Using art and everyday objects to fight HIV/AIDS in Uganda

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On collaboration:

► Developing Areas Research Network (Newcastle-Durham)

► British Academy Visiting Fellowship 2009

► Commonwealth Visiting Fellowship 2011-12
Kissing
(2001-2002) 20x20x25cm, papier maché, bark cloth
Support (2003) 126x23x5cm, wood

The Struggle to Live (2004) 177x35x11cm, wood, steel and copper plates, nails, rope
Sculpture in HIV/AIDS awareness & prevention

Aims of project:

► To use experiences of women living with HIV/AIDS to inform ideas for sculptural works to build capacity for HIV/AIDS prevention among Ugandan women.

► To develop sculptures that can transcend the literacy divide and make sense across diverse ethnic groups in Uganda.

► To assess the use of sculpture to break down taboos and facilitate discussion of HIV/AIDS and its prevention among both women and men.
Art as social practice

► Socially and politically engaged practice: “art in the expanded field” (Krauss 1979)

► Explore the potential for sculpture to play a transformative role in:
  - HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention
  - Gender relations that shape the dynamics of the disease (e.g. gendered taboo on speaking about sex)

► Participatory methods for designing the artworks and for facilitating discussion between women and men
HIV/AIDS in Uganda

- Success story in 1990s, but infection rates have increased in recent years (UNDP 2013)
- People living with HIV/AIDS: >1,000,000
- Adult (15-49) prevalence rate: 7.3% (UNAIDS 2011)
- Higher prevalence rates for women (8.3%; up from 6.4% in 2004-5)
- Women’s vulnerability higher (patriarchy, customary practices, sexual abuse, poverty)
- Women’s relationships and livelihoods are endangered when their partners learn they are HIV/AIDS positive (McQuillan 2005)
- Awareness is not always the problem; prevention is...
Using sculpture in HIV/AIDS prevention

Challenges:

► “Artistic and public expressions of love and physical intimacy are rare in Africa, and images of human sexuality are rarer still” (Cole 1990 in Wells 2002: 3).

► Sculpture not seen as effective, using forms and idioms that are uncommon in Uganda

Project combined notions of new genre public art (social sculpture) with traditions of Ugandan performance and musical art: entertaining while informing
Designing the sculptures through participation

- Portfolio of initial ideas to professionals in 13 HIV/AIDS organizations (Uganda)
- Interviews with 33 women living with HIV/AIDS in Kampala (NACWOLA & Reach Out HIV/AIDS).

Mortar and Pestle
Vulnerability

30cm wide basketry made of scrim, latex

The open-weave scrim material represents the porosity of the human body. The baskets are containers and are representative of women’s bodies that receive sperm, which may be infected. The various baskets symbolise abstinence (upturned), barriers (latex-lined) and infection (red basket with nails).
Soap Sculpture Project:  
*Transparent Soap*

Rationale:

- Can be produced as multiples
- Portable (taking art in communities), interactive
- Symbolic in form and content: associations with personal care; transparency as ‘openness’
- Accessible to literate and non-literate audiences drawn from different groups
- Abstract, provocative, but playful and humorous
**Male & Female** embedded with cowrie shell, seeds, nails.
Public showings in Uganda

Soap Sculpture Show
By Lilian Nabulime

The transparent Soap Sculptures are aimed at stimulating discussions about Sex-related issues among which is the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

Male Sculpture
Female Sculpture

Some of the Sculptures have been embedded with objects like nuts, seeds, and cowrie shells.

Workshop at Katikamu Catholic Parish Church
Workshop and group discussion: the significance of Lilian’s shared experience...
Breaking down taboos

► Able to transcend different literacy levels

► Attracted interest because of their novelty and humour, but subsequently engaged with on a serious and reflective level

► Stimulated discussion and sharing of experiences between men and women related to HIV/AIDS

► Prompted discussion about sex and HIV/AIDS that men and women traditionally find problematic

► A step in reducing stigmatisation and discrimination, and encouraging behavioural change?
Conclusions

► Participation of those living with HIV/AIDS in prevention projects is essential for these to work effectively

► Art can be transformative in the context of HIV/AIDS:
  - useful in non-literate and multi-lingual societies
  - challenging taboos on discussion of sex and body parts
  - raising awareness, changing attitudes, reducing stigma

► Art as social sculpture: *Transparent Soap* moves beyond the aesthetic into the field of social transformation

► Awareness and prevention are not the same... Prevention requires:
  - Behavioural change among men (in particular)
  - Economic and social empowerment of women
Thank you

Soap sculpture show at annual national AIDS conference, Kampala