

The Chaos of Rape

Risa Brudney
Professor Stewart
GLHTH 302 Global Narratives of HIV/AIDS

Word Count: 799
MLA Style Bibliography

Appropriation is the highest form of flattery. Many artists adhere to this mantra, and choose to, “appropriate masterpieces in order to comment on the original content and propose another.” (Gersh-Nesic) These appropriations take many forms, with the ability to expand upon the original work, highlight certain aspects of it, or invert it completely. Artist and author Tom Phillips devoted 50 years of his life to this sort of artistic appropriation in his creation of *Humument*. Journalist Adam Smyth asserts that Phillips’ *Humument*, “revealed [a] story [which] was in one sense always there... just lost amid the torrent of other text.” (Smyth) Risa Brudney, in her piece, *The Chaos of Rape*, draws upon Phillips’s technique of recontextualization to tell a story of chaos and confusion.

In Risa Brudney’s piece, *The Chaos of Rape*, she chooses to excavate a universally applicable narrative from an individual’s testimony in order to make an unconventional and slightly startling commentary on rape. Brudney sifted through the archives of medical anthropologist Maria de Bruyn in order to find inspiration for this piece. In her discovery of the pamphlet put forth by Namibia Women’s Health Network and its partners, titled, *Information and Women’s Testimonies About Abortion in Namibia*, Brudney claims she immediately knew she had uncovered a text she wanted to work with. The pamphlet included individual testimonies of young girls and women who had attempted to perform at-home abortions. “The more stories I read,” Brudney remarked, “the more I realized how connected unsafe abortion practices were to rape, and the clearer it became to me that I needed to bring attention to the raw, intense emotions that accompanied these narratives.”

