

In Conversation with Sophie Woodward and Ian Cook: Material Methods 4 – Political Lego

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SPEAKERS

Sophie Woodward, Ian Cook

Sophie Woodward

Hello, my name is Sophie Woodward, and I'm a professor of sociology at the University of Manchester. I'm also the co-investigator for the National Centre for Research Methods where I lead in creative methods. So welcome to this In Conversation event. And it's on the topic of material methods. So you may have seen some of the other videos on this. And if not, please do have a watch. And so this is the fourth in the series and basically, what we're looking at is, I'm having conversations with a series of different academics who use what I understand to be material methods to give you some introduction or interesting insight into different ways people have used these methods. So I'm really excited today to be in conversation with Ian Cook. And Ian is based at Exeter. So Ian, if you'd like to introduce yourself briefly?

Ian Cook

Yeah, my name is Ian Cook, otherwise known as Ian Cook et al on paper. And I'm a professor of cultural geography at the University of Exeter, and I'm the CEO of the spoof shopping website followthethings.com.

Sophie Woodward

Brilliant, thank you. Ian's done lots and lots of things that I would consider to be sort of different material methods. But today, I think we're going to talk specifically about political Lego and also how that links to follow the things. So follow the things is a kind of methodological approach that's been used quite widely in geography, but also perhaps a little bit in other disciplines. But I think there's quite an interesting take that you have on it, Ian. And so I think what I'd like to do then is just, if I could ask you to start off by telling me about what is political Lego and also, if possible, how does that link to follow the things?

Ian Cook

Well, yeah, political Lego, I mean, it's quite hard to define because I didn't read about it and then do it. I started playing with Lego and I started making these sort of scenes from the follow-the-things website.

We research filmmaking in art and activism that encourages people to think about who makes their stuff, basically. So there's all kinds of different characters and scenes and iconic kind of thought-provoking scenes, basically, that you see in this kind of work. And what happened is that I had a group of interns, and we started to try and recreate some of these scenes in Lego, just because we were just doing this open-ended, kind of play-based Lego lab. For three weeks, I was working with some interns, and I just said, "Well, I'll bring my Lego in and we'll just make stuff with Lego." We made a container ship first. That's follow the things, it's all about trade. And then we thought, what should we do next? So we started making what we've been researching. And then as soon as we sort of started to share it with people online, it was like, "Oh, that's interesting. That's really sick but also really funny. I'll have a look at that again. What on Earth are you doing?" So political Lego really is, is it's using Lego to recreate kind of, for us, controversial scenes in real life to do with trade injustice, to do with the Rana Plaza building collapse, recreated in Lego and then photographed and then put online as a way of drawing attention to something that people might not necessarily look at if it was a photograph. You know, what I mean? So it's a kind of a, it's a recreation of controversial incidents and scenes in order to put that online and then create a conversation about it. It's best known I think, well. So for example, there was a blogger called Lego Festo, I think she's still active, who recreated scenes from the War on Terror in Lego, the Guantanamo Bay series and whatever. And it was like a way she said to keep the story alive, because the fact that you'd made something so tasteless, out of Lego, it drew attention to it. And it's not trivialising it. It's actually kind of respectfully and carefully recreating something in order to generate and maintain conversation about it and draw attention to that topic when the news cycle goes. So that's kind of a, that's a long answer to your question. But you know, it is that kind of idea that you're doing something with Lego that Lego isn't supposed to be for, in order to engage people and move people in a way and move audiences to think about what it is that you're interested in, you know, what it is that you're concerned about, really,

Sophie Woodward

I think that idea of the kind of, you know, the recreation of things that happen, but also I think what's really interesting, what you said is the kind of ways in which these things have effects as well. And that kind of intentional politics in that I guess as well, in terms of sort of producing, the act of recreating these scenes, but also the act of trying to get things, these kind of Lego scenes, to have effects on people as well. And that seems to be some of what you're saying around the fact you're conversations. Yeah, yeah. Interesting.

