MINIFIGURATIVE POLITICS

LEGOING THE 2018 PENSION STRIKE

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This is the text that Ian Cook et al spoke from at his, our, their Inaugural lecture at the University of Exeter on Friday 8th June 2018.

Parts of this make not make sense, and you kind of had to be there!

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If you have any questions relating to this lecture, please email Ian at i.j.cook@exeter.ac.uk or tweet him @iancooketa

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No identification with actual persons (living or deceased), places, buildings, and products is intended or should be inferred.

Except where academic freedom applies.

No person or entity associated with this lecture received payment or anything of value, or entered into any agreement, in connection with the depiction of mobile phone, shackle, clothing or tobacco products.

No animals were harmed in the making of this LEGO.

[adapted from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/All_persons_fictitious_disclaimer]
Welcome, thanks (especially to Henry Buller for the introduction, and Henry & Isabel Castle for behind the scenes work).

Everything has gone well so far, it’s up to me not to mess it up.

‘Minifigurative politics’ is this lecture’s title. That’s prefigurative politics + minifigures.

That’s imagining and putting into practice the kinds of worlds you want to live in. Using LEGO minifigures.

My name is Ian Cook, but whenever I write anything on my own, I use this nom-de-plume Ian Cook et al.

Ian Cook and others.

Always others.

Because none of us works alone.

There’s no such thing as an individual.

Having a nom-de-plume is great.

To be a professor you have to use all kinds of hyperbole to say how exceptional and world-leading your research is, your teaching is, you are.

It’s embarrassing.

So I let Ian Cook et al do all of that.

Ian Cook et al is a hybrid character I have been working on - or with - for almost 20 years now.

Ian Cook et al: look at this **absolute unit**, this professor.

ASIDE: if you notice me using the language of a 15 year old girl, I am. My daughter Edie has taught me so much.

You are sitting in my, his, their - better - our inaugural lecture.

Right now.
BEHAVIOUR POLICY
EATING + DRINKING IN CLASS
PLAYING WITH LEGO
GURGLING
HECKLING
USING UR PHONE TO TWEET

@iancookeetal @exetergeography
PREVIEW:
TOYS ‘R’ US
This bit is like the trailer reel.

A brief insight into work that's a bit like the work I'll be talking about today.

To give you a flavour of what's to come...

It's just a one example...

You may know it...
Russia

Toys cannot hold protest because they are not citizens of Russia, officials rule

Siberian authorities ban protest by 100 Kinder Surprise toys, 100 Lego people, 20 model soldiers, 15 soft toys and 10 toy cars

△ The toy protest in Barnaul, Russia, last month. Photograph: Sergey Teplyakov/Vkontakte
In the early 2010s, reports emerged of a new wave of political demonstrations in Russia to which people bought witty placards and drew upon absurd humour.

One such protest in the Siberian City of Barnaul took place in 2012.

It involved dozens of dolls, teddy bears, LEGO minifigures, South Park figurines, etc. holding placards criticising disputed parliamentary elections.

The toy protest took place after authorities repeatedly refused to allow a demonstration by actual people.

But they seemed to find the toy protest just as infuriating, and tried to silence that too.

When a petition to hold another, much larger toy protest was submitted, they said NO.

A spokesman explained “Toys, especially imported toys, are not only not citizens of Russia but they are not even people.”

He continued, “It is possible that people who have applied are inspired by their toys ... and consider them their friends, but the law unfortunately has a different point of view. Neither toys nor, for example, flags, plates or domestic appliances can take part in a meeting”.

This is a remarkable example of toy-based cultural activism...

It’s the kind of thing I’ll talk about later...
BREAKING
ICE
Writing an inaugural is a strange business, there’s an unusual crowd.

Colleagues and friends from Geography, here and elsewhere. Thanks for coming.

Colleagues and friends made in equality and diversity initiatives, commodity art and fashion activism. Thanks for coming.

Students who take what you know and do and create amazing, unexpected things with it. Thanks for coming.

People who have helped you through long and difficult periods of steroid infused illness. Thanks for coming.

Friends you made this year because you were on strike together, fighting for your pensions and a lot more besides. Thanks for coming.

Plus, friends from school and people you are related to, have had children with, and are those children.

I wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for you all. Thanks for coming…

INAUGURAL ADVICE:

Don’t talk about your family or you’ll cry.
Don’t do it.

