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Emily Rosamond

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The Background Speaks:
David Mabb's **Announcer** and the Emergence
of Information
Emily Rosamond

David Mabb's artwork often stages complex interactions – synergies, conflicts, resonances, even fights – between the aesthetic vocabularies associated with significant moments in socialist history. In 2014, Mabb mounted his exhibition *Announcer* at the Focal Point Gallery, Southend-on-Sea, UK (14 April–12 July). At the heart of the exhibition, the series *Announcer* (Figs. 1-6) comprised 30 large canvases with backgrounds made from rows of text-laden pages from the *Kelmscott Chaucer* in facsimile edition. (The *Chaucer* was first published in 1896 by the Kelmscott Press. The Press was founded by William Morris and he also worked there as a designer.) Over these pages, Mabb has painted copies of some of El Lissitzky's constructivist illustrations of Vladimir Mayakovsky's revolutionary poems *For the Voice* (1923). The Kelmscott Press's pages interact with Lissitzky's designs in complex ways: each canvas is like a dance between quite unequal partners. Lissitzky's geometric forms interrupt the flow of the *Kelmscott Chaucer* pages. Illuminated first letters from the *Chaucer* (designed by Morris) peek through the harsh, geometric forms of Lissitzky's compositions. White paper covers Edward Burne-Jones's illustrations in the *Chaucer*, leaving only the text and Morris's surrounding decorative flourishes. The brilliant white rectangles represent the illustrative scenes in the *Chaucer*, but also extend upward, engulfing parts of Lissitzky's shapes in the pictorial foreground, and striking up a conversation with their bold, constructivist geometry.

In addition to staging these complex interactions as a series of large canvases in the gallery, Mabb has also reproduced each of the 30 works in a newspaper, printed in an edition of 2,000 without any additional text or accompanying information. These newspapers were displayed atop a shipping pallet in the gallery and distributed free during the exhibition (Fig. 2). In this printed form, the individual words from the *Chaucer* are so small as to be entirely illegible, reduced to a background texture against which the larger compositional elements push, or pull. Letters, even words, become inaccessibly small units of meaning-making. Instead, those who leaf through the papers 'read' the shapes of stanzas – a hum of irregular, rectangular rhyme royal blocks with frayed right edges – as a background pattern. This background punctuates, offsets and sometimes upsets Lissitzky's shapes and Mayakovsky's words which, lost on all but those well-versed in Russian, take on the abstract character of shapes imbued with urgency. Even when viewing the canvases in the gallery, a viewer would only be able to read parts of the *Chaucer*: the large volume of text, combined with much of it being either covered over with painted shapes and/or installed too high up on the gallery walls to be read, deliberately transforms the text into an image, a background. The background speaks: but here, without the crutch of its semantics, it speaks largely as texture. It speaks not only, not entirely, of itself, but also as the isolation of a point – a melting point, let's say – at which text becomes texture.

What is at stake in staging the transition from text to texture? What is at stake in inviting vision to navigate the point at which, according to a certain, sweeping kind of glance over too much textual information, it is no longer grammar that binds words together but page design, the shapes of stanzas, the drive to 'see' a set of stories coalesce, in their totality, into an image? As with many of his works, Mabb complexly layers historical moments in which social critique, dissent and utopian socialism forcefully intersect within art and design. He examines how such instances of political expression may play out differently across the various kinds of shape, image, and pattern that have been called upon to give form – or bear witness – to dissenting political voices, and utopian, socialist yearnings for newfound forms of equality (however flawed or untenable such yearnings might be in practice – and however much a design's political bite might decay over time, becoming nothing more, to contemporary viewers, than quaint and pleasing pattern). Much can be said about how, and why, Mabb's works stage



Figure 1. David Mabb, *Announcer*, installation view, Focal Point Gallery, Southend-on-Sea, 2014. Photo: Mark Blower.

a dialogue between Morris's and Lissitzky's quite different socialist moments (a full exploration of which would involve unravelling a vast web of other dialogisms: between Morris and Chaucer, Lissitzky and Mayakovsky, and countless others).

