This past summer I followed my travel instincts to Sweden chasing a desire to imbed myself in a culture that has a different relationship to objects than we have in America. My research interest for some time now has been generally focused around how and why people attribute value to material objects in their lives. Quality of life in Sweden continues to be ranked among the best in the world. Aside from having a world-renowned design culture and accessible government art funding, a quick search on the “Official Site of Sweden” will also tell you that 99 percent of all household waste is recycled in one way or another. It will also tell you that Swedish parents may take up to 480 days of paid parental leave, 60 of those days being reserved for fathers. If that is not reason enough to focus attention on Sweden, recently the country also approved the switch to a six-hour workday. Clearly there is attention paid to the value of living a good, efficient and stress-free life in Sweden. All of these credentials are rather conducive to the lifestyle of the artist and suggest attention and respect to material culture. I went to Sweden to see firsthand what that relationship to objects was like both historically and in contemporary life.

The day before boarding my flight I picked up a book that ended up greatly influencing my research and work while abroad. The book was called Stuff: Compulsive Hoarding and the Meaning of Things by Randy Frost. It got me thinking about what it is that attracts someone with hoarding disorder to the everyday detritus that most of us ignore and discard. While the reasons for hoarding differ from case to case, Frost discusses his theory that people with hoarding disorder may actually have an extraordinary ability. In an email exchange I had with Frost he said, “I think there is a kind of aesthetic
sensitivity regarding the physical world that is part of hoarding disorder.” I imagine that this is similar to the aesthetic sensitivity that many artists claim to have, especially in seeing the creative potential in objects and materials.

In the spirit of the hoarder I decided that over the course of my trip I would save all the material that passed through my hands on the way to the trash. These items were food wrappers, plastic bags, bottles and packaging. I had brought no art materials with me so this process allowed me to accumulate material to work with. I made it my task to consider every material item that came into my life of equal value and worth hanging onto even with the limited space available in my suitcase. I started to think of them each as souvenirs that marked specific moments of my trip.

I started my trip with a week in Stockholm in order to get a feel for the capital city of Sweden. While in Stockholm I had access to dozens of museums to explore a range of historical to contemporary Swedish objects. I documented and compared how objects were displayed in shops, boutiques, grocery stores, thrift stores, apartments, restaurants and museums exhibitions, all the while attempting to ascertain a Swedish sensibility for the treatment of objects. If I were to make any generalization about a Swedish relationship to objects, it would be that efficiency, affordability and accessibility for all people is a most sincere concern. When Americans think about Swedish objects the first thing that comes to mind is IKEA. I was surprised at the amount of Ikea objects I came across in my daily life and interactions with people in Sweden. Also surprising was how positive the outlook seemed to be towards the company and things they produce.
As it turns out, IKEA boldly states its mission as... "Our vision is to create a better everyday life for the many people." followed by the business plan of "Offering a wide range of well-designed, functional home furnishing products at prices so low that as many people as possible will be able to afford them." I found that most Swedes I talked to shared similar core values.

After absorbing a sense of Swedish city life, I left Stockholm to participate in the artist residency, Tomma Rum. Tomma Rum is Swedish for "Empty Rooms". The program, started in 2003, forms partnerships with municipalities to put to use empty or under-used buildings that are available during the summer months. Each summer a new partnership is formed and up to 15 artists at a time rotate through the program for the duration of the summer. They take up residence in the chosen community and utilize these “empty rooms” as a workspace and platform for cultural and artistic exchange.

Tomma Rum 2015 took place about two hours north of Stockholm in Ljusne, a former industrial town on the east coast by the Baltic Sea. Nestled in historical iron country, Ljusne once had a rich industrial culture. As industry declined over the years, so did the population. Today the town has a population of about 2000 people. Tomma Rum formed a partnership with the Söderhamn municipality who arranged the opportunity for us to use an empty power station by the Ljusnan river. The space used to be a chain factory
that made giant iron chains for ships. Now the building is used as an artist space called Konstkraft, run by local artist and organizer Ann-Caroling Breig. The municipality also put us up in some surprisingly decent apartments that happened to be destined for demolition later that year. Upon arriving in Ljusne, I was presented with unexpected diversity and energy. As it turned out, there is a large population of asylum seekers living in Ljusne, many quartered in the same apartment building as us. I met many individuals and families that had fled from Syria, the Ukraine and North Africa. This population became our most steady visitors to the power station.

