

# N scale (Caring to begin)

Brigid Mc Leer<sup>1</sup>

1 Brigid Mc Leer is an Irish artist based in London. She trained in Fine Art at NCAD, Dublin, University of Ulster, Belfast and Slade School of Art, London. She is interested in ideas around contingent subjectivity and community, and works in various media/modes including video, durational performance, photography, and drawing/writing. Her work has been shown in galleries, public sites, as online projects and on the page. Recent solo exhibitions include 'One + One', at Highlanes Gallery, Drogheda and Wexford Arts Centre, Ireland, 'Horizontal Ontologies' Art Currents Institute, New York, Isoli [cont.], Lanchester Gallery Projects, Coventry, and 'Vexations', Site Gallery Sheffield, UK. Group exhibitions include 'Diagrams', Pallas Projects, Dublin and QSS Gallery, Belfast curated by Niamh McDonnell, 'Platform, In the Making' at Site gallery, 'L'Ultime Cena', Reffetorio di San Michele, Pescia, Italy, 'Beyond Fontana', curated by Stephanie Moran, Studio 1.1, London and 'Unspeakable Engagements' curated by Steve Dutton and Brian Curtin, Chulalongkorn University Gallery, Bangkok and LGP Coventry. McLeer has also published critical and art writing in international journals including: Performance Research, Circa, Building Material (Art and Architecture) and Visible Language and image-text based work in poetry/art journals such as Chain and Coil.

She has taught at a number of UK universities including, the Royal Academy, Goldsmiths, Kingston, Wimbledon and most recently Coventry School of Art & Design. Between 1995 – 2000 she helped establish the innovative BA in Performance Writing at Dartington College of Art. She is currently studying for a PhD by project in Fine Art (Photography) at the Royal College of Art, London. More details of her past work can be found at [www.brigidmcleer.com](http://www.brigidmcleer.com)

What follows is the story of how four innocuous objects from a world replete with commodities that have become the instigators of a *beginning*, which in turn has initiated a response in the form of an artwork, a living memorial, a space of appearance, a site of engagement, a collection of unique and precious objects and a critique. From the moment the objects were released from their expected use, they began anew, and in doing so required curation. But it is not the objects themselves that need to be curated but rather the beginning that they have become. How to curate this beginning is the challenge, both aesthetic and political, that this work sets out to meet.

*"If there is a single object that can be said to embody the disavowed implicit in the transnational bourgeoisie's fantasy of a world of wealth without workers, a world of uninhibited flows, it is this: the container, the very coffin of remote labor-power."*

Allen Sekula 'Fish Story'



Having received as a gift the four small plastic models, neatly packed in their own plastic blister, backed by shiny black cardboard, and clearly branded 'GRAHAM FARISH' (in yellow) 'by BACHMANN' (in white) 'ACCESSORIES' 'N scale', I laughed. At a scale of 1:148, each one was one hundred and forty eight times smaller than the real thing. Yet they were surprisingly well detailed. Each was exactly the right dimensions (just smaller) for a standard 20ft shipping container and had the familiar corrugated sides, essential corner fittings, 'steel' door handles and bolts, and recognisable shipping company logo 'MSC' or 'China Shipping' or 'P&O' or 'Maersk Sealand' or 'Hapag-Lloyd' or 'Hanjin' or 'Hamburg-Sud' or "K" Line or 'OOCL' etc. emblazoned on the containers in the relevant company colour. Additionally every single model had its own unique ISO compliant eleven digit container marking, just as real shipping containers do, beginning with three letters to identify the company owner, followed by a single letter either 'U', 'J' or 'Z' to identify the product group, which in the case of shipping containers will usually be a 'U', then a six digit serial number assigned by the owner to each individual container, and finally a single digit from 0 – 9, derived from a complex

algorithm, known as the 'check digit', common to all serial code markings from cheques to barcodes to product serial numbers, designed to ensure the entire code is correctly composed.

Even at this tiny scale it was hard not to appreciate the efficiency, simplicity and fit-for-purpose 'elegance' of these revolutionary logistical units. In this particular pack, there were two sets of two and when I took them out of the blister pack, on the base of each I found the only marking that did not conform to the full-scale reality, the brand name of the model manufacturer, printed in relief, 'BACHMANN', under which were the words 'MADE IN CHINA'.

