

This is a pre-copyedited, author-produced manuscript of a chapter accepted for publication in *Pattern and Chaos in Art, Science and Everyday Life: Critical Intersections and Creative Practice* edited by Sarah Horton and Victoria Mitchell published by Intellect. The definitive version can be seen at <https://www.intellectbooks.com/pattern-and-chaos-in-art-science-and-everyday-life>

**David Mabb. Dialectical reversal in *About Two Worlds*<sup>1</sup>**



Figure 1: David Mabb, *About Two Worlds*, 2015. Acrylic paint, varnish, pencil, facsimiles of El Lissitzky's *About Two Squares* and William Morris' *Kelmscott Press The Wood Beyond the World* mounted on linen, displayed on wooden support. Painting 100 x 155 cm, installation variable.

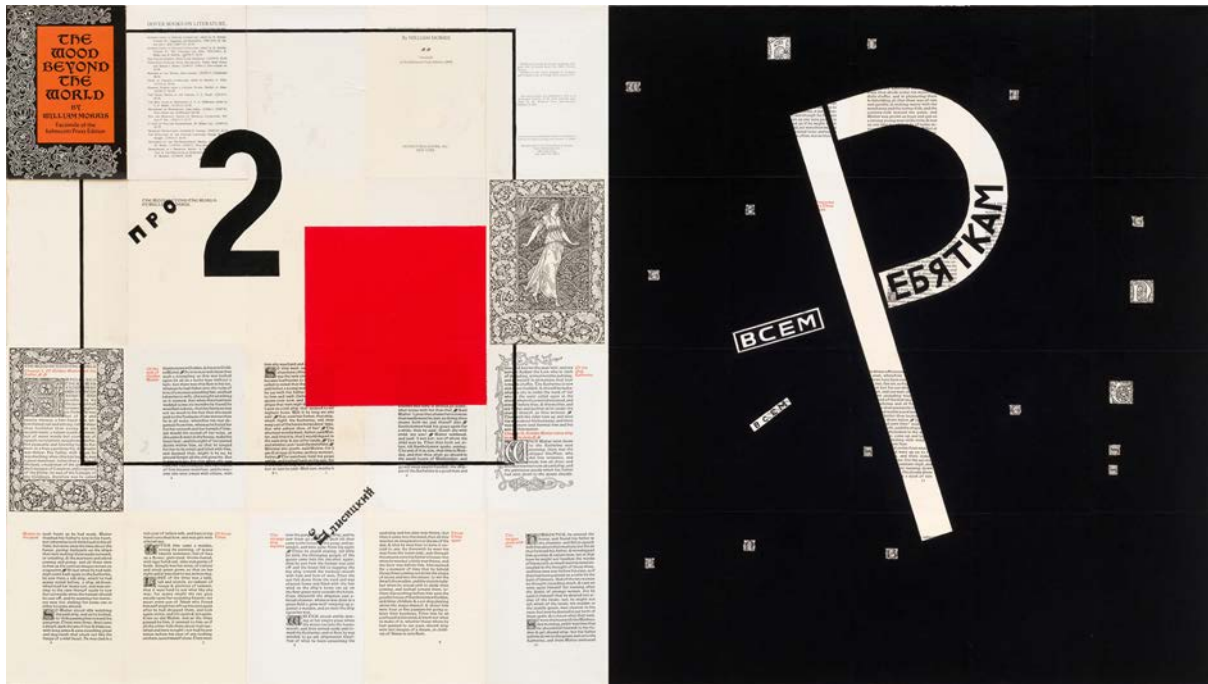


Figure 2: Sections 1 and 2 from *About Two Worlds*. Each section 80 x 70 cm.

*About Two Worlds* is made by bringing together two facsimile utopian modernist books.

The first is a facsimile of the Kelmscott edition of William Morris' *The Wood Beyond the World*, one of Morris' late romances originally published in 1894 and republished by Dover in 1972. Morris' prose romances "remain one of the most contested elements of Morris' literary legacy".<sup>2</sup> The cover of the Dover publication describes the narrative as a "wonderful fantasy in a medieval setting, brimming with high adventure and flights of fancy".<sup>3</sup> E.P. Thompson reads Morris' work with the Kelmscott Press as separate from his political activity as a socialist ("no part of the earlier "warfare against the age").<sup>4</sup> He recounts that "when a critic detected a socialist allegory in *The Wood Beyond the World*, Morris was quick to disillusion him: "it is meant for a tale pure and simple, with nothing didactic about it".<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, the visual qualities of the Kelmscott edition suggest an emphatic rejection of the ugliness of late 19<sup>th</sup> Century industrial capitalist society. Set in Chaucer type, one of three typefaces Morris designed for the Kelmscott Press, the Kelmscott *The Wood Beyond the World* fuses romantic narrative content with Morris' appropriation of book craft from the Middle Ages into a sort of utopian modernist space. It includes a frontispiece illustration of the Maid by Edward Burne-Jones which, in combination

