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GOO:GA: 'If I have to maybe squeeze a corpse out of my pussy, I'm going to get a fucking good show out of it.'

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ABSTRACT

This practice research article and collection of extracts from GOO:GA (2021), a comic live art film made during and about the pandemic pregnancy of lead artist Hannah Ballou, discusses the project's investigation of comic subjectivity in pregnant performance. The effects of the re-performance of comic material made by/about a pregnant body during a subsequent traumatic pregnancy on the process of the comedian are analysed. Iris Marion Young's theory of the doubling of the pregnant subject is expanded as a tripling, as the pre-pregnant self and the uneventful pregnancy are joined by the precarious pregnancy when Ballou's fetus is diagnosed with a rare cardiac anomaly. As a development of recent scholarship on ambivalence in pregnant comic practice, not only is the abjection of pregnancy mined for comedy, but also the taboo of precarious pregnancy, resulting in a practical counterargument to a Bergsonian model of comedy vis-à-vis trauma. The effect of the pandemic's enforced pivot to digital performance on a time-bound praxis of matrescence is analysed. GOO:GA is available to view at <https://vimeo.com/625256113>.

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'Content note: GOO:GA contains salty language, nudity, erstwhile animals, dodgy child acting, ironic pelvic movement, ukulele feminism, four minutes of literally nothing happening, and themes of fetal illness.' (Ballou, 2021)

GOO:GA scenes

Push It: Pregnant white people love yoga balls.
'Gender Reveal' Parties: 'My daddy burned down half of Arizona for my penis!'
Interview with a 5-year-old: Feminist parenting audit
Balloon Action
Word Bombs
Farokh to the Rescue
Ukulele Feminism

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(Re)Produce Aisle
 Dead Baby Jokes
 Demi Moore/Pastry Possum/Vanity Fair cover shoot
 Savasana: Corpse pose
 Interview with a dead pug
 Ritual: Hope (you fickle bitch.)

Intellectually *GOO:GA* is about re-performance and maternal subjectivity, feminist reclamation of pregnancy-as-spectacle, resisting binary fetal gendering, and questions about distance and trauma in the formulation of the comic.

Emotionally *GOO:GA* is about the inevitability of hope, the resilience of mothers, and finding comedy in the darkest of places. It's a performance for a film that was possibly inadvisable to make, but I'm glad I did it anyway!

The original concept for the work was inspired by one of my heroes, Ursula Martinez and her *Family Outing 20 Years On*, where she projected a video of her old autobiographical show that also featured her parents above the stage and then re-performed the work below it, with the differences forming the crux of the material. For example, her father had since passed away, so was absent from the stage, while present on the screen, and her mother had developed dementia and had a hard time remembering her lines. This all rendered the work very poignant alongside its humour. So, my plan was to borrow that concept and apply it to pregnancy, projecting an old show I had made during my first one overhead and make a work about performing it again, alongside it, gleaned comic material from the differences in a first and second pregnancy.

Then two massive wrenches were thrust into the gears of the project; the pandemic made a live audience impossible, and at my 20-week scan I found out my second pregnancy would be far more different than anticipated. So, I turned to film. (Ballou in Live Art Development Agency, 2023)

The above passage, written for a video introducing *GOO:GA* (2021) during its programming in the Live Art Development Agency's LADA Screens series makes 'turning to film' sound simple; it was not, but it both accommodated and transformed a performance impossible to reschedule. This reflection forms part of a performance praxis of matrescence, specifically pregnancy in conjunction with comedy, autobiography, and an enforced pivot from live to digital performance.

Contextualising *GOO:GA* (2021) within the *hoo:ha* (2012-2015) *goo:ga* (2016) *moo:ma* (2016) series

hoo:ha (2011–2015) was a performance practice research series that illuminated and deployed a dissonance between the comic and the erotic in feminist performance.

goo:ga (2016) continued that project by excavating the theoretical and practical applications of dissonance in the context of matrescence and the pregnant comic body.

moo:ma (2016) was a performance lecture establishing links between the comic process, matrescence, lactation, labour, and studio practice.

The live stage show, *goo:ga* (2016) satirised American ‘gender reveal parties’ in favour of a queer resistance to binary fetal gendering with a live audience opening the sealed envelope from my 20-week scan and revealing the baby’s sex to me by showering me with rainbow balloons on which they’d drawn tiny vulvas and shouting ‘It’s a HUMAN!’ *GOO:GA* (2021) retraces this ‘reveal’ process.

Additionally, in an attempt to audit the outcomes of the lofty feminist parenting goals expressed in *goo:ga* (2016), the 2021 film includes an interview with my 5-year-old about gender. Her views were encouragingly progressive and inclusive of an array of gender expressions. After this scene, it was time for my second baby’s 20-week scan reveal. This is where the show, like the pregnancy, goes off the rails.

