

## Valentine's Day 2020

### AKA My Partner Smashed My Egg in the Car on Valentine's Day

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**Emily Scarrott** is an artist and PhD student at Birmingham School of Art. Her performative research praxis explores the absurd as a non-cis-male protagonist. These experiences are led by nourishing and tactile encounters with unfertilised eggs. She is currently performing durational care to one specific egg; he is doing quite well, and they go everywhere together. Exploration of Emily's relationship with her egg culminates in repetitive manifestos, experimental speculative fictions, performance and rapid response making.

NARRATOR: It is late at night. We – my partner, my egg, and I – have been to see a band. It is 14 February, but we didn't go to celebrate Valentine's Day. It just so happened that a band that I like was playing in Birmingham on Valentine's Day.

The gig was over capacity and claustrophobic. Navigating a gig with a raw egg, specifically an object susceptible to confiscation due to expectations of aggressive use, is a high-intensity situation.

To get my egg past door staff, he was concealed in a rolled-up pair of mustard-coloured gloves in my (mostly empty) tote bag. Although the staff didn't check my bag anyway. I kept my fingers on him all evening, disturbed by the number of eggless bodies with no awareness that were getting a bit too close.

Afterwards, the three of us went swiftly to the car and headed home. Home is about 30 minutes away at night when there is no other traffic. It is now 11:45 pm.

*She is rummaging in a red tote bag.*

E: Where is my egg?

HE: I don't know ... What did you do with it?

E: I gave him to you when we started driving ...

HE: Are ... Are you sure?

*The couple get out of the car and start to look inside, using torches on their phones to search. They open the front doors. They fold back the seats to check the back seat. They open the boot to check inside. They close the boot. They go back to the front seats.*

E: I know I put him directly into your hand before I started driving.

*She turns and continues rummaging frantically.*

HE: ... Oh God ... I'm so sorry.

*She looks up, pointing her torch.*

*He holds up a sodden pair of rolled up mustard coloured gloves. There is a slight crunch to them, and they glisten in the torch light.*

E: ... Oh ... God.

*She slams the car door.*

E: I've left my keys in the boot.

NARRATOR: The boot, when closed, does not reopen without the button on the key.

*He climbs over the front seats into the back of the car, where he folds down the back seats, bending over them to search through the boot. He does all of this while tangled in the dark, and eventually retrieves the keys.*

*She stands holding the crunchy roll of mustard gloves. She attempts to look inside, but her fingers feel there is no apparent solid structure within the roll of mustard gloves.*

E: *Well*, there's a lot of eggs getting smashed on Valentine's night, *isn't there?*

*He wordlessly unlocks the front door.*

E: Isn't there!?

NARRATOR: We – my partner, the egg, and I – enter the house. We go straight through to the kitchen. My partner has his palms down on the kitchen surface, supporting his weight as he leans forward in despair. He is breathing heavily.

E: Are you okay?

*There is no answer. He is breathing heavily. It feels like he stands this way for ages. He can't turn around. The moment is silent, except he is breathing heavily.*

E: Are you okay? What's up? Are you cross?

*He does not turn around.*

HE: I'm just really sorry. I'm so sorry.

E: It's okay.

HE: It isn't, it's *your egg*.

E: I know, but it still is my egg, so let's help him out, shall we?

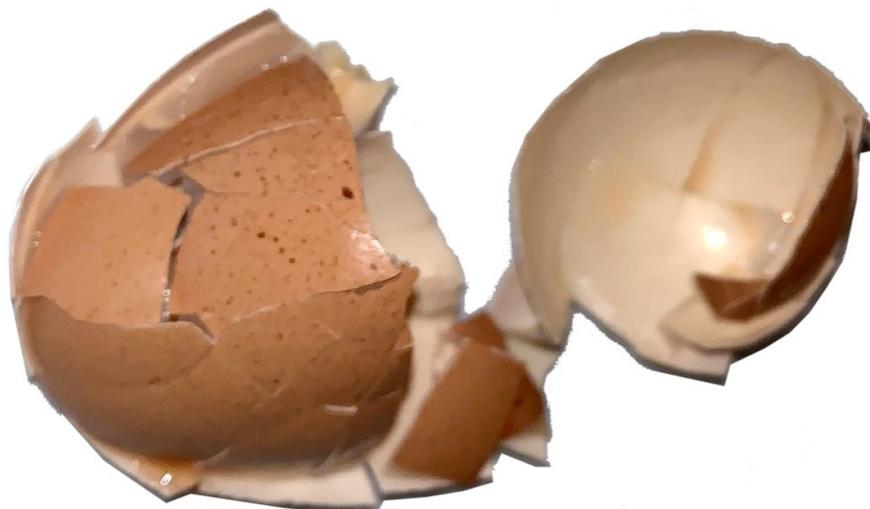
HE: But it's not been long.

E: It's okay, it was going to happen sooner or later. He's been whole for a hell of a lot longer than most eggs. Most eggs are in the bin pretty fast. Let's have a look at the damage.