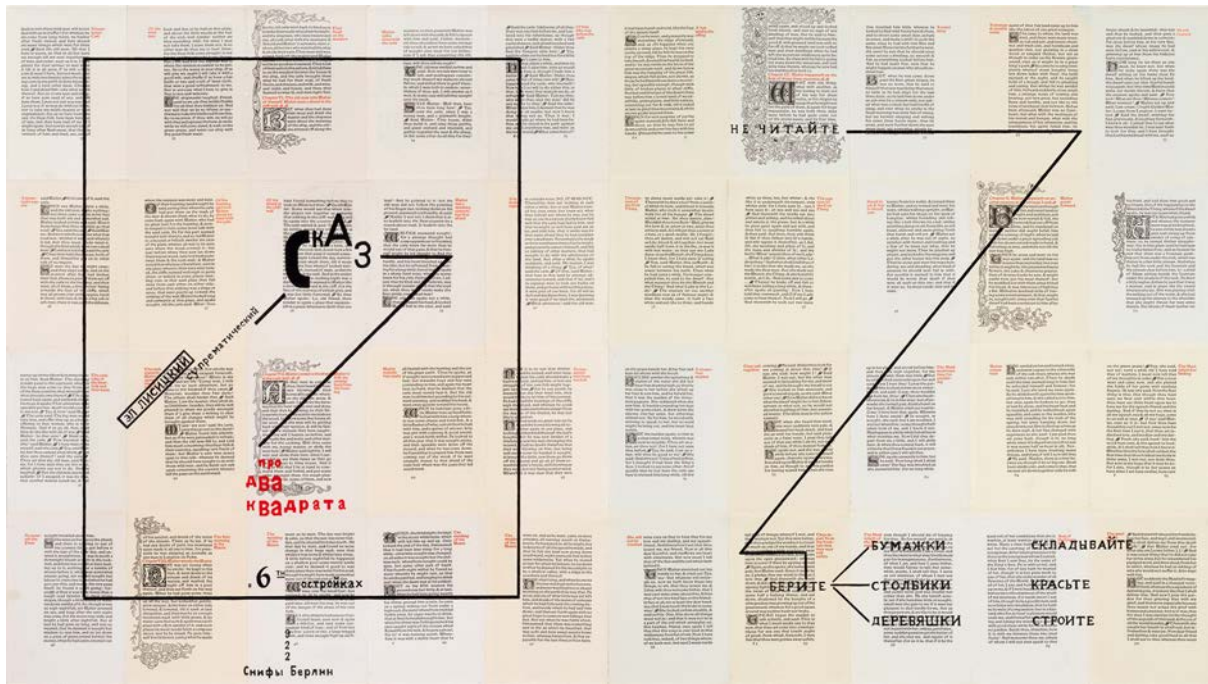


Figure 3: Sections 3 and 4 from *About Two Worlds*. Each section 80 x 70 cm.

with Morris' rich decoration of the borders, capitals and type, makes the Kelmscott *The Wood Beyond the World* something to be "looked at" as much as read.

The second facsimile book is El Lissitzky's children's story *About Two Squares* originally published in 1922, but translated into English and published by the Tate in 2014. Designed as a children's story, the narrative is very much embedded in design. At the beginning of the book Lissitzky instructs his young, and not so young, readers to join in: "Do not read, take paper, columns, blocks", and "fold, colour, build".<sup>6</sup> The book's narrative is very much open to interpretation but can be read as a science fiction communist fantasy. Sophie Lissitzky-Kuppers describes it as follows: "The two squares flew through the endless infinity of space; prophetic concepts were shot out of the artist's mind and took on forms, held in counter-balance by colossal tension. The red square destroyed the black chaos on earth in order to rebuild a new red unity. The black one, having been put out of action, fled into infinity".<sup>7</sup>