Excerpt 1: Balloon Action, Word Bombs, and Farokh to the Rescue

HANNAH: You’re not going to blow up balloons and throw them at me this time because that’s not exactly Covid-secure, so instead I had the doctor stick the appropriate balloon in the envelope. Now remember; we’re not learning anything about a baby’s future gender identity, just the angle my feminist parenting is going to have to take based on how they’ll be treated according to what their genitals look like.

Drumroll please!

[Hannah opens the envelope which contains a red balloon. She blows it up. It’s heart-shaped.]

[She keeps blowing it up until it bursts in her face. She finds more balloons. She repeats the action many times.] (Figure 1)

[A reverse angle shot reveals Hannah to be performing to an empty theatre]

[A medical examining table appears on stage. Hannah lies on it, exposing her bump. Georgia, her daughter, enters in a lab coat, spectacles, and her toy stethoscope, and uses the hand-held microphone as a sonogram wand.]

HANNAH VOICEOVER: Wow ... this is taking a long time. Is she just bad at this? She’s in her 50s so it doesn’t make sense that she would be inexperienced ...



Figure 1. Balloon Action. Documentation of developing this scene available at: <https://vimeo.com/537915146>.

[More scanning. Then Georgia puts the mic down and says something, but all we hear is the sound of terrible explosions; bombs dropping. Georgia exits. Hannah picks up the microphone]

HANNAH:

Word bombs.

'Quite a large heart.'

'Great Ormond Street Hospital.' [GOSH]

Screaming into my mask, hyperventilating, kicking the exam table like a tantrumming child. Which sense of the word 'quite'? The British sense as in 'somewhat' as in 'Hmm, this is measuring slightly out of the norm so I'd like to have a doctor take a look'? Or the American sense, as in 'very,' as in 'Holy shit your child's heart is a water balloon, take cover, it's going to blow!' Never has this discrepancy mattered more.

Staggering into a counselling room with a vase of grape hyacinths. Are they real or fake? I never check. Plenty of empathy, no information. 24 hours of panic.

Staggering to Great Ormond Street Hospital. More word bombs:

'Exceedingly rare.'

'We've never had a case.'

'Impossible to predict.'

Yesterday you were happening. You were a given. Today you're Schrödinger's baby; both alive and dead until we can open the box.

No! That's a shitty comparison because you just kicked me in the cervix so I'm pretty sure you're still alive!

Staggering on stage. The audience, are they real ...

[Sound: a bustling, chatting crowd, they burst into cheers and applause]

[Sound: cuts to total silence]

... .Or fake? I never check.

[Georgia re-enters in lab coat and spectacles]. (Figure 2)



Figure 2. Word Bombs. The artist's daughter plays her fetal cardiologist.

Excuse me, Doctor, I know it's not clinically or, in fact, socially relevant, but would you mind checking the baby's sex? I have a feeling there won't be any quasi-ironic feminist performance art reveal this time, and in the face of so much unknown, it might help me to know ... *something* about the baby.

GEORGIA as DOCTOR: Quasi-ironic ... ?

HANNAH: Never mind. Can you check?

GEORGIA as DOCTOR: Well, I'm a fetal cardiologist, so don't paint the nursery based on what I say.

HANNAH: *[to camera]* This struck me as false modesty; surely if you can diagnose complex congenital heart anomalies from shadowy pictures of minuscule anatomy, you can identify balls!

GEORGIA as DOCTOR: Here you go. *[hands Hannah a photo and exits]*

HANNAH: And then she gave me my first-ever *solicited* dick pick.

[to camera] Now that would have gotten a laugh if the pandemic hadn't sucked the audiences out of theatres like a giant philistine D&C.

And THAT would have gotten an uncomfortable titter and many blank stares.

This is unbearable. I need to connect with people. No more laugh track, and no more silence. I know who to call. *[Pulls out a phone and dials]* Hey Farokh, it's Hannah. How fast can you get to the Rose Theatre?

[Farokh Soltani, a tall man with a gloriously curled moustache, bursts into the theatre.]

FAROKH: *[rips off Covid mask heroically]* Where do you want me?

[Hannah points, indicating one of the 800 empty seats.]

HANNAH: *[to camera]* Farokh was at the original debut of *goo:ga* five years ago. Performers all have that one friend who they LOVE it when they come to gigs because their laugh is so loud and infectious. Farokh is mine.

FAROKH: *[from his balcony seat, wide shot emphasizing how isolated he is in the house]* I won't be infecting anyone from here!

