

Here we re-create in Lego...

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1. abstract

Many scholar activists have argued that it is no longer enough to train researchers to become 'discerning, detached and critical so that we can penetrate the veil of common understandings and expose the root causes and bottom lines that govern phenomenal worlds' (Gibson-Graham 2008, 618). Additional training is needed in a 'range of ... practices that apply and express critique through physical artifacts and material-technical practice' (Ratto et al 2014, 86).

In the 'follow the things' genre of commodity activism, experiments in 'critical making' have generated powerful critiques of, with, and alternative to the injustices of 'free market' capitalism. Many of these experiments have been researched and catalogued on the trade justice activism website followthethings.com, whose aim is also to inform, inspire and publish new work in this genre.

One example of this new work is a series of 64 photos of re-creations in Lego of scenes from films, art works, and events documented on the site's pages. This paper will explain the principles and flow of the process through which these re-creations came to be made, as well as the lives they have been able to have in the the new media ecology of web2.0 after being posted online with Creative Commons licenses.

Critical making practices like this are supposed to provide more than a means to be reflexive about technical work or to materialize conceptual insights. They are supposed to provide alternative ways to bring 'subjectivity and affect into the analytical realm' (Ratto et al 2014, 90). We will see...

followthethings.com

The screenshot shows the homepage of followthethings.com. At the top left is the logo "followthethings.com another kind of shopping". To its right is a red flower icon and the text "14 FEBRUARY: NOTHING SAYS 'I LOVE YOU' LIKE International Flower Workers' Day". Further right is a "Your shopping bag" icon with a red heart. Below the header is a navigation bar with links: "Browse our departments: Grocery | Fashion | Electrical | Health & Beauty | Sport | Gifts | Money | Security | Auto". The main content area is divided into several sections. On the left, there are four images with captions: "Factory living" (workers in a factory), "Farm living" (a farmer in a field), "Cafe living" (people at a cafe), and "Shop living" (a store display). Below these is a green box with the text "find hidden relations". In the center is a large black box with the text "Follow it yourself! ftt Learn from the experts how to create stories that stick". To the right of this is a "make mischief" icon. On the far right is a "Tweets" section with two tweets. The first is from Jeff Ballinger (@press4change) about HuffPo and Nike. The second is from followthethings.com asking for "fash_rev trump cards!". Below the tweets is a "Google Search" box with the text "Only search followthethings.com". At the bottom left is a section titled "Who makes the things that we buy?" with a paragraph of text. To its right is a red box with the text "We have shoppers in over 180 countries worldwide" and a "ClustrMaps" logo showing a world map with 26,093 visitors. At the bottom right are social media icons for YouTube, Facebook, and WordPress, and a "Check our online shopping channels" link. At the very bottom is a "SHARE" button with social media icons and a "go_to_site" button.

Earlier today, I talked to postgrads about followthethings.com, which I have designed, curated, and promoted with others, and which opened the Summer of 2011. ftt work aims to make apparent hidden relations between the producers and consumers of things. The website is a database and example of this commodity-centred cultural activism.

It's designed to resemble and be navigated like a familiar online store, in which you will find research on 60-odd case studies. Each has its own page setting out how it has been described, how, why and by whom it was made to have what kinds of effects on its audiences, the discussions that it provoked online, and the impacts it seems to have had on multiple publics. Taken together, for example, one of the things that this research shows is that the most successful work grabs audiences through personal narratives, juxtaposition and montage, détournement, shopping interventions, critical humor and other non-didactic techniques.

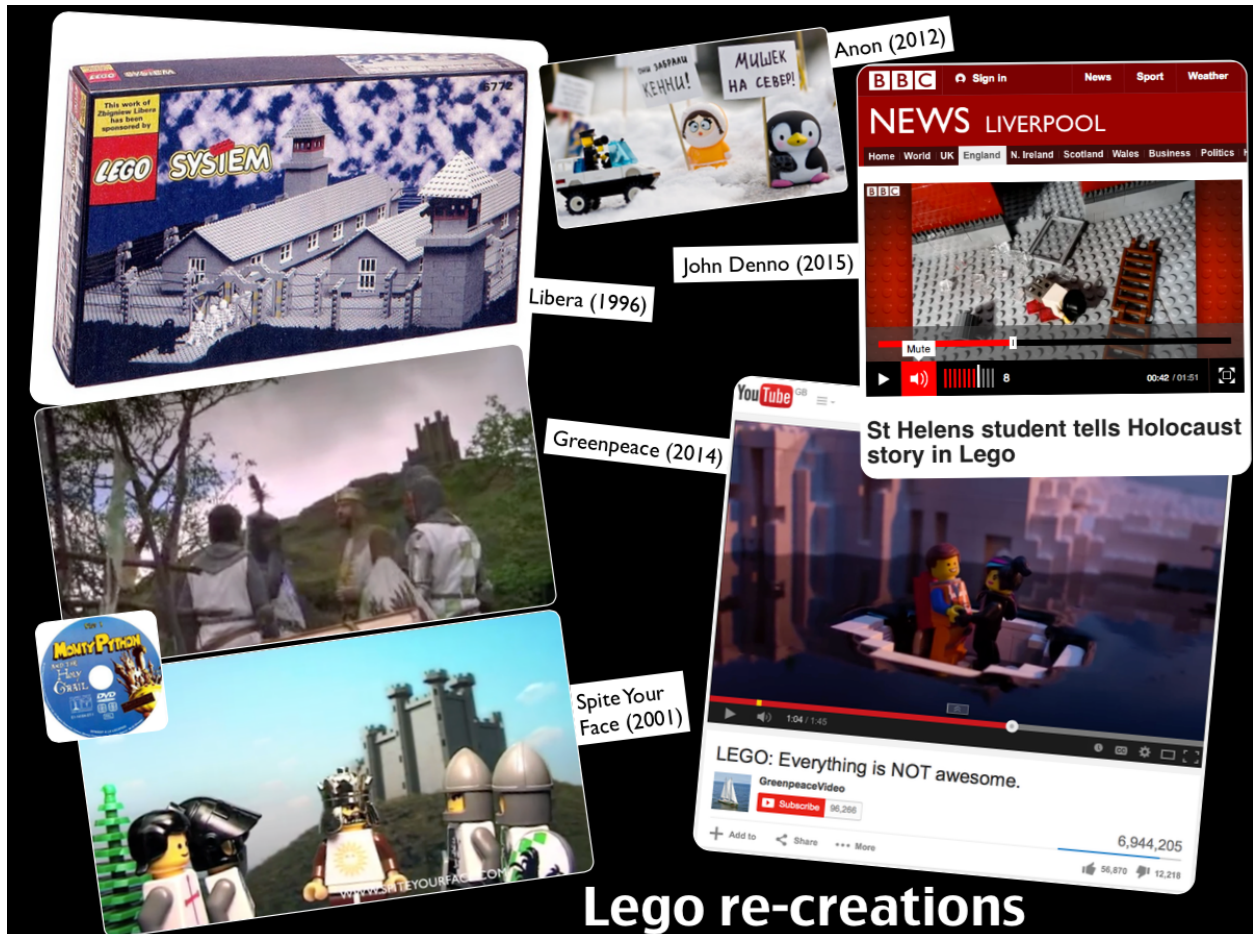
As well as showcasing and researching this work, the site is also intended to inform, inspire and publish new work in the followthethings genre. Groups of students at Exeter and Brown universities research its pages as coursework, and original student work is also published on the site. The Lego re-creations I'm talking about today are an example of this ethos on practice.