I laughed because models, in all their miniaturised glory, often have that effect. There's something wondrous and absurd about them that can't help but draw delight. Something uncanny that comes about through a shift in scale, where the security of fixed human dimensions becomes unstable and the apparent laws that govern how things sit in relation to other things are strangely undone. With miniaturisation there is also the inference of play, even when the model has a 'serious' purpose. And when I held the four 'n scale' model containers in my hand, having released them from the aspic of their display packs, they were light, amazingly light, and rattled like a bunch of dice ready for a game.

I put them on a shelf in my office. And got on with other tasks. Mostly I forgot about them, though occasionally I would glance up and see them there and over time, I began to wonder what exactly were they now? As I wasn't a model rail enthusiast, they were hardly playthings for me. But neither were they part of the typology of useless things generally found on shelves; ornaments, souvenirs, trophies, pseudo 'objects d'art'. In a sense they were mementos of a light-hearted moment of gift-giving, a recognition of friendship and its intimate knowledges. But gradually they began to detach themselves from the provenance of even that event by which they had come to be placed in my hands. And instead they began to take on the quality of 'things in waiting'. I would look at them in puzzlement, not laughing. Like a word said aloud over and over, their reiterative presence made them strange and something about their status in between a representation and a functioning full-scale ob-

ject made it feel like the order of ‘illusion’ to which they belonged was not enough to contain them.

They ceased to sit still.

I picked them up, one by one. I turned them around between my fingers. I scrutinised them. I put them back down. I got on with other things. I came back later and there they were, still unstill.

I noticed their imperfections. The crude effects of automated injection moulding processes, the places where the plastic’s former liquid state was still evident in its now solid form, a slight edge or lip, or an inexact angle. But I still enjoyed their attention to detail, even if I could only see some of those details by holding the model at a very specific distance from my eyes, roughly the distance at which you hold a child’s face when you want them to know you’re there. At this distance I could see, in particular, the shape of the corner fittings, ‘ISO 1161’, with their recognisable oval shaped slots which mean that the containers can be stacked and locked one on top of another, thereby enabling thousands to be shipped together. Here of course, the slots were not holes but merely indents, as five of the six sides of the model were moulded as one continuous piece. Only the base plate was an additional section that had to be added, and could therefore also be taken off. One day I prised it off, to find that the model, as expected, was hollow and on the back of the base section was a small metal plate, presumably to give it some downward weight so that it would stand more securely when mounted on the appropriate ‘n scale’ trailer. I had no desire to do this. It had never even occurred to me to expand my range of Graham Farish by Bachmann ‘N scale’ model railway accessories. If I was only sure of one thing about these odd little objects, it was that they were intended, if intended for anything at all, to serve an entirely different purpose than that for which they had been made.

I forgot about them, until one day I picked one up and again almost ritualistically turned it around in my fingers, and read again BACHMANN, MADE IN CHINA. Not far from where I lived at the time, there was a factory that was going to be knocked down and turned into flats, in typical post-industrial regeneration fashion. The factory

had been home to Lesney ‘Matchbox’ Toys, a British company producing ‘die-cast’ model cars and vehicles. In equally typical fashion, during this re-generation phase, a local art organisation was commissioning artists to develop projects that would reflect on the site’s history and future use. I began to do some research into Lesney Matchbox Toys and discovered that the company had suffered the same fate in the 1980s as many independent British toy manufacturers who could no longer compete in an increasingly globalised market. Production was either out-sourced to cheaper factories in South East Asia, India or China, or they were entirely bought out by bigger multinationals who were already operating production facilities from these ‘new economic zones’ with their cheap labour, relaxed or non-existent labour laws, and endless supply of available migrant workers from poorer, rural regions. In this way the proximity of relationship between manufacturer and consumer became stretched, distributed and etiolated as supply-chains cut their links to local geographies, both social and physical, and became global. Company profits supervened upon the seamlessness of this increasingly complex and far-reaching chain, a seamlessness facilitated in large part by the invention of containerisation and the standardisation of global shipping trade logistics.

‘GRAHAM FARISH by BACHMANN’. BACHMANN, MADE IN CHINA. It might have been more accurate to write ‘BACHMANN buys GRAHAM FARISH’. ‘Graham Farish’, just like Lesney Matchbox Toys were independent British manufacturers of toys and model rail accessories set-up in the late 1940s. Due to cornering the ‘N scale’ market for model railways, they lasted longer than ‘Matchbox’ before being bought out by Bachmann in 2000. However, Bachmann, originally an American company begun in the late nineteenth century, is itself a subsidiary of a larger multinational, ‘Kader Industrial’ who bought them out in 1981. Kader was founded in Hong Kong around the same time that Graham Farish and Matchbox were set up in Britain, however it is Kader, according to Bachmann Model Trains website, that has become ‘the world’s largest manufacturer, by volume, of model railroads’.