*He finally moves. He gives her a pale plastic tray and then begins to pace the room. He can't quite make eye contact with the egg as it is unravelled.*

*She cautiously begins to remove the egg from the gloves. The process is slow, carefully navigating a cocoon of mustard wool.*

*The shell of the egg comes out of the gloves as one piece, a jigsaw held together by the inner membrane. A deconstructed net of the egg's original shape. It looks like, with tender hands, it can be more or less moulded back into the ovoid structural form.*



E: Okay. Have you got any superglue? And do you have an egg cup?

*He obediently gets a small metal egg cup out of a cupboard full of condiments and puts it on the tray. He opens and closes drawers full of objects used for daily tasks and sorts through them determinedly, but does not find any superglue. There are a couple of simple candles in small glass pots, but there is not much left to burn.*

E: Can I use a candle and a lighter? I might be able to do something with the wax?

HE: I know that I have some modroc upstairs from when I was making puppets. I could get that?

E: Yes, that sounds good! I'll have a go with that! Do you have a small bowl?

*He gives her a small bowl. It is delicate, a bit like a teacup. He leaves the room.*

*She lights a candle. While it burns and the wax begins to melt, she squeezes the mustard coloured gloves over the small bowl. This process wrings out the raw egg fluids – aged yolk and white combined into a thin liquid – from the gloves. Her fingers are covered in remnants of the fluid, but she puts all of her strength into squeezing and the base of the bowl soon holds the liquid egg.*



*The wax has started to melt, and she positions the eggshell into an egg shape and tips a bit of liquid wax inside. Because the shell is still wet from yolk – an important aspect of the salvage operation – the wax solidifies without attaching to the shell, each drop creating a separate object which is easily removed from the egg.*

*He returns with some materials: two bundles of modroc and a tub of green Warhammer modelling clay. She takes a teacup and half fills it with water from the tap. She takes scissors and cuts small squares of mod rock. The operation begins.*

*She dips the modroc squares into the water and then uses the mouldable plaster to rebuild the inner structure of the egg. She soaks modroc in the yolk and combines this with the inner shell, returning the yolk to its position. She pours the salvaged yolk into the shell and it soaks into the hardening modroc, and the elements of the egg are reunited.*

*To complete the operation, she cuts a long strip of modroc, dampens it and wraps it around the centre of the rebuilt egg. The egg has been healed and it is time to rest.*

NARRATOR: We – my partner, my egg, and I – go upstairs to bed. I carry the tray, covered with objects: rolled-up mustard yellow gloves, a candle, a delicate teacup-like bowl, modroc, and packaging. The most important thing on the tray is my egg, a survivor, sat in a simple metal egg cup.

I put the tray on top of a closed portable record player, and tidy it up so that, while the objects are still collected, my egg has enough room to sleep comfortably. Although he is still within my arms' reaching distance, this is the first night that the egg has slept away from my body.

*The couple undress and get into bed. He turns the light off quite quickly.*

E: Are you okay?

HE: I don't want to talk about it.



## CRITICAL METHODOLOGY

My overarching PhD proposes the absurd as a liberatory landscape for non-cis-male existence, away from the misogynistic examples given in Camusian absurdist literature and opposing expectations of meaning hatched from a patriarchal-capitalist valuing of reproductivity in relation to the body. I navigate this research through a continuing relationship with an unfertilised chicken's egg, utilising my egg-making body to provide nurturing in an unproductive or meaningless way, rather than achieving conventional expectations of bearing a biological child.

Throughout my research, I have adopted the phrases 'egg-making body' and 'worm-making body' to describe the societal expectation of a body's role in reproduction. Using the words 'egg' and 'worm' as opposed to 'ovum' and 'sperm' is a playful simplification of the sex cells, reducing them to a binary of two shapes while actively avoiding the coded terminologies of assigned-at-birth gender. It is important to express here that eggs occur in bodies of all genders, and that not all women produce eggs. The absurd body protests a prescribed reproductive

purpose by a capitalist state. People of all genders born with wombs, people of all anatomies whose pronouns are she/her, aesthetically feminine people, and so on, all receive a patriarchal-capitalist dictation of meaning founded in reproductive labours and measured against the role of biologically 'female' (egg-making) reproductive organs in breeding.

In selecting (all cis-male) examples of 'the absurd man', Camus stated that he was "choosing solely men who aim only to expend themselves or whom I see to be expending themselves" (67). Sisyphus – Camus's champion and a cis worm-making body – is destined to perform a ritualistically failing physical labour towards a boulder. This task is external to his body, employing physical machismo to achieve his chore.<sup>1</sup> Sisyphus's failed imposition of his worm-making body upon its environment indicates a self-expenditure that could more comfortably align with Andrea Long Chu's description of 'female' as "any psychic operation in which the self is sacrificed to make room for the desires of another" (11). While Long Chu's text controversially offers definition of femaleness based upon subjugation, the implication that non-male identities are responsive to cis-male self-gain/expansion is an important contrast with Camus's statement, which suggests that 'the absurd man' is not actually 'male' at all.