3. Lego re-creations

This paper is about Lego. You may be familiar with it. It's a 'system, activity and culture of play' that can be found in 75% of Western homes. What's significant about it, according to Lego theorist Jonathan Rey Lee, is that it 'embodies two distinct yet related underlying logics of material culture: atomism, which conceives of and treats objects as assemblages, and plasticity, a mythos of unbounded creativity and mastery over objects' (2014, 96). Playing with Lego, he continues, 'reveals a complex performativity that condenses theory into thing, enabling us to critically deconstruct consumer culture, playfully encounter the material object-other, and constructively explore ecological subject-object relationships' (105).

This paper is about Lego re-creations. You may be familiar with them, too. One recent book on Lego art described them as:

"At the crossroads between fan art and pop art renewal, [where] numerous artists are hacking the mini figurine, fiddling with its image and placing it in strange, sometimes disturbing situations, building (with different degrees of benevolence) upon its iconic potential in ways profoundly emblematic of our time" (Bramadi 2013, 26).



LEGO re-creations

Famous examples include:

Zbigniew Libera's controversial re-creation in Lego of Nazi concentration camp, made and packaged as 'sponsored by LEGO'. Acquired by the Jewish Museum of New York.'

Spite Your Face's meticulous frame by frame re-creation of 'The Knights of the Round table' song from the 1996 film Monty Python and the Holy Grail, included on disk 2 of the film's DVD release in 2001.

The **2012 protest in a Siberian city** by 100 Kinder Surprise toys, 100 lego minifigures, 10 toy soldiers, 15 soft toys and 10 toy cars against corruption and electoral malpractice. People recreated a protest in which they would have been arrested, but protests like this were then banned as toys weren't considered to be citizens of Russia.

Last year: **Greenpeace's 'Everything is not awesome' film**, using the song and minifigures from the Lego Movie, recreated an Arctic being drowned in oil, the centerpiece of its campaign to persuade Lego to drop its association with Shell, who they accused of 'partnering with beloved brands to clean up its dirty image as an Arctic oil driller'.

And last week: a 16yr old schoolboy in Liverpool given a history homework assignment asking him to create something to help people remember the Holocaust, handed in a series of photos of his **re-creations in Lego of scenes from the rise and fall of Adolph Hitler**. He put them online, they were viewed all over the world, and were featured on BBC news.

4. working with materials

Vitally material forms of critique

We need to develop forms of critique that inspire hauntings, feed feelings, come alive, leap out and grab us... that are not about vital materiality, but are themselves vitally material (Cook and Woodyer 2012).

Working with materials

Might we not learn more about the material composition of the inhabited world by engaging quite directly with the stuff we want to understand: by sawing logs, building a wall, knapping a stone or rowing a boat? Could not such an engagement - working practically *with* materials - offer a more powerful procedure of discovery than an approach bent on the abstract analysis of things already made? (Ingold 2007, 2-3)

The textility of making

A work of art is not an object but a thing and, as Klee argued, the role of the artist ... is not to give effect to a preconceived idea, novel or not, but to join with an follow the forces and flows of material that bring the form of the work into being. The work invites the viewer to join the artist as a fellow traveller, to look with it as it unfolds in the world, rather than behind it to an originating intention of which it is the final product (Ingold 2010, 97)

In 2012, Tara Woodyer and I wrote a book chapter whose conclusion suggested that 'follow the thing' work should not only take an approach to commodities that pays serious attention of their vital materialities, but should also consider the vital materialities in and of forms of critique (Cook & Woodyer 2012).

My half of the paper was based on the undergraduate module that followthethings.com has emerged from. This, like most follow the things work, is based on Marx's understanding of commodity fetishism, as this has been read as a form of mischievous cultural activism of its time and later appropriated by filmmakers, artists, cultural activists and others to 'defetishise' or 'get with the fetish' of commodities to further the cause of trade justice.