\*

These stories were not unfamiliar, even if some of the names were. And they added a certain resonance to the meaning and potential of these four ‘n scale’ model shipping containers I had been given. But the meanings were apparent. It is hardly irrefutable any more that the container or ‘box’ as it is often known, is one of global capitalism’s most potent and ubiquitous symbols. In its uniform profligacy, and its visible invisibility, it continues to stalk the edges of consumer culture. Sliding through local train stations in between passenger trains, the ‘Freightliner’ schedule perforates commuter schedules and should we care to think about it, it might remind us that everything we have, pretty much everything we’ve bought, has arrived inside one of those boxes and has travelled a long, long way. It is not news of course. It is just capitalism. And so we step back from the edge and patiently let the train pass.

A model rail accessory is both metonym and mimesis. It too arrived inside its bigger counterpart, like a Russian doll, having travelled a long, long way, so not only is it a link to the supply-chain seamlessness it represents but it also relies directly upon it. But as a model accessory it can be held in the hand. I turn it around again in my hand for the umpteenth time. That human hands touch it, play with it, arrange and rearrange it in the rail enthusiast’s overall collection is what the model is for. This is its potency in both general and specific terms. But what is often forgotten is that at distances, in factories, oblivious to the meaning of such playful, puzzling, enduring touch, the model is fabricated. Hands work, predominantly small, young female hands, good at the dextrous tasks required to produce model upon model of these unremarkable boxes for grown-up men to play with. How skilled and adept their hands must become, as they repeat the gestures required for each particular stage of the production process. As one worker in a Chinese toy factory today put it, their hands “must never stop moving”. In an industry not yet entirely automated with human hands being replaced by computer controlled robotic arms, there is still tedious and repetitive manual tasks to be executed. When it comes to toys, even grown-ups toys,

these are often tasks with which women are traditionally associated; stitching, REF?, folding, pressing, turning, cutting, sticking, stacking, pulling, squeezing... And indeed they are tasks that continue to be performed predominantly by women and young girls in the factories of South East Asia, India, Bangladesh, South America, China and elsewhere, where ‘things’ becoming commodities are still made.

Kader Industrial, (the Hong Kong based manufacturer and owners of former American company Bachmann Inc. now producers of the formerly British brand Graham Farish, now Graham Farish by Bachmann ‘N scale’ model shipping containers, currently manufactured in China, four of which I was given as a gift from a friend on my birthday some years ago), once operated out of a factory complex in Thailand.

At the time, Nakhon Pathom Province was the location of a new industrial zone just outside Bangkok. Kader Industrial (Thailand) Ltd., along with many other manufacturing companies making goods for international export, had premises there and employed over six thousand workers.

Then one day, at 4.15pm just as workers were changing shifts, a fire started.

I opened my hand and looked at the tiny model box lying in my palm. It was not a relic. None of the one hundred and seventy six women and twelve men killed in the factory that day were directly involved in the process of making ‘n scale’ shipping container models. Kader at the time was a manufacturer of model trains but it also made toys for American and European retailers. And Kader Industrial, though then owners of Bachmann Inc., had not yet acquired Graham Farish. That was still to come. Yet there was a connection. The same company that had made the plastic model now lying innocently in my hand had allowed, through negligence and greed, an ‘accident’ of such devastating consequences to happen. To say that ‘there was blood on their hands’ seems just. Yet in the investigation that followed the fire, and the battle for compensation that ensued, Kader blamed Thai factory managers and when two weeks after the fire workers went to Hong Kong to demand



compensation from company investors, they came away empty-handed.

Of course Kader, whose investors were primarily Hong Kong based or Taiwanese, operated out of Thailand because of the need to compete in a global market. The pressure for cheap goods from consumers and retailers on British, European and American high streets and the pressure from shareholders for increasingly higher profits feeds a system of endless outsourcing in which those who are the most vulnerable and most in need become the most exploited and expendable ‘parts’ of the system. It is nothing new it is simply endemic to a system in which the pursuit of private wealth and the management of economic matters come to be the principles by which all life is governed. Friedrich Engels recognised as much when he wrote in 1872,

*“the infamous holes and cellars in which the capitalist mode of production confines our workers night after night, are not abolished; they are merely shifted elsewhere! The same economic necessity that produced them in the first place, produces them in the next place.”* (Engels: 1872)

Blood flows, and becomes sticky when it seeps out. The more one looks, the less clean all the hands become.

