

Giving HIV/AIDS A Face: A Humument
Submitted December 8th, 2017

Matthew Bague
Professor Stewart
GLHTH 302 Global Narratives of HIV/AIDS
678-761-7787
Word Count: 795
MLA

In his piece *Giving HIV/AIDS A Face*, Duke junior Matthew Brague reinterprets a page from the document *Policies to Influence the Portrayal and Image of HIV/AIDS and/or People With HIV/AIDS*, to represent the shifting images of HIV/AIDS overtime as well as a reflection of the international narrative. The document was distributed at the 8th International Conference on AIDS and the 3rd World STD Conference in Amsterdam in 1992, and the section that Matthew based his artwork off of was a specific section of page four, which advises journalists and media professionals on how people living with HIV/AIDS should be portrayed in the media. Juxtaposing positive and negative ways in which people with HIV/AIDS have been and can be portrayed, this document from a quarter century ago highlights the ongoing battle to reverse the negative effects of HIV/AIDS stigma from the top down, by changing the way in which HIV/AIDS is portrayed in the media.

The shadow silhouette represents a variety of ideas, namely the continuing question of *who* is the face of HIV/AIDS? Is there truly one specific face? It allows the viewer to reflect upon their own preconceived notions of who the face of AIDS is, and naturally the viewers thoughts then move to the faces that they can see; the faces of the background pictures.

Underneath the silhouette, Brague set the original document against a backdrop of three famous HIV/AIDS images; *David Kirby's Final Moments* by Theresa Fare, colorized by Benetton in 1992; *From the Inside: Benjy* by Sue Williams with David Southwood from 2000; and Gugu Dlamini's entries into the Johannesburg collection *Through Positive Eyes* from 2010. The choice and placement of each picture is purposeful and specific, with the oldest picture on the bottom of the piece, moving in time up towards the most recent picture at the top of the art piece, reflecting again this change over time of how HIV/AIDS is portrayed in the media.

In the early 1990's, when the image of David Kirby was first circulated, the United States was at the height of the AIDS crisis, frantically pushing new treatment methods to the market and determining how to address the growing crisis. Benetton colorized Fare's photograph in order to use it in a product advertisement. It is important to note that Benetton received informed consent from Kirby's family to do this, but it highlights the American focus on sensationalizing the epidemic. Second is David Southwood, the end of who's wall mural "I'm sick of Mbeki saying HIV doesn't cause AIDS", can be seen on the far-right side, highlighting the tumultuous reality of AIDS Denialism in South Africa during the first decade of the 21st Century. Gugu Dlamini's pictures are the capstone of the positive progression of HIV/AIDS portrayal in the media, with her proudly expressing herself through images of her breaking free and moving on from the confines of metaphorical stigma, pain, and misconceptions.

Today, the large majority of people can recognize the Red Ribbon that signifies HIV/AIDS, just as they recognize the Pink Ribbon for breast cancer and Blue Ribbon for Diabetes. Therefore, Brague utilized this image as a character to define "they", one of the two words of the original document that can be seen clearly without alteration, as people who have HIV/AIDS.

As he writes in the Introduction of the 6th Edition, Tom Phillips states "As has always been my practice I look for a text first and let its disposition condition any imagery that is at the back of my mind." Similarly, Brague attempts to move the viewers in this direction. The words that Brague highlights are purposed and distinct. The rest of the words of the original document can

vaguely be seen written across the background of the artwork, but by framing “They are” as the starting point of each reflective moment, the highlighted words act as adjectives and modifiers of “they” (again, with “they” being people who have HIV/AIDS) and allow the viewers to create their own images of who the actors are based on the modifiers. Rather than choosing to outline phrases in a poetic fashion, Bague created a collection of statements, some positive and others negative, to reflect the way that people with HIV/AIDS have been portrayed in the media over the last quarter of a century. The words highlighted with a red background are negative modifiers of what “they” are, such as “creeps that fantasy has created”, “anonymous vague threat” and “not informed.” The highlighted words without a red background evoke more positive or neutral images, and point towards the direction that we hope to be moving towards in how people with HIV/AIDS are portrayed in movies, television, and by journalists and reporters with phrases such as “admired people”, “organized in the most positive way” and “brave.”

GIVING HIV/AIDS A FACE

There are several possibilities for making contact with the media. Based on clippings, one can analyze which journalists have a sympathetic attitude towards people with HIV/AIDS. You can invite such a person to discuss the possibility of giving AIDS a face. Most people have no personal contact with people with HIV/AIDS only means an anonymous, vague threat to them, which fires their imagination and creates possibilities for prejudice. It can be very useful to give AIDS a face, that is to present a person with HIV/AIDS to the media. Two good examples are Magic Johnson, the American basketball player, with whom millions of young Americans identify, and Philly Bongoley Lutaaya, the African musician, who was immensely popular. If it's possible that they get AIDS, everybody could get it. And they are admired people, not creeps that fantasy has created. A Magic Johnson or Philly Bongoley Lutaaya have not yet stepped forward in many countries. It is even very dangerous in some countries to present yourself as a person with HIV/AIDS, because it may mean isolation and discrimination. However, if there are people in the country who are willing to present themselves, this must be organized in the most positive way.

The person who is brave enough to come out with his or her story on HIV/AIDS should be in control over the conditions under which this happens. What medium? With or without photos? Which journalists? A bad example is the (Asian) Newsweek article of 29 June 1992, in which a picture of three young sex workers who are HIV positive was placed on the cover. They are 16-year-old girls who were not able to refuse the journalist when he asked for photos and who were not informed what would happen with the photos. Finding themselves on the cover of Newsweek, hanging in every shop in the country for a week long, - and people will often be satisfied with the headlines, not taking the trouble to reading the article - has been disastrous for these young women. We can speak of exploitation of their situation.

If people with HIV/AIDS want to present themselves, this can for instance be done by asking a well-known popular national figure (who is known to have a positive attitude towards people with HIV/AIDS) to agree in a publicized meeting. In Thailand one can think, for example, about a meeting between a person with HIV/AIDS and the princess.

It is sometimes easier for a person with HIV/AIDS who got the virus through a blood transfusion to present him or herself, than for someone who got it through sexual behaviour. If that is the case, we must be extremely careful in not making any distinction between the ways of contracting HIV. It is not the way the person got the virus which is the issue, but the fact that people who look like everyone else in the street can have it.

If it is impossible to come up with a person with HIV/AIDS from the country itself, it is worth considering inviting someone from another country so she/he can be interviewed by national journalists. In February 1991, Marcus Erich, a Dutch person with AIDS, flew to Bangkok to have himself interviewed by the media because at that time there were no Thai people with HIV/AIDS who wanted to be known as such.

Bibliography

8th International Conference on AIDS/3rd World STD Congress, Amsterdam, 1992, pg. 4. Box 9. Maria de Bruyn papers. David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library. Duke University, Durham, NC. 18 Nov 2017. (MLA)

Gugu Dlamini. 2010. Digital Photograph. Through Positive Eyes, photography workshop, Johannesburg, South Africa.

Therese Fare, 1990, David Kirby's Final Moments, b/w photograph (Colorized by Benetton, 1992)

Tom Phillips - Tom Phillips's Introduction to the 6th Edition, 2016. (n.d.). Retrieved December 8, 2017, from <http://www.tomphillips.co.uk/humument/introduction>

Williamson, Sue. [with David Southwood]. 2000. From the Inside: Benjy. Mixed media, digital photography, street art wall mural.