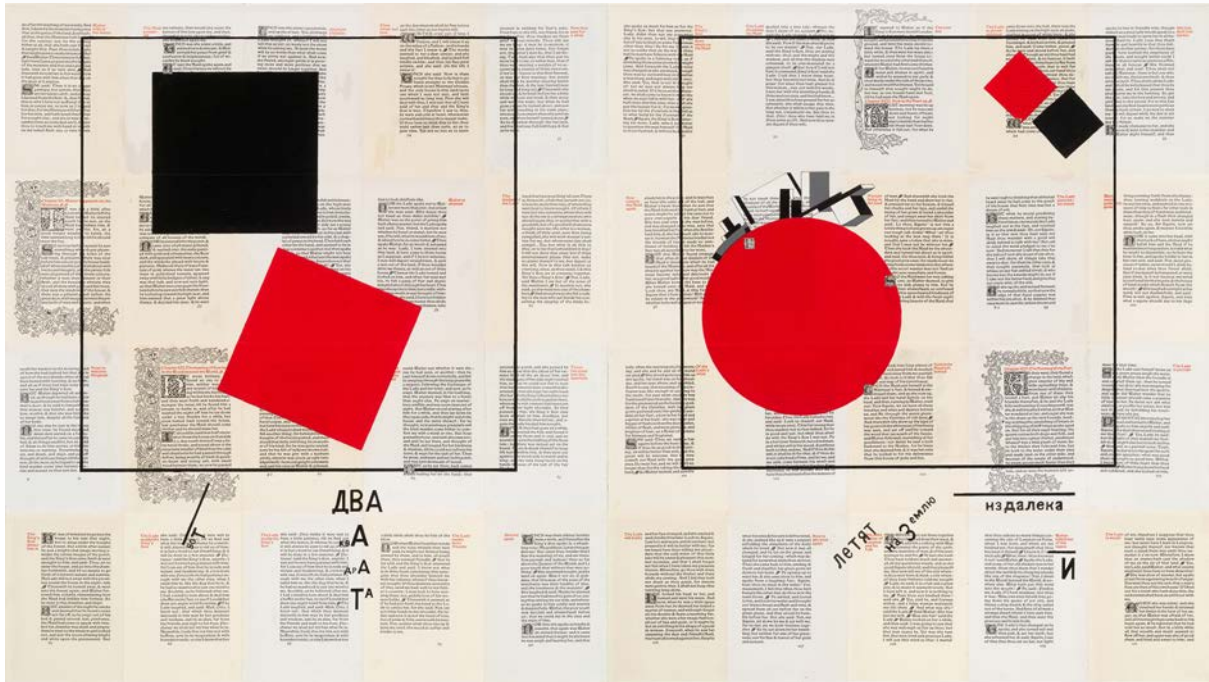


Figure 4: Sections 5 and 6 from *About Two Worlds*. Each section 80 x 70 cm.

At Handel Street Projects, *About Two Worlds* was installed diagonally across the two rooms of the gallery and hung on a long wooden structure so that both sides faced outwards. On the reverse side, which (taking Lissitzky's advice to join in) is seen first on entering the installation (Figure 1), all the facsimile pages from *About Two Squares* are glued in numerical order, recto and verso, onto a single canvas, and painted over with an enlarged painting of Edward Burne-Jones' frontispiece of the Maid from *Wood Beyond the World*.

On the front side of the work (Figure 9), all the facsimile pages from *The Wood Beyond the World* are glued in numerical order, recto and verso, across fourteen canvas sections. Each section is painted over with an enlarged copy of a single page from *About Two Squares* (Figures 2-8).

The painted parts never completely cover over the underlying pages from the *Wood Beyond the World*, but allow large elements of the text to show through, creating a dialectical interweaving between the two.