Yet rather than follow these threads to their end, I want to shift the focus, in my discussion, toward a necessarily more tentative, provisional and speculative task: an account of what I believe to be a tacit reference, in Mabb's images, to a recent twist in the conceptual history of 'equality'. If *Announcer* layers poignant moments in socialist design history which were imbued with the drive toward a vision of social equality, it does so, I argue, with an eye to another concept of equivalence that has become ever more important since the 1940s: the capacity to treat both image and text as data, and, in turn, as information. *Announcer*, in my reading, stages a process by which text loses its linearity, its particularity as narrative, and comes to be considered informatic in new (and newly quantifiable) ways. The sidelong glance at the 'whole' text in *Announcer*'s background speaks to new ways of understanding texts as quantities of information made available to machinic eyes. Mabb's images frame the informatic present as the future of the historical moments they layer together (Chaucer's, Morris's, Lissitzky's) as much as they delve into the past. They speak to the development of information (in the sense in which it was developed as a scientific concept in the 1940s) as both an important touchstone for the reception, distribution, and, increasingly, the production of art and culture, and a major shift in the conceptualisation of 'equality' in the arts. The prerogative of algorithmic analyses of data-sets, information – as concept and as cultural presumption – both equalises events and phenomena, in a certain sense, by presuming them all to be quantifiable and thus information-bearing; and, in another sense, is used to create new ways of understanding – and profiting from – difference, particularity and idiosyncrasy.

As Ted Striphas (Granieri, 2014) notes, the emergence of the scientific concept of information formed the conceptual basis for 'algorithmic culture', in which many tasks once presumed to be the province of human cultural activity (such as assigning relative values to cultural expressions) can be done automatically (as when, for instance, Google's search engine ranks results). Mabb's series, I argue, tacitly questions the emergence of informatic, and inherently quantifiable, conceptions of significance, which have fundamentally changed the landscape of meaning for text, type, image, and

their concomitant conceptions of equality. If Morris and Lissitzky each envision a radical new form of social equality in their works (each of which, arguably, fails), then Mabb's work stages a process in which a new equaliser comes along, transforming these previous moments into quantities of data to be processed as information. Thus, they grapple with the continual redistribution and re-conceptualisation of equality, and with how each of these conceptions of equality might produce its own kinds of hierarchical divides.

My account will be a necessarily broad, associative and, at times, idiosyncratic attempt to reconceptualise Mabb's work; and my interpretation of *Announcer* will by no means be comprehensive. In spite of these caveats, it is my hope that this experiment in reading *Announcer* might yield an intriguing move away from a dogged adherence to the reference points that the work, itself, provides, in order to account for what I argue is a massive epistemic shift happening today due to the digital processing of information. My analysis might also enrich burgeoning discussions of "algorithmic culture" (to borrow Striphas' term), which could benefit from both the longer view of modern art history that Mabb's work suggests, with increased attention to artworks that do not fall within the rubric of 'new media'. While art-historical discussions of algorithms, information and data are often confined to so-called new media art, my contention is that any medium – be it printing, painting, or online forums for rating purchases – is 'new' insofar as, on the one hand, it continues to impact culturally on available structures of thought and, on the other hand, it continues to respond to newly emerging conditions for cultural production and reception. Faced with the dialogical nature of Mabb's work, my response is to extend its logic by inviting another historical moment – our own – into the conversation. For if *Announcer* layers historical moments in pictorial space, it is the present that is, truly, their foreground.

The Background: Morris, Lissitzky and Socialist Typography

Before examining how data and information might be relevant interpretive concepts for the ways in which *Announcer* transforms text into texture, a brief (and by no means full) account of Mabb's primary references will be helpful. In this account, I hope to shed light on the complex interplay between equality and particularity in Morris's and Lissitzky's social and aesthetic ideals. As is well known, William Morris founded the Kelmscott Press in 1890, and it ran until his death six years later. The *Kelmscott Chaucer*, which was printed shortly before Morris died, was widely considered to be the crowning achievement of the Press and one of the most beautiful and important printed volumes.¹



Figure 2. David Mabb, *Announcer*, installation view, Focal Point Gallery, Southend-on-Sea, 2014. Photo: Mark Blower.