Before the fire began at 4.15pm on that day in May 1993 one can imagine that those young women’s hands were aching, growing tired, slowing down perhaps, as it was nearly time to change shifts and go home. Perhaps one of them had signalled to a friend to meet up after work and get some air after their long day in the humid, dusty factory. No doubt on that same day, somewhere in central London I was anticipating with excitement meeting up with friends the following evening to celebrate my twenty-third birthday. At 4.15pm I was probably taking the tube home to change before heading out to work at my part-time evening job. I don’t remember hearing or reading anything about this fire that evening, or the following day. I don’t remember (and my ‘forgetting’ is essential to the smooth operation of global capitalism) reading that the fire had started small but spread rapidly due to the inadequate storage and management of highly flammable materials used in the factory, nor

about the factory owners total lack of adherence to proper health and safety provisions, such as accessible fire-exits and working alarms, effective sprinkler systems or a well rehearsed evacuation procedure. I never found out at the time that the young women, some around my age, others considerably younger, and some of the men, had been trapped inside the building because the doors to stairwells were locked shut ‘to prevent theft’. In 1993, before the internet, rolling news and mobile digital technologies, I would have had to buy the newspaper, or turn on the TV or radio to find out that the factory was busy at the time producing a consignment of ‘Bart Simpson’ toy dolls for shipment to the US and Europe. Indeed I would have had to buy specifically ‘The Independent’ newspaper the next day, May 11th, perhaps while travelling off to my birthday celebrations, to read one of very few reports published on the fire. If I had, I would have learned that those young women, mostly emigrants from poorer rural communities in Northern Thailand, earned little more than £80-£105 a month (much less than I was earning in my part-time job) for working gruelling shifts and long hours. Had I read ‘The Independent’ report on the tube on my way out to meet my friends, I might have realised that the fifteen minutes it took for me to travel from my home to the city centre was the same time it took for three of the four, four-storey buildings in the Kader factory complex to completely collapse, leaving me to wonder perhaps, that it was a miracle that not more than one hundred and eighty-eight of the four thousand workers changing shifts in the factory at 4.15pm that day were not killed. (Whitacker: 1993)<sup>2</sup>

But, like many other people in London and elsewhere who didn’t pick up the newspaper on May 11th 1993, I didn’t know any of this, and quickly even those who knew must have forgotten as one remote and far-away tragedy ceded its way to

<sup>2</sup> In this newspaper report the buildings are said to have collapsed after only fifteen minutes. However a much more comprehensive and recent fire report by Casey C Grant for the ILO Encyclopaedia of Occupational Health and Safety outlined that the buildings in fact did not all collapse until 6.05pm.

others and as 'we' got on with our lives, working, studying, partying and shopping.

I didn't know anything of any of this until that blister pack of four 'n scale' model plastic shipping containers was placed in my hand, on May 11th some eighteen years later.

\*

Now, what is to be done?

A gift was given, a birthday gift, an innocuous, playful, 'miniature' gift. And through the workings of contemporary modes of public art practice, research was triggered that revealed the gift to hold a story. The story is one of both ubiquity and uniqueness. A deadly combination it transpires, in which ubiquity comes to drown out the particular. The story repeats itself, just as the little emblematic containers do, and in its repetition it disappears. Who doesn't know that capitalism exploits? Who doesn't know that the sweatshops of Asia and South America persist despite constant calls for new legislation at national and international levels? Who doesn't know that when you buy a t-shirt at H&M, or a computer at the Apple Store, or a stuffed teddy for a child, or any other commodity, that some young girl (most likely) somewhere far away from my Western high-street, has dextrously assembled it, or part of it, while not thinking of you (and your outfit or your essay or your kid's birthday) just as profoundly as you are not thinking of her. Who doesn't know that the connections that underlie our global condition rely upon alienations that have become so immanent as to be almost invisible.

