

ART and soft activism: An exploration of infertility through physical theatre

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In this essay I will explore concepts related to the politics of infertility, Assisted Reproductive Technology (ART), and family-making through the lens of performance art. The case-study presented here is drawing on my fieldwork with the aerial theatre piece *Egg*, which I accompanied through the Edinburgh Fringe Festival as a stagehand in August 2018¹.

The piece, written and performed by Paper Doll Militia co-founder and co-director Sarah Bebe Holmes, and set to music by composer and musician Bado Reti, is an autobiographical story describing Sarah Holmes' experience of becoming an egg donor for her friend Carol's In Vitro Fertilisation (IVF) procedure.

Fertility and reproduction are politically loaded topics, full of socio-cultural implications about gender roles. While reasons for infertility vary greatly and occur independently of sex or gender, the popular conception of infertility is often expressed through accusations against women (Loughran 2018). Thus, looking at the experiences of women undergoing IVF can allow an insight into the wider functioning of patriarchy, and amplifying their voices can empower women and undermine those harmful structures².

This article thus explores how artistic performance can contribute to discussions about infertility, reproductive rights, and ART. In the example of *Egg*, such advocacy for reproductive rights occurs

through informing audiences about the social and medical complexities of IVF as well as facilitating discussion and network-building. Through physical theatre, it furthermore makes the bodily sensations of IVF treatment relatable to the audience. The autobiographical story, presented with overpowering transparency and vulnerability, allows the audience to identify with the lead characters and thus to become sensitized towards the social stigmatization and emotional challenges often experienced by those undergoing the treatment.

Together, these methods allow for the creation of a supportive and safe environment, in which people can learn, relate, share their own experiences, and build communities. This renders *Egg* a form of "soft activism", defined by an approach reliant on total transparency and vulnerability³. Here, I argue, lies one way in which artistic explorations of infertility struggles may pose valuable contributions to discussion on reproductive rights.

Infertility and ART

Difficulties with infertility have existed throughout human history, with recordings dating back all the way to ancient Egypt (Jauniaux 2001: 107). Within the last decades, however, technological developments have massively impacted the way infertility issues are perceived and treated. Through IVF and/or sperm donation, couples who struggle to conceive can sometimes still have a biological child (NHS 2018)⁴. Yet, IVF is no guarantee against reproductive difficulties. Rates of successful IVF procedures are in fact shockingly low, with success rates of single-cycle treatments for women over 44 reaching only 1.95% (British NHS Survey from 2010, cited in Loughran, 2018).

With the average first birth age and childlessness rising, ART is becoming a relevant topic for an increasing number of people (Littleboy 2017). Hence, more information and discourse about ART and infertility are crucial.

Egg: Physical theatre about infertility

To inform and spark discussion is one of the main aims of *Egg*⁵. Sarah Holmes plays both herself and her friend Carol, while they go through the IVF process together. The story begins with Carol's decision to ask Sarah for her eggs, the audience then accompanies them through their encounters with the bureaucracy of medical institutions, their intense hormone treatments, and the alienation they experience through the sterilized, unempathetic medical procedure of IVF. Although the first attempt fails, they are finally rewarded when the second attempted transplantation works, and Carol gets pregnant.



Full Transparency: The show opens with Sarah sitting naked in a water-filled plastic bag, which is suspended from the ceiling. The piece is defined by its transparency from the moment the audience enters. Photograph by Richard Dyson.

Source: Paper Doll Militia. 2019. "Egg: Gallery." Accessed 12.08.19.
<http://www.paperdollmilitia.com/thegallery/egg/>

Carol's partner Pat, played by musician Bado Reti, appears only on a few occasions. The show makes use of aerial apparatuses, materials

that are attached to the ceiling and integrated into a dance-like acrobatic routine; an art-form mainly known from the trapeze in the circus.

Scenography is extremely important in *Egg*: set, costumes and props consist nearly exclusively of clear plastics. Even the aerial apparatuses are made from the transparent material. In an interview with *The Skinny*, Sarah explained: "It didn't necessarily make sense for me to tell this story using a trapeze. The process was so invasive that I, in a way, had to become transparent... there was nothing to hide" (Wright 2019).