But you have to make some introductions.

This is a rare occasion where past, present, work, life and family mix.

Where to start?
Here are a couple of studio photos of me and my brothers - Chris and Andy - and our mum and dad, taken around 1975.

We grew up in our mum and dad’s plumbing and heating business 16 miles away in a village called Shaldon (on the Teign Estuary).

We are what ‘professional’ people in the village call ‘Trade’.

We lived in a house called Glaron because it had been built by a couple called Gladys and Ron.

A card-computer operator called Mavis used my bedroom as her office, normally after I’d woken up.

My Dad future-proofed our house by installing pipework and electrics in the roof to ready it for every likely development in renewable energy.

The future he hadn’t anticipated was that my brother Andy would move in and rip it all out.

My Dad’s favourite memory from school is arriving at technical college, opening a door, and finding a room full of lathes.

I was the first person in my family to go to university and I am the only person in my family who has ever become a Professor or - much more surprisingly - been interested in Geography.

They joke that this isn’t actually my job, that I must be doing something else.

Working in a bakery.

Maybe.

Putting the jam in doughnuts.

That was my first ever job.

It’s amazing how much you can pump in before they burst.
We're here to help your business save money.

We're electrical contractors, commercial gas engineers and energy efficiency specialists, based in South Devon.

We offer a vast range of commercial plumbing and heating services, including electrical testing, and supply and installation of commercial solar panels.

We also provide M&E contractor and consultant services, working alongside architects to help create energy-efficient, money-saving heating systems.

Based in Newton Abbot, and we work with businesses, schools and commercial landlords throughout South Devon and the South West.

Highly-accredited and completely dependable, we have a strong list of high-profile case studies to our name.

Talk to us about how your business can become more energy efficient.

At Cooks we believe there’s no place like home. A warm, safe, energy-efficient home.

We’re a team of electricians, plumbers, Gas Safe engineers, solar panel installers, Green Deal assessors and providers, energy efficiency specialists... and more.

Based in Newton Abbot, we look after homes throughout South Devon, including Torquay and across Torbay.

We’re a well-known, local family-run company with over 40 years’ trusted experience, and we pride ourselves on our first-rate service.

As one of the most highly-accredited companies in the South West for the technologies we offer, we have a host of professional memberships and certification to our name.

Find out how we can make your home warm and energy efficient.
My Dad told once me he’d spent an evening on his laptop, looking at his lovely boys’ websites.

He was really happy.

This is Chris’.

He’s my big brother.

His company, Cooks Energy provides, among other things, ‘M&E services and consultancy, commercial energy systems and maintenance, and renewable energy installations for businesses.’
Private House

"Ease managed this challenging job from the drawing board to completion. Working closely with the architects, contractors and other specialist consultants they overcame the problems of difficult access, a sloping and rocky terrain and a demanding design to see the job through to a high standard finish. I recommend Ease as project managers without reservation."

Private Client, West Penwith, Cornwall

We are Ease

We are lucky enough to live in the South West and work with some great clients who give us interesting, challenging and enjoyable projects to work on. Driven to deliver the best experience we can for our clients we like to get involved really early in your scheme to help shape the design, cost and buildability. You will see we do lots of hospitality, leisure and residential work, but we also are delighted to take on some more unusual projects too.

Have a look through the website to see what we've done, who we work for and why we have so many repeat clients...."
This is Andy’s.

He’s my little brother.

His company Ease is ‘Driven to deliver the best experience [it] can for [its] clients’ and ‘likes to get involved really early in your scheme to help shape [its] design, cost and buildability’.
Who makes the things that we buy?

Few of us know. They seem to be untouched by human hands. But news stories, documentary films and artworks showing the hidden ingredients in our coffee, t-shirts, phones and countless other commodities keep appearing. They often 'expose' unpleasant working conditions to encourage more 'ethical' consumer or corporate behaviour. followthethings.com is this work's 'online store'. Here you can find out who has followed what, why and how, the techniques they use to 'grab' you, the discussions they provoke, the difference they can make, and how to follow things yourself.
I’m the middle brother and this is my website: a spoof online store that researches the making, discussion and impacts of films, art work, journalism and other forms of cultural activism that try to encourage their audiences to care about the people who make the things they buy.

