

THE EYEBALL BOMBER

A STORY BY
WILLIAM WALL

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The eyeball bomber was prepared to die for the visual arts. He issued a manifesto that could have come straight from the pen of Guy Debord. When Damian Hirst was commissioned by Fox Flying to design 'spots' for its aircraft, he issued a fatwah against Hirst stating that the artist had put the 'f' into 'art' (an allusion to the suggestion of a stream of bubbles emanating from the engines). Hirst was subsequently assassinated in mysterious circumstances and, according to reliable sources within the investigation, attempts were made to hang his naked body on the dining room wall. A campaign against Fox Flying billboard advertisements (Fox – The Clever Way to Go) followed. The actions and campaigns were so widespread as to suggest the work of an organisation, however the eyeball bomber never assumed a *nomme-de-guerre*, and consequently remained a spectral presence in the public consciousness throughout.



The anti-billboard graffiti consisted, in each case, of a flying sheep. At first glance all the sheep looked the same, but on closer inspection (for a gallery of the images visit www.eyeballbomber.org/gallery/) there were numerous subtle variations. The most popular variation was the exposure of part of the skeleton, and the most striking of these appeared on a billboard at the entrance to Heathrow Airport and depicted a flying sheep with a skeletal head. This mixed media work has since sold at auction for £1.2 m. The head is in fact a meticulous recreation in bleached pine of a sheep's skull, exactly one hundred and eleven percent life-size.

The first indication that this artist had turned to spectacular violence came when a pollock preserved in formaldehyde and set in a vitrine cabinet as part of a collective exhibition in the anti-establishment commercial gallery Itaka in Islington, exploded during the opening, killing two and injuring nineteen, including the well-known art collector Charles Saatchi who was treated for minor head wounds. The toxic effects of the formaldehyde are still being reported. This act of terrorism by an unknown hand, but clearly related to the previous acts of vandalism in that it referenced Hirst's famous shark in formaldehyde (*The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living (1991)*) was described by Prime Minister Gordon Brown as 'a new kind of terrorism'. Britons must be vigilant, he said,

in the protection of their ancient liberties. He urged the public to continue to visit exhibitions of modern art but to be wary of the more outrageous forms. A bill was rushed through parliament outlawing the use of art as a form of violence and making specific reference to what it called 'modern art'.

With the discovery by bloggers of the so-called 'Visual Terror' manifesto, the activist behind the outrages was deemed to belong to a subversive organisation. An appendix to the Art for Terror bill (2008) proscribed the Visual Terrorist Front (VTF) and gave the activist a label. Suddenly acts of visual terror on a smaller scale and at a lower level of sophistication began to assume enormous importance. Conversely, at the same time, melting LCD screens, haute-couture that ignited spontaneously on contact with water, poisonous food labels and footwear that issued smoke signals became fashionable. A new catchphrase emerged in marketing: commodity terror.

The VTF went silent. It seems now that there never really was a VTF – not in the sense of a directed organisation with coherent aims and a verifiable *modus operandi*. Instead the eyeball bomber seems to have been content to see his actions associated with those of others with whom he may have had no contact at all, as long as those actions were consistent with his manifesto. The government, as usual issued writs against sites and domains that hosted the VTF manifesto and its related documents, but as usual ramification throughout the world wide web could not be halted.

The effect of these actions on public confidence cannot be overstated. A climate of fear developed in which all art was viewed with suspicion. Mixed media objects assumed the status of Trojan horses and were subjected to intensive pre-hanging investigations – x-rays, ultrasounds, chemical analysis became standard tools in galleries throughout the developed world, even leading to a joke documentary on 'the medicalisation of art'. It became customary for artists to submit to galleries, along with the usual slides of their work, samples of materials used, certificates detailing previous good behaviour, statements regarding their political views (most held none), police clearances, etc. On the other hand, the avant-garde went underground and a lot of cutting edge work circulated in private and often on an exchange-of-goods basis or for no financial reward. Joke Art, Sad Art, Bastard Art, Art Macabre and En Suite Art were some of the schools that developed from this period.

Galleries downsized and there were massive redundancies in art management at all levels. The only growth areas were in security and storage. But the greatest damage was done in the public sphere. Advertising attracted unparalleled revulsion. Street artists were stoned. Company logos disappeared from clothing and documents. The graphic virtually vanished as a public interface with high art.

At what point did the eyeball bomber formulate his ultimate plan? The evidence is both fantastically complete and disappointingly imprecise. We know that he began to document the process using a digital camcorder somewhere around May 2009. This is based on a two second clip in which the corner of a newspaper appears; the headline seems to reference the retreat from Basra. All other metadata relating to the movie files has been scrupulously removed at binary code level from the extant material. This had to have been carried out by someone with low-level programming expertise – yet another puzzle.

What we know is this:

On a morning in May he made contact through the artist's underground railway with Gerhard Fromm, a German sculptor with a background in explosives. Fromm must have been excited by what he heard because he immediately broke cover, surfacing in Trieste, Barcelona and Stansted. Police kept him under continuous surveillance but had no reason to suspect he was meeting anyone sinister when he sat down to watch a Chelsea match in the Duke of York on Ball's Pond Road, Hackney. During half time he went to the toilet and disappeared for three months. When he emerged again from deep cover he was stepping off a bus in Leonberg near Stuttgart.

We now know that during that time the bomber had his left eyeball removed surgically and was fitted for a prosthetic or glass eye. He later fashioned several such eyes using a glass-blowing technique taught to him by ex-blower and anarchist, Tom Wright, currently serving a twenty year term for attempting to kill Tony Blair at Cliff Richard's Bermuda hideaway, by packing his wheelchair with explosives. A cardboard box containing eight trial pieces and eleven fully formed eyes, hand-painted and signed EB was discovered at squat off Ridley Road, Hackney. These artefacts have been retained by the police. Gerhard Fromm, during his interrogation, admitted that he assisted in developing the solution of nitro-glycerine that was used to fill the hollow eyeball. On the 11th January 2011, the eyeball bomber boarded Fox Flight 111 to Florence. Film preserved on the aircraft's high-res black box surveillance cameras shows the following sequence:

(Man stands up suddenly in row 8, steps out into the aisle, dips his head and when he lifts it again one eye-socket is empty.)

Unknown Passenger: Yeuch!

(Passenger throws eye-ball. Explosion. Cut to black.)

A still from the film, enlarged one hundred times, clearly shows the eye-ball in mid-flight, the pupil, for one bizarre moment, looking to camera. The image has achieved iconic status among far-left bloggers.

The Home Secretary, Peter Haine, declared, after the findings of the commission of enquiry had been published, that it is impossible to legislate for every possibility. However, legislation preventing the visually impaired from travelling by air, bus or underground railway was enacted, following the attack. Subsequently everyone who had been fitted with a prosthesis of any kind was barred from travel for five years from the date of fitting – this included artificial joints and heart transplants, the latter being defined as prostheses within the meaning of the act. The actual identity of the eyeball bomber has never been discovered. Gerhard Fromm is currently detained under legislation that permits detention of enemies of the state without trial on an indefinite basis, having been extradited from Germany. The last words of the bomber's manifesto are: Art and fear enter by the eye, but only art inhabits it; artists of the world unite, you have nothing to lose.

However, it is quite clear that the artists of the world had everything to lose.

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