Ian Cook

Yeah, I mean, it's not political playdough you know. It's not political woodchip or something like that, or political flour. You know, there's something about Lego that already has that effect, that those kind of affective relations and memories for... It's the most played with toy, I think, well, the most successful toy worldwide. So the language of Lego is already out there. People's memories of playing with Lego and making things are already out there. And so when you... the idea is when when you see a political Lego scene, you can see how it's made, you know, it's constructed. So you know that it's something... And then the idea is, I mean, when we get maybe later into the whole kind of theory of the whole thing, is that automatically, in a way, what's already in people's head is well, I could make something different with the same bricks, you know, I could make a different kind of society with the same bricks or I can make I've got all of those bricks, I could make something like that. So you it's almost like you... it's

something that you... affect is a good word. But it's I think that one of the ways that I read about it is that, Lego artists write about this, is you see it with your hands. Do you know what I mean? It's that you're kind of all going, you're kind of thinking, "Well I could make that." I've got those bits, you know, that kind of thing. And I think there's something... there's different ways in which you can engage people through material methods. But I think this idea of seeing something with your hands is what's unique to political Lego, because there's so much Lego literacy out there, you know, and Lego memories and what have you, that you're kind of messing with a little bit, but also going along with I think. Particularly myself, you know, I played Lego as a child, I played Lego with my kids, you know. This is just something that I know how to do. It's a kind of form of creativity that I've learned from being a kid. So it's not like I have to learn a new skill. It's just I'm taking something that I already understand, that I already have some literacy with, and just play with other people, and then just kind of like twisting it a little bit to make these kind of political Lego scenes to draw attention to these kinds of controversies and what have you.

Sophie Woodward

Yeah, I realised I should be doing this In Conversation at home, because I usually work in my children's bedroom, and it's literally a shrine to Lego. It's more appropriate, probably. Yeah, so I just asked you a little bit then about the follow-the-thing method, because you've written elsewhere about the idea about sort of connecting the people who make stuff within the people who consume it. And so I wonder if you could talk a little bit more about that in terms of I know, you've done the stuff around prime mark as well, for example, haven't you?

Ian Cook

Yeah, I mean, I just was thinking about, you know, when you do this kind of follow the thing, when you're trying to make these connections between, you know, people who buy stuff, and people who make stuff, and there's all these kind of intermediary people working in corporations, or managing factories or driving trucks, or, you know, working along on ships, and all this kind of stuff, you know, there's tonnes of tonnes of different connections in the chain. But when you do the following things, all you end up doing is you're always in the factory, and you're always in the farm. Those are the photographs you see in the newspaper reports, aren't they? I mean, those are the... that's all in the films and the documentaries. But it's very unusual to actually see, for example, the CEO of a company just in his office, or in her office, just just doing what making decisions. And so one of the things that I really, really enjoyed about making the Lego to go along with these with these kinds of, you know, these these documentary films or whatever, is that I just thought, "Well, everyone is equally Lego-able." So of course, I might recreate from a photograph a particular scene from a particular documentary, but why don't I just recreate something that I don't know happened, but I assume it happened. So for example, one of my favourite examples that just made me laugh so hard and that's very important that this sort of stuff. It's like you... it's a certain kind of laughing and you think, "Maybe I shouldn't be laughing, but this is great." So there's this phenomenon known as the Streisand effect, which is one of my favourite, which is when a corporation attacks its critics so publicly over such a long period of time that it draws attention to their critique and makes everyone want to see a film, because it's the film they didn't want you to see. So it's called the Streisand effect. So part of the Primark on the Rack series, which is in the paper, in Transactions of the Institute, you know, the political Lego paper that I wrote, was a series of the Primark CEO. I mean, I don't know what he looks like, but I decided that this