I have to say that Ian Cook et al has become the most brilliant, exceptional, world leading - yet modest - expert on cultural activism as a means to critique and challenge the exploitative and dangerous excesses in supply chains and commodity culture.

He - or is it we, or they? - is the world’s finest LEGO artist in this field.

More accurately, the only one.

It’s not the kind of academic work that relies entirely on logical, sensible, straightforward argumentation.

It’s often deliberately strange, playful and ambiguous to give people who see it something to think with, to make sense of for themselves.

So, don’t rely on me to tell you what’s what, 100%.

To give you the Tea.

What you make out of what I say and show is part of what I’m talking about.

You may think I’m saying things, but that could be your imagination.

SO, the ice is now broken.

If you need any energy-related work doing, at home or a work, please have a word with Chris.

If you have a building project that needs to come in on time and budget, please have a word with Andy.

After we’ve finished this lecture.

If you want to hear more about cultural activism - and in particular Minifigurative Politics - please stay where you are.
TOOLS
OF THE
TRADE
Why is a grown man, a professor at the University of Exeter, playing with toys?

Why is he making this the topic of his inaugural lecture?

Well, when my beloved life partner Lucy and I bought our first house in Birmingham, my Dad helped us to do some quite major home improvements.

But he was flabbergasted.

I didn’t have any tools.

How could I possibly do a job where I did nothing with my hands, made nothing with my hands.

Having a good set of tools is really important in my family.

My mum spent one year stealing lots of my dad’s tools, wrapping them up and giving them back to him as Christmas presents.

Each one was just what he wanted.

So I started getting spanners, molegrips, saws, screwdrivers, power tools, drill bits … every Christmas and Birthday.

But the question stuck with me.

What do you do with your hands?

When I got some internationalisation money from the university to set up the followthethings.com website with some awesome student interns, his dream came true… kind of…
A brick goes awry... It's safely retrieved and no-one was hurt #legoship
... I bought a LEGO container ship, and we made it WITH OUR HANDS, live tweeting our build, to absolutely no acclaim.

This ship, one LEGO fan had said in a YouTube review, was the kind that carried your LEGO to you.

We could do something interesting with that. I thought. To learn about the geographies of trade.

This ‘we’ in the summer of 2012 included Exeter graduate Jack Parkin, Brown University student Sabrina Skau - here - plus Exeter graduate Ellie Bird, Brown University student Diana Shifrana and Helsinki University Student Eeva Kemppainen.

We were an absolute unit.

When my daughter Ruby was little, we loved playing LEGO together.

We’d bought loads of minifigures and accessories in those £2.49 packs and....
...had build up quite a collection.

[which is being played with down here at the front of the lecture by people's children]
How about these lads returning that stolen crockery?

I need a face that’s quietly seething.

If we put a hat on this one to cover his ‘brows, it might work!

Is it OK to find this funny?

Inviting construction: Primark, Rana Plaza and Political LEGO

Ian Cook et al.
Back at our office on campus, after we’d finished making the LEGO ship, Ruby let me bring our home LEGO to the office for us to play with.

We did this for three weeks.

We knew about creative approaches to research and how important it was to have no idea what you are going to make next.

Just get the right people and materials together in the right kind of space and, given time, something will emerge from experimenting together.

You will know it when you make it.

And that’s what happened.

As soon as we started use this LEGO to re-create moments from the protests, films, art works, etc. we had researched for followthethings.com - we knew we were on to something.

We really enjoyed making them, in the sense that anyone could enjoy something that’s hilariously uncomfortable, powerful, awful (in a good way), tasteless, carefully shocking, dark and spooky.

Once finished, photographed, adjusted, photographed again - and so on - until they were just right, we posted them online - on twitter and flickr - and embedded them on their followthethings.com pages.

People seemed to enjoy these scenes much more that the website and its 100s of 1,000s of words of painstaking research.

We tagged and emailed the makers of the original films, etc. we had re-created showing them what we’d done.

One TV producer told us that he was ‘honoured’ to have his work LEGOed, and that it captured the emotions of his series perfectly.

Someone else blogged that: “Not only do these scenes produce openly assembled bespoke imagery, imagined encounters, and clever juxtapositions, they invite construction in a literal and figurative sense.”
We quickly knew we were on to something, although we didn’t fully understand what it was or why. That’s what we’ve been trying to work out since. And we think we might have. That’s what this talk is about.