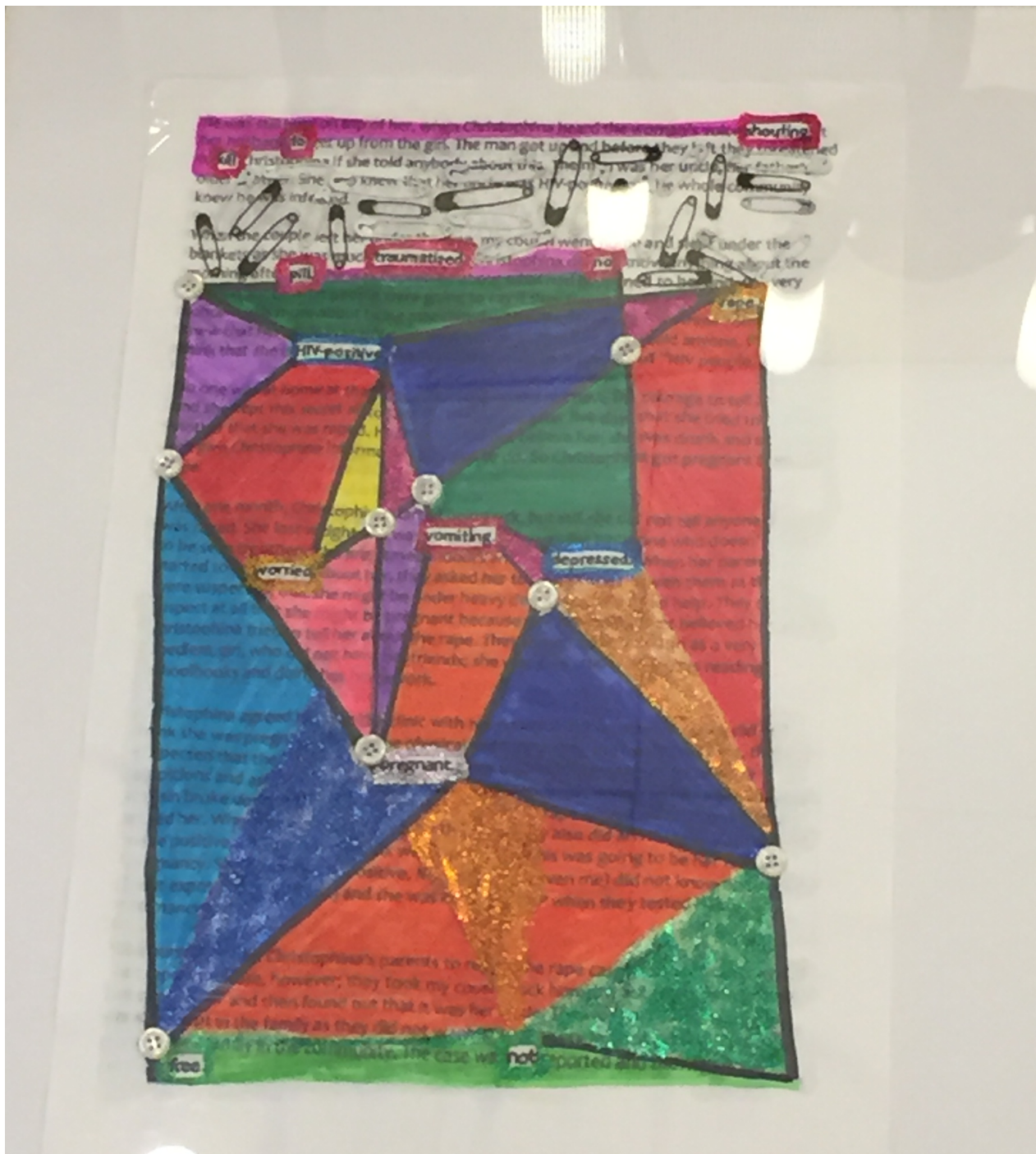
In *The Chaos of Rape*, Brudney emphasizes words from the original text in order to convey the overwhelming sense of helplessness that pervades narratives about rape, and uses a mixed-media collage to illustrate the tumult that accompanies such a traumatic event. The top quarter of the piece contains a short poem, which reads, “shouting to kill, traumatized, no pill,” with the words left out of the verse covered in black and white safety pins. Safety pins carry a symbolic meaning given their recent use as a visual representation of solidarity with marginalized populations. Black and white, to contrast the rest of the piece and illustrate ironically that situations of unwanted pregnancy are rarely ever black and white. Placed on top of uncovered words, alluding to the fact that no matter how many allies one may have, a support system can only help mask the effects of trauma; it cannot get rid of the experience. The short verse and safety pins introduce the story this piece tells and provoke feelings of panic and powerlessness in the viewer.

The remaining three quarters of the work is a collage, which upon first glance appears to be a colorful, glitter-filled, abstract “color-in-the-lines” image. Upon closer inspection, the viewer notices that all of the borders delineating one part of the collage from the other are drawn in order to connect specific words to one another. Words like “depressed”, “vomiting”, and “HIV positive” are emphasized and surrounded by glitter, while the remaining text is covered by various colors and glitter on the page. All of the highlighted words evoke visceral, anxiety-producing feelings, whose effects are made more powerful when strung together in this piece. Interestingly, the overwhelming

entropy of the piece allows each viewer to read all of the words in a different order, as there is no clear path that dictates the diction's flow. This lack of clarity makes the piece dynamic and makes its narrative malleable. It allows each viewer to have an individualized, unique experience with the art tailored to his/her own needs.

The use of bright colors and glitter, combined with the haphazard nature of the collage, further the message of confusion and anxiety. The feminine color scheme and elementary use of markers to create the piece is reminiscent of something that could be created by a young girl. This artistic style was no accident; Brudney used this approach to help the viewer make a connection between the quality of the art and the girls and women whose stories it recontextualizes. Additionally, small buttons are placed at the intersections of the various connecting lines of the collage, adding texture to the piece and symbolizing the concept of ripping apart one's clothes, again directing the viewers' thoughts towards assault.

The last line on the paper at the bottom of the piece reads, "not free." These simple words bring a heavy finish, and leave the viewer to feel an element of the same suffocating helplessness that is felt by the women whose rape stories this piece represents. While the piece in its entirety is not very pretty, neither is rape; Brudney knows this, and it shows through in her work.



Works Cited

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