particular Lego minifigure was, you know, was him. So there's a moment when he's at home, and he's on his laptop, and he's reading... I think he's reading an article by George Monbiot in the Guardian talking about the Streisand effect and how it's really, really stupid for a corporation to actually go after their critics in the courts. Because it'll just become.. It'll make it viral. It'll make it something that everyone wants to talk about. And so I wanted to Lego the moment when he learned what the Streisand effect was and I just figured that everyone is equally visible, as you decide. And you can you know that something like that probably did happen. And because it's obviously, you know, it's made up, it's fake. It's made of Lego, for goodness sake, you're not you're not making a photograph or anything like that, you know, clearly it's made up. But the point I think, is very, very powerful, I think. And I really liked the idea that, you know, someone at Primark has probably had a look at these Lego scenes. And I don't know what they would say about them, you know, it's like, did that happen? Didn't it happen? Does it really matter? Like you need to know about the Streisand effect, for goodness sake, you know, I mean, and this Streisand effect is quite a common thing in the follow-the-things activism genre. Either it happens by accident, or activists are doing it on purpose. They're deliberately trying to get their activism banned in order that it draws attention to it so you can say that it's banned. So you know, I think, yeah... So I just thought that these places of work that everyone does along a supply chain are equally important, but they're not equally visible with photography, or the way that you come across things. So that's what I kind of wanted to do to show these kind of connected lives through the medium of Lego, to visualise them through the medium of Lego. And the other thing that I kind of found myself doing is that you don't have that many expressions that you can draw upon a Lego mini-figure's face. So I ended up taking... So there was... Some of the heads with the expressions that I really like are then taken from one scene in the Primark offices and put somewhere else like at Rana Plaza. It's the same face with the same kind of emotions but in different places. So you do have this really kind of interesting, weirdly empathetic connections to do with the emotions that people are... So, for example when the Rana Plaza happened, Primark ended up being like the poster boy, I think it was described as, of the Rana Plaza. It was always, "The Primark factory collapses. Primark this." And so I made a scene in the office, the headquarters office of Primark, with the... It was the CEO and his, kind of like marketing team. And they're on their laptops. And they're absolutely... they look absolutely horrified, because there's no way that they can argue that this is some rogue journalist who's telling fibs about them. They're kind of thinking... It's like, "This shit has happened." You know? And so... "How the hell are we gonna.. how the hell are we going to deal with this?" You know, but I use the same face of horror on, I think it was a firefighter, who was crying at the scene of Rana Plaza, because, you know, somebody that we're trying to rescue had died in a fire, you know, that kind of thing. So, I'm talking about this very enthusiastically and I think it's quite funny. But it's also deeply sort of tragic. And, I really, kind of, I found that playing with Lego this kind of way allowed me and the people I was working with to explore this ridiculous array of emotions and affect or whatever that run through these kinds of really tragic kinds of stories in a way that I could never do just by writing about it, I think. That's where the affect kind of you know, and the emotion, kind of fit in really. It's that is that these... Lego already has that sort of stuff in it. And then once you start to play around with it and move it around, and you know, you recreate these different scenes of connected lives, then I think you end up having a much better understanding of those connected lives than if you'd just written about them. Because, this is a long answer, I'm sorry, but I've just got one more thing to say. It's that when you're making a little scene, so it's a little micro scene, which you take really close up with your camera upside down, so the lens is on the floor looking up kind of thing. You're thinking so carefully about the choice of the facial

expressions, the clothes that people can wear. There's not very many. And then the sort of accessories and how it's all lined up. So there's a certain kind of interaction going on. Eyes are meeting or, you know, that kind of thing. There's a certain kind of drama and you photograph it... Fiddle with it a little bit more until it into you think, "Oh, that's it, that's it." And then you've captured that kind of that moment, that real "ouch" kind of moment. And so what you're doing is... it's a really weirdly empathetic geographical thing to do to create one of these scenes and to think about how they connect with others. And it's done with a lot of care. And a lot of... It isn't fun, you know, what I mean? Is it looks like it's fun, but it's not because what you're creating is something that you know is oftentimes something really bloody awful, you know, but... as a way to express that, you know, the complexity of that emotion and those relational connections and all that kind of stuff. I just found it was a way to think it through and maybe to theorise it better and to put it on the page, in a way that I couldn't just by writing.

