

As It Might Be

The Radical Legacy of William Morris in the Work of David Mabb

Dave Beech

Famously, the Victorian architect A. W. N. Pugin did not employ a clerk or a team of draughtsmen: the understanding he built up with his builders, principally George Myers, was such that detailed drawings were unnecessary. Perhaps Pugin benefited from ‘the element of traditional building still present [in architectural practice], when the dividing line between architect and builder was blurred’,¹ but the picture of integrated, horizontal, organic and traditional working practices can be exaggerated in the Romantic flight from modernity and industrialisation. Although it is true that modernity is shaped by, among other things, the increasing fragmentation of the production process, it is not true that traditional crafts are immune from hierarchies, divisions and fractures. David Mabb, who has recently curated an exhibition at the Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester, of William Morris design, paraphernalia and merchandise, including his own Morris-based works, raises fundamental questions about the politics of manufacturing and consumerism. The exhibition presupposes no quick fixes already present in tradition, Romanticism, modernism or postmodernism, but instead opens out Morris’s legacy to deep and pertinent issues of political change, the role of art and, not least, utopia.²

Mabb’s exhibition resituates Morris within distinctly modern fissures, negotiating between the clashing needs of producers and consumers, idyllic nature and industrial machinery, business and revolution, fine art and mass production. Morris’s work has been stabilised within the contradictions of modern culture in two ways, both of which Mabb addresses in his current work. First, Morris is made com-



Fig. 1. *Rodchenko Production Suit*, Hammersmith Socialist Society banner and framed wallpaper samples produced before 1917, all hung against William Morris paint colours manufactured for Arthur Sanderson & Sons Ltd. by The Little Greene Paint Company. Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester, April – December 2004. Image © G ten.

plicit with educated good taste through the inversion of his vision of a socialist future into a dream of an idyllic past. And second, Morris is shorn of his aesthetic modernity by the 'elevation' of his work to the dominant forms of high art. Mabb kills two ideological birds with one stone, then, in works such as the *Rodchenko Production Suit* (2002), which literally presses Morris onto the radical history of the avant-garde by using Morris's *Fruit* fabric to make Rodchenko's Constructivist design for workers' clothing.³ The suit, hung high on the wall and partly obscuring the Morris-based 'decoration' [Fig.1] draws a viable line linking Morris's Marxism and the Russian Revolution, reminding us of the continuities between designing wallpaper and designing clothing intended to be mass produced, each establishing new relations between art and industry in their different

historical settings. Yoking Morris and Rodchenko together in this way Mabb calls up the intellectual and political weight that has been systematically withdrawn from Morris by heritage culture and the Morris industry. Unexpectedly, Rodchenko's suit is an apt home for Morris's imagery, framing Morris's iconography of natural abundance within something approaching the social form which that iconography signified. Not that post-revolutionary Russia was a place of abundance. Far from it. Mabb's montage marries two generations of Marxist hope for the socialist rejuvenation of culture as an echo chamber for the misery, terror and impoverishment that has cut through communist revolution, from its enemies as well as its architects.

Mabb's *Rodchenko Production Suit* may, at first sight, seem to be a gift for Morris, handing him the avantgarde context of Russian Constructivism and the proximity of a workers' revolution. Traffic between the two Marxists, however, is not one-way, as if Morris needed to be brought into the modern world and Rodchenko had nothing to gain from Morris. Strictly speaking – from a modernist point of view – Morris's patterns have no place on Rodchenko's suit; Rodchenko himself certainly turned away from figuration, handicraft and the iconography of nature. It might have been predicted, then, that Morris's fabric would reveal itself as culturally antiquated and formally obsolete, in line with the modernist prohibition on decoration. But no. Mabb turns against the use of Pre-Raphaelite design and workmanship as a stick with which to beat cold, hard, geometrical abstraction, or vice versa. Here Morris is not sidelined by modern developments but remains internal to them. Inevitably, the Morris design seems to soften the Rodchenko suit, but what it actually does is open up its rationalised, democratic forms to an aesthetic of care, vivacity and plenty, which chimes very well with recent developments in moral theory and Marxist philosophy.⁴ If Mabb's reworking of Rodchenko's suit has the look of an oxymoron, then, it is because Marxism in the twentieth century has been interpreted, by its leaders no less than its enemies, as far too narrow. As a result, and unexpectedly perhaps, Mabb's suit shows a glimpse of an alternative, unrealised, radical modernism.