HANNAH: Exactly! Ok, let's take it back a bit. *[The film rewinds a few minutes, repeating the section from 'Well I'm a fetal cardiologist ...' to 'my first ever solicited dick pick.']*

[shot of FAROKH laughing uproariously]

HANNAH: So, it's a boy. It's a very very very very unlucky boy. It was profoundly distressing to realise that I might go through months and months of the dramatic bodily transformation it takes to create life within my womb and then not get ... my maternity leave.

[FAROKH laughs]

Is ALL of this real or fake? I never checked.

The lack of a live audience was a problem comics addressed in different ways throughout the pandemic. The shift to digital performance along with pandemic restrictions on the number of people who could congregate in a space inspired me to develop the theme of re-performance by the audience as well as the performer. Farokh Soltani, whose loud laughter is audible throughout the documentation of the original *goo:ga* (2016) is invited to re-perform his own spectatorship in a cameo performance as the sole audience member. The absurdity of performing in an 800-seat theatre with one audience member is emblematic of pandemic-era comedy. He replaces the laugh-track that accompanies the performance until the reveal of the empty theatre which is juxtaposed with the reveal of the potential for an empty womb.

After 'solving' the live audience problem, the show continues with the task of developing the traumatic narrative through comedy. The comic incongruity of the punchline 'not get ... my maternity leave' deploys unruliness (Rowe, 1995). A 'good' mother would be worried about her baby, not paid leave from work. However, this was a real concern; I

was worried about my ability to cope with a return to work if my baby died before he crossed the legal threshold from miscarriage (no maternity leave) to stillbirth (maternity leave) at 24 weeks. (Tommys.org, 2023). This question is resolved in the (Re)Produce Aisle scene discussed later, but the 24-week threshold for statutory maternity leave in the United Kingdom can be very cruel to women who might experience bereavement in precarious pregnancies. 'Didn't make it to 24, dear? Here's a towel, back to work!'

Research questions

GOO:GA (2021) investigates re-performance in the context of autobiographical live art and comic subjectivity in pregnancy. Underwood-Lee and Šimić (2021) have noted the dearth of performance made by/about the pregnant body, and the *goo:ga* series addresses this first with the 2016 stage show, then with the 2021 live art film which takes a palimpsestic approach to re-performance. The first work in the series developed Iris Marion Young's theory of the doubling of the pregnant subject. By re-performing material from *goo:ga* (2016) alongside footage of that performance, *GOO:GA* (2021) searches for a different approach to this doubling in the context of a very different pregnancy to ask;

1. How might the re-performance of material made by/about a joyously pregnant body in the context of a later traumatic pregnancy further develop Young's theories of the doubling of the pregnant subject?
2. How might writing/devising/performing within a traumatic pregnancy, as opposed to reflecting upon it, impact the creative process of the comedian?

This investigation is pertinent to the wider debate around the necessity of distance, time and Bergson's 'momentary anaesthesia of the heart' in the formulation of the comic within humour studies, as well as the continuing feminist intervention in the construction of the maternal afforded by pregnant comic practice, building upon Lockyer and De Benedictus' (2023) discussion of ambiguity in this limited but (literally) expanding area of practice.

Since *GOO:GA* (2021), the film, is written over *goo:ga* (2016), the stage show, some of the research questions from the earlier work bleed through, though no longer foregrounded. To some degree, however, the performance still attempts to dissonantly manifest the comic and the erotic with the pregnant body, thus challenging heteronormative, postfeminist, and patriarchal configurations of pregnancy, 'funniness' and 'sexiness.' The re-performance of some material continues the series' work of:

- reclaiming agency in pregnancy-as-spectacle
- resisting the practice of binary fetal gendering,
- deploying the comic abjection of pregnancy.

See Šimić and Underwood-Lee (2021) and Ballou (2016) for further analysis of how *goo:ga* (2016) and consequently *GOO:GA* (2021) manifest a dissonant juxtaposition of the comic and erotic pregnant subject.

Practical framework

While Lockyer and Benedictus (2023) have noted an increase in high-profile comedians recording specials while visibly pregnant (e.g. Amy Schumer, 2019; Ali Wong, 2016; Ellie Taylor 2019) these practitioners were not addressing precarious or traumatic pregnancy. It is therefore useful to consider *GOO:GA* additionally within a framework of comic practice performed during/about a traumatic medical experience, including comedian Tig Notaro's (2012) well-known 'I have cancer' set, and humour scholar, Oliver Double's practice research performances *Saint Pancreas* (2006) and *Breaking a Leg*. (2017).