Sophie Woodward

Yeah, I mean, that's some really interesting things. I particularly like this idea of, it's kind of rethinking a lot of that follow-the-thing method. It's not just because I think in lots of ways follow the thing is being reduced to the idea that you follow the commodity chain all the way through. But I think almost the kind of imaginative bit, but also visualising different points, I think is really interesting, like, you know, the things that aren't always made visible. So I think that's really interesting. But this... what you've just said about thinking through the doing Lego is just really fascinating, I think. And that brings me into one of the kind of main things that I want to talk about. It's how we can think about political Lego as a kind of material method, because one way of thinking about your methods is that they are methods to understand materiality, but the only reason how we use the stuff of everyday life, whether that's an object interview, or whether it is political Lego, how these kind of material practices, or different methods, because they help us to approach something differently or think about something differently. And I think you've kind of spoken to that a little bit already. But what if you could talk a little bit about that more, about the the kind of materiality of Lego and playing with Lego? And how, maybe, we could think about this explicitly as a kind of material method in that way?

Ian Cook

Yeah, I mean, I suppose the way that I've tried to do that... because I started off doing this political Lego with I think there was six of us. And we're all doing our various sort of things and showing it to one another. And we had quite an intense kind of, you can imagine, quite entertaining, but intense, and really kind of like super serious kind of conversations about how to do this respectfully, and how to do this in a way that would capture people's attention. So there was something about... I did the Primark series on my own. But the way that the political Lego works much, much better is when you're doing it with other people. So you might be sitting in a room, you know, with everyone doing their own thing. Or you might come in during the... I used my political Lego in the pensions strike for UCU as well. So I created this character called Lego VC. Now, the thing is, I always did those creations, but they were all based on conversations on the picket line, and cafes and stuff like that. And I would just churn them over and then just create this thing and put it online, you know. But the Lego lab concept is really, really, I found to be really... We were going to do this weren't we in that workshop in Manchester but it never happened because of COVID. But the idea would be is that you just I just bring along my Lego. And I've got I've got a very specialist collection of Lego because it's got tonnes of minifigures and lots of weird accessories and not very many blocks, because I'm not trying to recreate Wembley Stadium, you

know. It's just tiny little close-up things. So there was a project that I was involved in called Blood Bricks, and it was about the brick trade in Bangladesh, I think it was. That's right. And the bricks that were being made there and exported to the UK. And it was about brick trade, brick kilns and the labour and what have you. And so I got together with the people in the team and some other brick specialists and had a Lego lab, which is appropriate, you know, plastic bricks, and, you know, normal bricks. And one of the things that was really amazing there is that I wasn't sure how it would go, but they seem to be quite confident. So I thought, well, I go with it. So they employed a photographer to document their fieldwork, and he then produced these amazing photographs. But they weren't able to use some of them because they had not been taken according to academic ethics, informed consent. I don't know the exact reason. I don't want to go too much into that, because that's their thing. But so what we said is, well... They showed me these photographs, and it's like, "Why don't you recreate those in Lego?" And they recreated them in Lego and they were just so brilliant. They were absolutely amazingly moving photographs that almost seemed to have the same if not more, sort of affective power than the photographs themselves. So then, and then we sort of had different other people who were Legoining their knowledge of the brick trade. And they produced these kinds of amazing work. And I think because everybody knew how to play Lego and everyone knew about the brick trade. And so it was just a question of rummaging around. Basically you put all the Lego on the table, and people don't necessarily know what they're going to do because you get inspiration from the pieces themselves. So this is part of the material method thing. You don't picture what you want to do and then find the pieces. It's kind of going backwards and forwards between some rough idea and what's there and then you end up having to use all kinds of, I don't know... I wanted to do this... One of the Lego, the Primark ones, is this journalist interviewing a firefighter outside Rana Plaza and the microphone that the journalist is holding to interview the firefighter is actually a Lego fork upside down. So you have to improvise, you know, with what you've got. If you don't have a Lego microphone, it's like well just find something else that kind of works like that, you know. So there is this kind of interplay between, you know, what you've actually got, the materials you've got and the ideas that you have. And so it isn't like... You're not materialising a thought. Do you know what I mean? There's this dialogue going on between the materials, and the ideas and, and it's almost like what you thought you were gonna do and what you end up doing are often very, very different to each other. Because you might have a great idea and then when you make it, it just looks bad, you know. So you have to just take it to pieces, and talk to somebody else and see what they're doing. And then they'll give you a piece. And, you know, that kind of thing. In the process of having the conversation with all, you know, that rustling Lego noise as the soundtrack, kind of thing, you end up having a very, very serious conversation, and then you share what you've, you know, you share what you've made, usually by by tweeting it or putting on Instagram or something like that. And then you put it on the screen and see what everyone has actually produced. And just as a method, it was a fantastic way of having a serious conversation. But not starting off by saying, "Let's have a serious conversation." You know, let's just make some stuff, let's just make what it is we're thinking about and in the process, things start to bubble up and you end up having quite profound... I find it very, very difficult if someone expects me to say profound things in an interview. I could be sitting around making something and things just bubble up, you know, as and when, you know, they come into your mind, you know. But I think the other thing about it is... I haven't done this year, but there is that kind of idea as well about... A lot of my ideas about this come from a geographer called Tara Woodyer, who's a geographer, a ludic geographer, a geographer at play. And a lot of this comes from her doing research where she's playing with kids, basically, you know, making Lego or an

