

Exposing the Humanity of Crisis

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Behind every dilemma is a power dynamic, waiting to be unearthed. For women living with HIV/AIDS, the dilemma of unplanned and unwanted pregnancy is waiting to be explored- or at least that is the interpretation from “Unplanned and unwanted pregnancy: dilemmas for women living with HIV/AIDS”, an exploratory study drawn from the Maria de Bruyn papers.

Lisa Guraya, the artist behind the piece, represents the “dilemma” as a visual power structure between opposing genders. Her artistic representation of an issue based in the sciences harkens back to the idea of “humanism” and “humumentism”, as defined by Marvin Sackner. Sackner said this of the philosophy behind Humuments: “Humanism also implies study of the humanities, i.e., literature, philosophy, art, poetry, music, etc., as distinguished from the sciences....Thus, “Humumentism” is an art form that integrates humanistic activities through individual creative thought that falls outside the current popular conception of artistic presentations.(Sackner, “Humumentism: The Works and Ideas of Tom Phillips”).” She represents this “humumentism” in her piece based off of Tom Phillips “A Humument” (“A Humument”, Tom Phillips).

The background of the piece is a choppy collage of male condom wrappers collected from the de Bruyn papers. The wrappers boast a variety of slogans, some written in English and some in other languages, some cut in half and spread throughout the page, and some trimmed down and randomized in the piece. In the middle of the piece is a bright red bikini- in the top of the bikini, three words stand out- “unplanned”, “unwanted” and “unsafe”. In the bottom of the bikini, three blank circles, of similar shape to the words in the bikini top, shine through.

The initial effect of the piece is overwhelming. The various themes of the condom wrappers with no discernible pattern paired with a bright red bikini painted over them seem as if it has no rhyme or reason, until one narrows in on what stands out. This lack of uniformity initially evokes a sense of “too much going on”, but then the words “unplanned”, “unwanted”, and “unsafe” make sense of the deliberate chaos that is Guraya’s piece. The list of “un” words used in this piece, and the disorder itself of the piece reflect the absence of normality in the lives of these women. For many women, especially those afflicted with HIV, being safe with a plan is key for stability, and the lack of that stability can be disorienting.

The use of the “un” words also complete the meaning of the symbols used in the piece. The bikini, as well as the color red, acts as a symbol for the exercise of female sexuality. At first, it seems the condom is the counterpart for the exercise of male sexuality. But the highlighted words give context for a greater message on the struggle many of these women face- that the absence of condoms led to not only their unwanted pregnancy, but also their HIV positive status. The repeated use of words with the prefix “un”, meaning “not”, describes what the women did not have, with the display of condoms showing what the women needed.

The theme of absence of empowerment is further used in the three blank circles- notably in the bottom part of the bikini- that formerly held words. The piece highlights the absence of the words by drawing them out from the red of the bikini bottom then blanking them out. This explicit silencing of the original piece is clearly deliberate, and speaks to the erasure that is associated with the three words highlighted in the beginning of the piece- being “unwanted”, “unsafe”, and “unplanned”.

Through careful choice of words that represent the pain of being HIV positive, Guraya attempts to represent the humanity beyond the scientific and sociological issue of abortion access among HIV positive women. This attempt culminates in a piece that by the nature of its lack of uniformity, and creates a sense of vertigo and disempowerment that is nearly akin to the feelings associated with hearing the words “You are pregnant” when you are an HIV positive woman without the means or desire to have a child.

In the document Guraya uses, the hypothesis states that “women living with HIV/AIDS face difficulties in preventing and dealing with unplanned and unwanted pregnancies.” By drawing out the chaotic nature of the piece and the symbolism of the condom wrappers and bikini, Guraya actually depicts these difficulties rather than writing about them in a study. The artistic disarray and choice of words that reflect struggle allow the viewer to put themselves into the shoes of the women from the study- her turmoil is your turmoil, and her disempowerment is your disempowerment. The original study may have caused readers to recognize the importance of an unwanted pregnancy, but Guraya’s transformation of the study allows viewers to live one.

Bibliography

Sackner, Marvin. "Tom Phillips - "Humumentism": The Works and Ideas of Tom Phillips." *Tom Phillips*. N.p., n.d. Web. 06 Dec. 2016.

"Tom Phillips - A Humument." *Tom Phillips - Home*. N.p., n.d. Web. 06 Dec. 2016.

The document used can be found in the:

Collection: Maria de Bruyn papers, 1988-2012 and undated

Box: Box 3

Archives: History of Medicine Collection. Rubenstein Library, Duke University. Durham, North Carolina.

Document: "Unplanned and unwanted pregnancy: dilemmas for women living with HIV/AIDS", Page 1.