The initial aim of *GOO:GA* (2021) was to adapt Martinez' palimpsestic approach in *Family Outing: 20 Years On* for a second live theatre performance that gleaned comic material from the differences between a first and second pregnancy (2019).

As previously mentioned, two unexpected events made a live performance impossible: the pandemic closed the theatres and I received a diagnosis of a rare fetal cardiac anomaly at my 20-week scan. *GOO:GA* (2021) was thus re-imagined as a live art film but the original concept is preserved in the *mise-en-scène* through an intermittent split-screen showing the corresponding moments in the 2016 performance.

Double titles his analyses of strategies for the development of comedy from traumatic autobiographical material 'Tragedy plus time,' drawing on his own practice of creating a stand-up set about a terrible injury he sustained. (2017) The 'plus time' that lends the comedian distance from their own trauma is key. Another of Double's works is thematically relevant to *GOO:GA* (2021): his stand-up comedy show *St. Pancreas* (2006) which reflects on his experience of raising two children with diabetes. However, *GOO:GA* (2021) does not adhere to the 'plus time' formula. It has more in common in this respect with Notaro's (2012) legendary set at Largo in Los Angeles wherein she disclosed to the audience her very recent cancer diagnosis. When the audience vocally expresses concern, she soothes them, 'It's ok. It's gonna be ok ... *It might not be ok* ... [laughter]' (2012) The verbal repetition bolsters the comic framing of shedding platitudes and acknowledging the abject horror of the unknown. She gleans material from within the trauma itself, not reflecting upon it, because she masterfully manipulates the gaping chasm between empathy and the distance some humour theorists (e.g. Bergson 1911, Morreall 2009) argue is required for comedy.

Whilst aspiring towards the level of dissonance between empathy and comedy in Notaro's revelation of the trauma in which she was then immersed, *GOO:GA* (2021) has more in common structurally with another well-known comedy special that features the revelation of a traumatic experience; Hannah Gadsby's critically acclaimed *Nanette* (2018). Although the traumatic incident of homophobic hate crime Gadsby reveals was in the past, otherwise the structure of *GOO:GA* follows her pattern: 1. Establish successful comic material and rhythm, 2. Break the contract of the comedian by not being funny. Though Gadsby's reveal had very a different dramaturgical function than the reveal of the heart anomaly in *GOO:GA*, it too enacts a compelling experiment with comedy, trauma, autobiography, and the performance frame. *Nanette* 'works' because Gadsby 'proved herself' as a comedian in the first half. She made us laugh so she earned our attention and contemplation of the fact that she intentionally stopped making us laugh. The darkness was darker because she stepped out of the light. It left our eyes reeling in the

adjustment. This is structurally paralleled in *GOO:GA* by the Balloon Action scene excerpted above.

Notaro, on the other hand, somehow made the room light and dark at the same time in her remarkable engagement with the audience after telling them she had cancer immediately after walking on stage. It shouldn't be possible, but it is, because the pathos and the comedy were juxtaposed and dissonant, but not mutually exclusive. They provoke each other. *GOO:GA* (2021) follows *Nanette's* trajectory, pretending everything is fine, switches out the lights midway through, then flicks them off and on throughout the second half of the show, aspiring towards some Notaro-esque moments of dissonant twilight, wherein the heart aches while the mouth laughs. That is why a *Guardian* critic's review of *GOO:GA* (2021) was somewhat validating, both artistically and in support of an argument for the possibility of comedy without a 'momentary anaesthesia of the heart.'

I watch her on screen, heavily pregnant and discussing the terrifying medical diagnosis that her unborn son received using a tableau of the vegetables that always seem to be used to chart a baby's growth, *with my heart in my mouth*. Despite the grimness of the subject matter, *it is hard not to crack a smile*. (Cosslett, 2023, my emphasis)

As Double notes, 'terrible experiences can become funny when time has lent them enough distance to be seen with detachment,' (Double, 2017: 46) which is demonstrably true, but the praxis of *GOO:GA* attempts to foreground that this distance is not inherent to the formulation of the comic. While Double analyses the process of distancing in the comic's creative process, the praxis of *GOO:GA* affords insight into that process when there is no distancing, rather the comedy is manifested from within the terror.

Findings

According to Young, pregnancy entails 'a unique temporality of process and growth in which the woman can experience herself as split between past and future.' (1984: 46) In the praxis of *GOO:GA* (2021) a traumatised pregnant performer still carries the embodied knowledge of a first happy, carefree pregnancy. I knew what it felt like to enjoy the late stages of pregnancy with novelty and joyful anticipation, and I re-performed comic work made by/about that body, but within a pregnancy narrative that ricocheted between misery and hope.