Airfix kit or playing a video game or something like that, you know, so as a research method, doing something, and then the conversation bubbles up. And that conversation can be really, you know, really, really fascinating, but you have no idea what's going to happen. But if you get the right people in the right... I always think if you get a really interesting combination of people in a comfortable space, with all the right kinds of materials there to play with, you know that something's going to happen. You don't know exactly what it is, but you know that something interesting is going to happen. It's kind of like party planning in a way. But you know, our research is like that, I think, isn't it? But getting people together with something to do to make together or with Lego. There's the convention of parallel play isn't there as well. So we're not making the same... We're just playing together, but separately. And I just think it kind of works as a way of, you know, for me anyway, it works as a way of generating these kinds of conversations.

Sophie Woodward

It's really interesting, because on one level is the kind of ways in which the kind of act of making does generate interesting talk. But I think one thing as well, I'm really interested in that's come out a little bit, what you say is the ways in which on one level, it's going with what Lego is, and what it's always intended to be, which is imaginative, playful, creative, but at the same time is this kind of subversive element in it as well. And, and I'm really interested in the ways in which the materiality of Lego allows that coexistence because it allows people to play because that's what it was intended for. But at the same time it is the subversion. It's not going against that, that's kind of part of Lego, because you can mix and match.

Ian Cook

You can make a tower and smash it straightaway, can't you? That's not what the, you know, the instructions tell you to do. But there's a lot of... a lot of that comes from people's experience of Lego. It's very, very... Because I think there's the Lego movie. It's the tension between, I don't have you seen it, but it's the tension between sticking to the rules, the instructions on the box, and then just making whatever, whatever comes to mind. And if you want to make something that's annoying or funny, or something like that, you know, it'll just it'll kind of just come out really, I think. But yeah, I know what you mean. It's it's very, very... I think play is subversive. So I mean, that's, that's what I would say, anyway. It's not like you're joining them together, but I mean, I think they, they genuinely are.

Sophie Woodward

Yeah, yeah, I just I love I really like that critical use of playfulness that I think Lego allows because it is, you know, this idea that it is play, but play doesn't somehow mean you know, something trivial or, you know. Actually, that is a way to... I think at one point you wrote in the article about issues that are really difficult to handle. They're almost too hard and actually playing with Lego is a way to kind of process them and deal with them and the models also allow people a route into it maybe in a way that a photo wouldn't.

Ian Cook

I mean, you've read the article, haven't you? I mean, what... The idea is, is that the photographs do a lot in that article. They're not just illustrations that they should be kind of jumping out of a page or

something like that. I mean, what caught your eye or what did... What was your experience? Do you mind me asking?