At Tomma Rum there was an ever-changing flow of Swedish and international artists in residence, musicians, filmmakers, writers and social practitioners each working in the same space but participating in their own daily practices. Given the quick turnover rate of participants, the work in the space was constantly changing. I was there for four weeks so was able to settle into a more durational project. The power station was open to the public everyday. It was both a challenge and gift to have visitors wandering through your workspace each day bearing witness to your most vulnerable moments of experimentation and play when embarking on a new project. Every Saturday, we halted our progress and cleaned up the space in order to hold a more official gallery opening, showing work in whatever state of completion it happened to exist at the time.
Being in Sweden in the summer meant endless hours of sunlight. As I grew accustomed to light at all hours of the day, it was no longer important to pay attention to time. I felt that I had endless hours to be productive. I stopped looking at clocks or my phone and found other ways to measure time, mostly through my work.

In addition to saving my trash items, I started a daily practice of going out into the fields and along the sides of roads to pick lupines. The entire landscape was littered with vibrant purple and pink lupines and it just so happened that their blooming cycle lined up perfectly with my four weeks in residence. When I arrived they had just started to open their blossoms and by the time I was leaving they had started to wilt away. Each day I would go out with two giant IKEA paper bags and a pair of scissors in order to fill one bag with purple and the other with pink lupines. The pink ones were more rare and
by the end of my stay harder to find. I would bring them back to the power station and stack them by color inside one of the old turbines in our space.

My initial concerns about what the locals would think of me cutting so many flowers from their landscape turned out to be unfounded. I soon learned that Lupines were considered an invasive species in Sweden. While I don’t know how much truth there is to this, one person told me that falling asleep in a field of Lupines could lead to death by an over-abundance of poisonous pollen. It was somewhat ironic that I was likely the only American in the whole town, an invasive species of my own sort, reveling in the beauty of these weeds. With this knowledge, the daily practice started to take on a new meditative quality. There I was, the only American in this strange small town in Sweden, new to Ljusne by choice, very unlike the steadily growing influx of asylum-seeking immigrants. I considered my position as part of a group of city dwelling artists interjecting themselves temporarily in an unfamiliar small town community. Everyday the pile in the turbine would swell with the addition of new lupines and shrink under the weight of new flowers and the wilting of time.

While lupines piled up in the turbine, a steadily growing collection of trash from my daily life was also building up in the power station. In order to pull together these processes into one cohesive installation, I decided to open a workshop and store called Souvenir Swap that would give me the flexibility to work with my trash items in a way that would be a daily performance for viewers to witness. I built a worktable and set it up in front of the Lupine Turbine. I assembled some wooden store displays and fabricated a tall shelving unit above the turbine that was only accessible by ladder. I laid out my growing
accumulation of trash items within the workspace so I could look at the variety of materials, colors and textures all at once. I decided that I would make small sculptural souvenir objects from the material. As I tinkered I found that the abundance of packaging materials in my collection lent themselves well to sails. I settled on the form of sailboats for the souvenirs, made more appropriate by our proximity to the ocean.

The remainder of my residency was spent sitting at my workbench each day making small boats and interacting with visitors while attempting to fill the expanse of shelving displays. I officially opened up shop during my last week under the premise that locals could trade one of their own possessions for a souvenir boat. No money was exchanged at *Souvenir Swap*. Visitors could participate by taking home a 5” x 5” Tupperware container that I supplied and placing an object of their choosing inside. A
filled container could then be taken back to the space and exchanged for a souvenir boat. The traded objects stayed concealed in their boxes until the completion of the project. After making 22 trades, I packaged up the containers without opening them and shipped them to Michigan, to be opened upon my arrival back in the states. The objects that were traded would become for me a collection of souvenirs from my time in Ljusne. Participants took home boats as souvenirs of their visit to the power station, each one made up of small mementos of my time in Sweden.

When I finally opened the *Souvenir Swap* containers back in the states I was met with the most genuine and thoughtful assortment of things. They so clearly illustrate our reliance on material objects to function as tokens or mementos of being in the world at a certain time and place. This project allowed me to survey an unexpectedly diverse
collection of people around how they assign value to material items in their lives in relation to their sense of home. This directly relates to my thesis project at Stamps where I will be exploring the invisible traces that people leave on objects.

selection of participants with boats
top center: Ann Caroline Breig with boat
SOURCES


"The Official Site of Sweden | Sweden.se." Web.