One of the first things that Morris says about work under Socialist conditions in his essay 'A Factory As It Might Be' is that industry

should take place in a building surrounded by vast, beautiful gardens. The gardens will be vast because land is no longer private property, hence ‘there is no need of stinting it of ground, profit rents being a thing of the past’.⁵ They will be beautiful because labour will no longer be a burden; it will be ‘light in duration, and not oppressive in kind’. Hence, ‘the labour on such gardens is like enough to be purely voluntary’.⁶ When work in Socialism isn’t creative in itself then it will be shared to such an extent, Morris says, that each worker will have the time and energy to engage in creative labour at some other point in the day. Socialism will not do away with unappealing work, but it will prevent any and all labour from alienation and exploitation, at the same time thwarting the social situation of Victorian capitalism in which one class of people lives in constant drudgery while another lives idly, managing boredom with leisure. As a Socialist, Morris is vividly aware of the social necessity of labour, not least in keeping the garden beautiful. His argument is not against labour but to replace the capitalist factory, ‘temples of over-crowding and adulteration and over-work’,⁷ with the merging of creativity and pleasure, primarily in labour but also in daily life. The garden in which Morris sets his factory is a synecdoche for Socialism: it is a practical proposal, of course, but it is also a trope that represents Socialism as a wonderful supplement to capitalism. Capitalism has factories and gardens but its factories are wasteful – anarchic production gone to seed – and its gardens are too efficient – managed, rationalised, cost-effective. In short, capitalism lets its factories run wild and trims its gardens according to the logic the market. With the abolition of private property and profit, however, Socialism will invert the formula and make factories into beautiful gardens of natural bounty and mutuality. In a word, the garden in Morris’s text is an image of universal human flourishing.

Morris’s Socialist future is not in fashion amongst intellectuals or workers today. It never was, to be fair, but its grip on the future has waned the more its terms and phrasing have aged. So is Morris’s futurology nothing more than a relic of lost hopes? The sticking point, of course, is the continuing dominance of capitalism, which creates its own forms of myopia. In fact, nothing could be more unlikely in today’s futurology than extrapolating a prospective society from the abolition of capitalism. Charles Landry, for instance, a futurologist

with some worthy principles, a practical approach to improving the everyday lives of ordinary people and a strong commitment to creativity, culture, knowledge and the arts, makes no bones about basing his advocacy for creativity on the economic effects of cheap labour in the Far East. He has developed the concept of the 'creative city', for which creative activity, 'soft' industries, information exchange and non-linear thinking are crucial, as a receptacle for a range of survival techniques for failing but ambitious cities. So, when Landry asserts that the old industries are disappearing and, hence, there is 'an acute need to go beyond inherited assumptions and ways of working',⁸ there is no equivalent demand that we go beyond the inherited (and inheritable) social and economic structure, which for Morris's version of 'going beyond' the 'inherited ways of working' would be a prerequisite.

Landry does not subvert the existing relationship between work and creativity; he seeks, rather, to insert creativity into the mechanisms of work, decision making, planning and innovation. Giving creativity higher billing within the capitalist mode of production (or pretending that production is a thing of the past because it takes place in China!), does nothing to bring about the conditions under which creativity could be anything but a calculable tool in the development of industry or a weapon in 'inter-urban competition'.⁹ Creativity is endorsed because it is profitable. Rather than see culture and creativity as forces that industry, commerce and town planning need better to exploit, a Morris-type 'creative city' – A City As It Might Be, perhaps – would be the reward for reorganising society in the opposite direction from the degradation of labour. Imagine: a 'creative city' full of citizens freed from over-work, under-payment, down-sizing and de-skilling, who are 'impelled towards the creation of beauty, and [who] would find their opportunities for this under their hands as they worked out their due quota of necessary work for the common good'.¹⁰ People impelled towards creation are described in *News from Nowhere* as 'men and women worthy of the sweet abundance of midsummer'.¹¹ Morris's 'creative city' would be a city worthy of that community. If Mabb's Morris-based work is, as it appears to me, an attempt to recover Morris's futurology for the future, then it has genuine weight, as well as being timely precisely for being out of step. Universal human flourishing, it has to be said, is a future worth remembering.

Following roughly the same montage principles as the *Rodchenko*

Production Suit, Mabb has previously produced a series of pictures that converted examples of Morris wallpaper into the format of Malevich's *White Square on White* (1918). Again, Morris is inserted into a revolutionary and avantgarde context that is transformed by its contact with Morris's aesthetic of care, but there is something vital missing in these works: being unique pictures, they naturally keep some distance from the world of mass production, industry and the everyday that is so central to Rodchenko's suit and Morris's wallpapers and fabrics. This is not to condemn the works outright, nor is it to ride roughshod over aesthetic judgement. But I do want to raise the spectre of the avantgarde's critique of aesthetics to try to account for what I see as the shortfall of this series.