Morris, a great admirer of Chaucer, had intended to print a volume of his poetry for some time; both he and Edward Burne-Jones, who provided the illustrations for the *Chaucer*, considered Chaucer's work to be one of their greatest discoveries from their years at Oxford (Peterson, 1992, p.229). As an avid collector and antiquarian, Morris was familiar with a vast history of illustrated printings of Chaucer; he wished to bypass the rather gentlemanly interpretations found in the eighteenth century printings, and revive the vitality of the earlier, fifteenth and sixteenth century printings. As Peterson (1992, p.235) puts it,

Morris believed that only by peeling off the Renaissance and neo-classical layers of cultural interpretation could he recover something like the Chaucer of the Middle Ages, and this involved both a careful restoration of Chaucer's text (including the spelling) and a return to a more Medieval style of typography and ornamentation.

This involved lengthy deliberations and delays on nearly every aspect of the *Chaucer*: from finding the appropriate version of the text to deciding on fonts and custom-made, deep black ink (Peterson, 1992, p.239; Milevski, 2012, p.2). Yet for Morris, all this was merely the work required to produce something equal to the social and aesthetic tasks it was meant to embody: to both enact a critique of the present by a return to Medieval values and fine craftsmanship; and to achieve a pleasing simplicity and utility. Morris described his aims for the Kelmscott Press:

I began printing books with the hope of producing some which would have a definite claim to beauty, while at the same time they should be easy to read and should not dazzle the eye, or trouble the intellect of the reader by eccentricity of form in the letters. (Peterson, 1992, p.3; Morris, 1895)

This opening passage from Morris's widely read "A Note by William Morris on his Aims in Founding the Kelmscott Press" (1895) reveals a complex interplay of beauty and eccentricity within his thought. In this passage, a tacit tension emerges, between beauty in utility, on the one hand, and beauty as eccentricity, on the other. While every font, ink, illustration and flourish was to be considered with the utmost care – the kind of care that, to Morris, was all too often absent from design after the industrial revolution – too much flourish for its own sake would frustrate the reader's ability to read, and lack inclusivity. Morris, here, seems to understand beauty as part of a continuum which, if taken too far, if delivered in too high quantities, could alienate viewers.

Can beautiful design be egalitarian? As many commentators have pointed out, a great irony of Morris' work is that, in spite of its socialist ideals, it was not, in fact, affordable for all. Milevski (2012, p.5) points out that the purchase of a *Kelmscott Chaucer* would have been well beyond an average worker's means at the time of printing, accounting for approximately 22% of an annual wage. That said, although Morris' designs came to represent little more than rarefied bourgeois taste for many, it may be somewhat simplistic to hold Morris accountable to the ideal of producing work that was affordable to all. Caroline Arscott observes that "The debate over whether Morris's Marxist politics were compatible with his art practice (producing handcrafted luxury goods for bourgeois consumers) is a tired one...one with which Morris himself was wearily, if anxiously, familiar" (Hemingway, 2006, p.9).² To hold Morris' egalitarianism to this economic ideal, arguably, fails to account for the fact that the alternative, as Arscott (Hemingway, 2006, p.9) points out, is to produce things cheaply, quickly – and this was one of the problems with alienated, post-industrial revolution production

¹ For examples of the superlative, even hyperbolic praise the *Kelmscott Chaucer* has received over the years, see Peterson (1992, p.228-229).

² While Arscott uses the term "Marxist" to describe Morris' politics, the latter was not actually a Marxist (though he certainly admired Marx); the term 'socialist' might be more fitting here.

