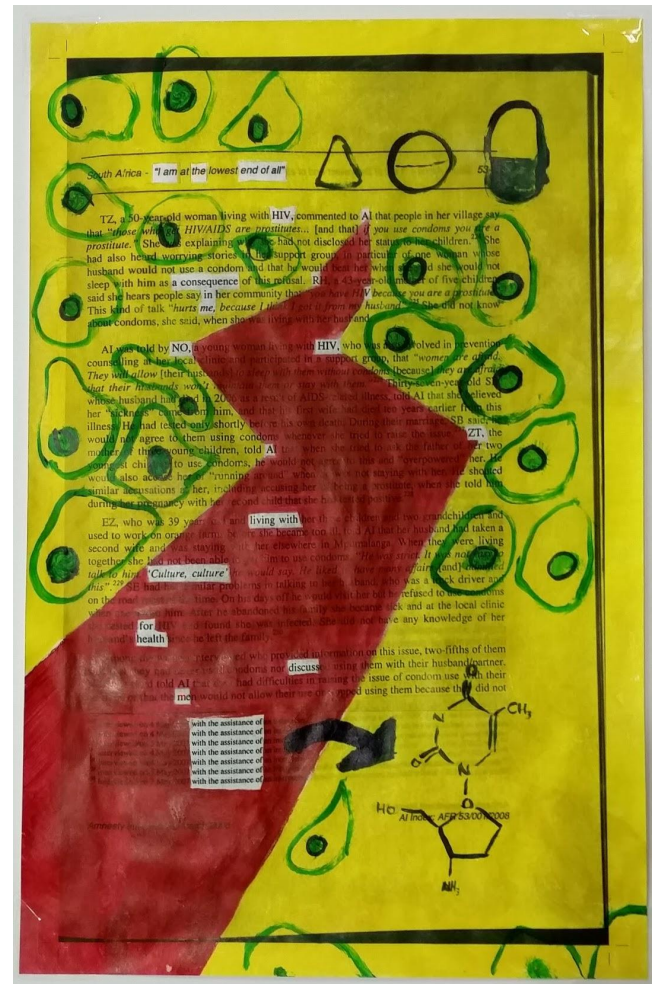


As legend has it, Pablo Picasso uttered the famous words, “Good artists copy, great artists steal.”<sup>1</sup> Tom Phillips’ magnum opus, *A Humument*, gives us an alternative axiom – good artists copy, great artists *transform*. Taking pages of text from an old Victorian novel, Phillips painted over the original work to create a new piece of art, marrying his images with selected fragments of text. Thus a new work of art is born from what Phillips describes as “an encounter between the living and the dead through a form of posthumous collaboration.”<sup>2</sup>

In the spirit of Phillips’ artistic endeavor, Grubbs’ piece transforms a document with the intent of resurrecting it from its archival purgatory. The page he chooses is from a booklet published by Amnesty International that details the human rights abuses faced by women in South Africa.<sup>3</sup> Mulling over the text’s message, he finds another narrative buried within. A chemist by training, the constellation of initials tells him a different story of AZT and ARV. The title condenses to read, “I am the end of all HIV.” Thus, out of the chronicles of suffering emerges a prophetic message of salvation through modern medicine.

Though thematically connected through HIV/AIDS, Grubbs’ narrative fundamentally changes the tone of the original message. He relies on artistic choices to emphasize certain elements that were already present, in addition to inserting his own visual components. First, the bright color palette of the work recalls the imagery of diagrams from a biology textbook. Crisp and geometric, the structures of the cells and blood vessel traversing the page subtly redirect the viewer to the scientific perspective. The page remains unadorned with superfluous details – the colors and shapes are just enough to prime the reader, making space for the text to define the piece.



<sup>1</sup> *Exploring the Benefits of Creativity in Education, Media, and the Arts*. Advances in Media, Entertainment, and the Arts (Amea) Book Series. Ed. Sifton, Nava R. editor. Hershey, PA: Information Science Reference, An Imprint of IGI Global, 2017. Print.

<sup>2</sup> King, Andrew. "'Were There but World Enough and Time': Tom Phillips on *A Humument*." *The Kenyon Review* (2012). Web.

<sup>3</sup> 'I am the lowest end of all': Rural women living with HIV face human rights abuses in South Africa, Maria de Bruyn Papers, Box 10: HIV/AIDS Support and Care, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University.

The crimson vessel guides the viewer's eyes long the trail of text that declaims the transformed narrative. The opening "A-R-V/NO HIV/AZT" triumphantly announces the arrival of the drugs that will end HIV. It continues with an exhortation for a "culture/for health." As suggested by the title's first person point of view, AZT himself eventually speaks out: "discuss/me." Finally, the words "with the assistance of" are repeated vis-à-vis the chemical structure of AZT. The arrow drawn between these words and the molecule reinforces the interaction between the text and image, heralding "the assistance of" AZT. The phrase repeated seven times in parallel evokes feelings of an incantation, adding to the prophetic tone of the piece. Equally as poignant, a cluster of text to the side reads, "a consequence in me."

The simple images painted onto the page reinforce the central message running along the blood vessel. The triangulated letters A-R-V point towards the array of pills lining the top of the page. Integrated with the surrounding cells, which are similar in shape, size, and even color, the medication blends into its biological context.

Even though he alters the narrative to portray the biology of the disease, he makes intentional creative choices to preserve the original text. By constructing the piece around the initials used to identify women in the report, the artist makes them the cornerstone of the piece. Moreover, the text still peers through from behind the thin veil of acrylic paint, permitting the original text to emerge. He makes no attempt to hide, but rather only to emphasize. By selectively painting over certain words and leaving others untouched, Grubbs permits the document's own words to engender new meaning. The text still speaks for itself, but its altered context now guides the viewer through its central message. This reveals the paradox that makes the piece so powerful: the context dictates the tone and the tone redefines the context. The artist's changes are slight, but the effects are compounded. True to the collaborative nature of Phillips' "Humument technique," Grubbs effectively works alongside the author of the text to jointly construct a new document. Thus Grubbs transforms the piece's tone from hopeless to hopeful, taking advantage of the original document's powerful message and viewing it with a new lens.