To further establish my own definitions of femaleness, I look towards Johanna Hedva's convictions behind using the word 'woman' as further encompassing than she/her pronouns. Hedva describes radical use of 'woman' to honour a genderfluid friend, treasuring the use of the word in relation to her identity and content with her worm-making body. In Hedva's sick woman theory, measurement against binary definition is ignored; each sick woman is instead an under-privileged identity corresponding to the lack discussed by Long Chu, living in a body that is denied autonomy by the state.

Elizabeth Bartlett questions whether there is a space for women among Camusian rebellion, or whether it is a fraternity which relies upon women "being in the private spaces of the home" (13). My egg care is an exploration of Sisyphus's boulder in response to traditionally feminised domestic labour. It is a durational task, performing the societally decreed labour of my biological form, doomed to continuously fail. Sophie Lewis asks: "How can surrogacy be turned against reproductive stratification?" (307). Unfertilised egg care applies nurture (traditionally given to a growing new being) in a way that is purposely fruitless.

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1 Camus describes the physical exertion of the external body: "the face screwed up, the cheek tight against the stone, the shoulder bracing the clay-covered mass, the foot wedging it ... the wholly human security of two earth-clotted hands".

In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus describes the maintenance of meaning and realisation of the absurd:

So long as the mind keeps silent in the motionless world of its hopes, everything is reflected and arranged in the unity of its nostalgia. But with its first move this world cracks and tumbles: an infinite number of shimmering fragments is offered to the understanding. We must despair of ever reconstructing the familiar, calm surface which would give us peace of heart (17).

The sequence described in this text is a crucial moment in the unravelling of capitalistic meaning and depiction of the absurd. An unfertilised egg, when whole, remains capable of capitalist productivity in provision of sustenance to the worker. When the egg is cracked and rebuilt, in the act of maintenance, it becomes freshly void. 'Valentine's Day 2020' is the despairing moment in which Sisyphus, despite his best efforts, watches the boulder fall to the bottom of the slope, sighs, and begins to push upwards again.

I was particularly interested in the coincidental date and my partner's role in the breaking of my egg. Heteronormative tradition dictates that the rupture of an egg-making body's egg by a worm-making body is a triumphant act, here falling on a date which capitalises on romanticising this pairing. Therefore, the invasion of my egg by a worm-making partner could be described as an aggressive and literal reproduction of the state-anticipated heterosexual cis-male act – the expansion of one body and the contraction of another.

Monique Wittig describes the concept of biological difference as how:

the masters interpret a historical situation of domination. The function of difference is to mask at every level the conflicts of interest, including ideological ones. In other words, for us, this means that there cannot any longer be women and men, and that as classes and categories of thought or language they have to disappear, politically, economically, ideologically (29–30).

Total elimination of a patriarchal language of reproductive meaning provides an environment for the blossoming of identities away from the constellation of sexual meaning. Where dictation of individual purpose is constructed on the theoretical role our bodies play in biologically making a child, here absurdity is found in the rebellious U-turn to concentrated deviation from heteronormative reproduction and collaborative rebuilding of the unfertilised egg.

Maintenance of ‘the everyday’ as an unstaged platform is vital to the integrity of absurd experience. Camus describes the relationship between artist and experience as good when the work itself is a portion of unlimited lived experience, rather than a theorised experience (95). Jane Gallop’s *Anecdotal Theory* is key to my collecting of lucid thought and articulating it as data of absurd praxis. Utilising anecdotes allows exposure of politically private and vulnerable acts, removing the authority of traditional pedagogies in explaining a concept (Gallop 24). The reflexive act of documenting preserves ‘the everyday’ as an arena for undisturbed, reactive behaviour.

However, documentation of the events of ‘Valentine’s Day 2020’ in an entirely confessional format does not feel comfortable. Memories of the experience exist in my mind as statements, objects, actions shared between multiple beings. There is a significance in the expansion and contraction of tensions between the three bodies – my partner, my egg, and I – and these details would be lost if presented from a single descriptive voice that attempts to purposely analyse.

I have been exploring experimental writing as practice as an expansion of anecdotal theory documentation. Anecdotal material is the basis for my findings, but there is also potential to retrospectively damage commonplace absurdity in over-analysis, and so alternative ways of articulating experience are important.

Katrina Palmer highlights the importance of giving space to moments of unembellished experience:

We don’t see the ordinary things we live with. In fact, we should avoid looking at familiar objects because we can’t make a spectacle of the everyday without losing it. If we look directly, and try to scrutinize its ordinariness, the very quality we want to inspect will recede (96).

The absurd everyday survives by collecting and reconstructing its shell, rather than attempting to clone every aspect of its original form.

In a scripted format, reactionary emotions are not explicitly described but instead retrievable in the possibility of observing the sequence as audience, or joining the experience as one of the players. Rather than a simplified diarylike focus on my distress, I hoped to expose the complex vulnerabilities of each of the three participants – my partner, my egg, and I – in the untold spaces of this template.

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