Following on from Merleau-Ponty, Young observes 'in pregnancy my pre-pregnant body image does not entirely leave my movements and expectations, yet it is with the pregnant body that I must move.' (Young 1984: 49) *GOO:GA* (2021) triples the subjectivity, foregrounding the plurality of pregnant experience even within one individual: with the embodied subjectivity of both pregnancies, the joyous, novel, voluptuous positive narcissism and anticipation of the first one, and the traumatic, terrified, staggering-through-the-day dread of the second one coexisting along with the pre-pregnant self. During the thirteen weeks between diagnosis and the shooting of this film, I inhabited echoes of that happy physicality and the gestures and positive public engagement it manifests. But those buoyant moments quickly sank into the mire as I became increasingly worried that my baby would die. The belly-stroking self-admiration of my bump flips from positive narcissism, tenderness, and anticipation to self-pity, anxiety, and dread.

The embodied experience of pregnancy is tripled through the intermedial approach to live performance and film. The authorial voice is tripled by two scripts and this reflection. The tripling is one of the motors for the comedy. Take, for example, the quasi-ironic pin up photoshoot scene from *goo:ga* (2016) which is 'improved' by refining its comic ecdysias-tics in *GOO:GA* (2021):

Excerpt 2: Demi Moore/pastry possum/vanity fair cover shoot and savasana: corpse pose

HANNAH: Speaking of sexy celebrities, *goo:ga 1* featured a scathing takedown of celebrity bump-watch culture that I frankly don't have the energy to repeat, so I'm just going to assume you get why it's not okay to only celebrate thin-limbed, perky-titted white women's pregnant bodies in so much as they can be used to sell whatever the advertisers are hocking. Celebrity fertility-as-spectacle had a definite point of genesis, it was this, [*Magazine cover appears*] Demi Moore's gorgeous and at the time controversial *Vanity Fair* cover shot by Annie Leibowitz in 1991. Fast-forward 30 years and postfeminist media culture is awash with airbrushed,

aspirational images of women who miraculously remain thin as a rail save the perfect basketball sticking out of their front without a stretch mark, backroll, or pendulous bosom in sight. Nice try, media, but the only celebrity I've modelled my pregnancies after is Pastry Possum:

[*image of a possum apparently unconscious in a box of pastries*] The little possum that beguiled the internet by breaking into a patisserie and eating herself into a

food coma.

[*cut to Farokh laughing*]

[*Split-screen footage of 2016 Hannah wearing a muumuu, discussing celebrity bump culture*]

Any minute now, it's time for my Demi Moore/Pastry Possum/Vanity Fair cover shoot. I'm about to pull off that muumuu and I'm naked underneath, and not a day has gone by in the last five years that I don't regret not having made that muumuu tearaway. It would have been so much funnier. [*She watches her past self disrobe.*]

So *this* pregnancy which has been such a painful journey, totally out of my control, I call upon the goddess of Velcro to give me the power to right that wrong!

[*Hannah throws her arms wide, and the muumuu magically flies off her now nude body, and a box of doughnuts appear in her hand*]

[*'Non, Je Ne Regrette Rien' sung by Edith Piaf plays*]

[*Hannah crosses to yoga mat, plops the doughnuts on it, and lays down with her head in the box, arms positioned Demi Moore-style as she eats the doughnuts with pornographic gusto.*] (*Figure 3*)

[*After a few doughnuts, Hannah stops eating and rests her head in the box, lying on her side. The music fades. A quiet moment.*]

HANNAH: This feels familiar. I've spent the last 13 weeks crying on my yoga mat in savasana before work, after work. Savasana means corpse pose and it's the part of yoga class where you get to have a cheeky little nap, but preggos aren't supposed to lie flat on our backs so here I am. I'm not usually a big cryer, so 5 years ago I kept a list of all the silly things that made me cry thanks to the crazy pregnancy hormones. [*She pulls a scrap of paper from the doughnut box*] Here's this year's list from the first 20 weeks:

- The scene from *The Queen's Gambit* when she finds the janitor's clippings about her chess victories
- Being overwhelmed by how difficult the pandemic made almost every aspect of my job
- The death of Alex Trebec
- The death of my friend Tori Tomalia to shitty lung cancer that didn't care that she had three kids to raise.
- Reading about Mary Agyeiwaa Agyapong, the nurse who died shortly after giving birth due to complications with Covid and her c-section.