A journal paper was published yesterday in the Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers.

By Ian Cook et al.

On Political LEGO.

That’s what this work is called.

Minifigurative Politics is part of it.

I want to show you some of this work.

How it evolved from single scenes to series of scenes that are like soap operas, telenovelas.

Super serious issues dramatised, made, captured, in LEGO and shared with the world.

You might be wondering…

How do they work?

What can they do?
MAKING SCENES
We made the earliest scenes to capture key moments in the real human dramas we researched for individual case study pages on the followthethings.com website.

I want to show you 3 examples.
“A young woman working in a factory in Shenzhen has become a global internet phenomenon after photos of her smiling on the production line were found on a new iPhone shipped to Britain.”
I’d researched what happened after a man in the UK had turned on his brand new iPhone in 2009 to find 5 photos already on it, the most iconic of which was of a young woman smiling and making peace signs at the camera.

He shared them on an Apple fan site.

Asked if other people had found them too.

Who was she?

Why were those photos on the phone?

Weren’t those Apple factories in China supposed to be miserable places to work?

Why does she look so happy?

Why were these photos taken?

Who took them?

Why were they left on the phone?

Were they some kind of advertising gimmick by the manufacturer?

Or an accident?

Would she get in trouble if they found out?

That’s what hundreds of people from all over the world were asking online as this so-called iPhone Girl became an internet phenomenon.

This image was my attempt to capture in LEGO the moment when that photograph was taken.

To locate that actual phone.

Held up, blurred, at the bottom right of the picture.

Taking the photo.

In the factory.

In quality control.
Phones having their cameras checked before they’re shipped.

Workers smiling because they’re having their photo taken.

They’re supposed to delete them, but these weren’t deleted.

An accidental, it seems, example of the ftt tactic of shop-dropping: leaving traces of human labour in or on commodities for others to find while shopping, to encourage thought about who makes our stuff.

I ask students to put the original photo on their phone’s home screens for a term, to see how they feel about this and what others ask about it.

I’ve had it on mine since 2012.
“Phone Story, uses a series of minigames with voice-over narration to shed light on the human cost and high environmental impact of Smartphone development. In one minigame [...] the voice-over explains the suicides at electronics manufacturers in China, and the facile solution of “prevention nets” - while the player must catch tumbling workers using a stretched trampoline”
Eeva had researched the making, discussion and impacts of a multi-level smartphone game called Phone Story.

It’s a game in which you earn points by ensuring that all of the labour that goes into making and recycling a smartphone takes place.

On the factory level, where consumer demand had to be met no matter the hours worked and human consequences of that, you had to move stretcher bearers from side to side to catch the hideously stressed assembly workers trying to jump to their deaths from the roof of the factory.

Each level’s was based on NGO and newspaper reports, all very alarming and tastelessly portrayed in the game.

But this was an attempt to show people the human and environmental costs of their smartphone use, in a way that’s all the more powerful because you play it as a game on your smartphone.

People described it as very ‘meta’.

Phone Story was approved for sale in Apple’s App Store, but shot to fame only after it was removed from sale, censored, unavailable.

Which meant more people heard about it, wanted to know about it, wanted to play this banned game.

What did Apple want to hide? Their attempt to squash this cheesy, tasteless, amateurish, informed critique of their own company only fanned the flames of that critique.

But you could still get it in the Android store.
“Moazzam Begg recalls the memory of looking down at his shackles in Guantanamo and realizing they were inscribed with ‘Made In England.’ The shackles turned out to be manufactured only three miles from his childhood home at a factory run by the Hiatt & Company.”
Our third example was made by Sabrina.

She was researching protests in Birmingham to shut a factory which made shackles used to restrain inmates in Guantanamo Bay.

The story of the protest began when British inmate Moazzem Begg told his lawyer about the moment when he looked down at the shackles around his wrists and ankles and noticed that they, like him, were ‘Made in Birmingham’.

ASIDE: For us, by the way, he and his fellow inmates were ‘consumers’ of this commodity.

What were we learning?

If you’re re-creating something in LEGO, it’s impossible to get a likeness.

The bricks, accessories and minifigures don’t allow that. It’s taboo in the Adult Fans of LEGO - or AFOL - community to get your paintbrush out to make even the most minor changes.

