The Maximum Appeal of

MARIE KONDO'S SELF-HELP BOOK ARRIVED here last fall with little hype and no outsize promises splashed across its cover, just a vaguely soothing watercolor of the sky and an all-lowercase title: *the life-changing magic of tidying up*. Kondo, a Japanese home-organizing guru, promotes a program of radical stuff reduction, sharing anecdotes about clients whose adventures in housecleaning led to stronger marriages, professional satisfaction, and weight loss. In short, her message is: Edit your belongings, experience nirvana—which is why the title was soon ubiquitous at third-wave coffee shops and other precincts of the privileged and anxious.

In a country where the average household contains 300,000 objects, many Americans need someone to tell them how to tidy. Clearly: Kondo has sold 2 million copies with commonsense suggestions about throwing away gifts kept out of guilt. And in the months since its release, the best seller has inspired a robust discussion about our stuff, becoming the Ur-text for a movement that's flipping an American ideal on its head.

In the United States, consumption has always been the hallmark of success. About 30 years ago, the comedian George Carlin riffed: "The whole meaning of life is trying to find a place for your stuff. . . . Your house is a pile of stuff with a cover on it. . . . Your house is a place to keep your stuff while you go out and get more stuff." Later, on shows like MTV's *Cribs*, celebrities fought an arms race to accumulate the biggest piles of stuff with the blingiest covers (shows like *Hoarders* depicted what happened when your piles got too big). Even our previous president, George W. Bush, exhorted Americans to show their patriotism by going shopping.

That was then. The financial crisis, as well as more awareness about where our stuff comes from and the likelihood of its winding up in a Dumpster, has made us more conscientious consumers. Thanks to social media, we're all more curatorially minded, too, thinking constantly about the image we're projecting. Being less conspicuous with our consumption is the new national religion; instead of celebrating Lil Wayne's whips, we mock the Rich Kids of Instagram. Now the competition is in promoting the most pared-down lifestyle. "It's a huge change," says Yves Béhar, the founder of the San Francisco–and–New York–based design firm Fuseproject, which gave us the Jawbone fitness tracker and the Jambox speaker. "People are interested in quality, no matter the price point. There's less tolerance for the cheaply made."

And sometimes, it feels like there's no toler-

BY **JESSE ASHLOCK**

Minimalism

The urge to cull, curate, and cut out completely is having a big moment, but when we start talking about hurting our socks' feelings, have things gone too far?

ating *anything*. Too often today, minimalism is confused with asceticism: Possessions are evil, it seems, and they need to be exorcised. Some of what fills Kondo's 224 pages has a cultishness to it. The decluttering strategy centers on "Konverts" holding an object at a time in their hands and asking if it sparks joy. It's peppered with animistic statements like "Your things . . . will feel clear and refreshed when you are done tidying." Never ball your socks, she insists, because that stresses them, and they don't deserve that after working so hard for you on your feet.

This mentality sucks all the status out of simplicity. Editing down what you own isn't about achieving austerity, it's not a purification ritual, and it's not about being dogmatic in your decision-making. (The site The Toast, in a satirical post earlier this year titled "How to Get Rid of Clutter and Live Abundantly," suggested that "things like 'having chairs' [are] preventing you from living your best life, and also you should throw away any item of clothing you're not currently wearing. If it's not on your skin, you don't really love it, do you?") It's about developing good taste—wearing the understated vintage watch, not the one with a face the size of a coaster; eating at the farm-to-table restaurant, not shoving your face with a foie-gras-stuffed doughnut—and being open to the ebb and flow of ideas and experiences that inform that worldview. "I have a fondness for things that challenge me rather than just give me the warm fuzzies," says Marc Kushner, a partner at the architecture firm HWKN and the author of the new book *The Future of Architecture in 100 Buildings*.

Feeling warm fuzzies is nice, of course. And if having your residence look like it came out of the pages of a Japanese shelter mag makes you happy, go buy one for inspiration. But what are the odds that it's not going to lead you to covet something? What practitioners of modern minimalism miss is that they're preaching a philosophy that revolves around endlessly pondering what you own, discarding, buying more, then purging again—a cycle that seems to inspire less calm than chaos. It also invites adherents to judge those who choose to live differently: Like being overweight, maximalism suggests a lack of self-discipline. But even people who spend their days thinking about how to design the things that Konverts put in the "keep" pile don't subscribe to theories of deprivation. Béhar says he strives to be a disciplined shopper. "The only place where I haven't been able to rein in my consumption is the amount of surfboards I buy," he says. "That's one impulse purchase I can't avoid." ■