

AIDS: an Introduction: A reflection on ABC
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The ABC's are the first body of text that many come to know *in toto*. In each variation of an ABC song, the composer re-contextualizes its meaning and significance. For artist Austin Peer, one public health recreation of ABC—Abstinence, Be faithful, Condom use—inspired his recent work *AIDS: an Introduction* (PEPFAR).

The work is in the style of Tom Phillips's *Humument*—text transformed and transmuted through art to reveal both narrative and visual themes (Phillips). In Peer's piece, the islands of text connect through dark, contrasting mixed media to deliver a pithy critique of global action on HIV/AIDS. James Kidd writes that "Humument is both a collaboration and a collision", and for Peer's work, the mode of expression is one of juxtaposition between improvement and inadequacy.

The narrative he creates is simple: HIV we target / first on sex / second on justice / that is our problem. The concise poem evolves from the effacement of a writing entitled *AIDS prevention in Africa: an overview* (de Bruyn and Paalman 1991). When asked, Peer says he chose the document because of his studies in global health, "It's easy to blame the apparent cause of a problem, but ignoring the structural drivers of health can lead to failed interventions and unintended consequences." The original document is the introduction of a review paper on prevention progress. The report includes interventions and research in Africa, something that Peer says made him think of many of the flaws of PEPFAR, a U.S. Initiative to combat HIV/AIDS globally (PEPFAR). With his conflicted sentiments, he says his goal then was to make the text invert itself inward, reflecting shortcomings on the face of progress.

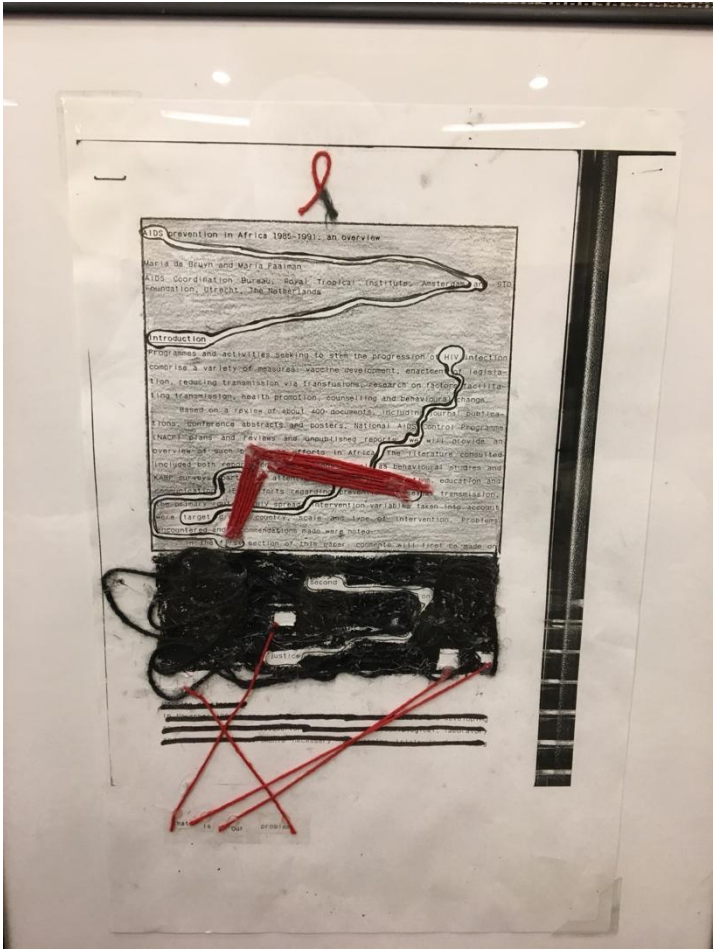
The diction and syntax of the poem are unassuming, but their lack of flair does not reduce the message of the work. The viewer must directly confront the artist's opinion, and the explicit nature perhaps allows the viewer to challenge his/her own perceptions of HIV/AIDS prevention. In the first verse, Peer highlights the word "target," a term often touted when describing research and interventions aimed at reduction of disease burden. The word is a clear metaphorical allusion to war—HIV as our enemy—and the illumination serves to highlight how this word should be analyzed and reconsidered. The emphasis begs the question: who/what actually is our target?

The riparian path of the next verse, "first on sex" intersects the corridor of the first verse, which suggests a linkage between the two lines. The straight red twine that directly connects the three-word verse brings a varied movement and draws in the viewer's gaze. The war metaphor resurfaces, with the taut twine resembling attack lines on a battle map. Though indirect, "target" is now linked to "sex." This may serve as the hidden crux of the piece, with the artist probing the viewer to assess this tight and narrow focus.

Below the darkened but visible portion of the work lies a dark and twisted path around "justice". Snarled black yarn snakes atop matte black pastel and the third verse is the most visible on the page. While the hot glue and disordered yarn are certainly not the most aesthetically refined, Peer says this section intended to portray and objectify the sort of entropy people living with or at high risk of HIV/AIDS must feel. He explains "How can you tell a woman to abstain who has just been raped? How can you preach fidelity when people can't control their partners' actions? How can you say buy condoms

to someone who can't afford food?" His frustration comes through in the circuitous path and the dark noise of the panel, and despite the lack of grace the work's appearance is not drastically hindered.

The thesis of the work becomes realized through Peer's fourth and final verse extracted from the darkness surrounding "justice": "that is our problem." Though the opportunity for introspection about the artist's thoughts is relatively nonexistent, the message certainly makes viewers question the artist's dissatisfaction. The red twine here creates an intentional address—a metaphor that removes "our problem" from the shadows. Again, Peer's own opinion is neither indirect nor muted. This edginess takes final form in a symbol that makes sense only after the close: the ribbon haloing above lacks the focus on justice that Peer would desire. For Peer, PEPFAR's ABC was a Humument that failed, and *AIDS: an Introduction* is a preservation, *more majorum*, of that regret.



Works Cited

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