In the iPhone Girl image, you can’t make peace signs with minifigure hands.

It’s really hard to reproduce a factory production line because even the tiniest bricks are enormous against the minifigure bodies.

Bricks and accessories are not always the colour or size you think you need.

I didn’t have a LEGO smartphone at the time, so used a plain black, flat 2 stud brick, photographed in the corner out of focus.

For the Moazzem Begg image, we knew that the real Moazzen Begg had a beard, but we didn’t have a bearded mini figure with the right expression on its face.

We also didn’t have LEGO shackles that could bind his wrists and ankles.

Or anything that looked like an open air cell with barbed wire.
But we did have a head with a staring, cross looking expression, a black hairpiece, an orange construction worker’s high-vis jacket and trousers, some handcuffs, and fencing that looks like a bit like cell bars.

We worked with what he had to try to capture the essence of each scene, a moment, a realisation that clicks with the text around it.

The most powerful thing was making and placing the minifigures.

You really had to think about who they were, how they got there, what they were feeling, to get the look just right.

Making these scenes, we had to empathise with the people we LEGOed, in those circumstances.

Put ourselves in their shoes…

Carefully and respectfully.

If you’ve ever played with LEGO, you might be thinking ‘I’ve got those bits and pieces’, ‘I can imagine making that’.

This is something we worked out as we did this more and more.

If you have played with LEGO, artist Nathan Sawaya argues, as a viewer you can see these images with your hands, as a maker as much as a viewer.

That’s one reason why making scenes with the world’s best selling toy can have powerful effects…

You may be sitting there thinking that there’s something not quite right - or maybe just right – about this kind of work.

We made these scenes to stick, to provoke thought, and discussion... to keep the story alive, to grab people in ways that a documentary photograph or a description might not...
If it’s making you laugh a little uncomfortably, then wonder why you’re laughing, then…. ouch, things might be going to plan.

This work is supposed to be a little cute, weird, and troubling...
MAKING SOAPS
But what about empathising with more than just the least powerful people in supply chains.

One criticism about research in this area is that it concentrates its attention in certain kinds of places - like farms and factories - and it’s only the people in these places who get to be humanised.

Everything happens to them because of some outside ‘system’ or chain - which of course contains loads of other people, doing things, responding to things, making things happen, all that stuff.

People - like company CEOs, etc. - who get to represent themselves, but are rarely seen, working, like everyone else, their decisions affecting others, deliberately and accidentally, out of sight.

But with LEGO, you can visualise what everyone is doing, equally…

So, we have started experimenting with series of LEGO re-creations, soap-operas that dramatise all kinds of moments, in different places, involving different characters, differently empowered, differently knowledgeable, whose lives are intertwined…
Primark on the rack

When you decide to attack your critics
I mentioned the LEGO paper that was published yesterday.

It’s where every single idea we have ever had about LEGO is jammed together in a compelling narrative.

It’s based around a unfolding series of 8 LEGO re-creations photographed and posted online to illustrate a page on the followthethings.com store about a sequinned top, a top featured in a 2009 BBC Panorama doc called ‘Primark on the Rack’.

I researched the making, discussion and impact of this film and it was pretty phenomenal in itself, but then something shocking and surprising followed.

Many of the single re-creations we had posted online - with creative commons licences - had become quite popular and were copied into other people’s talks, etc.

But, because the quotes they visualised were posted separately underneath them, their meanings got lost.

So, for this series, we decided to put some text on the images. Like Barbra Krueger postcards or cat meme.

Wherever they went, they would take that message with them.

A series title.

Primark on the Rack.

And a caption.

When you do this, when you do that…

Primark had a reputation as a highly unethical retailer a decade ago.

They knew that a BBC documentary was about to be broadcast - in its Panorama series - which exposed child labour in their supply chains.

It was called ‘Primark on the rack’.

But, instead of accepting an invitation to appear in the doc, Primark launched a counter-offensive.

A website, with its own films, questioning the truth of the Panorama film.
They payed a specialist PR firm loads of money to repair their reputation before customers even noticed it was tarnished.

This wasn’t the best idea, not the best way to improve ur corporation’s reputation.

As we will see.

For this seen I imagined and LEGOed the moment when Primark’s CEO - with the moustache - in his executive suite, first directed his team to attack these naughty bad BBC critics.

Set up that website.

Research the doc.