It isn't particularly Latourian or Deleuzian in its influences, but working with Lego is beginning to change this. This change is based both on the process of making and of reading, during but mostly after this Lego making, of academic and other literature that might help to make sense of what we have made and done.

Students had been making things as coursework for years, inspired in particular by Tim Ingold's question: 'Might we not learn more about the material composition of the inhabited world by engaging quite directly with the stuff we want to understand: by sawing logs, building a wall, knapping a stone or rowing a boat? Could not such an engagement - working practically with materials - offer a more powerful procedure of discovery than an approach bent on the abstract analysis of things already made?' (Ingold 2007, 2-3).

Ingold's approach, as you probably know well, owes a great deal to Deleuze and Guattari and their critique of the hylomorphic model of creativity, in which form is 'imposed by an agent with a particular design in mind, while matter, thus rendered passive and inert, became that which was imposed upon' (Ingold 2010, 92).

With Deluze and Guattari, Ingold wants to 'overthrow the model itself and to replace it with an ontology that assigns primacy to the processes of formation as against their final products, and to the flows and transformations of matter as against their states of matter' (Ingold 2010 92).

Trying to make sense of Lego recreations, however, seems to involve assigning primacy to both processes of formation (the making of Lego re-creations) and their final products (the photos of those re-creations that are posted online).

There's an intriguing passage in Ingold's paper that is perhaps where this paper is going, though: 'A work of art is not an object but a thing and, as Klee argued, the role of the artist ... is not to give effect to a preconceived idea, novel or not, but to join with and follow the forces and flows of material that bring the form of the work into being. The work invites the viewer to join the artist as a fellow traveller, to look with it as it unfolds in the world, rather than behind it to an originating intention of which it is the final product' (Ingold 2010, 97).

5. the Napoli



What were the forces and flows of material that brought the form of these Lego re-creations into being, then? And what did they invite their viewers to do?

This narrative can begin in research, in particular on the running aground of the container ship MSC Napoli in Lyme Bay in 2007, where many of its containers fell into the sea, were washed up on beaches along the E Devon coast, where people travelled from all over the UK to break them open and ‘salvage’ their contents. Front page news!

Divya Tolia Kelly and I took this event and its reporting as the focus of a book chapter on ‘Material Geographies’ (Cook & Tolia-Kelly 2010). This focused on the material geographies of landscape troubled by this event, of commodities as revealed in what washed ashore and salvaged, and of art practice that emerged as things were made with these salvaged commodities.

Container ships, as powerfully shown in Allen Sekula's recent documentary, are the 'forgotten space' of global capitalism and of 'follow the things' work. This is by far the most important way in which commodities are taken from sites of production to sites of consumption.

6. Lego container ship



A couple of years after the Napoli, back at home, there were two primary school-aged children, one of whom loved playing Lego with her Dad. I'd bought Lego online from the Lego Store and we'd ended up on their mailing list. We got catalogues in the post. In one was the Lego Maersk Container ship, part of a series of Lego Maersk sets celebrating Denmark's most famous corporations.

I found a review on YouTube by someone who'd made one. He'd worked in the Merchant Navy, and was describing its accuracies compared with the real thing. and rounded off his review by saying 'and this, of course, is the kind of ship that brought your Lego to you'.

I knew Lego was transported in container ships because I'd heard about the Tokyo Express which, hit by a storm in 1997, shed 62 containers into the sea off Lands End. Many of these were full of Lego pieces and, ever since, Lego cutlasses, flippers, spear guns, breathing apparatus octopi, brooms, daisies and dragons have been washed up and collected from beaches in Cornwall and much further afield.

I was very keen to get one of these sets. There was something special about them. But it would cost over £100. I didn't want to spend my own money on it and I didn't want my daughter to play with it either. This was for work. I could re-create in Lego the sort of thing I was researching and teaching students about. I wasn't sure how I could do this though. I wouldn't know until I got it.

7. Lego re-creations

UC Davis pepper spray incident goes viral
Police at UC Davis used pepper spray to disperse peaceful demonstrators at UC Davis, setting off a firestorm of protest, the suspension of two officers, and calls for the school's chancellor to resign.
By Brad Knickerbocker, Staff writer / November 20, 2011

...and protest re-creations.

theguardian Your search terms...
News | Sport | Comment | Culture | Business | Money | Life & style | Travel | Environment | Tech | TV | Video | Da
Life & style | **Lego**
Series: 2011 in review
2011 in Lego: the year's news - in pictures
From the royal wedding to the death of Osama bin Laden, the English summer riots and the fall of Gaddafi, here are some of major news stories of the past 12 months captured in Lego by Flickr members.
If you want to add your Lego take on a news event this year, email community coordinators@guardian.co.uk or join our Flickr group

Lego re-creations were in the news in 2010 and 2011, documenting key scenes in the Occupy movement, and being published on the Guardian's website.

The one pictured here was particularly memorable: the pepper spraying of a peaceful sit down protest at UC Davis.

But there were also the 'Occupy Legoland' photos on Facebook and twitter, that strange toy protest in Siberia reported in online newspapers and shared via social media, animated re-creations of races at the London Olympic games, and more.

8. we build our Legoship

First, we build our Legoship

Live tweeting to garner interest

Storify to gather online resources

followthethings.com
followthethings.com
followthethings.com
followthethings.com

Tomorrow's Lego container ship building with @TeamFTT starts at 10am. We are overexcited already & will tweet time-lapse photos...

"This looks like a real ship'. 'Can you pass me the, um, two one?' don't like this white ridgey one'. #legoship.

