SOFTWARE & TECH

A Humument A Treated Victorian Novel By Tom Phillips

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Introduction: Unveiling the Art of the Altered Page

In the vast landscape of experimental literature, few works are as singularly captivating as **A Humument A Treated Victorian Novel By Tom Phillips** . Since its first publication in 1970, this book has defied easy categorization, existing at the intersection of visual art, poetry, and literary revision. Phillips did not merely write a new novel; he fundamentally transformed an existing one. He took a forgotten Victorian novel titled *A Human Document*by W. H. Mallock and, through a process of painting, drawing, and collage, extracted a completely new narrative from its pages. The result is a living, breathing artwork that evolves with each edition, inviting readers to reconsider the boundaries of authorship, text, and meaning. This article explores the origins, creative process, artistic significance, and enduring legacy of this remarkable project, offering a comprehensive guide for anyone curious about the magic of treated books and conceptual art.

The Origins of A Humument: From Victorian Obscurity to Artistic Gold

The story of *A Humument* begins in a secondhand bookshop in 1966. Tom Phillips, a British artist and composer, purchased a copy of *A Human Document* for threepence. The novel, published in 1892 by the now-obscure writer William Hurrell Mallock, was typical of its era: a dense, sentimental story about love and society. Phillips had a different plan. He was interested in the idea of using an existing text as a **found object**, a raw material to be sculpted into something new. The title *A Humument*is itself a playful contraction of the original title, a portmanteau that hints at the transformation from a "human document" to a "humument" — perhaps a more human, more humorous, or more humbled document.

Phillips set himself a strict constraint: he would treat every single page of the 367-page book, creating a completely new work of art. Each page would be painted over, leaving only a few words or phrases visible, which would then be connected to form a continuous, if fragmented, narrative. This process, which he called **“treated”**rather than "altered" or "defaced," was not an act of vandalism but a collaboration with the original author. Phillips often said that Mallock had unknowingly provided the raw materials, and his job was to find the hidden poem within.

The Creative Process: How a Victorian Novel Became a Modern Masterpiece

Understanding the creation of *A Humument*requires appreciating the meticulous labor involved. For each page, Phillips would scan the text, searching for a phrase or sequence of words that could begin a new sentence. He would then paint over the rest of the page, sometimes using opaque colors, other times allowing the original text to peek through. The selected words were often connected by delicate lines, arrows, or other graphic

elements, guiding the reader's eye. The artwork on each page was not random; it responded to the mood or theme of the extracted text.

The Role of Chance and Intuition

Phillips employed a method that balanced chance with deliberate choice. He would sometimes close his eyes and let his finger land on a page, or he would cut words out and rearrange them. Yet the final arrangement always felt intentional. The resulting narrative follows the journey of a character named Toge, a name derived from the word "together" found in the original text. Over the course of the book, Toge experiences love, loss, artistic creation, and philosophical reflection. The story is fragmented, lyrical, and deeply poetic, yet it holds together as a coherent whole, a testament to Phillips's skill as a visual and verbal artist.

Evolving Editions: A Living Work of Art

One of the most fascinating aspects of **A Humument A Treated Victorian Novel By Tom Phillips** is that it never truly finished. Phillips produced multiple editions over his lifetime, each one different. He would revisit pages, repaint them, change the selected words, or add new visual elements. The first published edition (1970) was in black and white. Later editions introduced color, more elaborate collage, and even digital elements. The final version, the **Fifth Edition**published in 2016, is a full-color masterpiece that reflects Phillips's evolving artistic vision. This constant revision turns the book into a time capsule of an artist's mind, a work that mirrors the creative process itself.

Artistic Significance and Reception: Why A Humument Matters

A Humument sits at the crossroads of several artistic movements. It is a prime example of **conceptual art**, where the idea behind the work is as important as the final object. It also belongs to the tradition of **visual poetry** and **found poetry**, reshaping existing language to create new meanings. Moreover, it is a landmark in the field of **book art**, demonstrating that the physical book can be a canvas for endless creativity.

A New Way of Reading

The book challenges our conventional approach to reading. Normally, we read left to right, top to bottom, absorbing the author's intended sequence. In *A Humument*, the reader must actively search for words, follow visual cues, and piece together the narrative. This active engagement transforms the reader into a co-creator. Each reading is a unique performance, as different eyes will notice different connections. The experience is akin to looking at a collage or a surrealist painting, where meaning emerges from juxtaposition.

Critical Acclaim and Influence

Upon its release, *A Humument*was hailed as a groundbreaking work. Critics praised its originality and the sheer dedication behind its creation. It has been exhibited in museums worldwide, from the Museum of Modern Art in New York to the Tate in London. Tom Phillips was elected a Royal Academician, and his book influenced countless artists, writers, and designers. The project also inspired a range of related works, including a musical piece by Phillips himself and even a digital app that allows users to explore the book interactively.

Themes and Evolution: Love, Art, and the Passage of Time

Despite its fragmented form, the narrative of *A Humument* revolves around a few recurring themes. The central character, Toge, often grapples with love and loss, artistic struggle, and the search for meaning. **Love** appears in many forms: romantic, platonic, and self-love. The book's famous opening line, "She cries out for existence," sets a tone of yearning and desire. **Art** itself is a major subject, as Toge creates and destroys, reflecting the artist's own process. **Time**is another constant theme, visible not only in the narrative but in the physical aging of the book itself — the original Victorian paper has yellowed, and the paint has cracked, adding layers of meaning.

Visual Evolution Across Editions

Tracing the evolution of a single page across editions reveals how Phillips's interpretation changed. Early black-and-white versions were stark, emphasizing line and contrast. Later editions introduced lush colors, gold leaf, and intricate patterns. For instance, a page that originally featured a simple line drawing might later be filled with swirling abstract forms. This evolution mirrors the maturation of the artist and the deepening of the narrative. The final edition is a riot of color and texture, a celebration of the visual possibilities inherent in the printed page.

Legacy and Influence: A Humument in the Digital Age

The influence of *A Humument* extends far beyond the world of book art. Its techniques have been adopted by poets who practice **erasure poetry**, where words are blacked out to create new poems. Artists working with altered books see Phillips as a pioneer. The digital age has also embraced his work. The **A Humument app**, developed with Phillips's collaboration, allows users to swipe through high-resolution images of every page, zoom in on details, and access commentary. This digital version ensures that new generations can experience the book even as physical copies become rare.

Teaching and Inspiration

Many creative writing and art courses use *A Humument*as a case study. It demonstrates that creativity can thrive under constraints, that old materials can be reborn, and that collaboration with the past is a powerful artistic strategy. Tom Phillips's death in 2022 marked the end of an era, but his magnum opus continues to inspire. The book remains in print, and its vibrant presence in galleries and libraries ensures that the conversation between artist, author, and reader carries on.

Conclusion: A Testament to Artistic Vision

A Humument A Treated Victorian Novel By Tom Phillips is more than a book; it is a process, a philosophy, and a lifelong project. It challenges us to see the hidden poetry in everyday objects, to embrace constraints as catalysts for creativity, and to understand that art is never truly finished. Tom Phillips took a forgotten Victorian novel and, through sheer persistence and imagination, created a work that feels utterly contemporary and timeless. Whether you encounter it on the printed page, in an exhibition, or on a digital screen, *A Humument* invites you to look closer, read between the lines, and discover the beauty that lies beneath the surface. It stands as a dazzling reminder that even the most ordinary materials can become extraordinary in the hands of a visionary artist.

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