

## **Maria Lluïsa Borràs, *In addition to Chance*, Casal Solleric, Palma de Mallorca, 1997**

If we hypothesize that every great artist, painter, musician or poet, is basically interested in some concrete aspect – a portion of reality, of their interior world or an imaginary universe – we may then conclude that what has interested Peter Phillips more than anything else throughout his entire creative life is the systematic exploration of chance as a alternative to free will; as if his refusal of the concept of inspiration is a way of demonstrating that painting can even be a game of chance.

Chance, which for Engels was “a form in which the outside world manifested the need to delve into the human subconscious”, in Peter Phillips’ painting became a guiding theme from start to finish. As he said himself, things that happened during the day were arbitrary, as were the sensations they aroused in him. If he saw a telephone box, a car passing, a woman at a window, it all had a logic that he was unable to define.

The painter dealt with the theme of chance and randomness, right from his earliest images that include a multitude of aspects and versions of the most vulgar and daily lotteries, those truly available to one and all: slot-machines. Later he began to make use of fortuitous images, previously filed in a sort of image bank, first made from simple slides, but which he subsequently stored in a computer, attempting to systemize them so that he could digitalize any graphic information in order to obtain a sort of immense portable icon library that he could then manipulate as he wished according to various parameters.

At the beginning a painted image of a dancing slot-machine panel helped him to structure the composition into geometric sections, in strips or as a checkerboard, whilst at the same time the fact that he concentrated on a popular, street theme qualified him as one of those young artists, trained at the Royal College, who were none other than David Hockney, Allen Jones or R. B. Kitaj, who saw themselves as painters of everyday life, as Phillips himself did, and not only the unexpected founders of Pop Art, but also inaugurators of Postmodernism, a movement destined to achieve enduring success.

Peter Phillips was born on May 21, 1939, in Birmingham, and began art school at the age of 13, then he spent another two, from 1953 to 1955, at the Moseley Road Secondary School of Art, where he attended courses in a number of disciplines such as heraldry, graphic and urban design, architectural design, decoration and, of course, painting itself, although he did not study art history, as he himself likes to point out.

It was only after he entered the Birmingham School of Arts and Crafts that he decided to dedicate himself to painting and during the second year, in 1958, he exhibited for the first time. It was a collective show of “Young Contemporaries”, that was held in London at the RBA gallery.

The working world of his city, one of Great Britain’s major industrial cities, inspired a painting related to “social realism”, which he would soon reject.

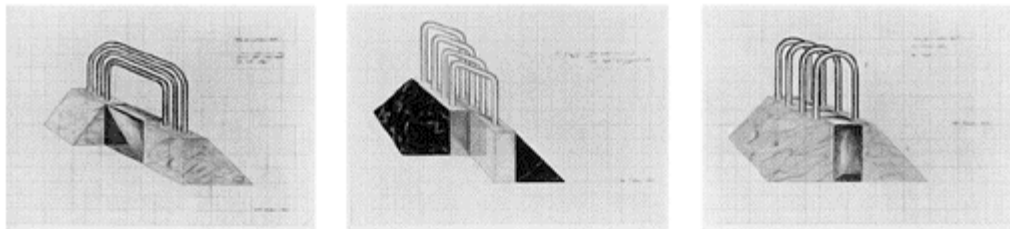
However, in 1959 the opportunity arose to make contact with abstract expressionism during a show that he saw at the Tate Gallery, dedicated to new North American Painting. He was so impressed with it, especially with the work of Willem de Kooning and Clyfford Still, that he redeveloped his own painting.

The curiosity he had nurtured for the pre-Raphaelite painters whose works were in Birmingham City Art Gallery, led him to investigate 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> century Italian painting and when, in 1959, a fellowship allowed him to travel in Italy, he rushed immediately to contemplate the works of painters like Cimabue, Giotto, Uccello and Bellini, who created not fantastic, but real spaces.

From 1959 to 1962 he continued his training at the Royal College of Art, where, in February 1959, he put together his first one-man show. His companions included Derek Boshier, Patrick Caulfield, David Hockney, Allen Jones and R. B. Kitaj. During the 1961/1962 academic year he alternated the Royal College with TV studies, which did not,

however, stop him graduating in painting that same year and giving lessons during the following academic year (1962/1963) at Coventry College of Art. Subsequently, when a Harkness Fellowship allowed him to set off for the United States, and of course he took with him preparatory sketches for the series *Custom Paintings*, until the impact with New York, where he lived from 1964 to 1966, forced him to interrupt what he had begun. An impact there was, however, and it was enormous and decisive, and the first symptom was not an increase in the size of his works. In 1965 drove across America with Allen Jones and with Gerald Laing created Hybrid Enterprises. In 1966 he returned to Europe where

**Study for a Multiple Object, 1968**  
matita su carta / pencil on paper  
25 x 35 cm



he was offered a contract as a professor at the Hochschule für Bildende Künste in Hamburg. In 1970 he married Claude Xylander and together they undertook long trips in Africa and in the Far East.