And yet here they are. Four little plastic containers rattling in my hand. Somehow becoming particular. Four of one hundred and eighty-eight. If I had forty-seven times as many as these four, my hands could never hold them, nor would the count, though specific, be tangible without being counted and even then it would be hard to keep track. And the number anyway is probably a lie. But it is with the counting that the disappearance begins. Who is Prathai Prayonghorm? She is number 132. Who died? The workers died. Who were they? They were 'the victims': one hundred and seventy six young migrant women from Northern Thailand, and twelve men...

The abstractions accumulate and the human cost manifests itself as a diagram of statistics that float above reality like a virtual cloud. What can be done to give back to this reality its density, its particularity, its life? How does one begin to care, and form that care into an artwork from which might be occasioned some small transformation? The question rattles, and seems to sound an answer in the rattling itself.

Begin with a box, and another, and another, and another.

Four 'n scale' miniature plastic shipping containers; a material reality passed between hands.

\*

The English word 'curate' comes from the Latin 'cura' meaning 'care'. So 'to curate' something is to care for it, or take care of it, hence its subsequent usage in terms of the role of a museum or collection's 'curator'. Its more contemporary understanding as the staging of an exhibition or arrangement of objects or events is a shift in focus away from the specific action of 'caring' towards the 'careful' display of such 'cared for' items. In this contemporary usage a certain quality of intention and responsibility has drained away, leaving only its visible effects.

However, here in the work that is emerging from the unquiet rattling of these 'n scale' plastic shipping containers 'curation' is brought back into contact with the demand of care at its heart. As such the demand of the work is not only to care, but also to *curate* care - a question of form - both aesthetic and political. *How* to care, in a work of art, for a tragedy at such a distance both of time and space? *How* to care for its victims, its calls for justice, its contemporary implications, its socio-economic underpinnings, its echoes in other subsequent and similar factory fires and collapses, its material and human reality? And how to do this not simply as activism or memorialisation but as an artwork in which activism and memorialisation (already practices impelled by care) find further, and perhaps more nuanced, articulation through the curation of objects, actions and bodies?

These are the questions I have been grappling with since I put that birthday gift of four 'n scale'



plastic shipping containers on my shelf and saw that they would not sit still. And they are indeed questions of curation, and care, and of what to do when it seems that whatever is done is always not enough.

\*

In New York city on March 25th 1911 there also was a fire in a factory, a garment factory known as the 'Triangle Shirtwaist factory'. Just like the Kader factory over eighty years later, its workers were mainly young migrant women, in this case primarily from the European diaspora whose families had come to America to build new and better lives for themselves. In this fire one hundred and forty-six workers died, again in similar circumstances to the Kader victims; inadequate or faulty fire escapes, locked exits, dangerous working conditions. And just as the young Kader factory women did, they too jumped from high windows, many of them dying from the fall. William Shepherd, a young reporter present by chance at the scene wrote,

*"I saw every feature of the tragedy visible from outside the building. I learned a new sound - a more horrible sound than description can picture. It was the thud of a speeding, living body on a stone sidewalk. Thud-dead, thud-dead, thud-dead, thud-dead. Sixty-two thud-deads. I call them that, because the sound and the thought of death came to me each time, at the same instant."*

Shepherd's brief but harrowing report describes a visceral count, sixty-two 'thud-deads', each time a death that is felt in the body, his body, as it takes place in the body of its victim. One imagines it like a kind of beating thud, thud, thud, thud... dead, dead, dead... onto the body of the reporter. This transference from one body to another is deeply important to the condition of witnessing yet nothing about the reports of the Kader fire (few that there were) seemed to communicate such a proximity. Hence it seems that one of the formal tasks of any artwork that might be made in relation to the Kader fire should deal in a proximity of bodies and the affect of one body on another. In this case however it would be living bodies mobilising

'life' as a form of *caring for*, *'curating'*, the dead.

Throughout there is also repetition at work. Just as work in a factory is repetitious work, and factories repeat themselves over time and territory, and the commodities that factories make are repetitions of commodities already, and yet to be made, these needless tragedies too repeat. These plastic models too are a repetition and an abstraction but the task of the work is to handle them such that they become, from the repetitions that constrict them, specific and individuated, the affect of the particular at work in the ubiquitous.

In New York every year since 2004, on March 25<sup>th</sup>, what the artist and activist Ruth Sergel does is to stage a memorial action to the victims of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire. The action is figured around their one hundred and forty-six names and takes place throughout the city in which they lived. On the anniversary day Sergel coordinates a team of volunteers who fan out through the city and chalk the names of the victims on the street outside where they once lived. The inscriptions cite the victim's name, age, address and circumstances of death i.e. Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire.

