestyle-themed television. Planet Green programs revolved around challenges and experiments designed to encourage ethical reflection on one's impact on the environment. Programs included *Living with Ed* (2007–2010), which profiled actor Ed Begley Jr.'s "low impact, environmentally conscious" lifestyle, and *Wa$ted* (2007), a show where green lifestyle experts confronted "average households about their long-term impacts on the environment," to encourage reflection on the environmentalism of everyday choices. While Planet Green was rebranded and its successor no longer encourages environmentalism, Pivot TV, a cable network geared to "socially conscious millennials," has picked up this theme with shows like *Human Resources* (2014), which follows a group of young people who are committed to reducing landfill waste by turning garbage into useful objects and teaching others to do the same.

The mainstreaming of a caring ethic can also be seen in the proliferation of reality shows about the tiny house movement (*Tiny House, Big Living*, 2014– ; *Tiny House Builders*, 2014– ; *Tiny House Hunters*, 2014– ; *Tiny House Nation*, 2014– ). In these programs, people who have self-consciously chosen to

downsize their lives challenge other people to give up "wide open spaces" and sprawling suburban homes for smaller, less expensive and more sustainable living arrangements. As with Planet Green programming, these "intimate experts," and the lifestyles they embody and advocate, are mediated by entertainment conventions and packaged to deliver suspense, emotion and drama in the interests of ratings. In the US, television's priority is to maximize profit through branding, sponsorship and advertising. The exploration of everyday ethics operates within a commercial framework that often sits uneasily with the advice being offered. Programs that profile "extreme cheapskates" (*Extreme Cheapskates*, 2012– ), who have chosen to adopt an ethic of thrift, exemplify television's contradictory relationship to alternative consumer ethics. People who forage dumpsters, reuse materials, and impose strict ascetic regimens on themselves and their families are presented as abnormal, extreme and exotic, whatever their reasons. Their tips and advice are not taken seriously, but are offered as voyeuristic and humorous entertainment. The individualized focus of programs that advocate less controversial ethical aims like recycling, eating healthy and locally sourced food, and conserving energy rarely engage with wider societal issues like corporate pollution or environmental policy. Nor do they acknowledge the class and race politics of the ethical regimens they promise—for example, the problem of "food deserts" where nutritional food is neither affordable nor available. As with other programming on lifestyle cable brands, these shows assume that TV viewers have the material resources (education, income, leisure) to take up the advice on offer, and contribute to the idea that politics is a matter of pursuing ethical lifestyle choices, not collective organizing for social change.

Still, the invitation to develop an ethical relationship with oneself can have progressive dimensions that are especially evident in lifestyle and reality programs that aim to rework and diversify gender and sexual identities. Anti-makeover programs like *More to Love* (2009), *True Beauty* (2009), *The Price of Beauty* (2010) and *How to Look Good Naked* (2008–2010) claim to empower women by problematizing internalized mainstream beauty norms and cultivating body acceptance and self-esteem. On *How to Look Good Naked*, experts deploy an ethic of care to emotionally bond with participants who believe they are unattractive and unshapely on the outside, and present suggestions,

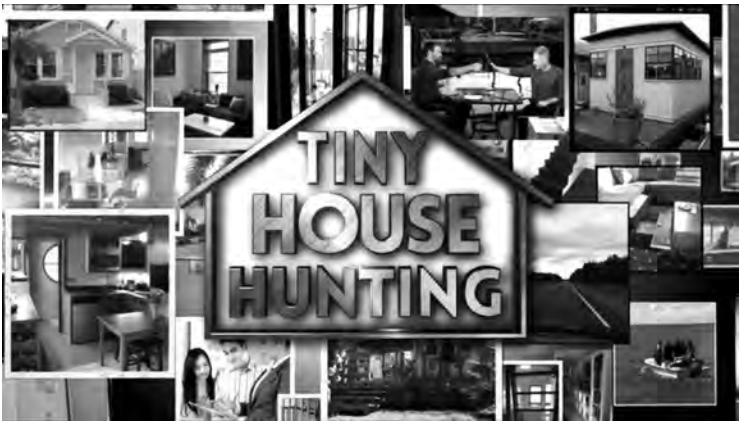


*Figure 2.2* *Tiny House Hunters* is one of a number of shows that bring the tiny house movement to lifestyle television.

techniques and challenges to encourage the women to re-evaluate their perceptions and improve their ethical relationship with their inner selves. The tone is earnest and sincere, and while the path to self-esteem involves learning to dress and accessorize one's body type (paving the way for "plus-sized" product placements), the message that anyone can be beautiful and attractive if they feel good about themselves does provide an alternative to the narrow beauty ideals and fat shaming perpetuated by many makeovers. But the suggestion that women can overcome feelings of unworthiness and social marginalization, and achieve their goals (romance, careers) in life with a boost of self-esteem, is a dubious one. *How to Look Good Naked* and similar "make under" programs are complicated interventions that challenge some gender ideologies, but minimize their societal causes and pitch self-work not social change as the solution.