As a result, the stage transmits a strong sensation of sterility, emphasized even further by the characters of a nurse and doctor wearing clear plastic coats, caps, and surgical masks. The clear plastic set mirrors the transparency that was required of Sarah and Carol during the IVF process. *Egg*, however, reclaims this transparency in order to facilitate dialogue and communal growth.

The politics of infertility and 'soft activism'

Egg is multifaceted in the issues it raises, which include themes such as family and parenthood, medical treatment and privilege, and gendered roles in society. It does so in a very gentle way, by favouring listening and nurturing as agents of social change:

There is no one *Egg* is pushing against. There is no one that is wrong. There's just a way that we can be a bit more vulnerable, a bit more open-hearted and a bit more open to hearing where people are at. I would call it *soft activism*, or passive activism. It's creating safe spaces, not through pushing against but through nurturing.⁶

This idea of “soft activism” is a valuable way of thinking about how theatre may be considered as adding to discussions about reproductive rights, as it makes topics accessible to wide audiences through its relatability and compassion. As such, *Egg* moves IVF and infertility into public awareness and informs through an intimate story. It aims to normalize and to create a platform for conversations about infertility, family, and women’s roles in society and thereby to facilitate also the establishment of support structures. Post-show discussions often accompany the staging to allow people to share their own experiences and thoughts, and to establish support networks. Thought and discussion are provoked mainly through three different techniques: by explaining the medical process of IVF, by offering physical representations of the sensation of undergoing IVF treatment, and by allowing an insight into the social stigmatization of infertility and the emotional burden that comes with it through the storylines of the characters.

Egg informs about the medical process of IVF via voice-overs and scripted texts, through which doctors and nurses explaining the process to Sarah and Carol. Additionally, videos depict the process happening inside their bodies, with animations of uteri swelling and egg-cells growing under the influx of hormones being projected onto the double bass. Through the development of the story, audiences are also made aware that IVF is in no ways a magical solution against all cases of infertility.

Acrobatic scenes on the aerial apparatuses represent the bodily sensations of experiencing hormone treatment and surgery, which makes the experience relatable in a physical way. One scene shows Sarah twitching, first on the floor, then making her way up the plastic apparatus all the while shaking and trembling, agitatedly and seemingly out of control: a physical representation of undergoing hormone treatment. Another scene describes the feeling of experiencing the egg-retrieval surgery while under General Anaesthesia. Here, she moves slowly and introspectively. Her

movements are floppy, falling into splits and out again, imitating the lack of control and clumsiness brought by the numbness.



Egg-retrieval Surgery Scene, photograph by Richard Dyson.

Source: Paper Doll Militia. 2019. “Egg: Gallery.” Accessed 12.08.19. <http://www.paperdollmilitia.com/thegallery/egg/>

By using physical theatre to create metaphors for the bodily sensations encountered during IVF procedures, the physical-ness of family-building and parenthood is moved into the centre of the discussion, in its full complexity. Symbolically, space for both strength and vulnerability is created through the vertical movement up and down the aerial apparatus which makes accessible spaces and motions that are not usually within our range⁷.

Lastly, the difficulties that Sarah and Carol encounter show the social and emotional suffering that result from stigmatization, societal silencing, medical commercialisation, and general lack of information. Characters share the sensations of loneliness, the prejudices with which they are encountered, the coldness of the

commercialised medical process, the strains on their relationships, and the fear of a negative outcome.

Implied in all three layers of representations of IVF there are underlying questions concerning fault, deservingness, privilege, and belonging, which to explore is one of the fundamental motivations of *Egg*⁸. For instance, since reason for fertility struggles in women are often connected to ageing, IVF patients are regularly given fault for their struggles for having ‘waited too long’. This is emblematic for a “double discrimination” working women who want to have children often experience. On the one hand, taking a career break at an early stage is often frowned upon, as there is often little protection for mothers’ professional lives (Loughran 2018). On the other hand, if a woman waits until her career is well established and she can take time off more easily, it might be too late to conceive without medical assistance. In this case she will likely receive stigmatization for using up the valuable medical resources for selfish reasons brought upon her by herself. In *Egg*, Carol’s character addresses this in a monologue describing her situation.