In its form, the memorial action disperses the victims' names out from the site of death and into the city where they lived their lives. The ephemeral quality of the chalk, and the 'hand-written' aspect of the inscription which often requires the volunteer to kneel down on the pavement, create a tender, humble and 'anti-monumental' memorial. Chalking the inscription on the pavement seems especially poignant as it draws attention to, and on, the space of 'thud-dead' as Shepherd described it, at the same time as it calls to mind the hand printing of famous actors on the forecourt of the Chinese Theatre in Hollywood. The pavement becomes a shared realm even in the context of such inequities.

In its annual iteration this work embeds the memory of the victims into the city in which they lived and worked. Living, working and remembering are recursive upon the same ground. Which is not to say that it is inward looking but it does remind one of the degree to which such located recursivity in terms of the production and consumption of commodities has become an anachronism for which we grow more and more nostalgic.

In the case of the Kader fire and its curation into a work of critical reflection, the ‘memorial/artwork’ has to stage itself upon the global tangle of distributions, supply-chains and remote complexities that underpin the lives of its victims, and the lives of ‘we’ who forget them, then and now. It is not accurate it seems to me, as I rattle the little plastic containers in my hands, to locate the memorial (neither literally nor figuratively) in the place of the fire. Or even near it. Instead it is the very fact that I can hold these model containers made in a factory in China, in my hands in an office in a building in England that makes their rattling all the more resounding. It is the distance that amplifies the sound.

So the work must resound that distance, somehow, at the same time as it draws attention to the connections that close it.

\*

So what have I done to begin this process of care and curation of the beginning that was these four plastic containers refusing to sit still?

Firstly I have multiplied them forty-seven times and now they are one hundred and eighty-eight. One hundred and eighty-eight tiny model shipping containers, metonymic ‘gifts’ standing in for one hundred and eighty-eight uncared-for young factory workers. My intention is to transform them from ubiquitous ‘commodities’ into unique and precious objects by way of a material transformation; the casting of each plastic container into copper smelted from copper coins.

Money itself is a curious thing these days. Increasingly and dangerously abstracted from the value of real material, it has itself become a product, a commodity. And yet in 1992, a year before the Thai fire, as this process was gaining momentum the price of copper rose massively due to the rapid expansion of Chinese and other markets (predominantly following the model of Western economies). This had a direct effect on the literal cost of money in Britain, so much so that the Royal Mint stopped producing pure copper coins and instead made their ‘coppers’ from cheaper steel laminated in copper. This meant, and still means, that a 2p coin is worth in terms of its material value, 3p. So

to acquire enough pure copper coins to cast all one hundred and eighty-eight plastic containers, the coins have to be collected from money that is already in general circulation. Hence a process or event of collection also needs to be curated.

The one hundred and eighty-eight plastic containers are currently a collection of their own. They reside in a specially designed sculptural object comprised of a series of nested acrylic boxes, suggestive of the storage or display of trinkets, that functions as a miniature memorial and also a kind of ‘vessel’ – a device for storage, display and transportation. The configuration of the memorial/vessel copied from the layout of the Kader factory buildings is therefore a sort of architectural model of the factory complex. Holding together all the separate boxes that make up the factory model are two solid acrylic rods, one of which is pushed right through the entire two-meter length of the memorial sculpture. It is a kind of ram shoved through the spaces where the doors would have been, a reminder of the locked exits and blocked fire escapes that caused so many people to remain trapped inside the building as it burnt down.

When the memorial/vessel/factory model is unlocked, unpacked and unloaded, within the time and staging of a eight hour durational performance - itself intended to be a mimicry or metonym of repetitive labour - the memorial object becomes a memorial site and an arena of commodities, things, bodies and actions calling for witness, reflection and, at selected times, participation in the form of the throwing of copper coins into the memorial ‘ring’.

The coins will then also be collected within the acrylic boxes which additionally bring to mind vitrines for the donation of money often located at the entrance to museums or other such public institutions. When enough have been collected the coins will be smelted down and the plastic containers used as molds from which new, and unique, copper casts will be produced.