MTV's *Girl Code* (2010– ) combines an ethic of care with humor and irreverence. In what is promoted as a hilarious, over-the-top "how-to manual" for young womanhood, a diverse range of female comics, actresses and athletes offer "rules girls can use for any and every situation" in areas of everyday life ranging from dating and sex to shopping and exercising. These guides to femininity speak from a variety of personal experiences and address the TV viewer as a friend. The ethics and "rules"

governing female behavior are not imposed by authorities or experts but are assumed to emerge from a community of women looking out for one another. "There's a sisterhood that women share, and its tenet is simple: We're in this together! Surviving the wonders and woes of the female sex demands that its members abide by the 'code' because, you know, starting a catfight on the dance floor or cutting a bathroom line is not cool," explains the *Girl Code* website. While *Girl Code* can certainly be charged with stereotyping women's love of shopping and investment in heterosexual romance, it does present self-making as a transparent and collective process. The female mentors reflect, in unusually frank (and sometimes contradictory) ways, on topics (including hook-up sex, female orgasm and vaginal health) that are usually considered too taboo for television. By trading experts for ordinary women who speak from personal experience, the show references women's subjugated knowledges, or knowledges that have been "disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naïve knowledges, located low on the hierarchy, below the required level of cognition or scientificity" (Foucault 1980, 82). *Girl Code* does not impose a moral framework on women, much as it encourages TV viewers to learn from women who share intimate reflections about their experiences of sexuality, food, the female body, friendship and everyday life, and circulate suggestions for living based on these histories. In this sense, the program comes closer than self-improvement-oriented lifestyle and reality shows to cultivating the new "aesthetics of existence" implied by Foucault (Gauntlett 2008, 142).

*RuPaul's Drag Race* (2009– ) links the aesthetics of existence to a questioning of gender and sexual norms, and puts fashion and style to alternative uses. In this competition, participants compete to be crowned "America's next drag superstar" as determined by a panel of judges, a quest that involves performing across gender lines. As Joshua Gamson points out, *Drag Race*, like drag culture in general, consistently critiques and complicates the fixity of gender and sexuality. As men are transformed into women, the performative basis of femininity and masculinity is revealed and accentuated, and gender and sexuality identities become more fluid. Host RuPaul, a celebrity drag performer and former model, mentors the contestants, offering advice on the stylization and performance of gender via an ethic of care. Her aim is

to help the participants, the drag community and TV viewers overcome the "adversity of gender norms and stigma" through his mantra of Charisma, Uniqueness, Nerve and Talent (Gamson 2014, 242). RuPaul is an intimate expert of subjectivity, who understands the reflexive project of the self as a means to expose and subvert the artificiality of norms. *Drag Race* and spinoffs such as *RuPaul's Drag Race Untucked* (2010– ) encourage an inclusive approach to self-fashioning that allows for a diversity of ethics and promotes collective social change. More than other lifestyle experts, RuPaul also celebrates the pleasure of self-making and re-making. As she states in *Workin' It: RuPaul's Guide to Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Style*, a book billed as a "navigation system through the bumpy road of life," style is a "celebratory celebration of your life force. You must approach it with a sense of joie de vivre. Open yourself to the possibilities!" (2010, xiv).

Recently, a handful of reality programs revolving around the lives of transgender people have provided a cultural platform to explore ethical questions and approaches to self-making rarely featured in mainstream media (*I Am Cait*, 2015– ; *I Am Jazz*, 2015– ). In her much-promoted show, newly transgender Caitlyn Jenner of the Kardashian family explores with the help of her famous stepdaughters how to fashion a female self, how to be and act as a woman, and how to live a beautiful life. The program features recurring scenes in which members of the transgender community share their stories, and activists discuss collective self-making ethics and struggles over resources and rights for transgender people. In a number of episodes, Jenner's new friend, national Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) co-chair and Barnard College English professor, Jenny Boylan, also a transgender woman, calls her to task for perpetuating gender essentialism and heterosexual norms by expressing a desire for men to treat her as a "normal" woman. Boylan operates as a caring mentor, encouraging Jenner to challenge the definition of normal, and redefine femininity and sexuality in her own terms. She also reminds Jenner that she's part of a community of "sisterhood." While steeped in melodramatic conventions geared to ratings and doubling as a promotion for the Kardashian and Jenner brands, *I Am Cait* nonetheless presents a rare space to negotiate new ethical formations and techniques of self-fashioning with the larger transgender community.