In the 1990s he became interested in the technological aspects of data collection and he made contact with a group of researchers working at the Cuenca Technologies Laboratory, where he produced a graphics portfolio of 50 original prints.

He currently spends his time between Zürich, Paris, New York and Mallorca, he feel himself to be a citizen of the world and he seems to repeat the words of a Saxon monk called Hugh of Saint-Victor:

"he who finds sweet his own homeland is still a young apprentice; he who finds each land to be as his homeland is yet strong; but he who finds the entire world foreign to him is the most fortunate. The young soul stops its love in just one place in the world; the strong soul extends its love to all places; the perfect man has cancelled the concept of "own" <sup>1</sup>.

A reserved and retiring man who discovered an unbridled interior passion for surrounding himself with trees and any other type of flowerless plant. With his unassailable tenacity and commitment he is able to transform untended land that is rocky and barren into fascinating gardens. As a painter he aims, and this is unexpected in such cold, concise work, for the world of rebellion, melancholic, a little disorientated but not lacking in humor.

At the age of twenty five Peter Phillips was already selecting and cataloging images of concrete objects, which he kept in a sort of grid, a perpendicular bulletin board. The icons were apparently chosen at random, with no connection between one another, even though a brief analysis would show that these images all tended to reduce life to determinism supported by chance. The compositions, structured in geometric boards, appeared to be inspired by the lurid hoardings, packed with images, of slot-machines and in an opus dated 1960, *Purple Flag*, the Union Jack occupied the upper half of the painting to bind chance to the place of birth, which is something that human beings cannot choose for themselves. In *War Game* the flag is a background for a soldier, because war takes from the soldier any hope of an act of free choice, and in *For Men Only*, dated 1961, eroticism appears, with a Marilyn and a Brigitte Bardot offered as prizes in a lottery. Despite Peter Phillips' refusal to use direct symbolisms, it appears evident that in the early works, these symbolisms do actually exist, and are referred to the certainty that the homeland, war and sex are all elements in a game of chance. Metamorphoses that imply references to the "défaitistes" of the 1914-18 war: Francis Picabia and Marcel Duchamp, motivated by similar preoccupations.

The exhibition illustrates this first era with *Forever Corporation*. The composition, separated into horizontal bands that make reference to various levels of information, is one of the most lyrical and markedly plastic of the series. In it the images are concentrated in the

are most often and naturally placed on the sides, in it the images are concentrated in the central band, dedicated to North American culture, with the head of Jackson Pollock – who had already died by this time – in the center of a star and Liberty inside a shield, balanced by two decal tiger heads facing each other. Above and below these images there are abstract compositions.

The insistence on the motor car, large and luxurious, as an expression of the most coveted consumer item (sometimes represented by one of its components – preferably the engine) is a constant reference to the automobile as opposed to eroticism, seen as another consumer item, represented by a provocative pin-up, as can be seen in *Custom Painting*. The car and eros are a reference to Duchamp's *La Mariée* or Picabia's *Novia*, which were simply cars. In 1968 this would allow Phillips' painting to be considered by Pontus Hulten in an exhibition called "Machines" (MOMA) as part of an established mechanicalist tendency, a kind of contemporary art genre species, which he felt to have been begun by Leonardo and by Dürer, and which continued in the work of countless ingenious inventors of the past, like Marey, the Lumière brothers and, naturally, Méliès. He also saw traces of mechanicalism in painters of the international avant-garde, and he affirmed that in modern times one of the most important tasks to be undertaken was that of understanding machines, delving into our relationship with technology.

There is no shadow of doubt that Peter Phillips, in a second phase, almost following Zarathustra, proposed dualism between two opposing principals, Ormuz and Arimán. This dualism broadens the bitter contrast between the natural world and that of technology, between the machine and sex, between the refusal and the product of industrial manufacturing. It should be noted that he preferred a printed not a live image, since he made use of *Scientific Magazine*, and that instead of drawing his obsessive birds of prey, he confessed that he had cut them from "Birds of America", illustrated in the 20<sup>th</sup> century by the Naturalist painter John James Audubon.

Phillips, at that time, resorted to what the writer William Burroughs called "deliberately aggravated contrasts", and could have affirmed, with him, that he wrote of what his senses found at the very moment of writing, which is to say he painted what he saw before his eyes at the very moment of painting.

Even the principles of the *Nouveau Roman*, which at that time were the latest trend in French literature, were akin to Phillips' painting, and the artist was in agreement with Alain Robbe-Grillet that it was impossible to find even the remotest allusion to emotion in his work.

