

# John Walter Co-Factors

14th February –  
10th May 2020

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The  
Suttie Arts  
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## Exhibition Information

**Co-Factors** is a series of paintings from a larger project by John Walter called CAPSID. CAPSID combines painting, drawing and film. It was originally shown in Southwark Park Galleries, London and HOME, Manchester, between 2018 and 2019. The project is the result of a collaboration between John and Professor Greg Towers of University College London. CAPSID looks at the way we talk about viruses such as HIV.

Capsids are protein shells contained within viruses that help protect and deliver viral DNA to cells during replication. **Co-factors** are particles in the host cell that interact with the capsid and guide it from the cell wall to the nuclear pore.

Viruses are things that affect us all, from common colds to complex sexual health diseases. In a case of a cold, the capsid might be spherical or in a retrovirus, it might be elongated. The capsid of HIV has exactly twelve pentagonal proteins and about two hundred and fifty hexagonal ones. This is a way to disguise and smuggle the genetic material of the virus into the cell to infect it. John uses the capsid behaviour to reflect how art forms are passed on from one generation to another. Throughout the project, capsids became an analogy for thinking about cultural transmission.

The work of Klaus Schulten and Juan Perilla in Chicago led John to find Professor Greg Towers work at University College London. Greg is a Professor of virology who looks at stories around the capsid and overturning the view that the capsid breaks up and immediately enters the cell. His research shows that the capsid interacts with the host cell to smuggle the genetic material to the nucleus of the cell.

CAPSID doesn't try to explain the science, instead it uses science as the base to make something else. John employs language and jargon to gather material to create paintings, drawings and films. The paintings in this exhibition multiply images and logos of global brands in a graphic equivalent of the viral process.

## **Artist Biography**

John Walter is a visual artist working across a diverse range of media including painting, moving image, installation and curating. He studied at Chelsea School of Art and Design, The Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art, The Slade School of Fine Art and undertook his doctoral studies at The University of Westminster graduating in 2017. In 2006 he was an artist in residence at KIAC in Dawson City, Canada. Between 2006-8 he was Sainsbury Scholar at The British School at Rome. He was a participant in Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in 2012. In 2017 he undertook a residency at Edinburgh Sculpture Workshop. Wellcome and Arts Council England have supported his work. He was awarded the 2016 Hayward Curatorial Open for Shonky: The Aesthetics of Awkwardness. The Arts Council Collection and The Walker Art Gallery in Liverpool have collected his work. Recent exhibitions include Brexit Gothic (DKUK, 2019); Crep Suzette - A Shoe Show (with Bert McLean, LUVA, 2019); The Fourth Wall (Look Again Festival Aberdeen, 2019); Booze Guitar (Matt's Gallery, 2018); CAPSID (CGP and HOME, 2018); Somewhere in Between (Wellcome Collection, 2018); Coming Out: Sexuality, Gender and Identity (Walker Art Gallery, 2017); The Zany Capsid (Hardwick Gallery, 2017).

**[www.johnwalter.net](http://www.johnwalter.net)**

**Extract from an interview with John Walter, filmed by Jamie Quantrill, for CAPSID at Southwark Park Galleries London.**

A capsid is a protein shell inside a virus with the genetic material of the virus contained inside this other shell. In the case of a simple common cold, it might be spherical or in a retrovirus, it might be elongated. The capsid of HIV is very peculiar. Its geometry has exactly twelve pentagonal proteins and about two hundred and fifty hexagonal proteins. This is a way to smuggle the genetic material into the cell that is invading and disguising itself and infect the cell. It becomes a very interesting way to think about art forms and how they are transmitted and passed on from one generation to the other. Capsids become like an analogy for thinking about cultural transmission

HIV and viruses are things that affect us all in some way. They are things that we can all relate to whether they are common colds or complex sexual health diseases. Discovered information about capsids through the work of Klaus Schulten and Juan Perilla in Chicago led me to find professor Greg Towers work at UCL. Greg is professor of virology and he is looking at narratives around the capsid and overturning the received wisdom that the capsid breaks up and immediately enters the cell. What he's shown us is that the capsid immediately interacts with the host cell to disguise and cloak itself and smuggle the genetic material to the nucleus of the cell. I thought that this was a way of imagining a new project in London, there are two spaces the gallery and Dilston Grove and they both became installations in their own right. Certain things hinge between the two, particularly the life cycle animation in the gallery here which becomes a kind of rubric for 'A Virus Walks into a Bar'.

In any given project there's a lexicon of images particularly in CAPSID, there's this U shape which is a cross-section through a slice of packing foam that is stuck onto paintings or is redrawn and printed. It also appears as a piece of fabric sewn into a costume. This becomes a code that allows you conceptually to join between all the different materials I am using. The easiest way to explain what a capsid is through this analogy of A virus walks into a bar. The film tells the life cycle of HIV. Certain characters are personified for dramatic purposes. This infantilises the story but it's a very easy way for people to latch on. It's a story of corruption, and friendship and collaboration. The film is on a loop so it's a very simple, absurd way of telling the story.

