

A Provisional Memorial to Nuclear Disarmament*

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A Provisional Memorial to Nuclear Disarmament is an installation which combines William Morris fabrics with anti-nuclear symbols and slogans. It was made in response to a visit to HMS Courageous, a 285-foot, nuclear-powered submarine decorated with William Morris *Rose* fabric. The *Courageous* saw service in the British Royal Navy for about two decades starting in the early 1970s. The vessel was decommissioned in 1992 after participating in the Falklands War of 1982, and is now laid up at Devonport naval dockyard in Plymouth, where you can visit free of charge, provided you book in advance and bring your passport for 'security' purposes. Now a museum, the submarine floats in a single dock with thirteen other decommissioned nuclear-powered submarines, awaiting the day when it will be dismantled by the Ministry of Defence in a sort of submarine mortuary.

You climb aboard down a steep ladder just in front of the conning tower and come straight into the officers' wardroom. All the seat covers and back rests are covered in *Rose* fabric. The seats go half way round the space: there is a lot of it, not just the odd bit here and there. There are *Rose* curtains in the officers' bunk spaces and *Rose* covers on some of their mattresses. There is even a *Rose* cover on one of the seats that the sailors used to 'drive' the submarine. It covers every single upholstered surface; seats, chairs, even beer barrels. At least in this part of the submarine – the officers' and senior ratings' quarters – the fabric is everywhere. But it becomes clear on the tour of the rest of the submarine how hierarchical the use of the fabric is: there are no Morris fabrics for the ratings who slept in between the armed torpedoes. Lastly, as you exit the submarine you see the future, in the form of a model of the proposed Trident submarine replacement.

The Ministry of Defence commissioned furnishing fabric from Sanderson, who own the Morris and Co. brand, to supply William Morris *Rose* for its nuclear submarines for thirty years, from the 1960s through to the late 1990s, including the Vanguard Class nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines which are armed with Trident nuclear-armed missiles. It is these

submarines that employ both nuclear weapons and nuclear energy technology that embody all the fears of atomic apocalypse, accidents and radioactive contamination.

To fit a William Morris fabric in these submarines seems in many ways profoundly contradictory given Morris's politics. During the 1880s Morris became highly critical of Britain's imperialist ambitions and became an active campaigning communist, speaking at demonstrations and rallies across the country. He participated in the founding of Britain's first socialist organisations and wrote many socialist pamphlets, as well as writing *News from Nowhere*, a utopian romance first serialised in *Commonweal*, a revolutionary communist newspaper. Morris thought that interior 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 as a designer and craftsman and the setting up of Morris and Co. Morris's designs for fabric and wallpaper are highly schematised representations of nature, where it is always summer and never winter; the plants are always in leaf, often flowering, with their fruits available in abundance, ripe for picking and with no human labour in sight. This can be seen as a form of utopian vision. *Rose*, also a densely schematised design with roses, rose hips, birds, leaves and briars complete with sharp looking thorns, was originally designed by Morris and printed onto cotton and linen in 1883. The original design is now owned by the Victoria and Albert Museum. The pattern is one of only three printed textile patterns in which Morris depicted birds; the others are *Strawberry Thief* and *Bird and Anemone*. For the Ministry of Defence, the pattern was reproduced by Sanderson as a woven furnishing fabric. It is a matter of conjecture as to why *Rose* was commissioned as opposed to any other Morris pattern or any other pattern at all. But they did commission it, and that decision, strange as it is, merits attention. We must ask: what does it mean to see one of Morris's designs used in the nuclear submarines of the Royal Navy?

The interior space of a submarine is a highly compact metal environment. The *Rose* fabric is the only point where nature, however stylised, is represented on any significant scale and the only point where fabric is used to soften the experience of living inside the machine. It offers a

respite, where domesticity, homeliness, comfort and normality are introduced: the *Rose* fabric was nicknamed the 'Birdie' fabric by submariners. It also might be read as a representation of Britishness, bringing a form of cultural identity into the submarine. However, the use of the fabric is class-based. As mentioned earlier, the fabric is not used in areas where ratings eat, sleep and work, but only in the officers' and senior ratings' mess.

The class and economic basis of these uses of Morris's fabrics goes back to the beginnings of Morris & Co. where Morris's works were always made for the rich. Morris's insistence on quality and beauty meant that the cost of Morris & Co. products were way beyond the means of the nineteenth-century worker. This was something about which Morris was acutely aware in his engagement with his customers, hence his well-known tirade about 'ministering to the swinish luxury of the rich'. He was one of the most sophisticated theorists of the aesthetic impoverishment of the working class, and he recognised that there was no solution to this dilemma within capitalism. The only solution possible was the dismantling of the capitalist mode of production and the development of communism.

