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Bridget Baker  
*Wrecking at Private Siding 661*, 2010-11. Reclaimed bricks, broken perspex, fluorescent lighting, cane woven human transporter, 38 page blueprint document, led lighting, glass bottle, knitted weights with raw wool linings, ropes and pulleys Room size 6.8m x 3.4m x 20m; size of cane woven basket 1.8m x 1.3 m.



Bridget Baker  
*Wrecking at Private Siding 661 (view from above)* 2010-11. Mixed media installation. Room size 6.8m x 3.4m x 20m; size of cane woven basket 1.8m x 1.3 m  
Image credit: Stephen White

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Bridget Baker  
*Cover letter document (installation object)* 2011. 38 pages, chequebook bound, cyanotype document, Ruscombe paper, 35.3 x 25.4 x 1cm  
Image credit: Daniel Isherwood

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Bridget Baker  
*New Arrivals Project (documented intervention with visitors)* 2011. Unserviced Sinar 4 x 5 stills camera; Film: Ilford Delta 100, The Wapping Project, London  
Image credit: Daniel Isherwood

## international reviews

Wrecking at Private Siding 661

**Bridget Baker at CHRISTIAN FERREIRA at the Wapping Project**

By Bianca Baldi

29 September - 11 February.

The site of 'Wrecking at Private Siding 661' at Wapping is the point at which colonial history and Bridget Baker's personal narrative intertwine. Now based in London, Baker was born in East London from a line of British settlers. These early narratives are transposed to the site at Wapping, East London, in the UK, where a large and peculiar object – a human transporter (a 19th century woven vessel) – has been recreated. The human transporter is installed in a distinct red brick hydraulic power station, which, due to its proximity to the Thames, powered a great part of London at the turn of the 19th century. Its heyday coincides with that of English settlement in South Africa, and the arrival of Baker's ancestors in the Eastern Cape.

As you approach the space, your entry is shaped by a shattered bricked wall entrance, a construction which nods to the shattered wall framing the supine nude in Duchamp's posthumously-built work *Étant donnés (Given: 1 The Waterfall, 2. The Illuminating Gas)* (1946-66). However in Baker's work the viewer is invited to enter into the space, in contrast to the cool, distanced, voyeuristic gaze encouraged by Duchamp's peephole. Although the human transporter sits quite comfortably in time within the accumulator tower, clues to its recent reconstruction are revealed in one anachronism: Looking up, one sees a shattered white Perspex ceiling, as if the transporter has crashed through. Descending from the top of the accumulator tower and through the ruptured ceiling, the woven object materialises a passage through time and space.

At first encounter, the object depicted in the sculptural installation is not quite familiar. A basket, a cage? Its origins or its use are not clearly evident in its design. However, the physicality stimulated by climbing through the hole into the space, coupled with the human proportions of the transporter, gives the viewer some clue as to its use.

This object, a so-called 'human transporter', caught Baker's eye when she revisited the East London Museum; the first museum she ever visited during her childhood. It was there that Baker found photographs of the strange contraption, used to transport settlers down the side of the large ships before the completion of the turning basin in the East London harbour. Intrigued by these objects as mobile containers of both people and histories, Baker embarked on an archival journey through East London's settler history, as well as that of her own family (who became well known in the wool trade), using the human transporter as a material frame.

Baker employs a historiographic mode with a strong narrative, approaching the project through what curator Dieter Roelstraete, in his text *The Way of the Shovel: On the Archeological Imaginary in Art*, refers to as 'history-telling'. He identifies methodologies such as 'the historical account, the archive, the document, the act of excavating and unearthing, the memorial, the reconstruction and re-enactment' as particular to this approach, many facets of which are employed in Wrecking at Private Siding 661.

After engaging in extensive research in East London, no clues beyond the photographs presented themselves to the artist. Even experts on settler or maritime history had seen few examples of such an object, heightening its curious appeal. Rather, this jerry-rigged object was born out of necessity within this particular location, and is thus testament to a very specific moment in a South African settler history. Consequently, the basket acts as a time capsule of sorts, mediated via the archive and the artist's imagination. As not many historical documents or detailed sketches on the basket exist, the artist's recreation – partly from photographs and partly from the imagination – exists 'in translation'.

Based on Baker's description, the object was then remediated through the specifications given to The Blind Society of Cape Town's weavers. After being aged in the South African sun and water, the transporter then followed the sea route back to the 'old country' when it was shipped back to London to be installed at Wapping. By creating this pseudo-historical object, the human transporter takes on a mythical nature, a strange lost ark brought back via a chain of archival documents and imaginative mapping.

'Wrecking at Private Siding 661' places these two narratives – that of colonial migration to South Africa more broadly, and Baker's more specific personal history – side by side, though they remain distinct stories. The basket and bottle move between a sense of the historic and the staged, while the presence of the documents inflects the human transporter with a bureaucratic aura. As an artist working in a similar research mode, I can identify the challenge of presenting such archival material: There is the constant lure of history, bound up with the potential for nostalgic presentation strategies and the tricky combination of found material and imaginary narratives.

Recent performative interventions around the site and object of the exhibition – like Baker's *The New Arrivals Project* where viewers re-enacted what settlers could have felt when arriving on new ground – have interwoven past and present, communal and individual history to create something else entirely. Baker's human transporter shuttles similarly between modes, inviting viewers to reactivate the historical object as prop to an elusive present.

Bianca Baldi is a South African artist currently based in Frankfurt am Main, Germany. See her website: <http://www.biancabaldi.net>. For more about Bridget Baker, visit <http://www.bridgetbaker.co.za>.

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### Venue

**CHRISTIAN FERREIRA at the Wapping Project**

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