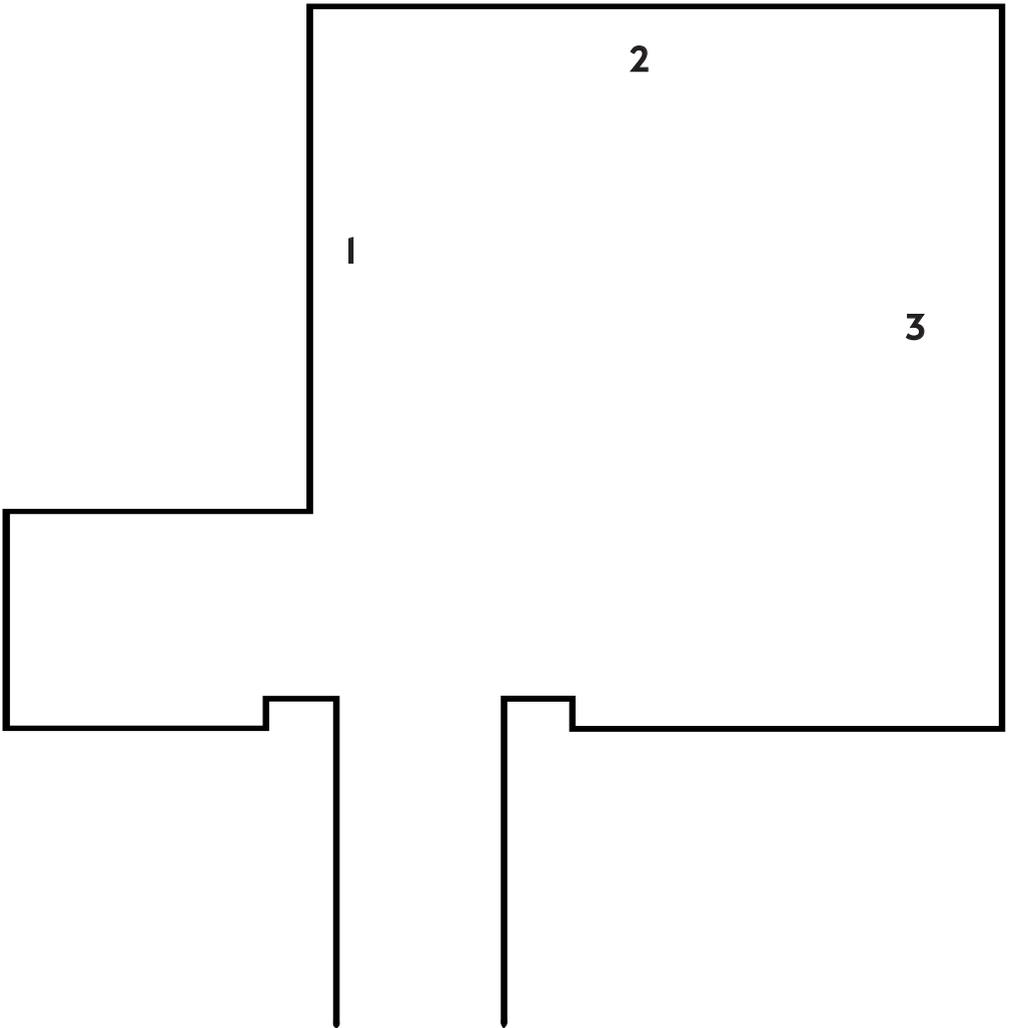
The project doesn't illustrate science it uses science as a springboard to make something else. I use language and jargon to gather material to make the paintings and drawings and films from. You'll see certain phrases that I've gathered from lab meetings and from my research into what Greg and his lab are doing. That is somehow poetic when it is taken out of context. In the film, this gets spoken backwards. It sounds like a Shakespearian tragedy. In some of the drawings, it becomes a sort of camp, shrill humour but this is a playful thing for me.

The maximalist aesthetic is really why I'm embedding multiple bodies of work into a larger hall. This is about the complexity you're immersed in a very patterned, coloured, over the top world. The purpose of this is to extend your experience more grandly and that includes film and painting and printmaking. There's a lot of gaudy imagery. There are a lot of objects that I appropriated, incorporated using pattern and the pattern is something I've learnt from the cell and the capsid. There are narratives around the innate sensing mechanism which is the ability of the cell to detect foreign genetic

material and kill it. I've learnt that, say in a transplant operation you might suppress the immune system with drugs you can do that with a painting that can lead to new forms of collage. What might seem unlikely imagery, things that say seasons greeting and so on, are ways of bringing foreign material into my vocabulary.

So there's a pedagogical approach you can have to the show where you learn about science but there is also an approach where you just come and be immersed in the colour and the pattern. I think that most people should leave with some joy and some laughs, and some sort of standout syndrome when they feel like might have been immersed in a very, very overwhelming thing.

## List of Artworks



- 1 Co-Factor: Two Jamiroquais
- 2 Co-Factor: Peppermint Breastfeeding
- 3 Co-Factor: Y2K

**‘CAPSID’ by Dr John Walter was co-commissioned by Southwark Park Galleries London and HOME Manchester, and project managed by SMART Art Agency Aberdeen. CAPSID is supported by a Large Arts Award from Wellcome and Arts Council England Grants for the Arts.**

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**HOME**



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