In 1954, the SS Warrior cargo ship travelling from Brooklyn to Bremerhaven contained 194,582 separate items – itemized as cases, cartons, bags, boxes, bundles, packages, pieces, drums, cans, barrels, crates, reels and so on.

Mark Levinson *The Box* 2006: 33
This is the Modern World
The Box that Changed the World

• Breakbulk to containers
• Dockers to cranes
• Decline of old ports, breakup of cartels and unions
• Standardization at 8x8x40, and the TEU
• Rise of new ports and supply chains
• Just in time, intermediate goods
Global Trade
A **tessellation** or tiling of a plane is a pattern of plane figures that fills the plane with no overlaps and no gaps.
Uncontaining
Efficiency

The flows of global trade now mean that some parts of the world have too many containers. Deficits in China are caused by stockpiles in Oakland. It is often cheaper for exporting countries to make new containers than to ship the empty ones back again. It depends on the price of steel. So, like bits of global driftwood, they pile up and rust in the quieter parts of the world.
Efficiency

London’s ‘Container City’ work/live developments; a theatre in South Korea; minimal accommodation for students and migrant workers in the Philippines; the huge ‘Seventh Kilometer’ market near Odessa in the Ukraine; the Electric Hotel moving theatre; mobile shops; art galleries, shopping malls; restaurants; cafes; rapid build housing after a crisis; pop-up health centres and kitchens. The US military used containers to hold detainees in Afghanistan, as well as for a wide variety of other transport and storage solutions. In mid 2011, there were over 10 thousand containers being employed for a wide variety of purposes in Camp Bastion, the city sized British base in the Afghanistan desert. One was even used as a Pizza Hut franchise. A buried shipping container also works well as an underground bunker, or even a hidden greenhouse for drugs. In 2008, Sussex police discovered eight subterranean containers joined by passageways in a field and connected to a generator for light and heat.
Efficiency
Efficiency
Excess
Security

Containerization and military supply.
Security

- Problems of theft and damage at docks

BUT

- ‘13 dead girls in a can’
- Counterfeit goods
- Drugs
- Weapons (Club K)
Security

‘According to the Italian Customs Agency, 60 percent of the goods arriving in Naples escape official customs inspection, 20 percent of the bills of entry go unchecked, and fifty thousand shipments are contraband, 99 percent of them from China – all for an estimated 200 million euros in evaded taxes each semester’ (Saviano 2008: 7)
Standardization

In the US, 48 and 53 foot trucking containers are common. There are also alternative heights, with ‘hi-cube’ units at 9 feet 6 inches and 10 feet six inches, and ‘half-height’ containers at 4 foot 3 inches. It gets worse, because some ‘standard’ containers are actually two inches wider to accommodate Euro-pallets, or the Australian RACE containers which accommodate Australia Standard Pallets. The 45 foot wide hi-cube shortsea container is becoming common in Europe, partly because it can be given legs to become a ‘swap body’ unit which can be moved between trucks without needing a crane. In the last decade, this has led to the European Intermodal Loading Unit initiative, the subject of an European Commission consultation paper in 2010.
Standardization

Because of all these sizes, and the confusion between imperial and metric, the TEU is not actually a consistent measure of space or cargo, more an approximation of the footprint of the box. Neither does it say anything about other features of the container, which can be collapsible, a frame holding a gas bottle or tank, contain a generator, be insulated, open top bulktainer for loose cargo, refrigerated, open sided for loading large pallets, ventilated, garmentainers for hanging clothing.
Confusion
Imagination
Joy
Rationalization

In 2009-10, the Polish artist Miroslaw Balka constructed a gigantic box for the Turbine Hall in the Tate Modern gallery London and called it ‘How It Is’. A metal ramp leading up to a metal box containing blackness. 13 by 13 by 30 metres, on 2 metre high stilts. 390 square metres of nothing reflecting the steel frame of a five storey hall of nothing which used to be a power station on the banks of the Thames. The comments of those who wrote about it suggested that it was a shipping container, a gas chamber, a cattle truck, a place to hold the stalking shadows of those who had already gone in. It was a sensory deprivation tank producing claustrophobia, holding the unknown, making people disappear. It was Balka’s reference to concentration camps and the industrialization of the world. It was art, because it was in The Tate, but it was just a metal box. A box that could swallow you, contain you, and cover you in darkness.
Fear
Plenty

In order to produce the huge range of things we have in the supermarket, the mall, the internet, the fullness of human materials that is our modern world, we employ space and machines.

We use nothing, and the non-human.
Plenty
The end point of all this movement is people paying money for things to eat, wear, listen to. Only twenty people are needed to take 3000 containers, with 100 000 tons of product from Hong Kong to Germany. These gigantic ships are almost empty of people, and when they reach port, a few people in machines – high up in cranes – take about three minutes to move a box like a Lego brick onto a transporters to move it into a storage location. The transporters take the containers to rolling stacker cranes, where they rest for awhile six high, before being collected by a truck. The machines are everywhere, and there are figures in the cabs of the machines, but no people. Machines read the bar codes, calculate movement instructions and track the speed and paths of ships, trains and trucks. One of the Liverpool dockers who didn’t lose his job, but moved into driving a container crane, said how lonely his new job was – ‘all the fun had gone’. Streets and workplaces full of smelly people, pubs full of drunken men, scams and fiddles and union solidarity all replaced by the episodic whine of motors in silent acres of steel.
Organization/disorganization

• Rationalization, speed, technology, progress, movement, standardization...
• ... produces art, crime, waste, recycling, smuggling, pollution, unemployment, dereliction, and ship spotters.
Re-organization