Watching a BBC News feature about the MSC Napoli wreck & washed-up containers while making our Maersk #legoship.

Legos and Art Lab - David Gauntlett - University of Westminster

Occupy Lego Land! Facebook

By followthethings.com

In the summer of 2012, I was working with ftt interns Jack Parkin, Ellie Bird and Eeva Kemppainen and Brown University summer school students Diana Shifrina and Sabrina Skau in the vacant flats on the top floor of the Hatherly Building on Exeter's Streatham campus.

Exeter's International Office invests money in academic staff to help us develop collaborative research with colleagues in overseas institutions. I have been able to do this every summer since 2011, when the site was finished off and published with intern help, those interns being the students who got the highest marks in the module through which most of the site's pages are created.

As well as employing Jack and the others, I used this money to buy that Lego Container ship for us to make. To get ready for the build, I put together a social media Storify page bringing together all we needed to know: e.g. MSC Napoli videos and photos (plus those of more recent wrecks like the MV Rena in New Zealand); news stories of container shipwrecks; and Lego recreation stories and photos; relevant academic and activist work, and tweeted conversations about any and all of this (see followthethings.com 2012).

We watched those videos, and looked through the other material as we made the ship together, carefully following the instructions, taking the right hard plastic bricks and clicking them together to make a solid whole, piece by piece. We tweeted as we went along, documenting how we were talking about putting it together, and showing how the build was going. We hoped that this live tweeting from our Lego shipyard might gain some interest and interaction online.

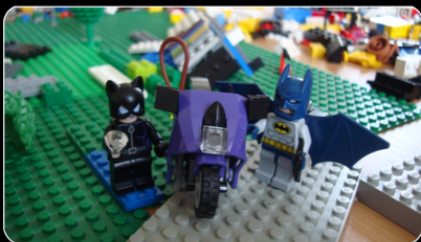
9. which is launched and runs aground

which is launched, then runs aground...



Started by the sunshine, the FTT Ladybird runs ashore on the Hatherley Flats, along the mid Devon coast. Its containers begin to fall into the sea.

Containers & their contents wash up onshore all along the mid-Devon coast. People flock to the beach to see what's there.



Soon the containers wash ashore. This photo of superheroes wheeling away a £25,000 motorbike encourages others to visit the beach to see what they can take home from the wreckage.

After the photograph of superheroes helping themselves to a batbike appear in the press, people from all over Europe visit Hatherley beach to help themselves.



In the excitement on Hatherley beach, 2 young minifigures take a box of precious crockery belonging to a Swedish couple retiring overseas. After the story hits the press, they sheepishly return the goods.

I wanted to re-create in Lego iconic photos of the MSC Napoli wreck. I also wanted to have a wreck of a Lego ship that, like that reviewer had said, was the kind of ship that bought your Lego to you. There was yet another container ship that had been important to us the year before: the Cosco Pacific which we had tracked and tweeted live as it was bringing the 5,000 shopping bags we'd had made in China to the UK; the bags with ladybirds on them. Just like Tesco's. So, the ship we made was called the FTT Ladybird.

Once it had been made, I borrowed my daughters' box of Lego from home, brought it in and tipped it onto the table in the Hatherley Flats. We then began to re-create photographs of the Napoli shipwreck, the goods it spilled on to the shore, and their salvage. We chose the photos that had become the most iconic media representations of this event.

We wanted to re-create a famous wreck story, with some twists. We tweeted this 'live' over a few days and added photos and captions to followthethings.com's Facebook page., like this:

1. Startled by the sunshine, the FTT Ladybird runs ashore on the Hatherley Flats, along the mid Devon coast. Its containers begin to fall into the sea.
2. Containers & their contents wash up onshore all along the mid-Devon coast. People flock to the beach to see what's there.
3. Soon the containers wash ashore. This photo of superheroes wheeling away a £25,000 motorbike encourages others to visit the beach to see what they can take home from the wreckage.
4. After the photograph of superheroes helping themselves to a batbike appear in the press, people from all over Europe visit Hatherley beach to help themselves.
5. In the excitement on Hatherley beach, 2 young minifigures take a box of precious crockery belonging to a Swedish couple retiring overseas. After the story hits the press, they sheepishly return the goods.

This wasn't an exact re-creation. We had to work with the pieces we had, and bought the only Lego motorbike that was available in Exeter's Toys R Us at the time. But this added something extra to the re-creations, we thought.

We hoped these photos and the drama we tried to create around them would get social media users interested in what we were doing. I also wanted to do this to enable Divya and I to publish a version of that chapter online without having to pay Getty images for the photos.

10. 3 weeks playing with Lego

then, 3 Weeks playing with Lego...



Here, we re-create in Lego a slaughterhouse scene in Nikolaus Geyrhalter's film 'Our Daily Bread'.

"One shot shows a man insouciantly sawing a cow carcass down the middle with an instrument that looks like it could have been nabbed from the set of a big-budget sci-fi movie. When he has finished, he pulls his mobile out of his overalls and starts chatting like he's at a bus stop" (Source: Jenkins 2008 np).

Here, we re-create in #Lego a candid shot from #Foxconn's #iPhone production line. @mdaisey @MacRumors

"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" (Source: Huifeng 2008a, p.4).

We have created in Lego the arrest in Brooklyn of notorious human organ dealer Levy-Izhak Rosenbaum.

"Dr. Scheper-Hughes is well known for her investigation of an international ring of organ sellers based in New York, New Jersey and Israel. Her compelling findings revealed hundreds of third world organ donors who were tricked into donating organs or threatened at gunpoint to do so. Her remarkable work led to several arrests" (Source: Winston 2010 np link).