Figure 3. David Mabb, *Announcer painting 2*, 2014.
Photo: Thomas Lock.



in the first place. Nevertheless, this inherent contradiction (which courses through many an artwork presumed to be critical of capitalist production) reveals, one might say, something of the 'cost' of representing a concept of equality: that to express an ideal of equality on one plane (within, say, a book or a picture frame) might well throw some form of inequality on another plane (say, in economic terms) into harsh relief. Certainly, such complexities have animated many of Mabb's past works, which, while working with Morris' designs, have by no means sought to deify them or straightforwardly promote their view of how socialist ideals should manifest themselves aesthetically. On the contrary, Mabb has rallied against the ways in which the meaning of Morris' gestures have been lost, melting into a field of pleasing, decorative flourishes that seem to have more to do with bourgeois taste than with the cold, hard struggles of socialism.³

Analogous tensions between equality and particularity, inclusivity and discernment animate Lissitzky's illustrations of Mayakovsky; whereas Morris looked back to the Medieval period as a respite from the ugly, cruel world he observed, Lissitzky and Mayakovsky's works were resolutely aimed at the future. Vladimir Mayakovsky (1893-1930) wrote passionately in the form of revolutionary poetry against the bourgeoisie, in support of the common people's struggle, and in favour of an "army of the arts" which would help to bring down the old order (World Digital Library, 2014). (Later, Mayakovsky would become disillusioned with the state of his country under Stalin's rule and take his own life at the age of 36.) But in 1923, before such pessimism had set in, Mayakovsky and Lissitzky published *For the Voice* through the Russian State Publishing House in Berlin. The book featured rousing poems meant to be read aloud to large audiences, which were interpreted in Lissitzky's innovative designs. Lissitzky strove to perfectly unify the poem with its typographic form; among his innovations was the use of a thumb index with symbols and titles of the poems in the right-hand corners of the pages, to make it easier for readers to locate the poems (Mayakovsky and Lissitzky, 1923). Writing of Lissitzky's large propaganda boards (which employed a similar strategy for relating image and text as that which can be seen in *For the Voice*), T. J. Clark describes the "true root of El Lissitzky's utopianism" as

...his sense of the possible relations...between the two great forms of established sign language in the culture at large – visual and verbal, picture and text. It is above all because the circumstances following 1917 were felt for a while to be bringing about a breakdown and remaking of these distinctions that abstract artists could believe their project was political, with a part to play in the world's death. (Clark, 1999, p.237).

³ Indeed, many of his works have sought to negate the designer's pastoral, utopian visions, as if challenging them to take a tougher, more rigorous look at the struggles revolution requires (see Casellini, 2013).

⁴ For a more detailed account of the many, varied, violent conflicts and complications of this period and how they affected constructivist artists, see Antiff (2007) and Clark (1999).

For the Lissitzky of the early 1920s, it was the force of the revolution, felt as something that could break down the distinctions between image and text, that led him to address workers directly, be part of the battle cry that would, for instance, call to workers in Vitebsk with an elegant, abstract sign: "The Workbenches and Depots and Factories are Waiting for You. Let Us Move Production Forward" (Clark, 1999, p.229).

It is this feeling of disparate forms of meaning-making – in images, in words – melting, fusing, and merging that led UNOVIS, the group Lissitzky belonged to (along with Kasimir Malevich and others; the acronym stood for Affirmers of New Forms in Art) to declare in a street flyer of 1920:

On our way to a single pictorial audience!
We are the plan
the System
the Organization!
Direct your creative work in line with Economy! (Clark, 1999, p.228)

As infectious as such revolutionary airs were, slogans such as these were rife with contradictions. Without attempting an account of the incredibly complex, conflicted years,⁴ fraught with suffering, from 1917-1923, when *For the Voice* was published, suffice to say that the artist and poet's idealisation of the workforce as revolutionary contrasted sharply with the realities of labour conditions as many would have experienced them at the time. As Clark wryly puts it, "Stanki depo [workbenches and depots, part of Lissitzky's sloganeering in Vitebsk] would have had a cruel, desperate ring, or maybe a faintly ludicrous one, to those who knew what depots and workbenches were actually like" (1999, p.241). For Clark, the tale of modernisation told by Lissitzky's work is, ultimately, rife with desperation and horror.