The starting point of any avantgarde critique is the insistence that art is a problematic category, as opposed to the locus of all that is great and good in the culture, as the dominant ideology suggests. Anti-art's resistance to social division, privilege, symbolic violence and barbarism is waged through the resistance to art, taken to be immanently charged with society's ills. So instead of regarding art and aesthetics as the cure for society and as immune from political division and degradation, the anti-artists calls for the struggle for a better society to begin as a struggle against art. Far from the promotion of culture, such as Landry's 'creative city' today, we need instead a critique of cultural capital and art's enactment of social distinction. In this sense, the anti-artist is in agreement with E. P. Thompson when he writes, 'the very term "culture", with its cosy invocation of consensus, may serve to distract attention from social and cultural contradictions, from the fractures and oppositions within the whole'.¹² Morris was no anti-artist, of course, but neither did he regard art as insulated from its social and economic conditions. What Morris and the anti-artist share is the fundamental commitment to social change as the precondition for the aestheticisation of life and, ultimately, of universal human flourishing. This is why it is no mere coincidence that Morris and the avantgarde refused to isolate art from industry, mass production and the everyday. True, the anti-artist does not call for Morris's aestheticisation of work, demanding instead the de-aestheticisation of art, but the merging of art and life is central to both.

Mabb's use of Malevich's square-within-a-square format raises the stakes for Morris, but what is missing from this technique is the active

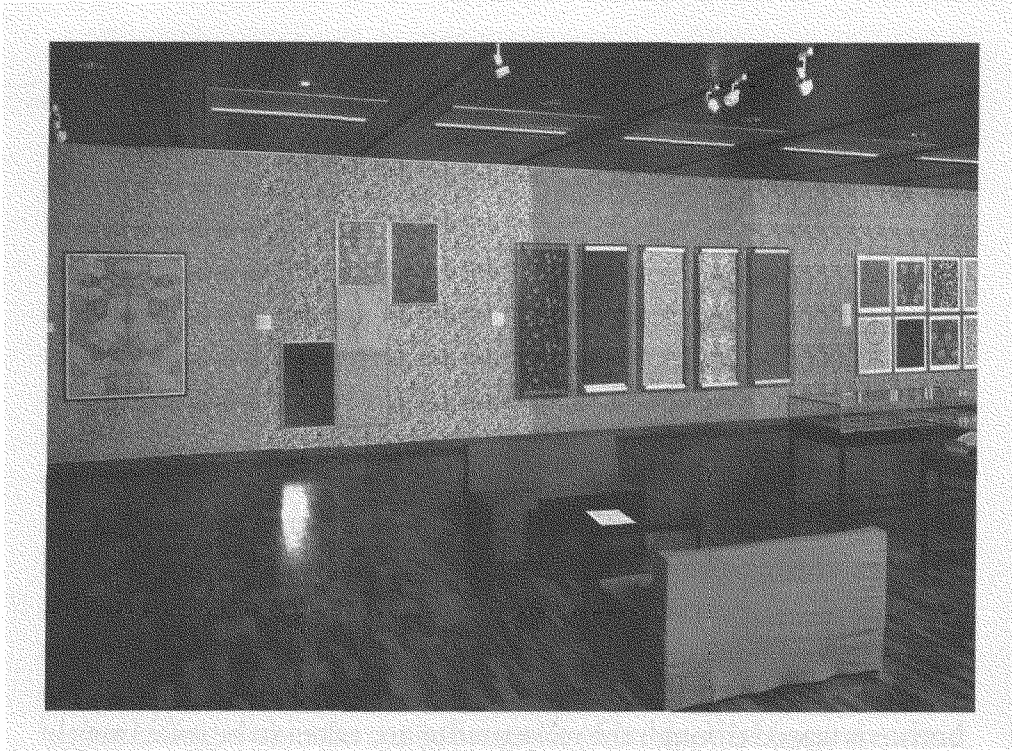


Fig. 2. William Morris wallpapers from the Whitworth Art Gallery's collection, produced early-to-mid twentieth century, hung on William Morris wallpapers produced by Arthur Sanderson & Sons Ltd. 2003-04. Image © G ten.