This year's list isn't very funny. Sorry Farokh. And then after sweet potato week, I only had tears for one thing. But the chaos of trying to teach theatre and performance online to my poor students trapped at home with dodgy wi-fi connections didn't leave me with much time to be with my feelings, so I had to schedule that in. After yoga, in savasana, I'd play our song. My baby and me ... We may never get to listen to it together after he's born, but it's gotten



Figure 3. Demi Moore/Pastry Possum/Vanity Fair Cover Shoot.

me through the last few months. For a weeping on the floor song, it's surprisingly upbeat which probably really confused my neighbours. 'Why does 'WAP' make her so sad?' I'm kidding it's not 'WAP'. I'm not going to play the song for you, but I'll put my headphones on and you can go find it on whatever device you're watching this on, and we'll press play together. It's David Bowie's 'Magic Dance'. Go ahead and find it. I'll wait. You can see it's 4 min and 12 s long, so what you do with that time is up to you; get up and dance, fast forward the film, take an online shopping break, whatever. I'm just going to be here on the mat. Ok, 1, 2, 3, play.

[Hannah listens to the entirety of 'Magic Dance' on her headphones in stillness. The tears come.

Eventually there is a shot of Farokh listening to his headphones too.]

[After the song, Hannah rises from the floor]

The show must go on.

The horizontality of the scene is important. In *goo:ga* (2016), I bounce back up after the ridiculous photoshoot, eager to see the pictures taken by the audience and basking in the laughter garnered by the unruliness of a dissonant comic/erotic spectacle manifesting an 'incredibly transgressive [...] too muchness.' (Šimić and Underwood-Lee, 2021, 69) In the second pregnancy, once I'm down, I'm down and the performance flows into the aptly named savasana scene that conveys the emotional toll of the 2021 pregnancy. It takes a theatrical cliché 'The show must go on,' to return to the verticality of the stand-up comedian and drag myself back into the reperformance of that earlier subjectivity.

Young notes that 'in classical art this 'aura' surrounding motherhood depicts repose (cf. Kristeva. 1980). The dominant culture projects pregnancy as a time of quiet waiting.' (Young 1984: 53) In this scene *GOO:GA* (2021) reclaims pregnant repose as an active process of transgressive 'quiet waiting' and invites the audience to participate. However, it foregrounds the specificity of the enforced pivot from live to digital performance in the pandemic context, wherein a proposal to engage a digital audience in an extended moment of stillness, plus the instruction to find and play a song is more complex than if they were congregated in physical space. The scene reflexively acknowledges that the invitation to participate competes with everything from the fast-forward

button to other browser windows to 'getting the idea' of the participation without actually doing it.

Lisa Baraitser's reading of Tom Lutz's analysis of depictions of the Virgin Mary weeping in Western art proposes that 'maternal tears appear to allow the weeper to withdraw from the cause of her anguish towards an inner world of bodily sensations.' (Baraitser, 2009: 107). This is borne out by the meditative weeping ritual in the savasana scene, but Baraitser also notes, 'a part of us cries with one eye on an audience even when we are alone; another who will witness, contain, and make sense of the tears.' (ibid: 108). The scene invites the digital audience to be the theoretical other bearing witness to this leaky aspect of matrescence in 'real' time that foregrounds its mediation. While Baraitser analyses maternal tears in relation to the realisation of the child's alterity via their separation in sleep, (ibid 120-121) *GOO:GA*'s maternal tears for the 'maybe baby' in the liminal state of a precarious pregnancy are shed for fear the child will never get a chance to separate. Baraitser notes the function of maternal tears as a signal of desire: a 'wish or a plea. (ibid: 108) or as David Bowie wonders in his lyrics, 'What kind of magic spell to do?'

In her discussion of alienation in medicalised pregnancy, Young suggested 'the control over knowledge about the pregnancy and birth process that the physician has through instruments, moreover, devalues the privileged relation she has to the foetus and her pregnant body.' (1984: 46) This alienation is worsened by precarious pregnancy, and this is exposed by the (Re)Produce Aisle scene which was written by collating the weekly fetal echocardiogram scan reports. Fortnightly and then weekly scans throughout the second half of my pregnancy, often attended by a sizeable medical team formed a cycle of dread; Terror Tuesdays. This was compounded by the fact that the trips to the fetal medicine unit were the only time we left the neighbourhood due to the lockdown. The segment, drawing on the ubiquity of fruit comparisons in a fetus' weekly development, was written one week at a time, paralleling the temporality of how pregnancy is constructed.

Excerpt 3: (Re)produce aisle

Every life begins as a stroll down the produce aisle, and my son is no different.

[There is a line-up of fruit and vegetables increasing in size. (Figure 4) Close up on Hannah 'finger walking' from the small end]

['Walking' past orange seed, pea, blueberry, raspberry, green olive, prune, and strawberry]

The first half of the pregnancy was great.

[When we get to the lime we see it's wearing a tiny face mask]

Oh, that's the week we got Covid.