Call it fake.
When you allege child labour footage was ‘faked’
Primark and its PR company were determined to show that Primark on the Rack was faked, demanded and got access to unedited film rushes and emails, got witness statements from the field and published a ‘myth-busting video.

They concentrated on one 45 second scene where young boys working just outside bangalore test the sequins on a sequinned primary top.

There was something about the way the scene was cropped, the fact that no other clothes were in shot, that they said showed it had been staged.

Their public wrangle with the BBC over the course of three years eventually forced the BBC Trust to say that only the filmmakers would know if this shot was genuine, because they couldn’t 100% prove that it was, so it might not be.

Primark seized on this, announcing that this admission proved that the whole film must have been a fake, and that the shoppers, teachers and students who had seen it so many times, had been deceived, badly let down by the BBC.
Primark on the rack

When BBC journalists drown their sorrows
I imagined the Panorama crew in a pub near the BBC HQ, after the verdict, upset, drowning their sorrows. They were humiliated.

Forced to hand back a TV award they had won for the film.

Make a public apology.

For them and the anti-sweatshop community, this was a travesty.

Even if that 45 second scene had been faked, what about the rest of the film?

Was this a victory for big business over investigative journalism?

A successful show of strength that would silence future critics?

Scared about its filmmaking ending up in court, the BBC was becoming more cautious, and tightened up its rules for the documentation of documentary films.

Riskier film ideas were being pitched to Channel 4 and, if they were rejected, safer versions were going to the BBC.

There were so many sorrows to drown if you were an investigative journalist or filmmaker at this time.
When you learn about the ‘Streisand Effect’
Primark had been desperate to shed its reputation as an unethical retailer.

Attacking organisations who helped to give it that reputation was its clever approach to change things.

But had it worked?

When this saga was over, a Primark spokesperson stated that it had had no negative effect on their sales.

But, he continued, if you google Primark and sweatshop or child labour and there were more hits that ever.

These figures had been boosted by a 3 year public battle over a film alleging this, a battled that was eagerly reported in the press and online, over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over

Through attacking its critics, Primark had made itself a ‘poster box of exploitation’, whatever the truth of the film.

I imagined the Primark CEO realising this, late one night, at home, on his laptop.

Reading about this phenomenon called the Streisand Effect.

Named after an incident when singer Barbara Streisand tried to stop a Californian coastal erosion research website putting an aerial photo of her house on their website.

Thinking it would help burglars get into it.

Before she took the project to court, hardly anyone had looked at it.

Afterwards, tens of thousands of people had looked at it, knew where she lived, and maybe thought about burgling her house.

Because it was discussed in the press.
The moral of the story?

Attacking your critics risks fanning rather than dampening the flames of their critique.

If it’s good enough to be banned, censored or attacked, OMG it must be worth a look.

What’s getting them so hot and bothered?

Critiques on the internet are soooo hard to control…

This, I thought, was the end of the Primark on the Rack series.

A spectacular failure.

A ridiculous own goal.

A lesson learned.

Done and dusted.
Primark on the rack 2013

When you report from Bangladesh on the shocking number of deaths from a garment factory collapse
Then, years later, on April 23 2013, a garment factory complex just outside Dhaka in Bangladesh, collapsed, crushing to death over 1,100 people making clothes for High Street stores.

It was horrific.

A global scandal.

Widely reported.

Cracks had been reported in the building's pillars the day before, people had refused to go in to work the next day because they were afraid, but they were cajoled and threatened with a loss of wages if they didn't go back in.

The women, anyway.

There were orders to fill.

The power went out at 8.37, and as soon as the generators on each floor kicked in, the building started to shake, crack, buckle, and then violently implode into a pyramid-shaped pile of rubble.

TV news crews reported live as rescue efforts took place, and as the death toll rose.

Some interviewed firefighters at the scene.

One crying in an interview after one trapped woman called Shahnaz who had survived 110 hours in the rubble, died in a fire just before they could rescue her.

These news reports also included photographs of clothing labels in the rubble.

Benetton, Mango, and Primark.

The people who had died had been making their clothes.

New Wave Bottoms, one of the factories in the complex, listed Primark as a buyer.

