

## Child of the Bomb

As an act of protest Paul Manning stuck a photograph on to a painting by John Constable.<sup>i</sup> Campaigning for the rights of fathers, this iconoclast mirrored, yet subverted, the actions of his predecessors the suffragettes who attacked paintings a hundred years ago.<sup>ii</sup> The artwork Manning chose was 'The Hay Wain' (1821), one of the most well known paintings made by an English artist. Carrying out his action in the gallery Manning used Constable's work as his own canvas. The image of a boy was placed on top of the horse-drawn cart that stands in the middle of the river. Gluing this portrait photograph of his son on to the surface of 'The Hay Wain' was deemed an act of vandalism, a criminal act for which Manning was arrested.<sup>iii</sup> However, with one small intrusion he had struck at the heart, trespassing on to the idyllic English scene and contaminating the painting with its upstart, the photograph.

Constable's painting is a totem of Englishness that is revered. Housed in the National Gallery, a devotional space at the heart of the capital, this handwrought image of a simple rural scene was made directly from sketches of the Suffolk landscape. This is the unspoiled landscape of Constable's boyhood with 'its gentle declivities, its luxuriant meadow flats sprinkled with flocks and herds, its well cultivated uplands, its woods and rivers, with numerous scattered villages and churches, farms and picturesque cottages'.<sup>iv</sup> We are presented with a picture of innocence, a British paradise before the fall. In his book 'On Living in an Old Country', Patrick Wright explored the Heritage Industry that had emerged in Britain by the 1980s. At the core of this discussion was the attempt to define the essentials of an English identity and existence of a 'Deep England'. As pointed out by Wright, the 'approved and dominant images of Deep England are pastoral and green'.<sup>v</sup> Constable's work is emblematic of this agreed image of Englishness. The phrase that was coined by Constable's biographer C.R. Leslie to label the painter's turf was 'Constable's Country'.<sup>vi</sup> By the end of the nineteenth century the small corner of England that Constable had depicted had become a tourist destination, and Willy Lott's house pictured in 'The Hay Wain' eventually became part of the National Trust.<sup>vii</sup> The nation has its icon, its place of pilgrimage and its beating heart.

Curator David Blayney Brown has suggested that Constable's art is about separation.<sup>viii</sup> Living in London Constable was referring back to his rural upbringing and, in this sense, his paintings depict a longing for what is lost, an idea of somewhere out of reach. Blayney Brown has also pointed to the split between father and son. Constable's father, Golding Constable, was a prominent merchant and farmer with his own mills and barges. His son was expected to join the family business and continue to live in rural Suffolk. Instead the painter left his father and his home county. Inadvertently referencing this split, Manning placed the photograph of his son into the cart. Pictorially the son is taken away, leaving the father to face the consequences. Following the incident a National Gallery spokesman reported that there was 'no lasting damage' to the painting and, after conservation to expunge the intruder, 'The Hay Wain' went back on display.<sup>ix</sup>

A more permanent image of protest has been saved for the nation by the Tate Gallery.<sup>x</sup> Peter Kennard's photomontage of 1980, 'Haywain with Cruise Missiles', is both a totem and an act of iconoclasm. Art historian Dawn Ades has identified the precursors of Kennard's work as the photomontages of John Heartfield however Kennard, who trained as a painter at the Slade School of Fine Art and the Royal College of Art, also refers back to an older lineage with that of the etchings of Francisco Goya.<sup>xi xii</sup> By bringing together a weapon of war with the tranquil English scene Kennard collides the world of Constable's rural backwater with that of European conflict made by Constable's contemporary Goya. It is this knowledge of the art of representation that enabled Kennard to target his missiles more precisely, inserted into the picture rather than stamped onto its surface. Whereas Paul Manning sought to take from the painting by damaging it, Kennard's aim was not to protest through destruction but through discourse.