Sophie Woodward

What I find really interesting is Lego is so familiar to me. It's such a part of my life all the time. I have three small children so I see it all the time. And I think... So I obviously read it and saw those images in that lens and that Lego is everywhere. And what really got me is this idea about the kind of familiarity and the strangeness in that, like it was so familiar to me. But seeing an image of a kind of political scene or seeing an image in an article is so not. And so there's this weird kind of moment of familiarity and comfort, but also stepping back thinking, "But this is about that." And I found like the image of the Rana Plaza thing, I was really interested in seeing because it's such an awful thing. And I've seen photos of it, and they're awful, but actually seeing the Lego thing and reading that story about how it was made, I think, doesn't in any way detract from that. But it actually almost kind of does give this different route in. And you know I really felt that in the sense in which because there is that familiarity of Lego, we can feel comfortable with it. You know, I feel comfortable with Lego. But at the same time, I didn't just look at them and think "Oh that's a Lego model. That's a good one". You get this feeling of kind of distance as well. And I think that's something that I felt quite strongly. It's that closeness and familiarity, but also the distance, I think.

Ian Cook

Gosh, that's amazing, isn't it? I mean, it's amazing... I mean, I think because it isn't trying to be literal at all, is what isn't. It's not trying to... it's not trying to be didactic, it's just trying to sort of like create this kind of world that's got all of this kind of, this meaning in it. I mean, what's really, I think what's really interesting about this kind of thing, which I suppose is like, anything that you create is that you invest your own meanings in it, you know, your own, and then some things that you do understand that some things you don't understand, but somehow, because when you put things together a certain way, they just, it just goes, "Oh". You know? It's like that. And you don't always understand why that's the case, because you just keep fiddling until it goes like that. And then when, of course when somebody sees it, but you know, they got all the things that they know about or they feel they understand or they, you know, they know about it particularly. And that's in there as well. So there's something about that, that I just... There's a real... I really enjoyed the reading for this because the follow-the-thing idea about reading is you don't read the follow-the-thing literature and then do follow the thing, you start with a thing, and then whatever, and you know, its journey or whatever it might be. And then whatever sticks to it you read. So that's your organising principle, you know. It's just the thing is your co-author, kind of thing. And I think with this Legoining, we didn't read about Lego and then do it. We did it and then read about it afterwards. And then found out that there were lots of things that we were doing that we didn't realise. And there was a really, really kind of... I found this great article about, I think it was affect and play. And it was the idea that there's this... It's almost like the affect comes first. Like you're following the kind of mood you're following the bricks, you're following your ideas, and then it just feels right. And then later on, you might if you're lucky be able to make sense of what you've done, I think. Do you know what I mean? And I know that's probably quite a common argument. But it really is true. If there's something that you're... It feels like you're tuning in to something. You're tuning into the materials and tuning into all kinds of things, and it all kind of, sort of, ends up in the work whether you understand it or

not, you know? And I think, I don't know. That's what certainly what it felt like to me. So when I read that, that that's an argument, I thought "Oh, yeah, that's exactly what... that's exactly what it's like." You know?

Sophie Woodward

Yeah. I mean, I think that, for me, gets exactly to the heart of material methods. So you know, so I started doing touring methods way back when I did my PhD, but I had no idea that I was doing it. And I started up in wardrobes and when I was working out what I was going to do, I just started with a wardrobe and I thought, well, how can I understand clothes? And, and that was kind of my starting point. And then I went back and read and, and I think actually that the sense in which it's, it's not in any sense, anti-ethnological or anti-theoretical. It's centering things and thinking about those things. And actually, I think that's really what's kind of exciting sometimes about these methods. It's that it then opens up different ways of doing stuff.

