GENERAL

a humument a treated victorian novel by tom phillips

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Introduction

When the pages of a forgotten Victorian novel are transformed into a living work of art, the result is a striking dialogue between past and present. **Tom Phillips** has mastered this dialogue in his celebrated series of *Humuments*, where he overlays his own text, images, and collage onto existing books, breathing new life into the printed word. Among his most renowned creations is a **treated Victorian novel** that exemplifies the power of reimagining literature through visual and textual remixing. In this article, we will explore the concept of a **Humument** , delve into Tom Phillips' artistic journey, examine the specific transformation of a Victorian novel, and discuss the cultural significance of this innovative practice.

What Is a Humument?

Origins and Concept

The term **Humument**combines the words "human" and "document." It refers to a book that has been altered—often radically—by an artist who adds, removes, and rearranges text, images, and other visual elements. The practice emerged in the 1970s when artists began to experiment with the boundaries of literature and visual art. Tom Phillips, a British artist and poet, is credited with popularizing the Humument in the 1990s, turning mundane, mass printed novels into unique, hand crafted artworks.

The Process of Creating a Humument

Creating a Humument is a meticulous, almost meditative process. The artist begins by selecting a source text, often a cheap, out of print Victorian novel. The pages are then lightly stained or colored with watercolors, inks, or other media. Phillips' method involves a layered approach: first, a base of watercolor washes; next, a collage of cut outs from newspapers, magazines, or other books; and finally, handwritten or typed text that reinterprets the original narrative. The result is a hybrid document that preserves the skeleton of the original story while inviting the reader to engage with new meanings.

Tom Phillips: The Artist Behind the Humument

Biography

Born in 1942 in London, Tom Phillips studied at the Central School of Art and Design, where he discovered his love for literature and visual storytelling. Over the decades, he has worked as a painter, poet, and designer, but his most enduring legacy lies in his Humuments. Phillips' fascination with Victorian literature stems from the era's rich storytelling and moral complexity, which he believes offers fertile ground for creative reinterpretation.

Artistic Philosophy

Phillips views the Humument as a conversation between the original author and the contemporary viewer. He believes that literature should evolve, not remain static. By overlaying his own text and imagery onto existing works, he invites readers to question authorship, authenticity, and the fluidity of meaning. This philosophy aligns with postmodern ideas about remix culture and the democratization of art.

The Treated Victorian Novel: A Humument

Overview of the Original Victorian Novel

The original Victorian novel chosen for this Humument is a lesser known work from the 1880s, published by a small London press. The story follows the life of a governess navigating the social mores of the era, a narrative that reflects the gender dynamics and class structures of the time. Though the novel was popular in its day, it fell into obscurity as literary tastes shifted.

How Tom Phillips Transformed the Text

Phillips began by selecting key passages that resonated with contemporary themes such as identity, freedom, and the role of women. He then applied a translucent wash of muted colors to the pages, creating a dreamlike atmosphere. Cut outs from period newspapers—advertisements, political cartoons, and literary reviews—were layered onto the text, adding visual commentary. Finally, Phillips wrote new lines that echoed, subverted, or expanded upon the original narrative, weaving his own poetic voice into the fabric of the book.

Themes and Motifs in the Treated Novel

Several recurring motifs emerge in this Humument:

- Duality of Identity – The governess's struggle mirrors the artist's own negotiation between authorial intent and personal expression.
- Transparency and Opacity – The translucent washes symbolize how past narratives can be both visible and hidden, depending on the viewer's perspective.
- Collage as Commentary – The juxtaposition of modern imagery with Victorian text highlights the continuity and change in societal values.

Visual Analysis: The Aesthetics of a Humument

Color and Texture

Phillips' choice of muted, pastel tones creates a subtle backdrop that allows the added imagery to stand out. The watercolor washes give the pages a tactile quality, as if the paper itself has been aged. This technique invites readers to feel the book's physicality, reinforcing the connection between text and material.

Typography and Layout

While the original Victorian typeface remains largely intact, Phillips introduces his own handwritten script in a slightly different font. The interplay between the printed and handwritten text creates a layered visual hierarchy that guides the reader's eye across the page. The layout often follows a non linear path, encouraging exploration rather than a linear reading experience.

The Cultural Impact of Tom Phillips' Humument

Reception by Critics

Critics have lauded Phillips' Humuments for their originality and intellectual depth. Literary journals have praised the work's ability to transform mundane texts into sites of critical inquiry. Art critics, meanwhile, have highlighted the technical skill required to blend painting, collage, and writing into a coherent whole.

Influence on Contemporary Art

Phillips' Humuments have inspired a new generation of artists to experiment with textual remixing. The practice has become a staple in contemporary art curricula, emphasizing the importance of interdisciplinary approaches. Many

artists now create “digital Humuments,” applying similar techniques to scanned PDFs and e books.

Public Exhibitions and Bookstores

Exhibitions of Phillips’ Humuments have toured major museums, including the Victoria and Albert Museum in London and the Museum of Modern Art in New York. In addition, independent bookstores in Europe and North America regularly feature limited edition Humuments, creating a niche market for collectors and literary enthusiasts.

Where to Find a Humument

Editions and Availability

Limited edition Humuments are typically available through Phillips’ own publishing house, as well as through specialized art book retailers. Each edition is numbered and signed, adding to its collectible value.

Buying Options

Collectors can purchase Humuments directly from the publisher’s website or through reputable art dealers. Online marketplaces such as Etsy occasionally list used copies, though authenticity must be verified.

Digital Versions

While the tactile experience of a physical Humument is unparalleled, digital versions exist for those who prefer e reading. These digital files preserve the visual layers but lack the physical texture of the original.

How to Experience a Humument: Tips for Readers

Reading Strategy

Approach a Humument as you would a puzzle. Start by skimming the original text to grasp the narrative arc, then return to the pages to discover Phillips’ additions. Take your time to let the images and new words settle into your mind.

Engaging with the Visuals

Use a magnifying glass or close up camera to appreciate the fine details of the watercolor washes and collage elements. The visual richness often contains hidden jokes or references that enhance the reading experience.

FAQs About a Humument

What is the difference between a Humument and a typical collage book?

A Humument specifically alters a pre existing text, maintaining its narrative skeleton while adding new layers. A collage book may be entirely original, with no underlying text.

Can anyone create a Humument, or is it a specialized skill?

While anyone can experiment with the technique, producing a professional grade Humument requires proficiency in painting, collage, and writing.

Are Humuments considered literary works or visual art?

They occupy a hybrid space, recognized by both literary scholars and art critics. Their value lies in the seamless fusion of text and image.

Do Humuments respect the original author’s copyright?

Most Humuments use public domain works, ensuring that the original text is free from copyright restrictions.

How long does it take to create a Humument?

Depending on the length of the source text and the complexity of the additions, a Humument can take anywhere from a few weeks to several months.

Conclusion

Tom Phillips' **a humument a treated victorian novel by tom phillips**exemplifies the transformative power of art to recontextualize literature. By overlaying his own visual and textual commentary onto a Victorian narrative, Phillips invites readers to question the nature of authorship, authenticity, and meaning. The Humument stands as a testament to the enduring relevance of Victorian themes and the limitless possibilities that arise when art and literature intersect. Whether you're a seasoned collector, a literary scholar, or simply a curious reader, exploring a Humument offers a fresh, immersive way to engage with the written word.

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