The 2012 interns and summer school students worked for me for the first 6 weeks of the summer holiday.

During the first week, we asked a visiting performance activism scholar to help us develop our critical creative faculties through two days of performance activism training. They then spent the following 3 weeks finishing student-coursework-created pages for the site: finishing off research, editing, adding and/or making consistent the references, and so on.

This was detailed, careful work with quite rigid criteria ... ugh. Interesting but tedious. After finishing this work, I promised them 3 weeks of creating new work that would be informed/inspired by the site, and would be published on the site. I had no idea what that would be. Making the ship started this off, and bringing in that box of Lego was the next step. Our next stage of Lego work could now start to take shape.

We had two rooms in the Hatherly flats - an office and a conference room with a big table in the centre. This became our Lego Lab, bringing together people, with ideas, and expertise, and hundreds and hundreds of Lego pieces.

We started to make, fiddle, chat, experiment with these pieces until we had a brainwave. Why not re-create in Lego scenes from the pages we'd been researching? We'd all been doing that, and making these scenes provided a way for us to talk about the site's pages and what we'd learned from making them.

The first included Eeva's recreation of a slaughterhouse scene from Nikolaus Geyrhalter's film 'Our Daily Bread': "One shot shows a man insouciantly sawing a cow carcass down the middle with an instrument that looks like it could have been nabbed from the set of a big-budget sci-fi movie. When he has finished, he pulls his mobile out of his overalls and starts chatting like he's at a bus stop" (Source: Jenkins 2008 np).

I recreated the taking of a candid photo from Foxconn's iPhone production line because, in 2008, "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" (Source: Huifeng 2008a, p.4).

Another of Eeva's recreations included the arrest in Brooklyn of notorious human organ dealer Levy-Izchak Rosenbaum, as described in the work of anthropologist Nancy Scheper-Hughes. What was important here, is that we didn't only re-create photographs and film footage, we re-created the taking of photographs, and scenes that we created from descriptions, scenes which were never photographed. We were using lego to visualize, bringing words to life.

11. using social media...

Jack, Sabrina, Ellie, Eeva, and Diana started to make out of Lego plenty of other scenes from the pages that they'd researched in the weeks before. Eeva, for example, had worked up for publication a page on the iPhone game Phone Story, which encouraged gamers to 'follow your phone's journey around the world and fight the market forces in a spiral of planned obsolescence'.

using social media to show our work...

PHONE STORY

Phone Story is an educational game about the dark side of your favorite smart phone. Follow your phone's journey around the world and fight the market forces in a spiral of planned obsolescence.

Available on the **Android market** | Banned from the **App Store**

LA MOLLEINDUSTRIA

Banned from the App Store

ftt followthethings.com
@followthethings

@molleindustria We have been researching your Phone Story game for our website. Here is one minigame we made in Lego [flickr.com/photos/followt...](https://www.flickr.com/photos/followthethings/)

Reply Delete Favorite

Flickr Flag this media

1 RETWEET

9:07 AM - 2 Aug 12 · Embed this Tweet

One of the game's levels was a tasteless commentary on the reported suicides of Foxconn factory workers assembling Apple products in Shenzhen China, jumping from factory roofs to their deaths below. Newspaper reports at the time included photos of suicide prevention nets being put up in response. In the game though, your task was to move stretcher-bearers from side to side on the screen to catch the falling bodies.


Eeva re-created this scene in Lego and tweeted the photo to the game's makers who retweeted it to their followers.

12. summing up emotions

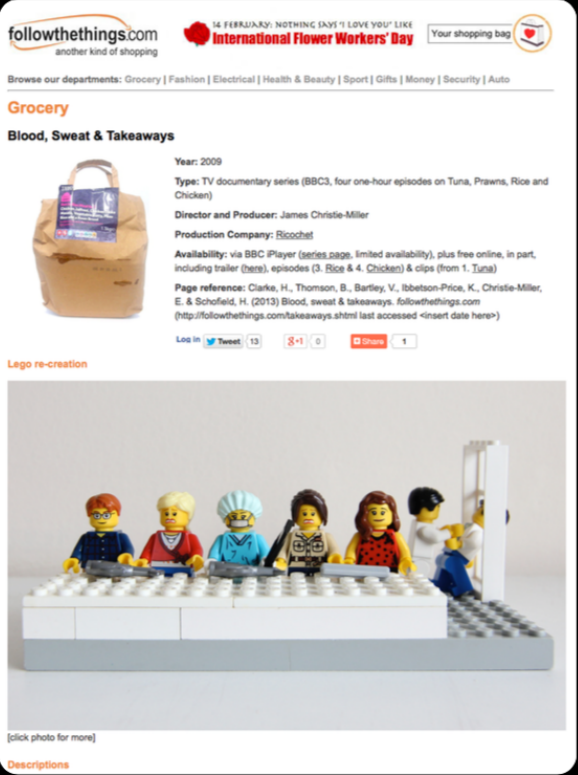
The photos were tweeted, shared on Facebook and uploaded to flickr, with the text that they were supposed to illustrate copied below, along with a link to the finished followthethings.com page on that example.

The flickr photos were also embedded onto the pages of the site, the first thing you see after the database information, in the hope that visitors might give a page a second glance... and also because we began to think that each image captured something about the whole page, summed it up somehow.

summing up emotions?