breach of the perimeter between art and everything else. The question that I am posing of Mabb here is, in fact, internal to his own inquiry. Several of the key moves of his Manchester exhibition actively breach the divide between art and the worlds of design, everyday life and commerce. Three aspects of the exhibition stand out as challenges to the isolation of Morris within a restricted Fine Art tradition. First: Mabb pointedly exhibits Morris's wallpapers as wallpapers [Fig. 2], contrary to the custom of placing Morris's designs within frames as if they belonged to the history of painting. Second: breaking away from concepts like authorship, originality and oeuvre, Mabb has included a critical presentation of 36 'William Morris Heritage' colour paints manufactured by The Little Greene Paint Company. Seeing these heritage colours placed prosaically one after the other like a row of bricks dampens their nostalgic aura. Third: taking the breach of the perimeter between art and everything else to an extreme, Mabb has displayed



Fig. 3. A selection of contemporary ‘heritage’ products from the 1990s and early 2000s using designs by William Morris, as displayed in Mabb’s exhibition. Image © G ten.

examples of ‘Morris kitsch’ in a cabinet as part of the show [Fig. 3]. Protecting these commodities behind glass implies a value that is absent when the same objects appear on a shelf next to a Jarrow March jigsaw or a William Blake coaster. Mabb thus abuses the techniques of cultural legitimisation in order to insert the ‘kitschification’ of Morris into a context of institutional critique.

It would be wrong, or at least superficial, to regard these techniques as nothing more than contextualising moves. Each of these gestures subjects the objects and images of Morris’s arts and crafts legacy to the kind of social positionality that Morris never failed to emphasise, execute and embody. By wallpapering the walls of the Whitworth Gallery, Mabb literally reinstates the social dimension of Morris’s designs. Extending the exhibition to diffusion ranges, to use the retail parlance for the mass marketing and cheap production of original designs,

Mabb acknowledges that Morris's designs were always destined for homes, not museums: these designs, which are based on the abolition of the division between mental and manual labour, are meant to be lived with not just contemplated. This alone brings Morris smack up to date by emphasising the continuity between Morris and the present generation of artists such as Jeremy Deller, Aleksandra Mir and Rirkrit Tiravanija who don't so much make aesthetic objects as promote aesthetic forms of living.

This generation of artists has recently been highlighted by Nicolas Bourriaud's theory of 'relational aesthetics' which is based on 'an upsurge of convivial, user-friendly artistic projects, festive, collective and participatory'.¹³ The key terms in relational aesthetics are dialogue, democracy and conviviality and the key works are those that, say, give away soup as a pretext for social exchange rather than present objects for visual pleasure. Some of this work is undoubtedly the most interesting work being made today, but Bourriaud claims too much for it. For example, it is impossible to take Bourriaud seriously when he says that the works 'outline so many hands-on utopias'¹⁴ – a sentiment that reverberates throughout his writing on the new art. Utopia comes easy for Bourriaud: dialogue is always democratic; social exchanges are always convivial; participation is always mutually affirming. In fact, Bourriaud goes so far as to suggest that 'through little gestures art is like an angelic programme'.¹⁵ Morris, like Adorno, would certainly react to such statements by questioning the very possibility that art can be angelic within a damaged society. Morris understood this as the difficulty of making genuine art under capitalism, and he took a near-Duchampian 'retirement' from art on this basis. What the avantgarde understood, in ways Morris never did, was that art must internalise the damage in society in order to give its utopian moment bite. When art, beauty and aestheticism contribute to the maintenance and ideological justification of intolerable political circumstances, anti-art allows art to go on without completely abolishing utopia. Mabb butts Morris against avantgardism to ask questions about art and anti-art's rival claims to utopia. The answer, I think, is that they need each other. Added together they don't congeal in contradiction; they form a dialectical whole which goes something like this: art without utopia is worthless but utopia without negation is nothing.

