



## **A very English kind of joke**

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By: Melinda Camber Porter

Tom Phillips' first major one-man show at the Musée d'art Moderne de Paris is the culmination of a long-established and fruitful contact with the French. His resolutely unassuming manner is, without doubt, refreshing for them. "Everything has to be a kind of joke," he says, "to prevent it from becoming boring. It's a very English attitude." But, through puzzling over the spoofy importance he attached to the banal question of what he had eaten for breakfast, I began to discover how he utilises apparently trivial elements of his life in his work.

"My work isn't consciously autobiographical. That would mean consciously telling the story of one's life. I'm not interested in direct, chronological accounts of other people's life or my own. An unwilling autobiography is more interesting, or hearing bits of conversation on a bus and trying to work out what must have preceded and what might follow. Then, you have a mystery to decipher."

Applying this to his work, he tries to decipher the mystery of why he reaches a certain idea or illumination and, in particular, which experiences in his life produced the right answer to a question. "You recognise that X is true but you don't know which combinations of events happened to make you see that X is true. It's hard to see in grander cases like Shakespeare. It was a pity that no one had the sense to get him to write his autobiography."

Phillips uses his illuminations, which he consistently talks of in terms of brightness and light, as trustworthy searchlights which might shed light on new problems. His major insights remain with him and all his work is subjected to their scrutiny. "Everyone has such a small amount of creative material that they tend to go back to where they started. I have a limited corner of illumination and bring new stuff to it. Some people would describe them as new ideas. I often think that I've made a tremendous break and have moved into something entirely new. Then I find it is completely consistent with what I did before. I look at everything in the light I generated previously."

While Yeats referred to recurrent images and symbols as the guiding insights of a poet, Tom Phillips, working in the visual world, turns to structures and abstract relationships. And the autobiographical is transformed into a pattern: "You could go round the world asking people what they had for breakfast and this would become a useful structure to work with."



And though he says that he “crams everything into his work,” he puts it at the service of recurrent and guiding ideas. His literary training at St. Catherines, Oxford, where he read mainly Anglo-Saxon, his musical interests, and singing experience, are utilised in his work but he subjects them to rigorous organisation. He uses these central ideas as stepping stones and as limitations. He finds it easier to explain his possible aims behind the persona of Mallarmé:

“Mallarmé had a project for a three-dimensional book which would become an environment. It was a very daring idea and he never got very far. Though everything he spoke about ended up as a book in other people's works. He tried to extend the form which he was chained. An environment isn't necessarily physical; it can be, like Marxism, the way people think. I see my work as a world that isn't quite joined together. But Mallarmé's work became a book disparate throughout the world.”

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