

Remedy for HIV: Confronting HIV/AIDS Fatalism Through Art

Submitted: December 8, 2017

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Word Count: 758
Style Manual: MLA

How can art be used to challenge our perceptions and conceptualizations of difficult topics?

In her piece *Remedy for HIV*, Moore uses the Humument technique, developed by artist Tom Phillips, to re-conceptualize an archival document from the Maria de Bruyn Papers at Duke University. The Humument technique, which Phillips describes as the “cutting” and “splicing” of words on a page to “exhume” new or hidden messages, serves to revitalize a pre-existing text by adding a layer of meaning beyond the intent of the original author (Smyth 35-36). In *Remedy for HIV*, the original document, “VCT – an effective remedy for HIV,” details the story of Catherine Phiri, an HIV+ Malawian woman who struggles with feelings of doom and hopelessness upon her diagnosis; much of Catherine’s negative thinking stems from her belief that HIV represents a swift death sentence (“VCT...”). Using Phillips’ Humument technique, Moore revitalizes the document and challenges the validity of HIV/AIDS fatalism through art.

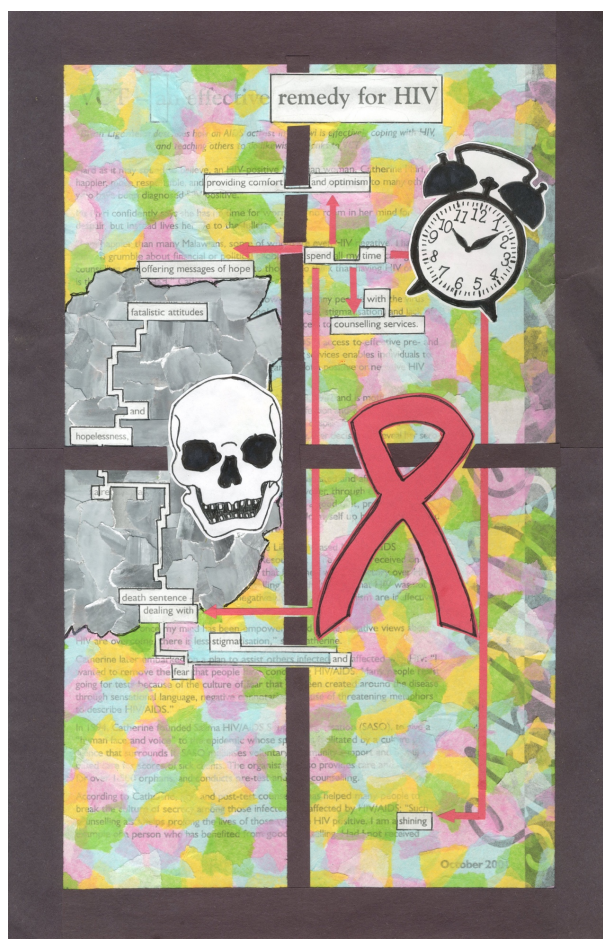
Moore’s piece takes the form of a stained glass window, which functions as a visualization of changing perspectives on HIV/AIDS. In particular, Moore advocates for movement away from the narrative of HIV/AIDS as a death sentence and toward a more hopeful framing of HIV as a chronic but livable condition. According to Moore, she uses stained glass in her depiction to illustrate that even life with HIV/AIDS can be a beautiful mosaic.

Remedy for HIV depicts two competing ideas. On the left side, grey and black stained glass and the image of a skull represent a traditional fatalistic view of HIV/AIDS. However, instead of the original text, which asserts that HIV/AIDS is a death sentence, Moore reinterprets the text to read “fatalistic attitudes and hopelessness are a death sentence.” According to Moore, in an era where testing and life-saving treatments for HIV are more available than ever before, feelings of stigma and fear represent a serious threat—perhaps more dangerous than the HIV virus itself. Moore explains that her encounters with HIV/AIDS fatalism in film and literature speak to the tangible consequences of this negative thinking in both Africa and the United States. For example, in *Sizwe’s Test*, a South African novel, the main character elects not to get tested for HIV, since he views death and ostracism as inevitable if he were to test positive (Steinberg). In *Chiedza’s Song*, a Zimbabwean film, Chiedza’s family treats her as if she is already dead by distributing her possessions among themselves after her HIV diagnosis; claims of her impending death initially prevent Chiedza from planning for the future or enthusiastically following treatment regimens (Ferrand). In these cases, HIV/AIDS fatalism has precluded testing and treatment-seeking, two behaviors that could save the lives of HIV+ individuals. Furthermore, HIV/AIDS fatalism appears in American portrayals of HIV/AIDS, such as the 2002 documentary *The Smith Family*. In one of the film’s most chilling scenes, HIV+ Steve and Kim Smith take their sons to visit their future grave sites—preparing for what they see as certain and approaching death (Oldham).

Given the pervasiveness of HIV/AIDS fatalism in both African and American culture, *Remedy for HIV* offers an alternative to fatalistic thinking. In contrast to the left

side of the piece, the right side employs brighter colors to convey a sense of optimism. The text on this side reads as a literal “remedy for HIV”—a series of directives that Moore views as *more productive solutions* to an HIV+ diagnosis than fatalism and negative thinking. Moore encourages her audience to “spend time providing comfort and optimism,” “offering messages of hope,” engaging “with counseling services,” “dealing with fear and stigma,” and lastly, “shining.” This final instruction—to shine—relates closely to the clock motif; Moore suggests that, rather than prepare for impending death, HIV+ people have time to plan for the future and to lead long, fulfilling lives. An HIV+ diagnosis does not have to “stop the clock” on an individual’s future.

By employing the Humument technique, *Remedy for HIV* buries the traditional notion of HIV/AIDS as a death sentence and instead exhumes a reconceptualization of HIV/AIDS as a chronic, long-term illness that can be managed. In her piece, Moore offers a message of hope: with support and optimism, HIV+ people can shine and rise above their diagnosis. As a “window” into the future of HIV/AIDS perspectives and activism, *Remedy for HIV* promotes proactivity and hopefulness in the context of HIV/AIDS as a way to encourage testing, promote treatment adherence, and improve self-image among HIV+ individuals. Fatalism itself decays in the piece, and a message of hope dominates this window into the future.



Moore, Chandler. *Remedy for HIV*. 2017, tissue paper and marker on paper. Duke University, Durham.

Works Cited

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