This double discrimination can lead to further questions concerning the deservingness of medical treatment based on the notion of fault⁹: should someone get help if they’ve waited too long to conceive without medical assistance? Are they taking away services from others who might need them more urgently? And then: is the right to a biological child equatable to the ability to conceive without medical assistance? Something IVF patients often hear is: if they can’t conceive a child themselves, why not adopt one? Ignoring the many factors that complicate adoption (such as the immense expenses, the emotional strain, the complicated bureaucracy, etc.), the responsibility for children without a home is often pushed onto those parents who struggle to conceive (Loughran 2018; Edelstein 2018).

Finally, another question *Egg* raises is: how do we organize and build families? Who belongs, who doesn’t? In the closing scene

Sarah tells the audience: “People ask me if I feel protective. Do I feel like he’s mine? But they’ve got it all wrong!” She then recites the poem ‘On Children’ by Khalil Gibran, where he beautifully expresses that children do not ever belong to their parents:

Your children are not your children.
They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself.
They come through you but not from you,
And though they are with you,
Yet they belong not to you. (...)

The show ends with Sarah declaring that rather than claiming ownership of the child, she will work together with Carol and Pat to support them, thereby challenging a normative nuclear family structure and instead favouring caring communities.

Conclusion

The way infertility is socially treated and negotiated reflects the societal discrimination women experience under hetero-capitalist patriarchy. As such, the experiences of infertility and IVF are vast and many important topics could not be included here, such as for instance the commercialization of reproduction¹⁰, queer experiences¹¹, disability, class-informed and racialized experiences, and much more.

Egg is an autobiography; it aims not to generalize or polarize, but to share a personal story of pain, but also success. It addresses the complex network of interrelated topics sensitively in three main ways: by informing the audiences about the medical procedure of IVF, by making the physical sensations of hormone treatments and surgeries relatable to the audience by representing them through aerial acrobatics, and by sharing the difficulties the characters encounter in order to show the social stigmatization of infertility and ART. Thereby, *Egg* informs and platforms these commonly silenced

topics, facilitating conversation about them in post-show discussions, media, and in private. *Egg* thus creates space for vulnerability and empathy, for nurturing through listening and thus growing better and stronger collectively. Because the story is presented through an intriguing multi-sensory aesthetic and with such overpowering transparency, it makes the difficult topics surrounding the politics of reproductive health and family-building accessible to anyone, independent of their gender or age¹². This is where its strength as “soft activism” shines through, by opening up and thereby facilitating a space where others can share their experiences too. This sort of “soft activism” is an important contribution to feminist discussions, as it permits new ways to relate to personal experiences of socio-patriarchal discrimination by focussing on caring and listening. It is hence essential, in my opinion, to recognize art as a meaningful form of activism, through which social change can be achieved.

Artistic projects exploring the complexity of reproductive rights and fertility are gaining visibility. An excellent example includes for instance the Fertility Fest, an arts and science festival first established in 2016 focussing exclusively on fertility, which gives activists a platform to share their work on¹³. It is my hope for the future, that the number of such projects will continue to grow, so that collectively, we all “(...) can be a bit more vulnerable, a bit more open-hearted, and a bit more open to hearing where people are at.”¹⁴

Notes

¹ This research was conducted for a master’s course at Georg-August-University Göttingen, supervised by Eva-Maria van Straaten and Angelika Thielsch.

² Another important aspect relating reproductive rights and gender to each other is the discrimination faced by queer and transwomen, but due to limited space I won’t address this topic in this article specifically.

³ Sarah Holmes, interview July 2019

⁴ IVF is a procedure, where donated or previously ‘harvested’ and frozen eggs are fertilized in a lab with sperm, after which the resulting embryos are

planted into the womb of the recipient. The initial retrieval of the eggs involves heavy hormone treatment, followed by a surgery. Similarly, in preparation for the embryos to be planted into the womb, the recipient must also undergo hormone treatment.

⁵ Sarah Holmes, interview July 2019

⁶ Sarah Holmes, interview July 2019

⁷ For a discussion of space in vertical arts see Lawrence (2010).

⁸ Sarah Holmes, interview July 2019

⁹ Sarah Holmes, interview July 2019

¹⁰ See for instance Jemma Kennedy’s play *Genesis Inc.* (Kennedy 2014).

¹¹ An aerial piece in production about a queer experience of ART is *Mother Mother* by Alice Ellerby.

¹² Information from Online surveys and audience feedback forms

¹³ Fertility Fest, 2019 <https://www.fertilityfest.com/our-mission>

¹⁴ Sarah Holmes, interview July 2019.

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