The writer, in his book *Pour un nouveau roman* [For a New Novel], seems to be writing about Phillips' painting: "We must allow objects and gestures to stand out by their mere presence, we must allow this presence to prevail over and above any other explanatory theory that attempts to compress them within a reference system, whether this be of emotional, sociological, Freudian or metaphysical character. A universe in which the gestures and objects will continue to exist, eternally present, hard, inalterable, scoffing at its own meaning, of that significance that vainly tries to reduce them to the role of precarious instruments of temporal and embarrassing tissue ... Not only have we ceased to believe that the world is ours, our own personal property, designed in compliance with our own needs ... but we do not even believe its importance any more".

The divorce between the kingdom of action and that of psychic reactions, the elimination of human sentiment, significance or any other symbolic relationship, which characterize the "Nouveau Roman", aimed at time itself, as in a certain sense Phillips himself did, at the transformation of humanity and at its passage to an individual and a collective existence. We should begin thinking of reading Phillips' painting as an interpretation of the obsessive emphasis on the object like a criticism of materialization and excessive reification.

The slow and gradual transformation of the image from those early icons, to those first "things seen out on the street", from those transparent dichotomies (the natural kingdom versus the technological), crosses distinct, subsequent stages until it arrives at the refined and hermetic compositions of today.

In the Seventies the painter begins a process of reduction, of shrinking the images (*Art-O-Matic Cudacutie*, 1972), and geometry converts from a sorting element to another object. In a series of smaller size paintings, of which there are several examples in the exhibition, with mechanical components and geometrical figures, the images, each endowed with its own identity and floating in empty spaces, seem to move like virtual artistic forms obtained from a computer. The painter called them *Selec-O-MATIC* and said that they were the cumulative result of an aesthetic that he had been developing over the previous eight years, from when he first began to use spray. In effect, he himself explained that in the 1960s he projected slides above the canvas and reproduced the image he obtained with spray paint, using the Surrealist manner. With the discovery of a number of synthetic products that reduced drying time and allowed him to re-spray immediately, he committed fully to this type of procedure, which fascinated him for its rapidity and efficacy, until he decided that he was risking routine and serial production so he fast lost interest in the process, with the consequent sudden end of the experiment.

In reality, he was at that time going through one of those phases in which an artist considers the past in its globality, mentally reviews the work completed overall, and faces the problem of where to go from here. Well, that look back, although tinged with nostalgia, forced Phillips to close a kind of new encounter with his most angrily Pop phase, that of the Sixties. I do not know if this was a considered decision or if it was something that arose spontaneously and without intention: what is certain is that from that moment onwards a fracture arose between the brutalism of Pop and the lyricism of the latter period, in which collage, liberated from any geometric structuring, fluttered freely in the void of the compositions which, despite being composed of perfectly recognizable objects and elements, seemed to follow in the tracks of Informalism.

Continuing a life of experimentation, he fragmented images into squares that he then put back together haphazardly in a difficult to decipher mosaic (*Mosaikbild*, 1975, or *Mosaikstack No. 1*, 1979).

At the end of the decade he laid the images out harmoniously in empty spaces (*Mediator No. 2*, 1979), mysterious ambits and surprising sceneries. They are fragments of barely recognizable things, perfectly isolated images, individualized in compositions of compact color (the sleeve of a woman's dress, perhaps a fan, ...) painted in chiaroscuro, with which the artist presented decisive and dramatic effects (*Repetition of a Night-Time Safari* or *Aboriginal*, 1980; *Dual Performance*, 1981-82). Often painted with utmost realism and attention to detail, and even with showy collages that overflow from the limits of the canvas (*Stages of a Journey*) and float in an atmosphere of compact color, which locates them in an ambit that goes beyond that of real things. Peter Phillips returned to the dual cosmogony of Mazdeism, and laid out the images in diptychs of color, setting each of the two dichotomic elements in a hermetically sealed and unreal space (*Seesaw*, *Poses* or *Echo*, all three 1991).