So, from the very start of the UK news coverage, Rana Plaza was referred to as the “Primark Factory” and protestors gathered outside its stores to demand compensation for the dead and injured.”
When you realise your PR and legal teams will never be able to argue that this footage is fake

Primark on the rack 2013
I made this LEGO, live, as the story unfolded.

I reassembled the office set back at Primark HQ, and posed the CEO and his crack PR and legal teams, shocked, horrified.

There was no way they could argue that this footage had been faked. They would have to deal with this very differently.
Primark on the rack 2013

When you see that people died making your clothes
Back at the Rana Plaza, a photographer called Taslima Akhter was at the scene, taking photos of the tragedy, the massive loss of human life, the trauma, the rescues.

She took perhaps the most iconic image of the disaster.

Later dubbed ‘The Eternal Embrace’.

A man and a woman, dead in the rubble, seeming embracing each other in their last moments, the man shedding a single bloody tear.

This photo was used countless times in news articles, and in online petitions signed by millions of people to force the brands and retailers whose clothes had been made there to come clean about their supply chains and pay compensation to the families of the dead workers and to those injured.
When you phone your competitors asking why you’re the only company offering compensation
So how did Primark face this crisis? They couldn’t attack these critics.

They immediately said they were shocked and saddened & expressed condolences.

Sent their ethical trade team to Bangladesh to collect information and provide support.

Made available its local banking infrastructure to deliver emergency funds.

Provided immediate needs to families, including emergency food.

Accepted its responsibilities in the disaster.

All in the first 4 days of the collapse.

Children of those killed and injured working for their supplier in the building were promised long term aid, those injured were promised financial aid, and families of those who died were promised payments.

Primark paid the wages of of 3,650 survivors who had made clothes for them - and for their rivals - for 6 months after the collapse.

Five months later, 29 brands were invited to an International Labour Organisation meeting in Geneva to discuss a £75m compensation scheme for victims. 9 turned up. Including Primark, who added 6m to the fund.

The Deputy Director of the ILO hoped their exemplary response would encourage people to ask the brans who failed to attend - like Benetton and Mango - to pay their fair share. Primark did this too.

Primark now uses this ‘exemplary response’ to Rana Plaza in news stories about their continued success. Making the argument that fast fashion can be made in countries like Bangladesh without putting workers at risk.
This is clearly a shocking story.

And you may be wondering why anyone would want to re-create it in LEGO.

There are lots of good reasons...
Primark on the rack 2013

When you report from Bangladesh on the shocking number of deaths from a garment factory collapse
Let's take one of these images and just look at this for a while.

Soak it up.

Work out what it's trying to say and how it's trying to say it.

Then I'll explain...

[NB. in this part of the talk, each of the following was 'revealed' on screen, one at a time. The image on the previous page is the final culmination of everything that follows]

First, what's it inspired by, or based on?

A passage that I'd found in a newspaper report a few days into the rescue efforts about firefighters crying while being interviewed for TV.

Second, what materials is it made from?

A LEGO baseplate to click things onto with a tipped-out box of bricks in the background to act as the collapsed building.

Three minifigures (one a firefighter, one an interviewer, and one a camera operator slightly to the left of centre) with expressions of grim concentration and barely concealed tears, holding accessories such as a TV camera and fork as microphone.

As another five minifigures lie on their backs on the floor to the right, their bodies covered in sheets.

This grim scene was carefully composed to capture a moment.

Made in a place well lit by natural daylight - overcast is best - on the kitchen table at home.

Photos taken with a smartphone from the TV director's perspective, behind the camera operator and interviewer, on location in Bangladesh.

Cropped and sharpened using the phone's photo editing app.
The firefighter centre stage - it’s all about the eyes! - everything else revolving around him, or is it her?

Once a photo is taken and edited, I email it to my computer, add it to a word-processing document, where the title - this is in the Primark on the Rack series - and a caption are added.

Every photo in this series was captioned ‘When you…’ which is a common way to caption memes...

It invites you to identify with the protagonist, to stand in their shoes for a while, see a situation from their perspective.

The you being, in this case, the film crew, reporting from the scene.

And, once this is done, finished scenes are screen grabbed, posted on twitter, archived on the photo-sharing website flickr, from where they are embedded on the right followthesthings.com page as a slideshow, a slideshow that condenses 20,000 words of reading into 8 images.

Posted in 2013, this one has been viewed over 6,600 times to date.
When you report from Bangladesh on the shocking number of deaths from a garment factory collapse
All of these scenes are made carefully and respectfully.

