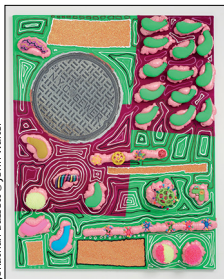




## Exhibition

### Finding common ground in art–science collaboration



Innate Sensing Mechanism: Sower. Photograph: Jonathan Bassett © John Walter

CAPSID is supported by the Large Arts Award from Wellcome and Arts Council England Grants for the Arts. It is on display at the CGP Gallery, London, May 17–July 8, and can be viewed at HOME, Manchester, Nov 10–Jan 6.

For more information about John Walter visit <http://www.johnwalter.net/>

For information about Walter's role at the Towers Lab see <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/towers-lab/public-engagement/art>

"The greatest scientists are always artists as well", Albert Einstein purportedly said to a journalist at the Durham Morning Herald. Gone are the days of the Renaissance polymath—our system favours specialisation over diversification—but Einstein's point is that good science requires creative and intuitive thinking, the kind of thinking that is fundamental in the arts. A recent trend in formal art–science collaboration attempts to counter the cultural and institutional polarisation of art and science, and discover what happens when the two worlds collide. If Einstein is right, they might have more in common than we think.

For the past 2 years, multimedia artist Dr John Walter has been the de facto artist in residence at the University College London Towers Lab, where he was invited by Prof Greg Towers into the world of structural virology. Building on a previous project addressing the representation of HIV called *Alien Sex Club*, Walter moved from the clinical to the laboratory environment where Towers and his team study the HIV capsid.

An eponymous show, CAPSID, brings together Walter's expansive body of work created over that period. Currently on display at the CGP Gallery in south London (ending July 8), and moving to HOME Gallery in Manchester in November, it brings together around 250 works in a maximalist eruption of colour and form. In the main gallery, prints cover the floor, and hybrids of sculpture, collage, and painting texture the walls, creating a sense of chaotic immersion. In the second Dilston Grove space, an elegant concrete church built in 1911, the room is draped crosswise with giant busy canvases that you experience in layers, moving through one to get to the next. At the far end of the room the show concludes with Walter's short film, *A Virus Walks into a Bar*, a Lynchian oddity full of surreal interactions between characters dressed in plush onesies. Walter's source material: the lifecycle of a virus, the

geometry of a capsid, laboratory jargon, and much more, all pulled from the Towers Lab environment, and blended with icons from high and low culture: cartoon characters, urinal mats, arcane symbols, and modern art references. The deadly serious and the tongue-in-cheek colliding in an eccentric post-modern mash-up.

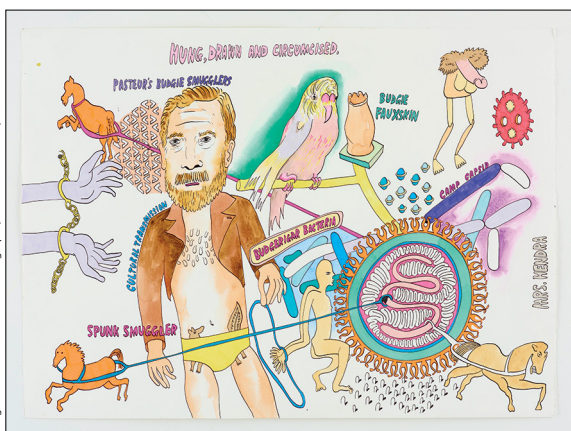
In among the maelstrom is an unswerving commitment to scientific accuracy. Walter and Towers hope to update and deepen the public conversation around HIV by refocusing it meaningfully on up-to-the-minute science. But CAPSID is less illustration of the science, more homage to it, creating a mythology and a poetics of virology that honours the scientists and their work.

Back at the laboratory, a performative aspect to the work was at play. Walter embedded himself in day-to-day activities, attending meetings, and engaging with researchers and students. Mobilising his own skill set, he ran science communication workshops and became proficient in bioimaging software, using it to create works for the show. But his role was also one of the interloper and jester, a disruptive character that exists outside of the hierarchy and paradigm of the laboratory. "I can ask questions of the science that the scientists can't ask", said Walter when he gave me a tour of the show, "and we can challenge each other."

Walter offered laboratory members an opportunity to think reflexively about their research. He was "fantastically helpful in clarifying your own thoughts", explained Towers on the phone. "What are we actually doing, and why are we actually doing it?" This kind of reflexivity is commonplace in the art world where conversations about language, power, and funding are par for the course. The world of natural science is less familiar with thinking about how the language and context of the work relates to the outcomes of the research.

Their differences in stark relief, Walter and Towers were surprised to find genuine kinship, and also to discover how similar the goals of science and art can be. As Towers puts it in the CAPSID catalogue, "both are creative enterprises, both are underpinned by curiosity. We both aim to do something original and innovative that engages, entertains, and excited our audience." While their output might be dramatically different, both Walter and Towers are experimenting at the boundaries of what is known, searching for patterns, exceptions, and missing links, and both share a rigour and commitment to their work. For Walter this was his eureka moment: "We're doing exactly the same thing!"

Catherine Lucas



Hung, drunk and circumcised. Photograph: Jonathan Bassett © John Walter