Ian Cook

Yeah, totally. Absolutely, absolutely. I mean I just figure, you know, I've read lots of things, it's all in my head. And when I play Lego, it's gonna be in there somewhere. But the only problem is working out what on Earth is in there. So that particular paper... We've been doing this Legoining for years and years and years. But it took me... it took me a heck of a long time to write it, because it didn't understand what what I done in order to... Do you know what I mean? It took quite a long time to be able to think and reflect on it, and read and just work it out. Just to sort of say what it was that we were doing and why it was interesting, you know, or might be interesting to other people that might want to have a go. I don't know. That's, and I think that's always the it's more that kind of approach to methods. I think, you know, just to echo what you're saying, where you're constantly moving between what you're doing and what you're reading, and then each one kind of shapes the other. And I think that's that's just a, for me, that's a follow-the-thing method anyway, because you're constantly... This thing, it's... you're taking whatever it might be that you're researching. And, you know, you finding it in a different context where people are talking about all these things, or better read about those things, you know now, you know. It's that the similar kind of... It's like an attitude to research, isn't it really? It's going to be all right. It's going to be alright. But it is, kind of... Sometimes you've just got to go with the flow. If it's interesting, and you're enjoying it, and people are talking to you about stuff, and it's like, you're, you know, you're in the right place, whether or not you fully understand why you're in the right place is something to work out a bit later on.

Sophie Woodward

Yeah, I think that definitely resonates with what I do. And I like this idea that actually isn't always that, you know... because one of the things that I've really thought in material methods is trying to disassemble this relation between theory methods, empirical, is that actually, often with the material method, you start with the stuff and then you are doing the theory.

Ian Cook

Yeah, absolutely. It's theorising, It's helping you to theorise. It's drawing, your... It draws your attention to combinations of things... To me, we follow-the-thing method, and the Legoining is it just draws your attention to all kinds of things that we might not normally find together, theoretically. And that's the

theorising process. It's the joining together of all of these different disparate sort of ideas and concepts and what have you. And that's why in a way, the narrative approach to presenting it is so important, because that theorization is part of that unfolding process, oriented narrative of the work.

Sophie Woodward

Yeah, really interesting. And so we'd like to ask you a little bit about disciplinarity, actually, and partly because I think a lot of material methods involve the kind of drawing of stuff from maybe the arts, or from design, and kind of using them to think through whether that's a geographical or sociological kind of question. So I just... I guess, I just wanted to ask you a little bit about the place of kind of the methods of follow the things or the method of political Lego within your own discipline, or if you think it's kind of just common discipline.

Ian Cook

I mean, the follow-the-things stuff is, for me, inherently geographical, because it's multi-sited. It connects up different places, and, you know, scale and distance or the classic place, you know, all the sort of classic geographical things that we claim are our own, which, but aren't, you know. So to extent, that's definitely the case. And you know the Lego recreations are about recreating something that happened somewhere. It's recreating a place and a moment, you know, that kind of thing. But I just think it's for... I mean, it's like you're trying to understand something, so anything that sticks, anything that helps you understand it is what you read, you know. So for example, I was thinking when I did my... I did a paper years ago on Caribbean hot pepper sauce. And it was made in Jamaica and eaten in the UK and I managed to do this kind of multi-sited ethnography all the way through. And for part of it, I had to, I mean, I had to understand the most ridiculous combination of things in order to understand that journey. So I had to know something about... I think I got really interesting flies at one point. So the plant, the particular, I think it was a scotch bonnet pepper or something like that, it was susceptible to a particular kind of fly. And so the fly and it's life, and it's, it's, you know... whatever it needed to survive just needed to be interrupted in order for that flow to take place. So I have to know about flies. And next thing I know, I'm trying to work out why it is that people like these kind of capsaicin, and it's called capsaicin, which is the enzyme in the chilli peppers, that gives you that kind of hot sensation. So then I was reading all this stuff about how the tongue works, you know, and the different taste receptors. And I remember having to get in touch with a Japanese academic who was the world's foremost expert on tongue capsaicin. Just to say like, "Have I got this right? You know, that kind of thing. And then I'm talking about political economy and structural adjustment, and all of these kinds of things all in the same sort of space. So I'm, I kind of... I think, the theorization is possible. I'd never be able to theorise these things abstractly, God in a month of Sundays, and never even imagined that I had to put them together at all. But I think because it's about, you're always talking about the thing, and you're always trying to understand part of its life, you can sort of like move two steps away from the thing, talk about this particularly and then come back, you don't have to be the world's expert on these things. But it's a... I mean, that's inevitably going to be you know, cross disciplinary, transitional, post disciplinary, whatever you want it to be, but it's almost like it's in an accessible kind of way. Of course, you have to talk about these flies, you know. Of course you have to talk... They can ruin the whole, you know, the whole supply chain. Of course you have to talk about the tongue and capsaicin because that's what people... you know. You can't... It's almost like you've got to... All the stones have got to be unturned one way or another just to just to join it all together. So it is inherently like that I think, and it's the same