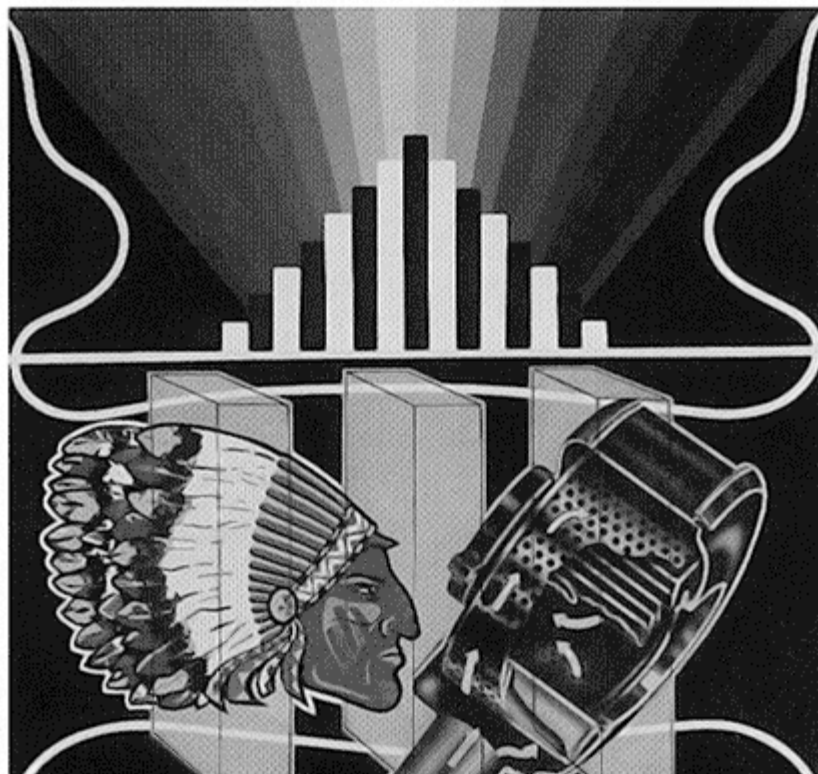
If Phillips resorted to an iconography of popular culture taken from widely circulated magazines for the images of his early work, now it seemed as if his iconological bank had transformed into a sumptuous professional inventory of a jeweler or of precision tools (*A Judgement*, 1986; *Stages of a Journey*, *A Promise*, 1987-88).

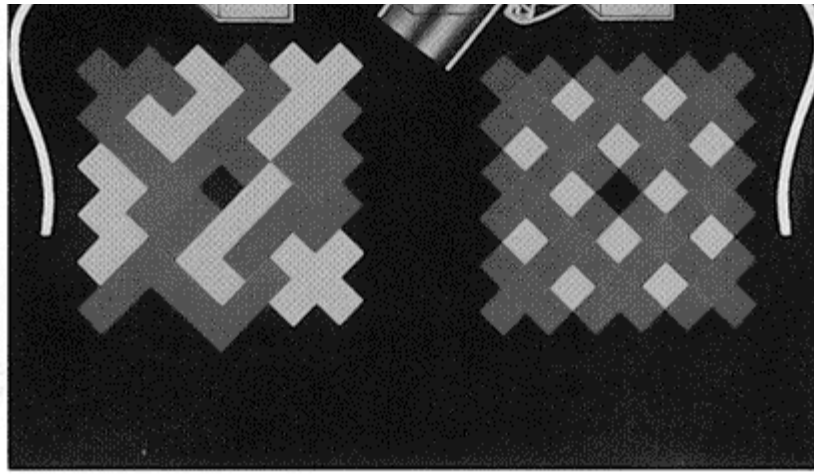
#### **Eliminator, 1968**

olio su tela / oil on canvas

102 x 66 cm

collezione / collection Meyer Zürich





In the Nineties he cut the canvas and covered it with fragments of cardboard and wood, forming pieces with strange circular amalgams, painting-objects, which the artist, in his usual to and fro between one theme and another, one era and another, seemed to recover from *Relief Studies* dated ten years earlier.

This was a unique, refined type of painting, in which I can see no affinities, and even fewer similarities, with any other type of painter; a painting that created an ideal world, closed and inaccessible, without apparent meaning or symbolisms, in many aspects absorbed in a final, virtuoso effort to locate the most faithful copy of reality, that is to say the object itself, however unusual and strange, in an abstract universe.

Objects that the artist gathered together, totally rejecting the intervention of a muse or of inspiration, actually forcing the opposite, a direct action of chance in a show whose process of creation he may refuse to control. A bold attempt – even improbable –, a challenge whose utmost interest lay not in the fact of painting a picture that might or might not have a message, of this or that style, but moving in more subtle and risky domains, more significantly intellectual: to succeed in obtaining a painting by exploiting a random method, which the painter refuses to control without this diminishing by an iota the evidence of an opus possessing a unique and exclusively personal aesthetic value, distinguishable from all others because contrary to all expectations, overall, the circumstance that caused everything vanishes, and that which is highlighted is only a style, a language, a manner that reveals without doubt the decisive hand of its author.

The point is whether chance, which grouped together a series of objects in a random fashion, is capable or not of putting together a valid work of art that bears the artist's unmistakable stamp.

<sup>1</sup> Hugh of Saint-Victor, "Didascalicon", opus by 12<sup>th</sup> century monk, re-printed by Columbia University Press in 1961, translation by Jerome Taylor, quoted by E. Said "Culture and Imperialism", edited by Knopf, New York 1993, page 512.