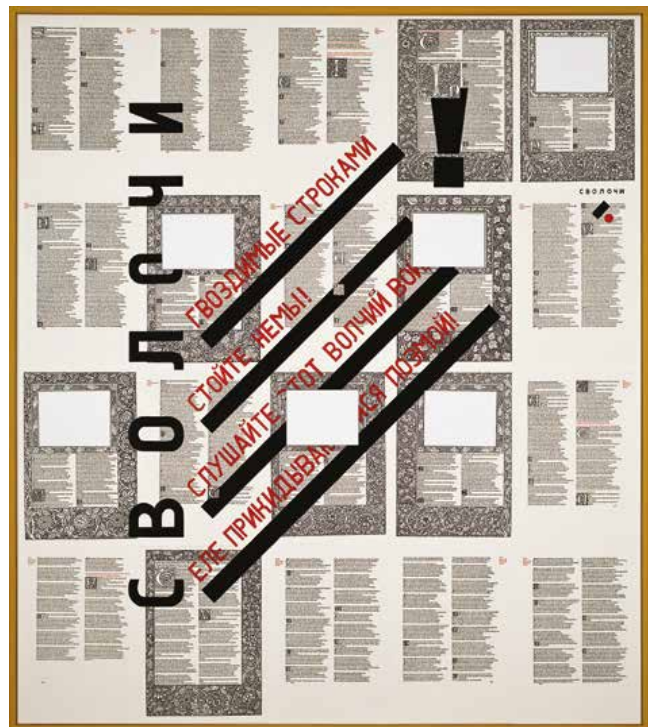


Figure 4. David Mabb, *Announcer painting 10*, 2014.
Photo: Thomas Lock.



Figure 5. David Mabb, *Announcer painting 14*, 2014.
Photo: Thomas Lock.

In Lissitzky's propaganda boards (and, I think, also in the mouthpiece motif in the cover illustration of *For the Voice*, repainted Mabb's Announcer series – see Figure 3), Clark sees the cruel irony of revolution: “the state shouting (as it usually does) through the revolution's mouth” (1999, p.297). The sense of urgency, which seemed as if poised to melt the distinctions between image and text, and between verbal and visual communication, seemed to be the voice of revolution, but turned out to be little more than the violence of state formation. Analogously to Morris' designs, which became (for the most part) seamlessly incorporated into the practices of bourgeois good taste, the voices given form in *For the Voice* spoke of revolution, but on behalf of the state. Poised between these fraught expressions of socialist design, Mabb's canvases stage a defamiliarisation process, rendering the compositions alien to themselves, throwing their voices into question. Lissitzky's illustrations, in the foreground, act as magnets, pulling the white margins of the *Kelmscott Chaucer* into a new kind of focus as compositional elements. The *Chaucer* pages, for their part, render Lissitzky's illustrations transparent, as if to articulate the idea that one could look through the compositions of modernisms past, like windows opening onto layers of design-infused conflict thrown into atmospheric perspective. But if each of these compositions might be read as a layering of historic text-images put into perspective, what if *both* of the principal historical moments they represent – Morris's and Lissitzky's – were treated as a background for conditions yet to come? What current conceptual, and political struggles between equality and domination fall into step with the rhythmic pattern that *Announcer* initiates?

