

Conceptual fatigue has arrived. Practitioners who do not comfortably align themselves with craft as a discipline, or sit more comfortably between material disciplines, are questioning what was lost in the conceptual gold rush of recent decades. Taken in moderation this momentum towards the conceptual was arguably long overdue. Materials do carry meaning that goes beyond an appreciation of skilled production. The everyday role of textiles in particular infuse them with a wealth of stories – from mundane to extraordinary – many of which benefit from being conveyed by means other than written or spoken language. But along the way consideration of materials came to be seen as gauche. Conceptual craft became the only sanctioned version of contemporary craft – everything else woefully behind the times. But as Swedish artist Petter Hellsing recently observed, “I am tired of going to exhibitions that are better when read about.”

Hellsing’s past work embraced the potential of storytelling.<sup>1</sup> *A Little Cabin in the Woods* (2002-2004), for example, drew together the artist’s embroidered responses to his home in Flemingsberg, a suburb of Stockholm, alongside contributions from the local community. Stories of immigration and Sweden’s emerging multicultural identity were central to the project, which grew from Hellsing’s stitches into his facilitation of broad community engagement. More recent work has taken a distinctly different approach. While stories remain a motivating element, abstraction has begun to gain a far more prominent place. Reflecting on the Saxophone he played as a young man, Hellsing revised his thinking that improvisation belongs to music alone and has brought the strategy into his artistic practice. For someone quick to admit that he relishes the detail of small stitches, he now creates situations that force a loss of control.

More recent work has grown to combine textiles with materials such as wood sourced during the installation stage of an exhibition. Rather than arriving with finished artwork under his arm, Hellsing demands of himself a relationship with the local context and community to complete the installation. This new strategy pushes his work towards the collective<sup>2</sup> rather than the individual. Inspired by the anarchic character of the textile found in temporary housing or market places, he builds on site – negotiating local realities to solve the practical material challenges at hand. The final work is less concerned with proving the stories behind the construction, instead trusting the rhythms and contrasts of a less literal, more abstract communication with the local audience.

“Is it possible to use the abstract to discuss the political?” Hellsing muses. The question is on-going, tempered now by a different relationship with time that informs his latest work. “If I don’t finish it, someone else will,” he reflects on a new found acceptance that his artistic production contributes to a much larger continuum. Desire to work with local materials and reflect on the patterns and structures that surround us bring the readymade, randomness and material reuse to the centre of this work. “I’m not making – I’m combining to make new,” he explains of this purposeful scavenging.<sup>3</sup>

Professor Jessica Hemmings

June 2016

<sup>1</sup> **story** 'sto:ri/ noun plural noun: **stories** 1. an account of imaginary or real people and events told for entertainment. “an adventure story” synonyms: tale, narrative, account, recital, a plot of storyline. “the novel has a good story” synonyms: plot, storyline, scenario, chain of events; technical diegesis 2. a piece of gossip; a rumour. “there have been lots of stories going around, as you can imagine” synonyms: rumour, piece of gossip, piece of hearsay, whisper; more informal a false statement; a lie “Ellie never **told stories** – she had always believed in the truth” synonyms: lie, fib, falsehood, untruth, fabrication, fiction, piece of fiction.

<sup>2</sup> **collective** kə'lektiv/ adjective 1. done by people acting as a group. “a collective protest” noun 1. a cooperative enterprise “the anarchist collective and bookshop”

<sup>3</sup> **scavenge** 'skavɪn(d)z/ verb gerund or present participle: **scavenging** 1. Search for and collect (anything usable) from discarded waste. “people sell junk **scavenged from** the garbage” synonyms: rummage, search, hunt, look, forage, root about/around, scratch about/around, grub about/around.