

Blame and Understanding: Dual Meanings in Alexopoulos' *WANTED*
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Introduction

A single face amidst red. A cheeky grin, a checkered shirt wrinkled from use, neatly parted hair. Take a step back, and the face is no longer untroubled. The boy is a criminal on the run, sought by those who oppress him.

Evi Alexopoulos' *WANTED* utilizes techniques inspired by Tom Phillips and David Wojnarowicz to humanize individuals with HIV. Alexopoulos poses questions such as: who is to blame for HIV transmission? And, how does persevering stigma impact the lives of HIV positive individuals?

The artist's choice of original manuscript from the collections of Maria de Bruyn contrasts the image portrayed, creating a duality that serves to illustrate lingering stigma and lasting judgement that plagues individuals with HIV/AIDS.

Discussion

The background text, a piece of a document from the 8th International Conference on AIDS that suggests terms for journalists to use when communicating about HIV positive individuals, attempts to combat stigmatized terms. The artist selectively chose to keep certain words visible, that, when read in a sequence, creates a statement that debases the meaning of the text: "Caution! AVOID AIDS "victims" they are helpless and can do nothing to live a longer and healthier life. Someone is guilty as a result of poor personal hygiene. Avoid people with multiple sex partners and homosexuals." The artist's intentional duality of the selected word and the background piece offers a thought-provoking juxtaposition that causes the viewer to contemplate the prevalence of stigma and the assignment of guilt today, even though many efforts have been made towards open-mindedness.

Furthermore, the stigma and harsh words stand out against a stark red background, and contribute to the Wanted poster theme of the work. The highlighted statement serves to place blame upon HIV positive individuals for transmitting the disease due to promiscuity or homosexuality. Alexopoulos' intent to portray contrast successfully delivers the idea that HIV positive individuals still are the targets of judgement and prejudice. To many, HIV/AIDS is still a "gay man's disease." The artist illustrates this close-minded and harmful viewpoint through her selection of words from the original piece; through this perspective, individuals with HIV seem culpable.

In describing his *A Humument*, Tom Phillips noted that "there are as many echoes of other poets as there are of other artists [in the book]" (Xerri). Alexopoulos echoes visual style from both Tom Phillips' *A Humument* and David Wojnarowicz's *One Day, This Kid...* to expand on her chosen theme of ever-present stigma and blame. While Phillips' book acts as overall inspiration for her piece, Alexopoulos' choice to have the face of young Wojnarowicz as seen in his famous art piece to both humanize those with the virus and display that guilt and stigma does not discriminate. The black and white face of the innocent boy nods to Wojnarowicz's original. Moreover, the wanted poster aspect contributes to the feeling that individuals with HIV/AIDS are cast out from society and considered criminals. Reminiscent of United States western lore, viewers must reconcile their view of gun-toting criminals with the face of America's criminal: the boy. The red background serves as a reminder of the AIDS ribbons, but the artist's colored pencil work permits the original text to peek through, both transforming and maintaining the starting text.

Conclusion

Like *Chiedza's Song*, the artist's work addresses the question of normalcy in the lives of individuals with HIV/AIDS, but leaves the answer—however complex it may be—unclear. Chiedza chooses not to be defined by her disease in a world that classifies individuals based on their gender, sexual orientation and white blood cell count. Through ambitious efforts and countless battles, activism has reduced the prevalence of stigma against HIV/AIDS; Alexopoulos challenges this notion.

The duality of the selected original piece, *Reporting on AIDS*, and Alexopoulos' chosen words and Wanted poster engage with common assumptions of HIV positive individuals. The face of young Wojnarowicz serves to demonstrate that no person with HIV/AIDS, no matter how young or innocent, is safe from judgement and stigma that pervade in modern thought. Beneath the surface of red is a promising document that attempts to combat discrimination and expectations; however, this partially covered work becomes cruel and assuming when altered purposefully by the artist.

Alexopoulos' *WANTED* grapples with the blame and stigma that HIV positive individuals experience from two perspectives: those imparting such prejudices and those facing such pre-conceived notions. The artist experiments with visual techniques and selectivity of phrases to at once depict a stigmatized outlook and inspire reflection in viewers about the persistent presence of stigma in the United States.

Bibliography

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