The Sidelong Gaze: Text as Quantity, Text as Texture, Text as Information

The fraught optimism with which visionary modern designers looked at text obliquely, melding word and image (or at least troubling their readymade distinction from one another), might be understood as a precursor to the fraught optimism surrounding the emergence of new means to access and process large quantities of text, associated with the age of big data. As Ted Striphas argues, we are witnessing the emergence of an “algorithmic culture” (Hallinan & Striphas, 2014, p.3; Granieri, 2014), in which there are, properly speaking, two audiences for culture: people and machines. Early uses of the term culture were closely aligned with technology (for instance, the word culture was sometimes interchangeable with *coulter*, meaning plough); now, according to Striphas (Granieri, 2014), the connotations of culture and technology seem to be re-aligning in new ways. For instance, the emergence of the digital humanities, which uses computational tools

to analyse cultural materials (such as analysing several thousand novels to find a heretofore unrecognised subgenre) demonstrates that there may be certain aspects of ‘human’ culture that are only intelligible to machines. Striphas' term “algorithmic culture” describes “the use of computational processes to sort, classify, and hierarchise people, places, objects, and ideas, and also the habits of thought, conduct, and expression that arise in relationship to those processes” (Hallinan & Striphas, 2014, p.3; see also Striphas, 2012 and Granieri, 2014). Algorithms, run by Internet services companies like Google, social network companies like Facebook, audience measurement tech companies such as Quantcast, information services companies such as Experian, ‘fintech’ (financial technology) startups such as ZestFinance, and many others,⁵ increasingly automate the practices once associated with (human) cultural work: of sorting, evaluating, characterising, classifying and placing people hierarchically, objects, ideas and expressions.

These new information industries, while they might claim to democratise information or access to credit, also innovatively invent new ways to profit from data analytics. We are witnessing, I argue, a massive epistemic shift as a result of the widespread use of such automated processing, the implications of which are very hard to grasp in the present. Like the constructivists of the early 1920s, perhaps, recent cultural practitioners find themselves flung into the new terrain that Tim Jordan (2015) terms “information politics”, without a clear overview of the implications of these widespread changes. Without, of course, being able to do justice to all of these changes, I would like to give a sense of some of them below, in an attempt to paint a broad picture of the newly emerging terrain which, I argue, might be understood as *Announcer's* invisible foreground.

According to Striphas, the emergence of the scientific concept of information in the 1940s was a key precursor to “algorithmic culture”, in that it made it possible to view all events and phenomena – from “genetic material to the temperature inside one's home” to “the content of a novel” (Granieri, 2014) – as, in some sense, comparable, quantifiable and similarly analysable. Information is by no means a simple concept. As Lars Qvortrup (1993) points out that since the 1940s, the term has been fraught with controversy, as it has remained unclear whether information should be understood as objective – a ‘thing in itself’ – or whether it must come entwined with a subject, existing only relationally as ‘information-to-someone’. Due to this uncertainty, Qvortrup outlines four possible definitions of information on a spectrum from “information as thing” to “information as psychic construction”:

Firstly, information may be defined as something (a thing or a substance) existing in the external world like heat, electricity, etc... i.e. as a *difference* in reality. Secondly, information may be defined as something in the external world which causes a change in the psychic system. Here, information may be defined as a *difference which makes a difference*... Thirdly, information may be defined as a change in the psychic system which has been stimulated by a change in the external world... here information may be defined as a *difference which finds a difference*... Fourthly, information may be defined as something only in the human mind, a concept or an idea. Here, again, information may be defined as a *difference*, now however as a cognitive difference... (1993, p.3-4).

This uncertainty as to the status of information – as to what kind of *difference* it might represent – sheds light as to what is at stake in information politics given that, increasingly, data analytic practices allow companies to make judgements about human character and future behaviour based on data that may have little to do with their conscious self-expression, intentions or even their rights. Big data processing places less and less emphasis on free will, autonomy, personal decision-making and self-expression as it models new ways to link what people actually *do* with what they are likely to become. As MIT scientist Alex Pentland enthusiastically puts it:

Who you actually are is determined by where you spend time, and which things you buy. Big data is increasingly about real behaviour, and by analyzing this sort of data, scientists can tell an enormous amount about you. They can tell whether you are the sort of person who will pay back loans. They can tell you if you're likely to get diabetes... They can do this because the sort of person you are is largely determined by your social context, so if I can see some of your behaviours, I can infer the rest, just by comparing you to the people in your crowd (Naughton, 2014).