There was a sound point here, about the exploitation of workers in poor countries, and the real costs of cheap food. Unfortunately, it was stifled somewhat by our panel of intrepid guinea pigs, who ranged from the unremarkable to the downright nasty. The worst was sent home after pushing one of his team-mates into a glass door. As a result, the factory management refused to allow any of the other British males back on to the premises (Source: Baylis 2009 p.47).



followthethings.com another kind of shopping

14 FEBRUARY: NOTHING SAYS 'I LOVE YOU' LIKE **International Flower Workers' Day** Your shopping bag

Browse our departments: Grocery | Fashion | Electrical | Health & Beauty | Sport | Gifts | Money | Security | Auto

Grocery

Blood, Sweat & Takeaways

Year: 2009
 Type: TV documentary series (BBC3, four one-hour episodes on Tuna, Prawns, Rice and Chicken)
 Director and Producer: James Christie-Miller
 Production Company: Bloochee
 Availability: via BBC iPlayer (series page, limited availability), plus free online, in part, including trailer (series), episodes (3. Rice & 4. Chicken) & clips (from 1. Tuna)
 Page reference: Clarke, H., Thomson, B., Bartley, V., Ibbotson-Price, K., Christie-Miller, E. & Schofield, H. (2013) Blood, sweat & takeaways. followthethings.com (http://followthethings.com/takeaways.shtml last accessed <insert date here>)
 Log in [Twitter](#) 13 [+1](#) 0 [Share](#) 1

Lego re-creation

(click photo for more)

Descriptions

I love the immortalisation in Lego, it neatly sums up all the emotions of the series perfectly...! The webpage is great, and a wonderful resource for gathering together all the articles and feedback on the series - thanks for taking the time to do this... It still fascinates me how much of an impact the shows made (James Christie-Miller, Director and Producer of the BBC3 TV series 'Blood, sweat & takeaways': via email).

Sabrina re-created this scene from the BBC documentary series 'Blood sweat and takeaways' in which young UK consumers worked in, for example, fish processing factories in SE Asia whose produce was sold in the UK. In one scene, there was an altercation between two of the male participants. One pushed the other into a glass door. As a result, the male participants were kicked out of the factory and one was sent home in disgrace...

Sometimes, when we get in touch with the makers of the work we study to tell them what we've done, they reply. What we found quite quickly was that, while they often appreciate our meticulous research into the significance and impact of their work, the Lego recreations offered more. Take for example, the email we received from the director/producer of Blood, Sweat and Takeaways. He said:

“I love the immortalisation in Lego, it neatly sums up all the emotions in the series perfectly...!”

When we asked people to write short reviews of the site for its peer review page, the importance of these Lego re-creations became more intellectualised. Matt Hockenberry, the developer of the Sourcemap platform, wrote for example:

“What is notable about the work [on followthethings.com] is not its depth of detail, which is significant ... but rather the breadth of initiatives it brings under its banner. A favorite of mine is the “Made in Lego” series, which recreates contemporary accounts of the disjunctures between production, consumption, and everyday life. Not only do these lego enactments produce openly assembled bespoke imagery, imagined encounters, and clever juxtapositions, they invite construction in the literal and figurative sense.”

13. reflections on making

Reflections on making...

materialsensibilities
Lego: just imagine... I
 Posted by tarawoodyer on September 5, 2012

Eeva: For a relatively systematic and organised person like me, even the messy outlook of our Lego Lab was an adventure. Dozens of unfamiliar Lego pieces, a totem of seriously weird-faceted Lego heads, no proper plans or specific things to be achieved. Well, after one or two experimental, open-minded, slightly puzzling Lego play days we started to have a thing that we were doing as a group. We shared ideas, helped each other in finding the perfect Lego pieces, discussed if our creations were artistically good... An unexpected Lego Lab system formed from a chaos. I loved it. Even more I loved the discussion while building things. Ontology of playing intertwined with the ontologies of commodities... what is a commodity and the fetish for it, what are our values, what has been made into a commodity... Little chicks? Tiny pet animals? Virtual swords? Kidneys and the human body?

Sabrina: Lego has long held a special place in my heart... my parents gave my younger sister and I each a tub of Lego one year for Christmas when I was about seven or eight. We used to play Lego for hours, building houses and acting out different stories with our mini figures. When I was fifteen I made two stop-motion videos using my Star Wars Lego mini figures, one of which was a re-telling of Book 12 of Homer's Odyssey. I realised then the potential of Lego for creative story-telling and engaging audiences and was thus very excited to bring Lego into the FTT experience as well.

Ellie: when faced with my first ever pile of Lego bricks, in all honesty, I was a little nervous. They are really small! It's not like Duplo where with 8 bricks you can have a viable home for your plastic animal! Lego seemed to require some sort of inbuilt skill! But I copied what everyone else seemed to be doing and got tactile. I get it now. There is definitely a sense of achievement when you finish a small scene and it actually looks good. Especially photographed, there is something visually captivating about Lego. As a tool, it allows for new ways of expression, creativity, silliness and as Ian has mentioned you don't need to go in with a plan. In fact the outcomes seem better when nothing's planned! So for me, my interest in Lego has developed since the container ship arrived, it's a new interest. It seems to fit in well with our ethos, and I see it as a metaphor for so much of the stuff we do. Connectivity, co-creation, co-learning, accessibility, relationality, tactile geographies, a playful way of saying something serious, iconic, symbolic.

Ian: After working with Tony, one of the things that came across was that the process was the thing that would help you to 'achieve', and that you wouldn't necessarily have a strong idea of what that achievement might be, except that we would create something together, in a relatively non-hierarchical way, that we would enjoy (and laugh a lot about), and that we could somehow share with others ... I wanted us to achieve something new and engaging in a FTT way, to which we could all contribute... It's part of that argument about creativity enabling a positive form of critique of commodity fetishism. A lot of the Lego scenes and photos made have an amazing quality, for me at least, of being shockingly ... I don't know what the word is ... hilariously uncomfortable, powerful, awful, in a good way, tasteless, carefully shocking, dark, spooky...