While awaiting this transformation, the plastic containers are each wrapped up in coloured ribbon, protecting them and also echoing the swaddling of burnt bodies as they were laid out on the ground having being recovered from the rubble of the factory. These ribbons (in colours that match the plastic containers) invoke ceremony, the sewing



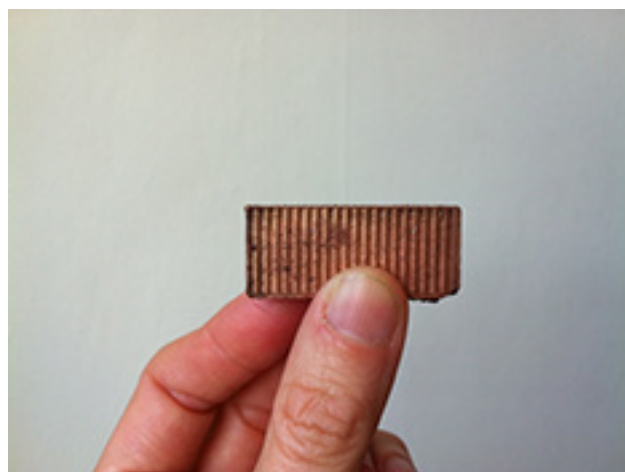
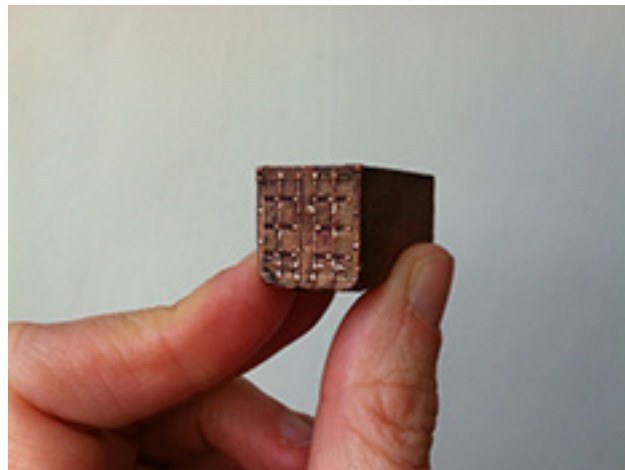


of garments and folk culture but are also directly appropriated from the emblems of nineteenth century operative workers' and trades union' societies. When unfurled within the performance of the work to reveal the tiny plastic model within them they draw a new emblem for these 'disappeared' factory workers who hadn't then, and still in the case of many contemporary factory workers in China, Asia and elsewhere, haven't now, got any adequate union representation.

Each ribbon-wrapped container also has a number, drawn from the ISO serial codes used to identify shipping containers. These numbers are a form of 'counting' that draws attention to the abstractions that stand between logistics and the uncounted reality of thousands of workers in this global chain. In order to oppose these abstractions I am hoping to include the names of each of the one hundred and eighty-eight victims. However, perhaps unsurprisingly given the investment in forgetting that surrounds this tragedy, the names are hard to find, at least from this distance. I am currently in touch with someone who may be able to give them to me, but this is far from certain. To date I have found only one or two, and consequently a quality and weight of human reality still evades the work. Though in itself this is not inappropriate, as it is this very human reality that is constantly evaded in the interest of supply chain seamlessness, profit and the systematic alienation of individuals – workers and consumers – in the world of global capital.

All of these elements have been so far curated into an object that waits, like a vessel docked. In performance the object will be activated and the memorial it exists as will become live. As such it is the curation of living bodies, voices, actions and movements, in relation to all these things, that are the current task of the work. Ultimately my intention is that the one hundred and eighty-eight plastic containers, when finally cast into copper from the coins donated, will become the cared for collection of a further one hundred and eighty-eight 'curators'. Ordinary people (who may perhaps become the members of a new *inoperative* workers' society) that will each take it upon themselves to care for these tiny little casts, the critique contained within them and the remembering of a young woman or

man far away who died in a needless, shameful fire while making the things 'we' now hold.



## References

- Engels, F (1872) *The Housing Question* (First appeared as articles in Volkstaat, Germany 1872-73)
- Whitacker, R (1993) Fire in Thailand factory leaves 210 dead: No alarms of fire escapes in building that collapsed in 15 minutes as 4,000 workers changed shifts. *The Independent* [online] pages. Available at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/fire-in-thailand-toy-factory-leaves-210-dead-no-alarms-or-fire-escapes-in-buildings-that-collapsed-2322362.html> Accessed: 12.10.16
- Ruth Sergel, 'Chalk: Public intervention' <http://streetpictures.org/chalk/>