⁵ For a more detailed account of some of these companies' algorithmic activities, and a discussion of their implications, see Cheney-Lippold (2011), Hallinan & Striphas (2014), Gillespie (2012, 2014), Striphas (2010), Pariser (2011), Palmás (2011), Hearn (2010), McClanahan (2014) and Naughton (2014). For a general account of a ‘control society’ (one of the by now classic conceptualizations of the significance of computer-based, panspective surveillance), see Deleuze (1992).

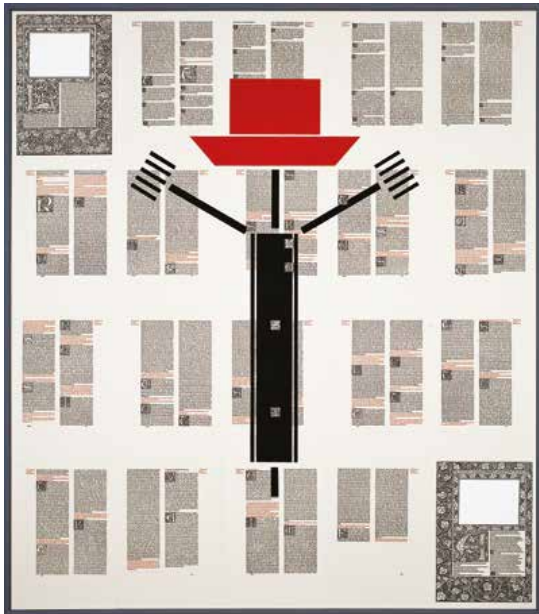


Figure 6. David Mabb, *Announcer* painting 22, 2014. Photo: Thomas Lock.

Pentland, and others like him, pays less attention to outputs such as Facebook status updates, and more attention to 'raw' data (such as GPS coordinates from smartphones) – information gleaned with a sidelong gaze, by 'reading' individuals from an angle quite different from the one from which they might choose to present themselves.

People (along with texts, objects and many other phenomena) come to be understood in this new information economy not by the self-expressive online presence they choose to cultivate, but by what kinds of largely unconscious digital 'breadcrumbs' they leave behind in the process. Such approaches to data have been particularly revolutionary in the field of 'fintech' startups, which use big data analytics (sometimes combined with psychometric testing) to determine individuals' 'creditworthiness' with (so they claim) greater accuracy than previous methods of credit scoring, in order to provide underwriting services to the 'underbanked' (and thus expanding the credit underwriting market). One such company, ZestFinance, is based on a very simple theory: "that consumers' online behaviour can be a decent proxy for their reliability in managing money" (Jenkins, 2014). Its founder and CEO, Douglas Merrill (formerly a Chief Information Officer and Vice President of Engineering at Google), summarised the company's approach to data as follows:

We feel like all data is credit data, we just don't know how to use it yet. [...] This is the math we all learned at Google. A page was important for what was on it, but also for how good the grammar was, what the type font was, when it was created or edited. Everything...Data matters. More data is always better (Hardy, 2012).

What could better typify an oblique, sidelong gaze at text (oddly akin to the ways in which *Announcer* conceptualises textuality at a distance from narrative) than this conception of the informatic content of a page? Font, grammar, and metadata all become subject to a new kind of scrutiny, and take on significance that might well remain at a remove from the purported content they convey.

Announcer is certainly not the first artwork to ask its viewers to consider large quantities of text at a distance, to navigate the boundaries between visuality and textuality differently to how one normally might if reading a page: searching, instead, for larger patterns on the level of page layout, type and texture.⁶ That said, given the massive recent shifts in data analytics, such modes of looking at text in

the background – at text as background – cannot help but allude to a newly emerging kind of equality in difference (in that all such patterns can be considered informatic); a new kind of optimism (to democratise information and the drive to discover new forms of significance by algorithm); and a new arena for political conflict (in contesting the corporate stakes in information processing).