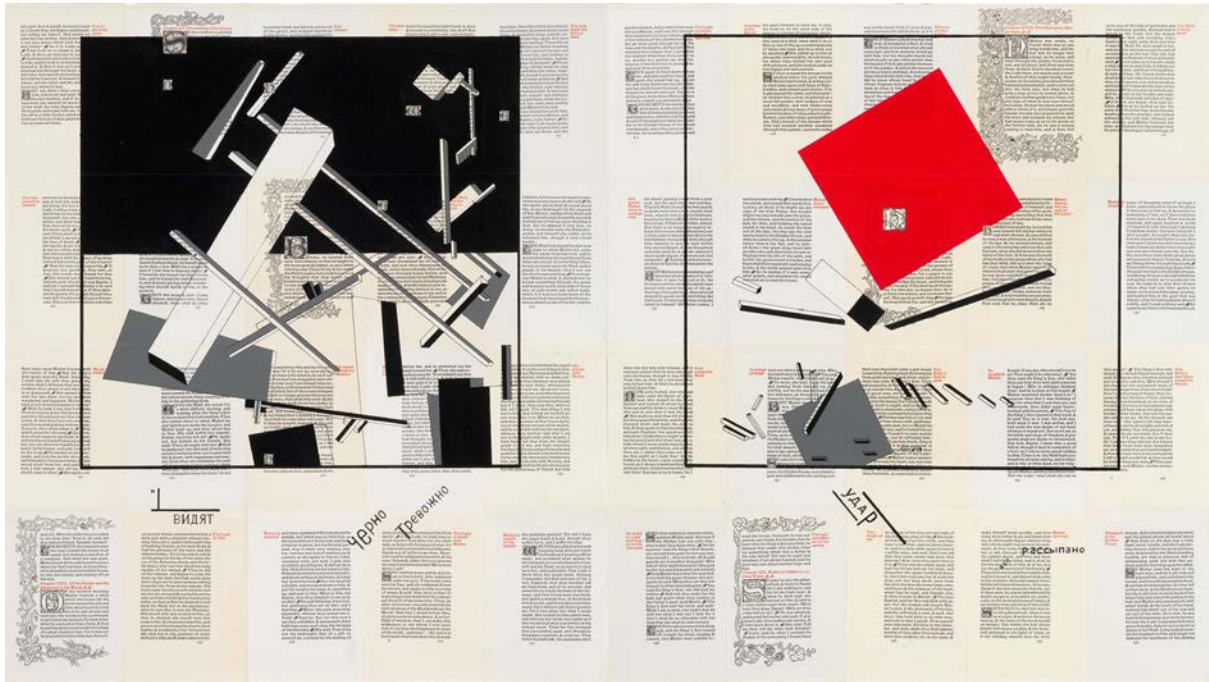


Figure 5: Sections 7 and 8 from *About Two Worlds*. Each section 80 x 70 cm.

The work draws our attention to the differences and similarities between Morris' and Lissitzky's respective works. Both stories are fantasies, with Morris' narrative taking place in the medieval past whilst Lissitzky's looks to the future. The materials, design and production of both books replicates this difference, with Morris looking to the Middle Ages for his influences, while Lissitzky consciously breaks with the past in his use of abstraction.

However, the work *About Two Worlds* complicates this division. Morris' original hand-crafted Kelmscott *The Wood Beyond the World* is here replaced by a facsimile -- a mass-produced machine printed edition which has been hand painted over with images of Lissitzky's originally machine printed pages. Over the facsimile pages of *About Two Squares* is an enlarged hand painted version of Burne-Jones' illustration frontispiece of the Maid, originally printed using engraved wooden blocks. All this confuses the division between the backward looking Morris and forward looking Lissitzky. The old binary between the hand and machine-made gets broken down by dialectical reversals.