In response to the uses of *Rose* by the Royal Navy, I have placed the fabric in another nuclear context, that of anti-nuclear protest. This transition is prompted by the work of British Marxist historian E.P. Thompson. Thompson wrote the political biography *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary*, initially published in 1955, but updated and republished in 1977 when he was a leading intellectual in the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament.¹ He was also the author of the pamphlet *Protest and Survive*, a parody on the government leaflet *Protect and Survive*, a booklet that claimed to tell you how to make your home and family safe in a nuclear attack.²

In the installation *A Provisional Memorial to Nuclear Disarmament*, anti-nuclear protest signs, quotes, slogans and symbols are painted onto the backs of fifteen old projection screens (not unlike the ones found in officers'

¹ E.P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary*, 2nd rev. edn (London: Merlin, 1977).

² E.P. Thompson, *Protest and Survive* (London: Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, 1980); Central Office of Information, *Protect and Survive* (London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 1976).

wardrooms on nuclear-powered submarines) where the screen has been replaced with William Morris fabric. By making the paintings on screens, a number of transformations occur. For a start, the works become three-dimensional, acquiring a front and a back. Some of the fronts are plain William Morris fabrics, but most have been painted black or occasionally yellow – colours often appropriated by protest banners from radiation warning signs.

By contrast, on the backs of the screens, anti-nuclear protest slogans and signs are painted onto Morris fabrics but allowing elements of the Morris pattern to poke or surface through. Seen from the back, it is not exactly clear what the viewer is looking at: the protest images look didactic, like a group of projected lectures which are telling the viewer about something. But because Morris's designs surface through the painted anti-nuclear images, they produce an unstable picture space that is not fixed, where a Morris pattern and the painted image neither merge nor separate. On the screen, where images would normally be ephemeral, requiring projected light, they are now painted, fixed, stuck in time.

The slogans and symbols carry with them a history of struggle, but might now appear to be clichés. Perhaps the Morris fabrics, too, in their contemporary mass-produced form, can seem overly familiar and drained of meaning. Bringing the slogans and signs into the gallery might be seen as a way of rendering them mute, but, at the same time, the slogans resonate, and in the new context of being 'interlaced' with the Morris fabrics there is the possibility of reading them afresh. Moreover, the dialogue works both ways: the slogans and symbols cry out, 'charging up' and revivifying the political content of the Morris fabrics for a new era.

The *Provisional Memorial to Nuclear Disarmament* re-conceptualises what painting might be as part of a political struggle for a nuclear free-world. The *Memorial* also takes back painting from what John Roberts calls 'its own retarded conditions of conceptualisation' where painting 'has no purchase as social technique and, as such has an attenuated relationship to the extra-artistic real'.³ The thin-legged and crooked screens in a group look like a

³ John Roberts, *Revolutionary Time and the Avant-Garde* (London: Verso, 2015), p. 2.

demonstration or protest march, with placards jostling or clustering in solidarity. They take back Morris's fabrics from their appropriation by the Ministry of Defence and re-appropriate them for ongoing anti-nuclear protest.

Britain's Conservative government has, despite opposition, decided to go ahead with the commissioning of a new generation of Trident nuclear submarines armed with up to twelve nuclear missiles with multiple warheads, all many times more powerful than those used at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, at a cost of about £250bn. According to CND, '[t]his money would be enough to improve the NHS by building 120 state of the art hospitals and employing 150,000 new nurses, build 3 million affordable homes, install solar panels in every home in the UK or pay the tuition fees for 8 million students'.⁴ The British government also recently confirmed that it is going to proceed with the French- and Chinese-financed Hinkley Point C, the first nuclear power station to be built in Britain for two decades. The *Memorial* is only provisional and will need adding to in the near future.

* *A Provisional Memorial to Nuclear Disarmament* is an Arts Catalyst Nuclear Culture Commission. It was first exhibited as part of 'Material Nuclear Culture' at KARST, Plymouth, UK 17/6/16 – 14/8/16 and as part of 'Perpetual Uncertainty: Contemporary Art in the Nuclear Anthropocene' at the Bildmuseet, Umea, Sweden 02/10/16 -16/04/17, both curated by Ele Carpenter.

⁴ Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, 'No to Trident', available on: <<http://www.cnduk.org/campaigns/no-to-trident>> [last accessed 21/11/2016].