Text, Typeface and Character: Art and Information Politics

As data analytics get better and better at processing vast quantities of information, and in recognising oblique patterns and correlations, citizens (alongside cultural artefacts and many other phenomena) become more and more 'legible' as characters – but to whom, and to what end? As Deidre Shauna Lynch (1998) points out, at the beginning of the eighteenth century in Britain, the concept of a literary 'character' could just as easily refer to typefaces and letters as to the fictitious personages these might be used to describe. The idea that a typeface might exude a particular 'character' is certainly with us today; companies spend much time and money on choosing the right font to express their corporate 'personality', and certain fonts might be described as, say, 'friendlier' or 'warmer' than others.⁷ Now, as Merrill's account of the importance of font shows, typeface, along with other information-bearing phenomena, takes on new kinds of significance to machinic eyes, which render it subject to algorithmic analyses, seeking correlation obliquely in vast quantities of data. Aspects of one's 'character' (for instance, being 'creditworthy') might be linked to fonts in ways that algorithms, not human eyes, determine by correlation.

Mabb's series, which juxtaposes poignant moments in socialist design history, tacitly invites viewers to consider this shift, as they navigate between text and image, text and texture, text and quantity, text and information, and ask themselves: to what kind of future do Morris's and Lissitzky's moments allude? In my reading, *Announcer* suggests that the enthusiasm – and ambivalence – which accompany the ever-increasing ability to access, process, and perhaps even democratise information finds its lineage in this history of modernist, socialist moments at which the boundaries between type and image seemed to melt away. While various writers have addressed the relationships between information theory and the visual arts (see Lippard, 1996, Ilfeld, 2012), many such accounts have tended to focus on new media works, which could downplay how artworks in painting, collage, and other more 'traditional' media speak to information politics on their own terms. Similarly, there have been some interesting accounts, in recent years, of art installations that deliberately overwhelm

visitors' abilities to take in all of the information they present, thus transforming visitors into 'samplers' of a random section of a larger work. For instance, Kate Mondloch (2010) has written about video installations comprised of hours and hours of footage. Rendering visitors samplers of a larger work, she argues, has often been lauded as a counter to the passive spectatorship that screen-based media often promotes; yet it, too, can easily become a normative form of spectatorship (p.41-42). Such accounts of the temporalities of 'too much information' in recent art are very important; but again, they are often confined to discussions of video and other screen-based art. Mabb's *Announcer* is an example of a work that rigorously examines such dynamics through print and painting alone. I hope that my account of *Announcer* – though it is necessarily based on broad and speculative comparisons – might offer an alternative to such narratives of 'high-quantity' artworks, and place them within a longer historical trajectory of utopian optimism, ambivalence and struggle.

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All images courtesy of David Mabb.

⁶For instance, an important reference point for Mabb, which I will not have space to develop in detail here, is the work of Tim Rollins and KOS. (Kids of Survival). Rollins, an artist and activist who worked with vulnerable youth from the South Bronx, produced images collaboratively with his students, using image-making on top of printed text as a pedagogical tool. He would read classic texts to his students and invite them to draw on top of the pages as he read, thus encouraging them to relate to the stories on a personal level. Together, his classes would produce canvases pasted with cut-out pages of text, on top of which would be painted intricate compositions of shapes and symbols; this became the signature style of the group (see Berry, 2009).

⁷For instance, Simon Garfield (2011) writes of Easyjet's decision to use Cooper Black font for its logo, in part because of its long-standing association with "anything intended to be warm, fuzzy, homely, reliable and reassuring" (p.53); or Ikea customers' outrage when the company switched fonts from Futura to Verdana (the latter of which was seen as a more "generic" and "corporate" font by consumers (p.79-82); or renowned typographer Matthew Carter occasionally fielding questions such as "What typeface should I choose if I want to be really friendly?" (to which Carter responds that he does not know, as such things are often more complex than simply ascribing a personality to a given font) (p. 76).

