

Recontextualizing Rights: Using Humumentism to Change the Rhetoric around
Women's Reproductive Rights

December 12, 2016

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GLHTH 302: Global Narratives of HIV/AIDS

Word Count: 706
Citation Style: MLA

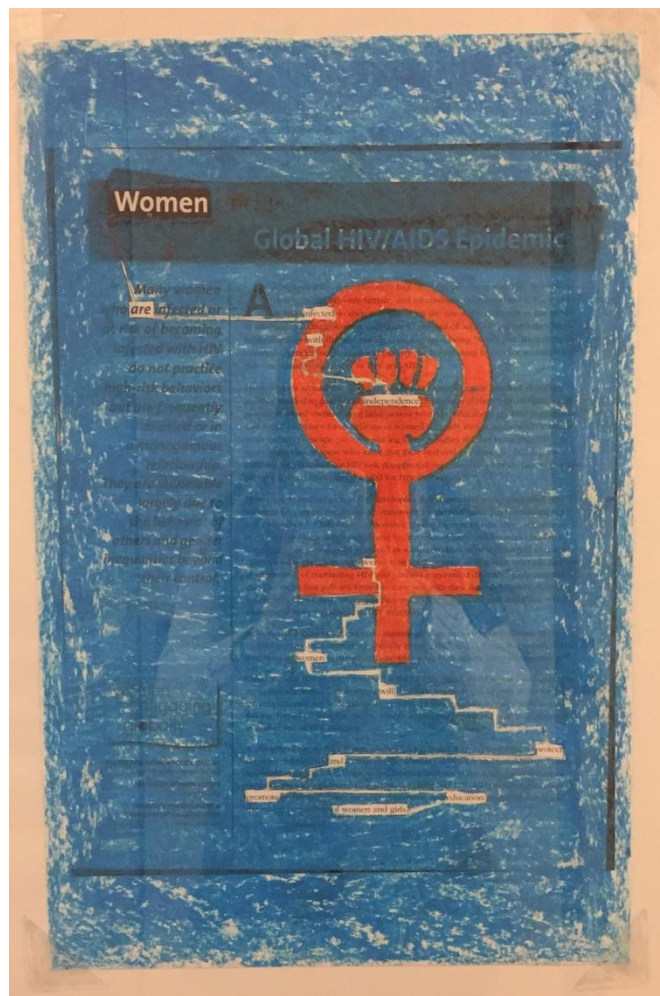
Women. The word stands out several font sizes larger than the other words left visible on the page, in white on black backing. While not the most intricate piece on the wall, this project stands out in its boldness and simplicity. After gravitating towards the the orange symbol in the center of the page, the eyes naturally follow the text. The artist sought for her image to catch attention, but not take it away from the poem she created in its negative space.

The piece is one of twenty-four student-created artworks for *The Humument Project*. Inspired by Tom Phillips' ongoing work, *A Humument*, now in its sixth edition, students in Dr. Karrie Stewart's Narratives of Living with HIV/AIDS course were encouraged to recontextualize items found in the Maria De Bruyn archives on HIV/AIDS at Duke's David Rubenstein Rare Book and Manuscript Library. They did so by using various forms mediums to cover up parts of the text, leaving other words exposed to create visual artwork along with poetry.

Like Phillips, Simone Serat, the artist of this specific work, sought to drastically change what was being said in the original work (Phillips). The artist was inspired in a negative way by what she came across in her search through the archives in the box on Women's reproductive rights (*Women in the Global HIV/AIDS Epidemic*). Clearly frustrated with the way the factsheet that she found took away women's agency, Serat chose not to obscure the background text beyond legibility. She invites viewers to read what the piece said originally and contrast it to the poem she created.

The underlying text discusses facts women, especially women in the developing world, have come to know so well: females are more likely to be infected with HIV/AIDS because of biology, society, and culture (*Women and the Global HIV/AIDS Epidemic*). The tone of the piece conveys that women have little say in protecting themselves from contracting HIV. Given this narrative, the sponsors for the factsheet are surprising: three organizations that focus on empowering women, Center for Women Policy Studies, League of Women Voters, and Women's Environment & Development Organization (*Women and the Global HIV/AIDS Epidemic*).

Serat's work seeks to alter this narrative, as a woman who has directly worked to empower women in protecting themselves from HIV, as well as the daughter of a



midwife. “Women...are...infected...with...independence,” the piece reads, the fist in the middle of the female symbol clenching word “independence” for dear life. “we...women...will...protect...and...promote...education of women and girls.” Inspired by her time working with Kenyan women in an HIV clinic this summer, Serat uses bold, contrasting colors and a simple design to get her point across without mincing words.

Frustrated by the lack of agency Kenyan women were given in their sexual relationships, Serat worked with the public health officer to design and implement a curriculum at HIV support groups and schools to teach condom negotiation. While this sexism is easy to blame on a misogynistic culture, Serat was surprised to come across similar rhetoric from Western feminist organizations. Building on her past work to change the conversation around women’s agency in their reproductive health, Serat selected this factsheet as her text for the *Humument Project*.

In transforming this piece, Serat promotes the transformation of the attitude therein. Beginning with the words “Women...are...infected,” the artist shifts the tone quickly to show that a disease is not the only infectious agent, and that independence and education will bring women forward. The image, the female symbol with a clenched fist in the middle, emulates the fight that women must undertake in order to claim their reproductive and educational rights.

Just like her poem, the artwork is powerful in its boldness and its simplicity. While not the most intricate or artistic of the pieces on the wall, its strength lies in its message. Those that know the artist know her passion for women’s reproductive rights, and those that are not familiar with her will see this characteristic in her after examining her artwork. At a time where women feel disempowered by the recent election, it is as important as ever for women to feel inspired to fight for what they believe in. There is no question what Serat believes in after viewing this piece.

Bibliography

Women and the Global HIV/AIDS Epidemic. Women Engaging Globally, n.d. Print. Box 16. Maria De Bruyn Papers, 1988-2012 and undated. David M. Rubenstein Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Duke University, Durham, NC. 17 November 2016.

Phillips, Tom. "Tom Phillips's Introduction to the 6th Edition, 2016." *Tom Phillips*. Tom Phillips RA, 2016. Web. 11 Dec. 2016.