

# Out of Hours Art

## The Alien Sex Club

*Ambika P3, The University of Westminster, London, 24 July 2015–14 August 2015, and The Homotopia Festival, Liverpool John Moores University, 30 October 2015–29 November 2015.*

## A CHEEKY LOOK AT CONTEMPORARY GAY CULTURE AND HIV

Deliberately provocative or clever marketing? Imagine my initial thoughts when I was sent an invitation to *The Alien Sex Club*!

This art installation was John Walter's PhD project at the University of Westminster, a joint collaboration with Dr Alison Rodger (a HIV specialist at UCL), and curated by Ellen Mara De Wachter. It was supported by the Wellcome Trust, Arts Council England, and Terrence Higgins Trust, among others.

Unlike other exhibitions about HIV which are usually serious, sombre, and sometimes depressing, Walter used a fun, colourful, and cheeky perspective to reflect on and occasionally poke fun at contemporary gay culture.

Walter used the concept of a 'cruise maze', found in gay saunas and sex clubs, to enable visitors to walk through exhibits and video booths, with music and interactions to explore the relationship between HIV and contemporary gay culture.

The exhibition also teases the visitors' senses through the viewing of colourful and thought-provoking artwork; touching the exhibits, tasting the gin and tonic at *The Capsid Club*, and listening to the music playing from two albums *Post Polari* and *Alien Sex Club*.

Barbara Truvada reads your tarot using *The Alien Sex Club* card set, – the four suits referring to the typologies of gay men's HIV risk stratification: *Bugchasers*, *Giftgivers*, *Barebackers* and *Serosorters*. The tarot uses images serving as a guide for 'Barbara' to discuss various subjects including sex and relationships. Also on show is a sculpture called *Pug Virus* (see above), a 4-metre high inflatable head sewn in pink nylon and based on one of a series of 3D printed 'virus heads' Walter has made.

*Pug Virus* is his attempt to re-envision HIV in our current time of highly-effective antiretroviral therapy, a contrast to 1980s representations of the virus during the 'AIDS' crisis, tombstones and all.

*The Intestinal Corridor*, which is a throat or sphincter, takes the visitor into the cruise maze, with images of viruses and antiretroviral medications featured throughout the journey. The visitor is encouraged to visit *Prostate Palace*, where



*Pug Virus explores the relationship between visual culture and HIV today. This sculpture is characteristic of the artist's colourful and carnivalesque approach. Image care of Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool.*

the male G-spot is 'transformed into a new architectural landmark for London'.

The casual visitor will enjoy the artwork and videos which are humorous and satirical at times, while the medical visitor may gain further understanding of HIV and the current cultural factors contributing to its transmission.

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