Mabb's Morris-based work explores an under-developed conception of the predicament of art in and against capitalism. Few artists in the last forty years have examined this predicament as extensively as Terry Atkinson, one of the founders of British Conceptualism, and perhaps more importantly, one of the first of that generation to recognise how Conceptualism's radical politics had washed up on the shore of its own institutional success. Atkinson engineered a shift in the mid-'70s, which he later dubbed a 'volte face', 'to break out of the narrowing preoccupations of Conceptualism'.¹⁶ He acted on the assumption that to continue to be a conceptualist after 1975 was to betray conceptualism. The slither of independence that Conceptualism had made for itself through its techniques of resistance and negation had been lost in the process of its institutional and commercial recuperation. Following this, Atkinson proposed, shockingly at the time, that perhaps the best way to uphold the central theoretical concerns of conceptualism would be to test them within a framework anathema to the familiar formats of Ideas Art and Text work, namely, of a politicised pictorialism. Superficially, Atkinson's 'volte face' seems to trade in the avantgarde for the deep rooted aesthetic values of drawing and painting. But this is no conservative backlash. Here, revising one's established practice is posited as the best way of retaining the work's principles under conditions in which those principles were under threat from the work itself: 'what was attempted to be articulated in the work was a break with the style of Conceptualism whilst retaining the supply lines from theory'.¹⁷ We need to think of Mabb's use of Morris in the same light, I think. Mabb's is not a revivalist project but a sophisticated attempt to complexify the understanding of the relationship between art and utopia which was for so long neglected, until recently when it has degenerated into cliché.

Atkinson's 'volte face' was an attempt to counteract a special sort of commodity fetishism, institutionalisation. In this respect, Atkinson and Mabb are, in their different ways, struggling with the same predicament, namely, the political shortfall of the avantgarde. Neither's choice, then, is adequately described as a personal preference. 'What pressures artists into making ... about-faces', Adorno said, 'is the realisation that their works are overloaded with elements of organisation and control'.¹⁸ We might say that not only individual artists, but the whole of the avantgarde, or all ambitious artists in the

wake of the avantgarde, have to develop an about-face of this sort. What these artists are doing in drawing on the remains of Socialist Realism and Morris respectively is to unearth resources that are so damaged that they become useful in a challenge to conventional wisdom. Morris is a resource for hope. What Mabb's work shows, however, is that Morris does not yield much utopian hope if we gaze at his work nostalgically or, worse still, regard his own historical gaze as fixed on the past. Morris is a resource for hope because he points towards a radical future. E. P. Thompson makes this very point in another context when he writes, 'We shall not ever return to pre-capitalist human nature, yet a reminder of its alternative needs, expectations and codes may renew our sense of our nature's range of possibilities. Could it even prepare us for a time when both capitalist and state communist needs and expectations may decompose, and human nature may be made over in a new form?'¹⁹

NOTES

- 1 Patricia Spencer-Silver, *Pugin's Builder* (Hull: University of Hull Press, 1993), p. 12.
- 2 David Mabb's exhibition, 'William Morris: "Ministering to the Swinish Luxury of the Rich"', ran at the Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester, UK, from 10 April to 23 December 2004. The exhibition catalogue is entitled *William Morris. 'Ministering to the Swinish Luxury of the Rich': An Exhibition by David Mabb* (Manchester: Whitworth Art Gallery, 2004).
- 3 An image of Mabb wearing his *Rodchenko Production Suit* appeared in *JWMS* 15: 1 (Winter 2002), p. 13.
- 4 Moral theory has been transformed by feminist critique, particularly that based on the work of Carol Gilligan, which challenges the ethics of duty and law with an ethics of care. Some of the implications of this theoretical paradigm shift have been incorporated into Roy Bhaskar's extensive reworking of Marxist thinking.
- 5 William Morris, *A Factory As It Might Be* (1884), reprinted as a pamphlet with commentary by Colin Ward (Nottingham: Mushroom Bookshop, 1994), p. 7.
- 6 Morris (1884), p. 7.
- 7 Morris (1884), p. 8.

- 8 Charles Landry and Franco Bianchini, *The Creative City* (London: Demos, 1995), p. 11.
- 9 Landry and Bianchini (1995), p. 12.
- 10 Morris (1884), p. 18.
- 11 William Morris, *News from Nowhere*, in *Three Works by William Morris*, ed. A. L. Morton (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1968), p. 330.
- 12 E. P. Thompson, *Customs in Common* (London: Merlin Press, 1991), p. 6.
- 13 Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods (Paris: Les Presses du Réel, 2002 [1998]), pp. 60–61.
- 14 Bourriaud (2002), p. 9.
- 15 Bourriaud (2002), p. 36.
- 16 Terry Atkinson, *The Indexing, The World War I Moves and the Ruins of Conceptualism* (Belfast, Manchester and Dublin: Circa Publishing, Cornerhouse and Irish Museum of Modern Art, 1992), p. 16.
- 17 Atkinson (1992), p. 17.
- 18 Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (London: Routledge, 1984), p. 67.
- 19 Thompson (1991), p. 15.