Eeva: In a simplistic way, I see our Lego recreations as an interesting and humorous visualisation of written work (academic and artistic combined is actually an intriguing and out-of-the-box thing to do itself). But in a more multidimensional way, at least in my opinion, the actual making things with your own hands and taking a photo of it for other people gives space to discuss uneasy, even disgusting sides of commodity production. I would appreciate if our work – text and pictures together – would increase multisided discussion and get a critical message across to young people, especially. And if not, at least I consider my own thinking to be changed and awareness expanded...

Scholars of 'critical making' argue that what's learned through the making is much more important than the finished product. So, at the end of our 3 weeks of Lego work, we held an open day for our funders, friends and collaborators. One person who came was the geographer of play, Tara Woodyer. She asked us all to reflect on what we had learned for a post she was writing on her materialsensibilities blog.

Sabrina had done something like this before, and wrote: 'When I was fifteen I made two stop-motion videos using my Star Wars Lego mini figures, one of which was a re-telling of Book 12 of Homer's Odyssey. I realised then the potential of Lego for creative story-telling and engaging audiences and was thus very excited to bring Lego into the 'follow the thing' experience.'

Ellie had never done anything like this before, and wrote: 'Lego seemed to require some sort of inbuilt skill! But I copied what everyone else seemed to be doing and got tactile. I get it now. There is definitely a sense of achievement when you finish a small scene and it actually looks good. Especially photographed, there is something visually captivating about Lego.'

I struggled to describe what we'd made, saying: 'A lot of the ... scenes and photos made have an amazing quality, for me at least, of being shockingly ... I don't know what the word is ... hilariously uncomfortable, powerful, awful, in a good way, tasteless, carefully shocking, dark, spooky.'

And Eeva wrote about what she hoped this making and sharing would do: 'the actual making things with your own hands and taking a photo of it for other people gives space to discuss uneasy, even disgusting sides of commodity production. I would appreciate if our work – text and pictures together – would increase multi-sided discussion and get a critical message across to young people, especially. And if not, at least I consider my own thinking to be changed and awareness expanded'.

14. giving them Creative Commons licenses

We were beginning to get a sense of how this work, to go back to Ingold, 'invites the viewer to join the artist as a fellow traveller, to look with it as it unfolds in the world'.

& giving them creative commons licenses.



Putting the photos on flickr, and adding tags like, for example, 'iPhone Girl', Foxconn, Shenzhen, Apple, we hoped that web users doing image searches might come across our photos, take a second look, see what they illustrated, want to find out more, visit our site. That was the idea. But we also wanted the photos to travel, too, so gave all of them creative commons licenses so that they could be reproduced elsewhere.

These photos, to date, have had many thousands of views, and have also begun to be used in other publications including an article in Wired about robots replacing people on Foxconn's production lines, and in an article in Truthdig critiquing the 'hollow arguments' made against higher wages for factory workers. Both mention followthethings.com as the source of the images, and hopefully connect these articles to our site...

What's interesting about these photos is that both have been used in the spirit that they were made, these Lego scenes are unfolding in the world of web2.0.

15. 'What's with all these...?'

What's with all these 'Lego version of...?'

Andy Extance (@andyextance) 5:14pm · 2 Aug 12
What's with all these "Lego version of..." sites? Has the Lego marketing department gone for a full-on viral attack?

Angela Last (@angelalast) 8:29pm · 2 Aug 12
@followthethings More political Lego links for you! Legofesto: legofesto.blogspot.co.uk & what seems to have started it all: raster.art.pl/gallery/artist...

LEGOFESTO UNITED KINGDOM
Legofesto is a politics-junkie and news-hound, with a thing for lego. This is not a blog for children. She is very, very pissed off about how the War on Terror (or whatever we're now calling it) is prosecuted around the world, led by US/UK. Human rights abuses and real events in the world are recreated in lego. LEGO® in no way endorse this blog or the images

Legofesto's photostream
Sets | Galleries | Tags | People | Archives | Favorites | Profile | Add Legofesto as a contact

- Police brutality at the G20...** 4 photos
- Guantanamo Bay** 4 photos
- Sri Lanka: Bombing a...** 14 photos
- Abu Ghraib** 11 photos
- Darfur** 16 photos

"...an idiosyncratic campaign to keep the memory of what happened to detainees in US custody during the Bush Administration alive by recreating their suffering using Lego" (NY Times 2009).

"The simplicity of the artwork is made more powerful by stripping the original image down to its shocking essentials. Usually the tableau are added to her blog with a cut and paste of a news story about the incident, only rarely does the artist make a direct commentary" (Carling 2009).

"As we look at these and other photos, we see something that we don't normally see on other Lego blocks: fear, hopelessness, and the feeling of being powerless. ... These feelings transmit tension..." (rush81 2010).

"The use of children's toys is at once sanitizing and horrifying and many of the images have received thousands of views" (Wired 2009).

You might have come to this talk expecting this to be trivial stuff, a bit of light relief... It's certainly an odd experience to stand here talking to you about what my interns and I have been making with Lego. How could this be serious academic work? What kind of serious academic work is it?

These images exist in the new media ecology of web2.0. In the process of making followthethings.com and its Lego re-creations, we have tried to learn how to work effectively in this environment. Here, what's been helpful every now and again have been brief online discussions about what on earth we're doing, and how significant it is in terms of trade justice activism.

One discussion was started in a tweet by science journalist Andy Extance, asking 'What's with all these 'Lego versions of...' sites? Has the Lego marketing Department gone for a full-on viral attack?'