with the Lego. It's like I have to understand what I'm Legoing but I also have to understand Lego itself, you know, and, and the story of Lego, the politics of Lego, you know, that everyone is yellow because that, you know kids don't understand race, you know, that kind of thing. All that stuff is all combined together, you know. So yeah, it's inherently got to be... It can be located in geography because I'm a cultural geographer and you know, this is a sort of thing that is encouraged there. So that's why I'm happy to call myself a cultural geographer, because I don't, I'm not... I'm not kind of swimming against the current, you know, here. It's just kind of what cultural geographers do. So that's, that's a good thing about the disciplinarity being in the right bit of your discipline, which encourages you to not be in the discipline, kind of thing, you know?

Sophie Woodward

Yeah, yeah. I mean, I guess that's the thing isn't it? It's that no matter how much you were asking questions that come from your discipline, if you're doing material methods, or material based research, you always have to understand the stuff itself, what, you know, whatever that is. And I guess that's, you know, whether that is the Lego... So, so the final question to ask you about then was about kind of the future of the method. So whether that's, for you, how you could imagine value or how you think you could imagine other people might develop it, what the possibilities about are as a method.

Ian Cook

I don't know. I published this paper. It's been published for three years now. And at the end of it, it says, you know, "Why don't you try with your Lego?". Or your, you know, Sylvanian Families or your Hello Kitty figurines. And I thought that I might get some, some response. I haven't got anything. So I... I think, specifically with the, you know, with the Lego, I don't think that... It's just part of a much broader kind of creative practice, you know, that is being, you know, that is taking over in all kinds of ways. So, for example, you know, one of one of my PhD students is doing research on homeless women. And she is, she's developed this methodology of manicures. So she's going to offer manicures to homeless women. And in the process of them doing their nails, they're going to have this kind of conversation, so you know, so it's just that it's more to do with the principles of the creative methods, really. And you know, I'm not doing this alone. We've got a very, very active creative geographies, kind of bunch of people in, you know, my department, and we're constantly going on retreats, and we've got artists and sculptors and dramaturges, and people who are kind of like hybrid geographers, who are coming along. So we're constantly doing this kind of thing. So it's more like a culture of creative practice, I think. So all of the kind of main ideas, the broader ideas about what I've learned about Lego can be applied to all kinds of things. It's just, it's just, I think it's people finding their own ways in which they can take the broad ideas and put them into practice, really, and I think that's... So in terms of the future of political Lego, I got no idea. It might just be a flash in the pan. But I think the broader idea is definitely... There's all kinds of fascinating things that are happening, really, and I'm really lucky to be in a department where this is something that we, you know, a big bunch of us have been doing for a long, long time as well. So, you know, it just doesn't come out of nowhere, you know. It's a certain research culture, which is, you know, which is massively encouraging for experimentation basically and making mistakes and being a bit crap, but something will bubble up out of it. You know, it'll be interesting, you know.

Sophie Woodward

Yeah, I mean, you know, I think that's probably is a nice point to end on, because obviously, as I said, I'm kind of, you know, thinking a lot more broadly about creative methods. And I think this fits really nicely into lots of other creative methods that people are starting to use and develop and think about with research. So thank you very much, and hope you enjoyed the recording.

Ian Cook

I have. Thank you.