During the 1970s a generation of artists, alongside the graphic style of Punk, developed montage techniques: Peter Kennard was one of this generation.<sup>xiii</sup> His work 'Haywain with Cruise Missiles' became an iconic image for the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND). In 1980, protests followed the announcement that nuclear missiles were to be deployed at two airbases in Britain. Greenham Common became the better known of these sites through the actions of the Women's Peace Camp.<sup>xiv</sup> As Constable had pictured rural England of the early nineteenth century, Kennard brought the image up-to-date with the politics of the late twentieth century. A combination of time and the mass-circulation of reproductions of Constable's 'The Hay Wain' had reduced the image to a cipher for an unproblematic view of the countryside. From beginning its life as an innovative work, it had become a conservative banner. We had stopped asking questions of the picture, and instead placed it safely in a space for devotion. In Margaret Thatcher's England of the 1980s, the ideal of a rural idyll was disfigured. By loading cruise missiles into the back of the hay wain, Kennard made us think about Constable's picture anew.

Peter Kennard did not work on top of Constable's painting but instead used a printed reproduction. In turn, Kennard's photomontage would become a reproduced image circulated beyond the art gallery. The theorist Walter Benjamin referred to a traditional artwork's 'aura' that emanates from its uniqueness and authenticity.<sup>xv</sup> He believed that the reproductive techniques of photography would destroy this aura. Continually repeated the artwork would lose its uniqueness, its magic of presence lost. Facsimiles of Constable's original painting abound diluting the actual painting's mystique. The artwork moves from totem to discourse. Kennard's photomontage engages with this discourse by combining the reproduction of the painting with the photographic fragment – old and new collide. His interaction questions how we have imaged the English countryside and how it is seen now. In contrast, Manning responds to the aura of 'The Hay Wain', acting within the ceremonial confines of the art gallery that confirm authority. He reinforces the ideology of the image rather than challenges it: his act remains in the past.

In Kennard's photomontage the hay wain is a modern-day rocket launcher poised for action to defend England. Missiles stand erect, undoubtedly phallic,

they point into the picture ready to penetrate the calm. The totemic rocket can be seen to represent paternalism and so resonates with Manning as a father. The child of this bomb is Manning's son who thirty years on replaces Kennard's cruise missiles in the back of Constable's cart. Alternatively, the missiles can be seen as a threat that has invaded the English countryside. An alien presence the missiles are unwanted. Manning's son is also alien to the picture, a contested trespasser. Both the bomb and its child disturb the traditional scene.

Constable's art can be seen as an art of remembrance, recalling what he left behind, his boyhood and his corner of England. By placing the image of his son in the cart Manning is almost saying farewell to his son, and his own liberty, as both he and the boy are to be carted away. Cruise missiles eventually left Greenham Common, removed from the English landscape, and like the cart that carries them they seem to be redundant technology.<sup>xvi</sup> Growing up as children of the bomb we seem to have become so familiar with it that we have forgotten it and our fear of it. The bomb is still with us, which gives Kennard's image its continued potency. Did the potency of Kennard's image invite Manning's act of vandalism? Manning replicates the physical actions of Kennard but not his intent. Lacking the eloquence and discursive engagement his intervention becomes unstuck. Manning's protest is motivated by singular need, his own rights. Kennard addresses a communal concern, the right of survival.

Since the end of the Cold War our attention has turned from nuclear conflict to terrorism. Terrorism, like vandalism, is a more individual act; something acted out by the disenfranchised few on the many. The cut and paste of photomontage equates to the process of defacing and destruction - small acts of terrorism to attack authority. Photomontage can also be used to renew images and construct new meanings. As an act of protest Peter Kennard made us look again at Constable's painting of the English scene and our relationship to its ideology. The fallout from this intervention continues to radiate into the present.

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Peter Kennard is Senior Tutor in Photography at the Royal College of Art, London. As part of the collaboration kennardphillips he has work in the exhibition *Catalyst: Contemporary Art and War*, at the Imperial War Museum North, Manchester until February 2014.

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<sup>i</sup> This news story appeared on-line and in the printed press. Not all press images showed the photograph attached to the painting. One of the papers that did was the Daily Mail. See: Kisiel, R. (2013) 'Hay Wain is attacked by fathers' group campaigner', *Daily Mail*, 29 June, p.10.

