

INTER/her: An immersive journey inside the female body – VR experience demo

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1. INTRODUCTION

INTER/her is an intimate VR immersive exploration of the inner world of middle-aged women's bodies and the post-reproductive diseases they suffer, such as endometriosis, fibroids, polyps, Ovarian and other cysts, cervical, ovarian, uterine and endometrial cancers – with a focus on female health as personal exploration, conversation starter, and community building.

INTER/her explores concerns of female mortality, but also a survivalist instinct to cleanse the body to heal it; positioning the physical body as a site to examine the psychological issues of womanhood. Themes of sense of self and identity, loss of body parts, body image, sexuality, confusion, pain and lack of reliable information, still male-dominated medical institutions, body betrayal, ailments and tumours – representing negative festering of pain and anger, and feelings of mortality.

The sensory and emotional experience moves from the outside, within a real dome space, into VR space with a spatial audio soundscape of the stories in the voices of real women recounting their experiences of diseases and pain, with accompanying wearable haptic garment providing a visceral vibration responsive experience on the lower abdomen, where the various diseases occur, making it an intimate, emotional and possibly haunting experience.

2. CONTEXT/MOTIVATION

INTER/her was motivated directly from Dr Baker's own experience fighting (and winning) against ovarian cancer in 2016/17, providing the personal imperative to make an artwork that would give

something back to other women in the same circumstance. The project is based on Baker's experience and journey through the healthcare system but using her own art practice as the frame in which to communicate the experiences, emanating from silence, inconsistent information and varying medical support for women's health. It is also inspired by the stories she then started to hear from friends and family about their reproductive disease experiences, which seemed hidden or kept to themselves until the topic was raised.



Figure 1: Early interior artwork for inside the VR experience © 2021 Sarah Büttner for *INTER/her*.

3. THEORY & IN PRACTICE

Initially, the project started from an overtly techno-feminist perspective, but overtime and focussing on the practical and aesthetic production with the all-female team, the intellectual feminist perspective fell away to a more intimate, emotional feminist comradery approach. All the women on the team

have faced the same issues discussed in the piece itself, from polyps, fibroids and endometriosis to menopause and HRT and ongoing testing and biopsies and pain.

From a first-person perspective of ‘feeling from the inside, excerpts from the books “*Invisible Women: Exposing Data Bias in a World Designed for Men*” (Perez 2019) on the way the health care system fails to diagnose or support women in pain and disease; and “*WOMAN: An Intimate Geography* (Angier 2014) for the biology dimension, exploring concerns of mortality, but also a survivalist sense to cleanse the body to heal it; positioning the physical body as a site to explore psychological issues of womanhood and the sense of self, exploring the body: vagina, uterus, cervix, Fallopian tubes, ovaries, bleeding, pain, endometriosis, Fibroids, Cysts and other disorders, technology, treatment, surgery, etc. All threaded with actual women voicing their experiences with bespoke music and sound effects to accompany each story.

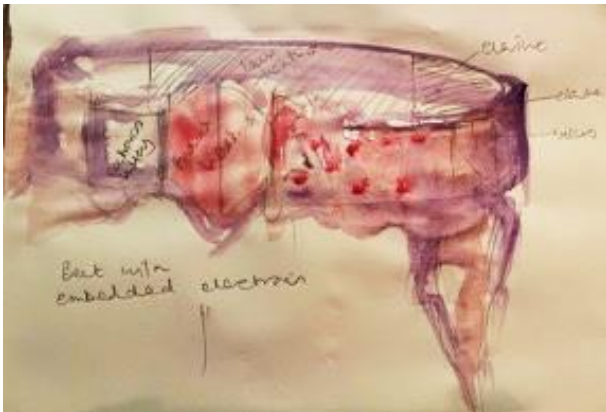


Figure 2: Haptic corset sketch for nearly completed design © 2021 Bushra Burge for INTER/her.

4. EXPERIENCE

INTER/her is an immersive visual journey and emotional experience, from the inside out within in the bespoke tent space, with accompanying wearable haptic garment providing a visceral vibration responsive experience on the lower abdomen. The tent has a vulva-shaped opening and up to 3 women/visitors can lay on red beanbag chairs on the floor inside and are pre-dressed in the haptic corset, in order to feel the sensations on the lower abdomen triggered by related stories / voices being heard in the 360 interior body space.

Participants are dressed in the haptic corset, fitted with embedded vibration motors actuators in order for people to feel different sensations on the lower abdomen while listening to the stories / voices. The

imagery is of abstract organic objects like flowers, plants and fungi, to represent the different diseases women can suffer from that grow and mutate, as each story is told to keep the attention of the visitors before they move on to the next. Spatialised sound with the women’s voices telling their stories women’s disease experiences, and bespoke soundtrack and ambient sound effects of breath and heartbeat, for atmosphere – all to support the main narrative and move visitors to the next story and to empathise or relate to the experiences of the women whose voices are heard.

Each woman/visitor is debriefed afterward to ensure that they are ok with what they experienced and to discuss their experience, as well as to give feedback on the experience. The exhibition will be accompanied by female health information and health support charity leaflets, to take away and to help inform and support visitors to reflect on their own bodies.



Figure 3: Bespoke tent © 2021 Imagine Inflatables for INTER/her.

5. ALL FEMALE TEAM

One characteristic of the project is that it is designed entirely by an all-female team of artists and designers, using all available tech tools for design collaboration including Zoom, Github, and Royal Mail (for testing the corset), as well as the design tools: TiltBrush, Gravity Sketch, Blender, Unity, SideQuest and GitHub. This has been particularly challenging during these COVID times.

Credits include:

- Camille Baker – Artist/Artistic Director
- Mafj Alvarez – Interaction Designer
- Sarah Büttner – Tilt Brush and 3D environment artist
- Bushra Burge – Haptic Corset Interaction /Fashion Designer
- Kat Austen – Sound Designer

6. CONCLUSION

For the EVA Conference the hope to have the full or partial exhibition on site in London for conference attendees to try experience, discuss and constructively critique from an aesthetic and technical point of view, but also to exchange views on the larger feminist and medical issues.

7. FUNDING ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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8. REFERENCES

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