Announcer

David Mabb

William Morris 1834-1896 was an English wallpaper, textile and book designer, poet, novelist and socialist activist. He thought that design had a fundamental role to play in the transformation of everyday life. This essentially political motivation — a commitment to the radical potential of design — is behind much of his work. His designs are often highly schematised representations of nature, where it is always summer and never winter; the plants are in leaf, often flowering, with their fruits available in abundance, ripe for picking, and with no human labour in sight. This is a Utopian vision, an image of Cokaygne, the medieval mythical land of plenty. He opposed industrialised production for both political and aesthetic reasons, and researched medieval forms of manufacture that used traditional craft skills.

Morris' 1896 *Kelmscott Chaucer* is thought to be the pinnacle of his career as a typographer and designer. Set in Morris' medieval-style 'Chaucer' font, it has ornamental borders and decorative capitals, and is illustrated with eighty-seven woodcut illustrations by Edward Burne-Jones. These provide a setting for Geoffrey Chaucer's poetic works, including *The Canterbury Tales* and *Troilus and Criseyde*. Painted over the pages from the *Kelmscott Chaucer* are enlarged copies of the cover and illustrated pages from Vladimir Mayakovsky's book of revolutionary poems *For the Voice,* designed by El Lissitzky in 1923. Mayakovsky first became known as a Futurist poet before the Russian revolution and later became one of its most famous exponents. Lissitsky was a leading practitioner of the Constructivist group of artists and designers who, influenced by the politics of the Russian Revolution, rejected "art for art sake", believing that art should be rational, functional and useful. *For the Voice* is considered Lissitzky's most spectacular achievement in "book construction".

Figure 6. David Mabb. *Announcer*, 2014. Installation view, Focal Point Gallery, Southend-on-Sea.

Announcer, Focal Point Gallery[1]

The main gallery space was dominated by a new installation of paintings entitled *Announcer* (2013). The work is composed of two facsimile editions of the *Kelmscott Chaucer* which are pasted in a grid, twenty pages at a time, onto thirty canvases measuring 148 cm x 168 cm. Two editions are used so that every page, both recto and verso, is shown. This appropriates the form of the paintings of American artist Tim Rollins and KOS, in which pages from books are glued to canvases in grids. But the resemblance stops there. The Lissitsky images painted over the *Kelmscott Chaucer* pages are not painted as a response to a reading of the *Kelmscott Chaucer* as in Rollins' work, but are presented as equal partners. The methodology used is dialectical montage, where a "third meaning", an abstraction resulting from the juxtaposition of separate representations, is produced. Walter Benjamin in *The Arcades Project* describes such an image as "that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words, image is dialectics at a standstill."[2] In the paintings, the large decorative capitals of the Kelmscott design are left unpainted, interrupting

Figure 7. David Mabb. *Announcer 2*, 2013. Paint on paper, 148 cm x 168 cm.

Because of the combination of Middle English and Russian texts, few people are able to 'read' the painting/installation. It is understood through viewing the formal juxtaposition of the constituent parts. When the two books are 'merged' together in *Announcer,* the viewer/reader walked into the Focal Point Gallery and was surrounded on three sides wall to wall, floor to ceiling. The books cease to be objects that can be held, becoming an environment. Physically the painting/installation was hung with only very small gaps, two paintings high by fifteen paintings long, and measured nearly three and a half meters by over twenty-two meters. But another transformation also took place. The 'politics of form', the aesthetic investigation of the ideological intersections and differences of the two very different book designs, is an important part of the work. Through a crossing of disciplinary boundaries, combining design, literature, and fine art, it re-visioned the world out of its constituent historical elements. *Announcer* takes a magnificent but backward looking work (Morris looked to the medieval period for the Kelmscott Press' influences), and combines it with one of the most futurist of works (Constructivist artists were violently opposed to art from the past). Morris' once utopian book design is recharged with political meaning by its integration with Mayakovsky's and Lissitzky's designs for a revolutionary moment. *Announcer* questions both the rose tinted medievalism of Morris and the blind rejection of history of the Constructivists.

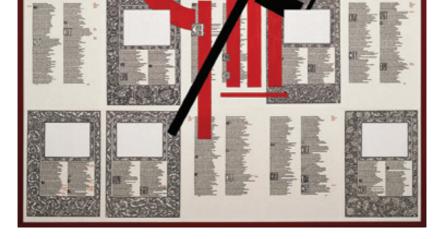Also in the gallery opposite the work was a free printed newspaper was

Figure 8. David Mabb. *Announcer 14*, c. 2013. Paint on paper, 148 cm x 168 cm.

In Gallery 2 *Rhythm 69* (2008) is a series of paintings on a William Morris 1960s block printed wallpaper sample book. The book presented each wallpaper cut down to a 38cm x 48cm page. The 69 pages of wallpaper from the book (and the front page, an image of the Sanderson's shop, which produced Morris and Co. wallpapers at the time) have been glued in sequence onto separate canvases marginally larger than the pages. Images from a Malevich-inspired Hans Richter storyboard are painted sequentially onto each page. The paintings are hung vertically down the wall (emphasising the filmic qualities of the work) in a formalist grid which can be seen as a metaphor for the regulative practices of industrialised society which both generates and contains the paintings' utopian potential.

Painted along the Window Gallery was a site-specific triptych of paintings titled *After Morris and Malevich* (2014) that presented a series of Morris patterns defined into a Square, a Cross and a Circle clearly quoting Malevich's Suprematist forms.

To accompany the exhibition, a limited edition screen print *beaT bout* (2014) was produced. Measuring 41cm x 29cm, an enlarged image of a page from El Lissitzky's designed book of revolutionary poems by Vladimir Mayakovsky *For the Voice*, was printed onto pages from a facsimile edition of the *Kelmscott Chaucer*, a collection of works by Geoffrey Chaucer published by the Kelmscott Press, as used in *Announcer*. The title *beaT bouT* is a translation/transliteration of the Russian text on the page from *For the Voice*.

At the time of writing it is still available in an edition of 270 individual prints. Each screen print is printed on a different page of the *Kelmscott Chaucer* and is therefore unique.[4]

Together both *Announcer*, *Rhythm 69, After Morris and Malevich* and *beaT bout* offered a dialectical vision that suggest a way of reinterpreting the past. Through restaging and reconfiguring key moments in the history of design, the works investigate what a visual language of change might look like.

Endnotes

1.   Southend on Sea, Essex, UK 14 April to 12 July 2014.
        http://www.focalpoint.org.uk/archive/exhibitions/50/ (2014-05-21)
2.   BENJAMIN, Walter — *The Arcades Project*. Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University
        Press, 1999, N2a, p. 3.
3.   http://www.focalpoint.org.uk/printed_matter/publications/ (2014-09-11)
4.   http://www.focalpoint.org.uk/printed_matter/prints/(2014-09-11)