<sup>ii</sup> The campaign group Fathers4Justice refer to current campaigning as protesting in the spirit of the suffragettes. See:

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Dugan, E. (2013). 'Fathers4Justice vows to step up attacks on the nation's artworks', *The Independent*, 7 July [Online]. Available at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/fathers4justice-vows-to-step-up-attacks-on-the-nations-artworks-8692589.html> (Accessed 1 November 2002)

The campaign of the Suffragettes is included in the exhibition *Art under attack: Histories of British Iconoclasm* at TATE Britain until 5 January 2014. See: Griffin, J. (2013) 'The Seeds of Destruction', *TATE etc.* (29) pp. 44-49

<sup>iii</sup> Manning's case was thrown out of the Crown Court with an expert concluding that the damage had simply brought forward the painting's planned restoration. See: Dutta, K. (2013) 'Dismissed: the case of the Fathers4Justice campaigner and the disfigured 'Hay Wain'', *The Independent*, 30 September [Online]. Available at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/news/dismissed-the-case-of-the-fathers4justice-campaigner-and-the-disfigured-hay-wain-8849782.html> (Accessed 1 November 2013)

<sup>iv</sup> John Constable quoted in Blayney Brown, D. (2005) 'The Flatlands: 'The Nature of Our Looking'', in Dimbleby, D. *A picture of Britain*. London: TATE, p.166.

In relation to this image of England see Stanley Baldwin's 1926 text *On England* which begins "The sounds of England, the tinkle of the hammer on the anvil..." quoted in Wright, P. (2009). *On living in an old country*. Oxford and New York: OUP, p.78 (first published 1985 by Verso).

<sup>v</sup> Wright, P. (2009) *On living in an old country*. Oxford and New York: OUP, p.83 (first published 1985 by Verso).

<sup>vi</sup> Blayney Brown, D. (2005) 'The Flatlands: 'The Nature of Our Looking'', in Dimbleby, D. *A picture of Britain*. London: TATE, p. 172

C. R. Leslie's *Memoirs of the Life of John Constable* was first published in 1843.

<sup>vii</sup> Blayney Brown, D. (2005) 'The Flatlands: 'The Nature of Our Looking'', in Dimbleby, D. *A picture of Britain*. London: TATE, p. 173

<sup>viii</sup> Blayney Brown, D. (2005) 'The Flatlands: 'The Nature of Our Looking'', in Dimbleby, D. *A picture of Britain*. London: TATE.

<sup>ix</sup> BBC (2013) 'Constable's The Hay Wain attacked at the National Gallery.' *BBC*, 28 June [Online]. Available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-23099594> (Accessed 1 November 2013)

<sup>x</sup> Peter Kennard's work 'Haywain with Cruise Missiles' was purchased by the TATE in 2007. See: <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/kennard-haywain-with-cruise-missiles-t12484> (Accessed 1 November 2013)

<sup>xi</sup> Ades, D. (1986). *Photomontage*. London: Thames and Hudson, p.58

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<sup>xii</sup> See Peter Kennard's website:

[http://www.peterkennard.com/main/my\\_story/my\\_story.htm](http://www.peterkennard.com/main/my_story/my_story.htm) (Accessed 1 November 2013)

<sup>xiii</sup> Taylor, B. (2004) *Collage: The making of modern art*. London: Thames and Hudson, p. 204

<sup>xiv</sup> The other site chosen for the storage of nuclear missiles was RAF Molesworth in Cambridgeshire.

<sup>xv</sup> See Brückle, W. (2013) 'Walter Benjamin', in Durden, M. (ed.) *Fifty Key Writers on Photography*. Abingdon, Oxford: Routledge, pp. 40-46

<sup>xvi</sup> Cruise Missiles were flown back to the USA in 1991/1992. See the Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp website <http://www.greenhamwpc.org.uk/> (Accessed 1 November 2013)