[Continue finger-walking along lemon, orange, pear, avocado, onion, cucumber, and mango]

But, otherwise smooth sailing.

[She stops when she reaches the sweet potato]

When he was a sweet potato, we found out he had a pulmonary arteriovenous malformation resulting in cardiomegaly. A big heart.

Banana week: no change. Some relief that he's not rapidly deteriorating.

Grapefruit: cardiothoracic ratio shoots up from .50 to .56. I give him up for dead. Started calling him Zombie Baby.

Pomegranate: No change.

Aubergine: Small pericardial effusion measured at 3.1 millimetres. I cry for a week. On the plus side, we've legally crossed over from miscarriage to stillbirth now, so that maternity leave is in the bag.



Figure 4. (Re)Produce Aisle.

Squash: Pericardial effusion no longer visible. A ray of hope?

[a literal ray of light hits the squash]

NOPE! TURN IT OFF!!! *[light disappears]*

Cabbage: no change.

Lettuce: no change.

Cauliflower: Cardiothoracic ratio climbs to .60. Please stop.

Broccoli: No change

Coconut: Return of the pericardial effusion.

Melon: No change. Cesarean section in 4 weeks. Respiratory distress and desaturation are anticipated. Happy Birthday.

[Takes a bite of cauliflower, chews, and swallows]

Dr. Victoria Jowett, the clinical lead for fetal cardiology at GOSH who diagnosed the anomaly and was part of the large team monitoring the pregnancy, was played by my daughter in the film because she delivered one of the moments of autobiographical ‘found humour’ (Double 2017) that made it into the show; it struck me as very funny that she doubted her ability to determine the baby’s sex. Jowett participated in a panel after an early screening of the film. In our discussion of the (Re)Produce Aisle scene she noted ‘[...] all of these things create such a lot of tension and such anxiety [...] the weekly scan and the build-up and the worry about things which to us might be relatively minor changes, to you feel very significant. [...] I’m wondering whether I should take measurements off. *(laughter)*’ (Jowett et al 2021) The particular cardiac anomaly my baby had was so rare that the team were unable to give any prognosis based on meaningful data. This set the stage for a major theme of the work, my battle against and ultimate surrender to hope. On the panel, I asked Dr. Jowett to comment on her views on the relationship between the clinical process of prognosis and the wild, messy emotion of

hope, a question the praxis grapples with, but this was perhaps outside the scope of what was achievable in a short panel discussion.

In *GOO:GA* (2021), hope is framed as an intruder, an enemy, and a 'fickle bitch,' to whom I ultimately surrender. My collaborator, designer Peter Case, asked during this process of reflection whether my comic vulgarity was a tactic to both endure and thematically engage with the terror of hope. This is likely so; being funny made me feel confident enough to be vulnerable, but there are social and practical dimensions as well. Building upon Lockyer and De Santis' (2023, 352) conceptualisation of individual and representational ambivalence in pregnant comedy, *GOO:GA* employs vulgarity and grotesque comedy to foreground a 'disruption of cultural expectations of femininity' using gallows humour to 'mock unspoken elements of the maternal body,' not just comedically mining the abjection of a healthy pregnancy but also the taboo of a precarious one. I had attempted to engage with the genre of 'dead baby jokes' during the devising process of *goo:ga* (2016); I wanted to know what would happen if a pregnant woman delivered them. Ultimately, however, I felt unable to mould the material into anything interesting, so they were cut. The writing process for *GOO:GA* (2021) obviously presented an opportunity to reengage with them in a different context. I chose three well-known jokes and wrote a fourth original one ('What's the difference between a dead baby and Donald Trump? (...) I'd rather have a dead baby up my cunt.') using them as segue material to move the performance back into 'stand-up comedy mode' after the '(Re)Produce Aisle' scene. They were less integral to the praxis, though, than the line that gives this article its title, which is a direct quotation from the crowdfunding video for the project; 'If I have to maybe squeeze a corpse out of my pussy I'm going to get a fucking good show out of it.' By restating the basic intention of the project in shockingly vulgar and comedic terms, I hoped to assure my potential audience and investors that firstly, my mental health was robust enough to safely glean comic material from a dire situation and retain my comic voice despite my devastation, and secondly I would be raw and funny in my approach to matrescence.