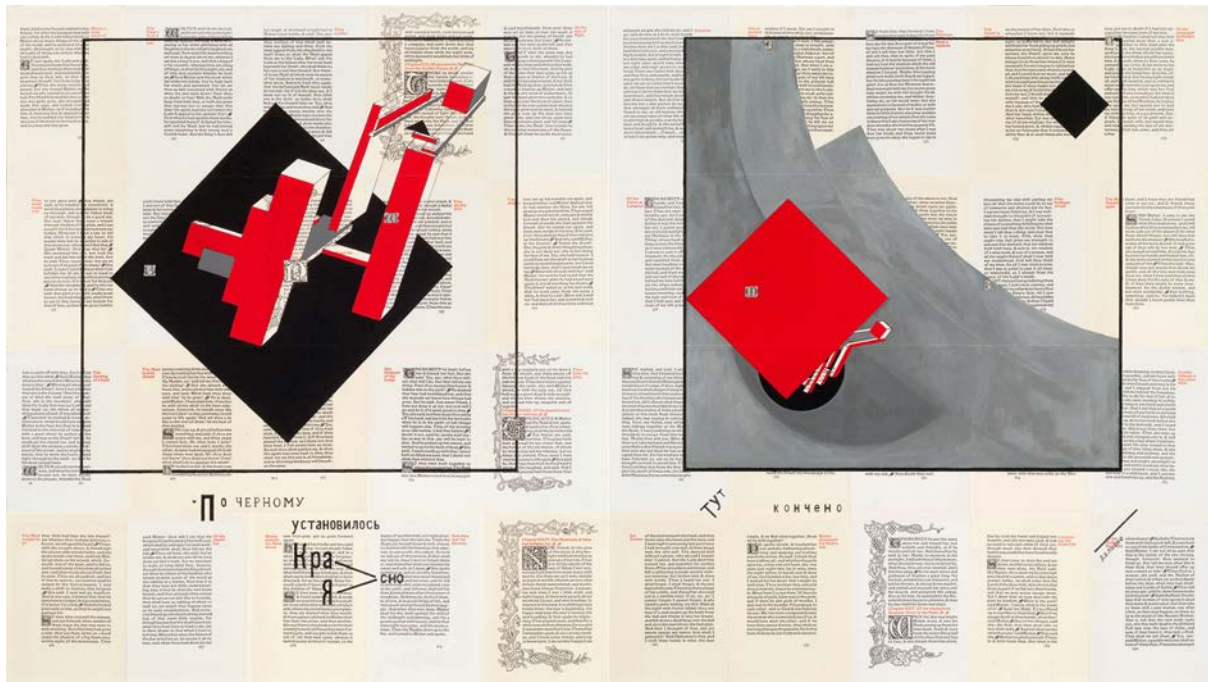


Figure 7: Sections 9 and 10 from *About Two Worlds*. Each section 80 x 70 cm.

More broadly Morris and Lissitzky both used their art to promote their socialist politics. Yet, whilst Morris saw beauty in the past, wanting to elevate Victorian society from the ugliness imposed by nineteenth century industrial manufacturing, for Lissitzky, the Russian revolution and the rapid advancement of science and technology meant the old world was no longer recognisable. He sought an entirely new visual language that could express the socialist world he believed he was helping to construct. By juxtaposing both works through dialectical reversals, *About Two Worlds* recalls Walter Benjamin's "dialectics at a standstill": "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".<sup>8</sup> The painting proposes that it is out of these fragments appropriated from the past that a future can be imagined.

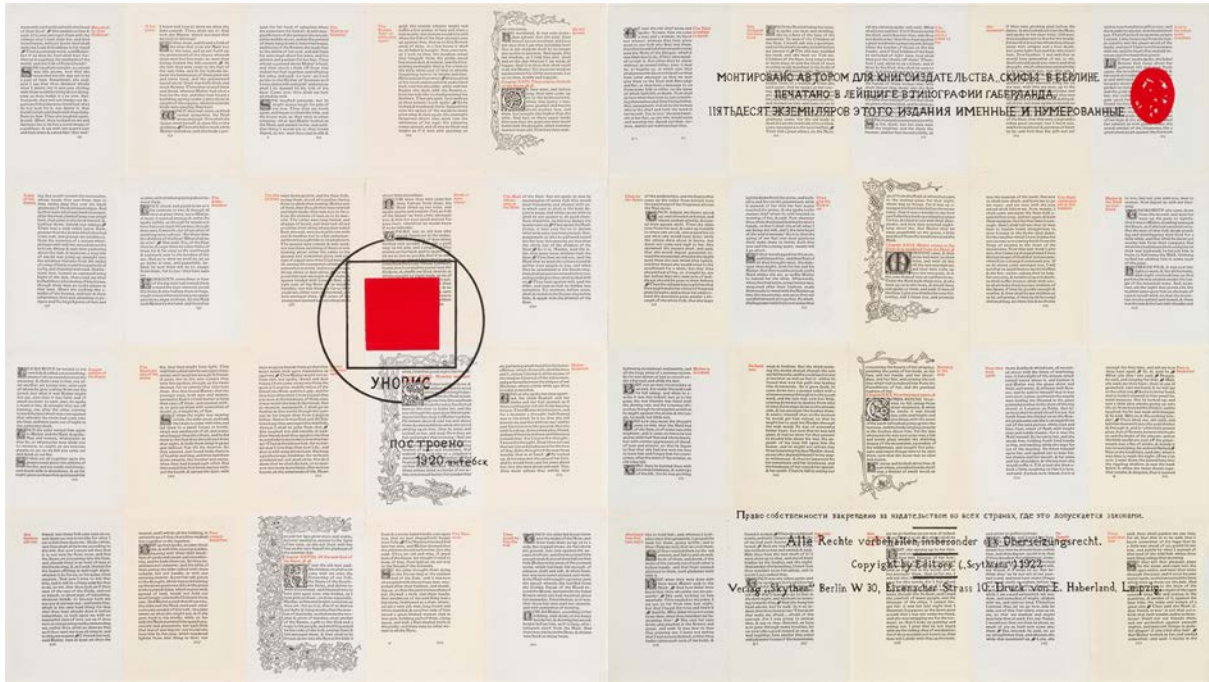


Figure 7: Sections 11 and 12 from *About Two Worlds*. Each section 80 x 70 cm.