## ENTERPRISING SELVES

Lifestyle and reality television circulate multiple aesthetic strategies, forms of expertise and ethical frameworks for fashioning identities and lifestyles. Since the late 1990s, the self as project has increasingly intersected with a self-enterprising logic. This logic is connected to a growing tendency to extend the values of the marketplace into domains that were not previously considered economic, like selfhood and personal relationships. As many critics have argued, societal trends of deregulation, privatization, public-sector downsizing and welfare reform have been accompanied by a shift in the way individuals are encouraged to make themselves into subjects. In neoliberal societies, the marketplace has become the dominant grid for much social life, including self-making and everyday living (Read 2009). Increasingly, we are all called upon to operate as *entrepreneurs of the self* (Rose 1996; Foucault 2010), who embrace values like competition and personal branding, invest in our "human capital" and maximize our quotidian choices to our own strategic advantage. Nikolas Rose argues that enterprising logic draws from and exploits processes of individuation and the care of the self for dispersed political agendas. As we will see in later chapters, self-enterprising subjects are integral to forms of governing at a distance that enlist citizens as the managers of their health, prosperity, security and futures (Rose 1992, 1996).

The logic of enterprise operates across a range of lifestyle and reality programs that apply market concepts (cost–benefit ratios, audits, strategic outcomes, branding) to matters of style, domesticity, relationships, the family and personal life. Life coaches—a new type of expert that originated in the corporate sector—have become more prevalent on these shows; their entrepreneurial, results-oriented strategies for self-transformation circulate in tandem with other modes of guiding individuals. The mantra of *tough love* deployed on many reality programs fuses an ethic of care to the mantra of self-enterprise, and stitches intimate expertise to authoritarian and humiliating strategies rationalized in the name of prompting people to help themselves. One of the most enduring reality formats is the life intervention, in which tough love experts observe, diagnose and transform human subjects while the camera rolls. Since the late 1990s, interventions have proliferated across daytime and primetime, broadcast and cable channels, taking real people as

the raw material for addressing a proliferating range of perceived problems, from unemployment and criminality to obesity and divorce. Assisting failing or "at risk" individuals to overcome their situations and improve their relationship with themselves frequently hinges on adopting an enterprising ethic, as exemplified by *Dr. Phil* (2002– ). Hosted by Philip McGraw, Ph.D., a psychologist turned entrepreneur who also has a bestselling line of self-help books and workbooks, *Dr. Phil* claims to help mainly lower-income women "maximize themselves" and achieve the "results they want" in an increasingly competitive world through personal audits, cost/ratio analyses of behavior, and other technologies of the self adapted from the marketplace (Ouellette and Wilson 2011). "As your life manager," it is your job to "keep you safe and secure from foolish risks, create opportunities for you to get what you really want in this life, take care of your health and well being," McGraw tells his customers. It is up to you to "require more of yourself in your grooming, self-control, emotional management, interaction with others . . . and in every other category you can think of" (McGraw 1999, 169–170).

Dating shows also apply an economic grid to social experience and personal life. In *Tough Love* (2009–2013), a commercial matchmaker coaches women who have "failed" to find the romantic partners of their dreams. Through weekly lectures, tests, lessons and experiments, the women are taught to evaluate themselves through the eyes of potential male partners conceived as shoppers. As they detach from themselves, they are taught to conceive of themselves as commodities that must be successfully packaged and sold in a competitive dating milieu. At the same time, the participants of the dating boot camp are taught to become managers of themselves who, after coaching from the matchmaker, will make strategic decisions about their makeup, hairstyle, wardrobe, body language, voice, mannerisms and personality geared to maximizing desired outcomes. The neoliberal idea of the self as a repository of human capital, in which individuals must invest to receive returns, takes an explicitly feminized form in *Tough Love* as the perpetual management of the self intersects with gendered assumptions about the body, beauty, sexuality and social power. While heterosexuality and marriage are enforced as norms, the "problem" addressed by the life intervention (being unmarried) is presented as a failure of feminine self-enterprise, and solved accordingly.