Process

My decision to continue with the project (i.e. 'get a fucking good show out of it') after the diagnosis was reminiscent of autobiographical performance artist Bryony Kimmings' admission in her work about masculinity and mental health, *Fake it Til You Make It*, that one of her very first thoughts after finding her partner's hidden medication was, 'This is going to be a show.' (Kimmings and Grayburn, 2015) When discussing *I'm a Phoenix, Bitch*, her autobiographical performance about postpartum psychosis, Kimmings encourages performers contemplating work with autobiographical material to consider when they're ready to tell a story, observing, 'not all shows need to be made immediately.' (Kimmings in Gardner 2018) In my position a 'ruly' woman (to extrapolate the counterpart to Kathleen Rowe's (1995) comic archetype, the unruly woman) would have cancelled the show, focused on 'staying positive,' 'self-care,' and maintaining a healthy pregnancy. She would have abandoned the comedy and embraced the pathos and trauma, and made a show once it was all over and done with, and other people weren't so worried about her. However, as someone accustomed to processing my lived experience through the medium of performance, such a terrifying experience could only be withstood by

channeling my thoughts into a creative process. I didn't just 'need to be heard,' I needed to be heard in my preferred medium and tone. Though there would be plenty of crying on a yoga mat, one can't sustain that around the clock. Eventually, I had to get up and do something else with my thoughts.

After being reassured by my medical team that the pregnancy was healthy, it was just the fetus who was sick, I stopped walking around like I had a crystal vase balanced on my bump. There was nothing I could do (or not do) for the baby, but there was plenty I could do for myself. When I interviewed producers for the project, one of them suggested outright that I ought not to do it. The inference seemed to be, 'You're doing *tragic mother* wrong.'

As turning the project into a film was more expensive than a live performance and I needed to pay more collaborators, I had to crowdfund the production budget. Unsurprisingly, the onset of a personal tragedy is a good time to ask for money. The fundraising campaign video had to strike a tricky chord: professional, hilarious, and vulnerable, as if to say, 'I'm nearly broken, but not so broken that I can't execute a complex art project that you should invest in!' The campaign, led by producer Alice Roots, was successful; people might lift you up, if you let them.

The use of that fundraising model, however, impacted the creative process. When I tested out the Balloon Action in the devising studio, drawing on my globophobia and the heavy-handed metaphor for my fetus' cardiomegaly, the resulting R&D documentation wherein I ended up sobbing after scaring myself by popping balloons had to double as marketing for the fundraising campaign.

The show could have needed a re-write at any time if the baby died. So would my concept of self. As a precaution, we scheduled two separate shoots, with the second being contingency dates in case the worst happened right before the first scheduled shoot to give me time to process the shock both personally and artistically. I knew myself well enough to know that my suffering would be entered into more fully, honestly, and bearably if I applied a rigorous creative lens to my grief.

After the filming was in the can, the original performance text included three quotation titles before the credits and after the final action of sprinkling my beloved dead dog's ashes onto my belly in a ridiculous but sincere and poignant ritual of hope as I conceded my battle against it:

Hope springs eternal in the human breast. – Alexander Pope

Someone I loved once gave me a box full of darkness. It took me years to understand that this, too, was a gift. – Mary Oliver

If I have to maybe squeeze a corpse out of my pussy, I'm going to get a fucking good show out of it. – Hannah Ballou.

However, when the Claire Nolan, the film's director/editor, sent me the first edit she had omitted my vulgar quote from the ending. I didn't know if this was intentional or accidental. Was it a suggestion, or a mistake? I could have just asked her, but instead, I decided to go with it and backed down from ending the work with my most honest, unruly maternal self. I don't regret it, but I am pleased to reclaim the line for the title of this reflection.

Epilogue

The film does not reveal what happened at the end of the pregnancy. This honours the place of 'not-knowing' I was in when I made it, but naturally, people wonder.

His heart did fail, as expected. He was whisked off to GOSH, where they successfully implanted a device to close the communication via a catheter. He did brilliantly, but was left with an aneurysm, so although we got to leave GOSH after two weeks, we had to anticoagulate him, first with dalteparin injections, then with oral rivoroxaban. His cardiologists wanted to wait and see if the heart could be remodelled before they decided whether to do heart surgery to remove the aneurysm. That was a scary thought that I pushed to the back of my mind while caring for my gorgeous and ostensibly healthy baby for 8 months. Then, one year to the day after the Word Bombs fell, his cardiologist at GOSH phoned with the results of the previous week's CT scan; his heart looked 'spectacular'. The aneurysm was gone. It had remodelled itself. He didn't need surgery. He didn't even need medicine. 'Come back in the summer for a checkup.' I hesitate to use the word miracle because I don't want to discount the enormous amount of medical science, care, and resources that went into saving his life, but that part did feel miraculous. At the time of publication, he is 3 years old and in perfect health. I often wonder what it would be like to look back on the film if he had not had such a fantastic outcome. Would I title this article 'I had to squeeze a corpse out of my pussy but, at least I got a REFable outcome'? I'll never know that version of myself, but I love and honour all the mothers who do.

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