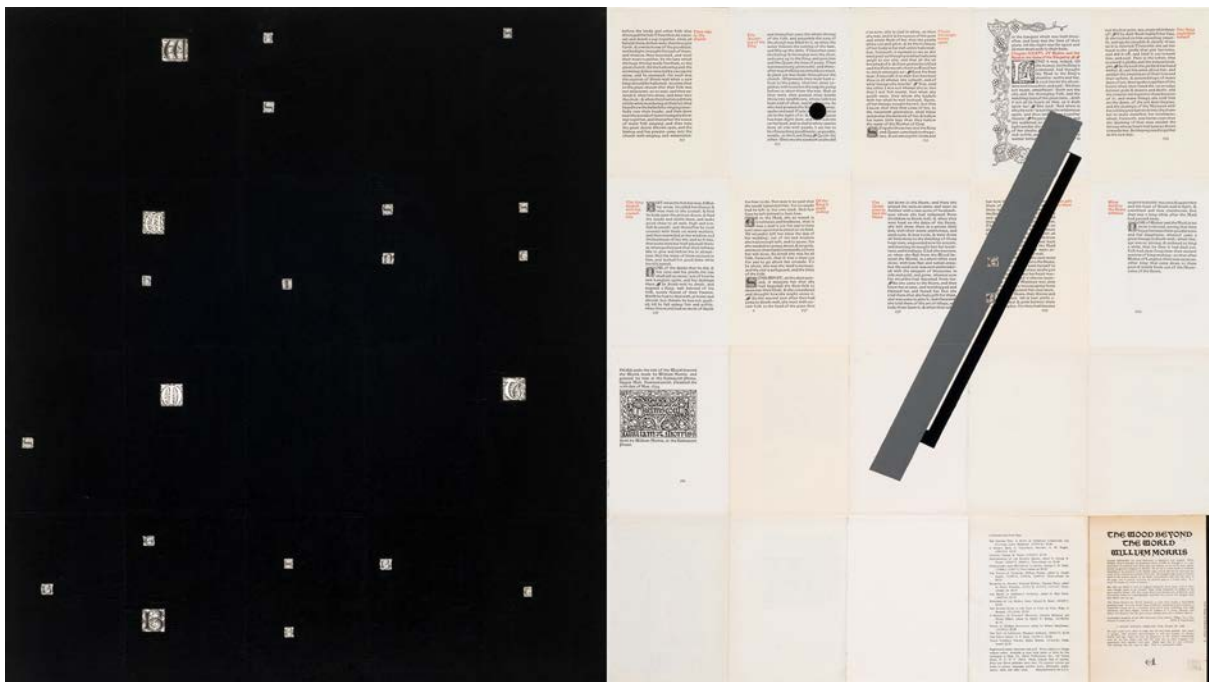


Figure 8: Sections 13 and 14 from *About Two Worlds*. Each section 80 x 70 cm.





Figure 9: David Mabb, *About Two Worlds*, 2015. Acrylic paint, varnish, pencil, facsimiles of El Lissitzky's *About Two Squares* and William Morris' Kelmscott Press *The Wood Beyond the World* mounted on linen, displayed on wooden support. Each section 80 x 70 cm, installation variable.

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<sup>1</sup> *About Two Worlds* was first shown at Handel Street Projects, London from 16th January – 20th February 2016. All photographs Peter White, FXP Photography.

<sup>2</sup> Phillipa Bennett, “Rewilding Morris: Wilderness and Wildness in the Last Romances in The Routledge Companion to William Morris”, ed. Florence S. Boos (Routledge: New York and Abingdon, 2021), p.343.

<sup>3</sup> William Morris, *The Wood Beyond the World* (Dover: New York, 1972), back cover.

<sup>4</sup> E. P. Thompson, *William Morris, Romantic to Revolutionary* (PM and Merlin Press: Oakland 2011), p 679.

<sup>5</sup> E. P. Thompson, *William Morris, Romantic to Revolutionary* (PM and Merlin Press: Oakland 2011), p 679.

<sup>6</sup> *El Lissitzky* (Tate, London, 2014).

<sup>7</sup> Sophie Lissitzky-Kuppers, *El Lissitzky: Life, Letters, Texts* (Thames and Hudson: London, 1968), p 24.

<sup>8</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, Convolute N 3, 1, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge Mass: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 463.