An ethic of self-enterprise also underscores a growing number of makeover and style programs. The conception of the self as never-ending reflexive project is compatible with a market-oriented approach to everyday life, as exemplified by *Real Housewives* cast member and lifestyle entrepreneur Bethany Frankel's mantra for losing weight and staying slim: "It's all about checks and balances. Your diet is a bank account." Across lifestyle brands like the Food Network and HGTV, cooking and home programming has been infused with market sensibilities and the demonstration of self-enterprise. How-to cooking shows are overshadowed by high-stakes competitions like *MasterChef* (2010– ), *Top Chef* (2006– ), *Hell's Kitchen* (2005– ), *Iron Chef America* (2005– ) and *Cupcake Wars* (2009–2013). Home improvement programs increasingly approach home ownership as a moneymaking enterprise as much as (or more than) a consumer choice. Programs like *Curb Appeal* (1999–2011) and *Property Brothers* (2011– ) apply an economic lens to the family home, and encourage and facilitate "quotidian" forms of financialization through domestic real estate (Allon 2010; Hay 2010). Programs about flipping houses for profit—often after the former owners have been forcibly evicted due to financial hardships—have become nearly as pervasive as decorating, fixer-upper and real estate shows in recent years. *Flip this House* (2005–2009), *Flip It to Win It* (2013– ), *Flip or Flop* (2013– ) and similar shows construct the foreclosed home as a business opportunity to be seized by enterprising individuals. The housing crisis triggered by the financial crisis and the recession that followed, and the trauma of dispossession engendered by soaring home foreclosure rates, are glossed over as other people's problems. An ethic of bare enterprise underscores the frenzy of financial speculation, risk assessments and fierce competition that unfolds as self-interested entrepreneurs scramble to bid on foreclosed properties they are not allowed to inspect in advance, and carry out quick and cheap renovations in the hopes of maximizing the return on their investment.

Reality programs revolving around pawn shops, auto repossession agencies and storage locker auctions take the logic of self-enterprise to its final conclusion. In these shows, which proliferated in the wake of the recession, the chronic poverty and misfortune of the lower classes is narrated as an entrepreneurial goldmine. Week after week, this strand of programming enacts an everyday version of the global process that David

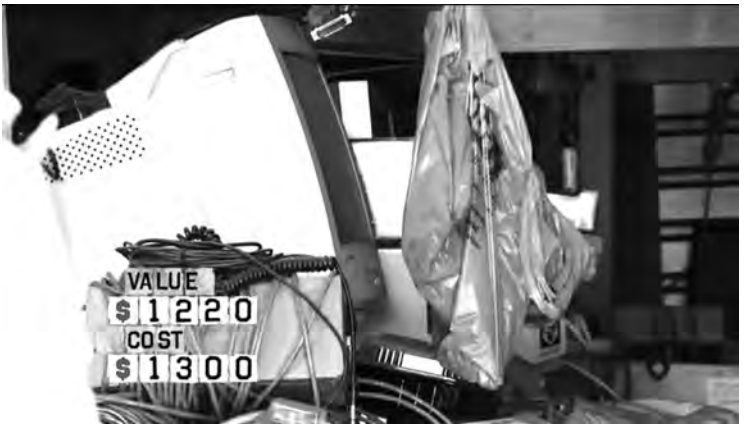


*Figure* 2.3 The contents of storage lockers up for auction on *Storage Wars* are reduced to dollar amounts.

Harvey calls "accumulation by dispossession" (2004), as small business owners and entrepreneurs capitalize on the seizure of personal property (furnishings, automobiles, electronics, heirlooms) in the course of everyday economic practices. Hyper-competitive, calculating and willing to rationalize the hardship of others in brazenly self-interested terms, the mostly male characters perform an extreme version of *homo economicus*, the self-enterprising subjectivity traced by Michel Foucault in his genealogy of neoliberalism in the West (2010). Ruthlessly, they reduce seized consumer goods, and other investments in individuation, identity and the "good life," to dollar amounts and profit ratios. Those who lack or lose property are stripped of individualism altogether, registering only anonymous and disposable populations, integral to the business of recessionary profiteering, but relegated to the periphery of a society imagined in free market terms. While this hardcore enactment of self-enterprise is especially shocking and cruel, it arguably only magnifies elements of a self-interested market sensibility operating across a growing spectrum of lifestyle and reality television.