In response, we tried to explain what were doing, but then geographer Angela Last chipped in, saying this was ‘political lego’ and directing us to Libera’s Concentration Camp sets which, she said, had started it all. Searching online for more ‘political lego’, we came across a ‘politics junkie and news hound with a thing for Lego’, who went by the name of Legofesto.

She had recreated scenes from the ‘War on terror’ and made them available on Flickr in sets, such as ‘Police brutality at the G20’, ‘Guantanamo Bay’, Sri Lanka bombing, Abu Graib, and Darfur.

Her intention with the Guantanamo Bay scenes, for example, was to ‘keep the memory of what happened to detainees in US custody during the Bush administration alive’, by ‘stripping the original image down to its shocking essentials’, transmitting tension through Lego scenes whose mini figures show ‘fear, hopelessness and powerlessness’, physically burning the lego bricks and snapping apart the mini figures where appropriate, and cutting and pasting a news story beneath each one without passing comment herself.

She was simply ‘re-creating’ widely-reported scenes, including scenes so distressing that conventional photographs of them had not been published.

As one Wired journalist put it, her ‘use of children’s toys is at once sanitizing and horrifying and many of the images have received thousands of views’.

16. relations to wider activist work

Legofesto explained to the press why she had made this work. The War on Terror was ‘treating [people] as if they had no more moral worth than a toy figurine’.

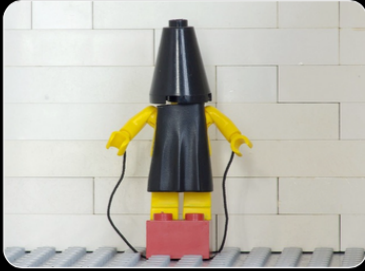
She’d seen her son ‘throwing his minifigures into a toy prison’ and wanted to see what happened when she ‘used the language and toys of play to depict the real world at its harshest and most unjust’.

By playing with Lego, she could create a visual tension in these Lego scenes that, she hoped, would make the viewer ‘linger longer’.

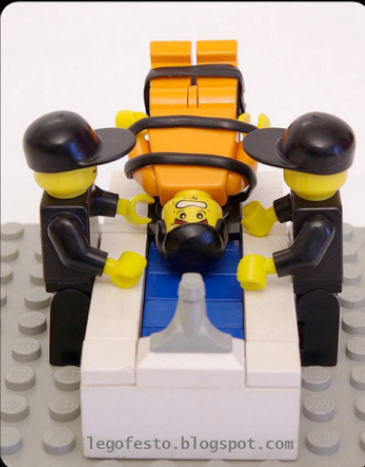
Posted online, the images, she hoped, would help to keep these atrocities in internet users’ minds, and ‘keep conversations about torture and state violence going, even after the news cycle had moved on’.

They would come up in searches, look intriguing, get some hits, and thereby keep the story alive ... at least a little.

... and relations to wider activist work?



"I was playing with my boy one day and he was doing what boys do, playing with knives and throwing minifigures into a toy prison and it made me think about how we're dehumanising people, we're treating them as if they had no more moral value than a toy figurine, so I thought it would be interesting to see what happened when I used the language and toys of play to depict the real world at its harshest and most unjust" (legofesto in Carling 2009).



legofesto.blogspot.com

LEGOFESTO

"By using toys, I hope the viewer will linger longer over the image and think again about what is actually being depicted or described, in a visual language that is recognised by us all: LEGO. ... The incongruity between the immoral and horrific acts and events depicted and the smiley-faced children's toy create a tension" (legofesto in Time Magazine 2009).

"I want to keep the debate going. To keep it in people's minds, to remind us of our atrocities because the media has moved on and they don't want to dwell on the tactics [of the 'War on Terror']. ... People are using Legofesto to talk about torture and state violence" (legofesto in Carling 2009).

"It was touching and profoundly humbling when recently freed prisoner Moazzem Begg told me that he had used Legofesto to explain to his children what he had been through" (legofesto in Carling 2009).

followthethings.com



The moment when Guantanamo Bay inmate Moazzem Begg realised that both he and the shackles that restrained him were 'Made in England'.

These re-creations were powerful stuff. She said she'd been amazed when freed Guantanamo Bay prisoner Moazzem Begg told her that he'd used her re-creations 'to explain to his children what he had been through'.

Coincidentally, the first re-creation we put online was the moment when Moazzem Begg realised that both he and the shackles that restrained him were 'Made in England'.

17. imagine

When I put this presentation together, I was hoping that - by this stage - some of you may have laughed at some of the re-creations I'd shown. And then maybe felt guilty for laughing. And then wondered why you should feel that way. And then said to yourself ... I'll have a look at these, maybe share one or two of them online with my friends, use them in lectures, maybe try to make one myself - I've got some of those pieces, I like the way they've used them, to get that critique right - send it to Ian, get it published on followthethings.com, add it to the publications on my CV. These are publications on my CV! Or should be. That, as far as I'm concerned, would be 'joining the artist as a fellow traveller'...



This is DIY work. None of the people who made it would consider themselves to be an artist. But the work that we have produced can be said to be artistic in the way that Ingold uses the term. This work is made to unfold in the world, somehow, based - perhaps - largely on its ability in its making and sharing to evoke the kind of ironic juxtapositions - described by James Brassett - that can be 'playful, chiding us to drop the straight faced moral seriousness that freezes ethical (self-)critique, [but] can [also] connect up with tragedy' (2009. 223), and creating the kind of jokes that can - as Paulo Virno puts it - 'open up an oblique path that links together heterogeneous semantic contents previously unrelated' (in Lewis 2010, 644).

That's follow the things work, re-imagined. I think. Making things and following them forwards.

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