All these careful choices, and especially the mini figures you assemble and place in relation to one another, allow you to empathise with the people you are depicting.

Thinking how they would feel under those circumstances.

But seeing the circumstances from different perspectives and different places.

The ‘you’ being the Primark team in some shots, and journalists in others.

But there’s more going on.

Look at the faces.

It’s the same camera operator who was drowning her sorrows in the pub.

And the same interviewer, her hair’s the same anyway. But the firefighter’s face is her pub face.

That’s also the face of the Primark PR person looking at these scenes.

All shocked and horrified.

And any of their heads could have been twisted around to the blank side to be the head of the man with the single bloody tear, dead in the rubble.

A common humanity.

What the LEGO corporation thought kids would learn through role-playing with its mini figures…
“LEGO recreation of the torture technique known as waterboarding, which has been used by the USA in Iraq, Guantanamo Bay and Bagram airbase, as well as in other "black sites" in the name of the War On Terror. ... As we now know, the CIA destroyed thousands of images and videos of interrogations using torture, including those showing waterboarding.”

Posted on flickr in 2007.
If you think this is all getting rather dark.

It is.

The culture of LEGO play does include the careful, rule-bound activities needed to make a new - say Star Wars - set according to the instructions.

But it also includes much more anarchic and violent play - the making, smashing, bashing, collapsing, throwing, burning, ... these plastic characters and worlds.

That's what kids tend to do with LEGO anyway…

That's the argument made by a LEGO art-activist called LEGOfesto.

After seeing her son throwing minifigures into a toy prison, she thought how society was dehumanising people, 'treating them as if they had no more moral value than a toy figurine'.

This was about a decade ago, when she was watching news stories about the War on Terror, Guantanamo Bay, Abu Graib, Darfur. Stripping down photos, drawings and victim testimonies into their shocking essentials, re-creating them in LEGO, posting them online, with links to the originals.

In the hope people who saw them would ‘linger longer’, share them online, to keep the ‘memory of what happened alive even after the news cycle had moved on.

Freed Guantanamo prisoner Moazzem Begg told her he’d used them to explain to his kids what he had been through.

This is what LEGO art-activists do.

And what we have learned to do.
Zbigniew Libera’s 7 box Nazi Concentration Camp set (first exhibited 1996).
Then there’s the work of Polish artist Zbigniew Libera whose 7 LEGO boxed and branded sets of Nazi Concentration Camp scenes caused immense controversy in the 1990s.

They were made using bricks, minifigures and accessories donated to him by the LEGO corporation.

Audiences at a Contemporary Art and the Holocaust conference in 1997 pelted him with insults.

This isn’t art.

You’re an anti-semite.

People couldn’t stop discussing them.

In 2002 they were exhibited at a ‘Mirroring Evil’ exhibition at New York’s Jewish Museum, and were discussed in detail in the book written to accompany it.

One contributor said Libera’s LEGO sets allowed people to temporarily identify with the perpetrators of such atrocious acts, how easy it can be to become complicit in these acts.

These concentration camp sets were made out of standard pieces. They came with instructions. But you don’t have to follow the instructions. You can make something else with those pieces.

You can make in LEGO the kinds of worlds that you want to live in: that’s the argument about Minfigurative Politics.
FINAL THOUGHTS
Let’s party!
We should all play LEGO together, every now and again.

Try to re-create with our minifigures and accessories situations that concern us, interest us.

Playing LEGO slows you down, makes you think, talk with other people, its what we like to call ‘fun-based productivity’.

You have to work with the things you have, to make something out of them.

All kinds of ideas, inspirations, jokes, memories, etc. get brought into the mix, into the making.

It’s a wonderful set of tools to help us think together about what’s going on and how it might be different, who is affecting and who is affected by what’s happening around us and in distant places.

That’s it. Let’s party!

After some people say some words...
Sources

All of the examples made by Ian, Eeva, Sabrina and Nancy that were featured in this talk can be found on the followthethings.com website and in the ‘Made in LEGO’ Flickr album. Each one has a Creative Commons license.

The main arguments in this paper about Political LEGO can be found in this publication:


The article about the Siberian toy protest was published in the Guardian newspaper, here.

Chris Cook’s website is here.

Andy Cook’s website is here.