

# Remembering Baby

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## *Creative collaborations and bereavement support*

Arts-based activities are often incorporated into grief therapy interventions and clinical application of art therapy techniques with the bereaved has been widely documented (Bolton 2008, McGuinness and Finucane 2011, Weiskittle and Gramling 2018). In this short article we seek to contribute to this body of work by exploring the valuable role that public art exhibitions can play in bereavement support focusing on our recent exhibition [\*Remembering Baby\*](#). This exhibition sensitively explores what happens when a baby dies, from both parent and professional perspectives. Drawing on visual images from the exhibition and anonymised testimonials from visitors, this paper focuses on exploring the role of the public exhibition as a mechanism through which to challenge silences surrounding baby-loss, and also act as a source of bereavement support. In sharing some of the thinking behind our work we seek to highlight the benefits of taking a collaborative and participatory approach to exhibition curation, focusing on the benefits of involving members of the baby-loss community in the creation of artwork.

## *Remembering Baby: Life, Loss and Post-mortem*

*Remembering Baby* is an interactive exhibition featuring visual images, film, physical objects, sound installation and parent/ sibling art work. Figure 1 shows' one of the interactive installations in the exhibition *Handle with Care*, involving thirty-seven memory boxes gathered on a plinth, each containing items relating to the experience of baby-loss- from knitted hats to ultrasound images. Visitors are encouraged to open the boxes and engage with what's inside, to literally lift the lid on this taboo subject.



Remembering Baby, Photography: © Hugh Turvey HonsFRPS FRSA (lead artist)

The exhibition was inspired by a research project which was funded by the *Economic and Social Research Council* and led by Dr Kate Reed and a team of clinicians and researchers (Dr Elspeth Whitby and Dr Julie Ellis) at the University of Sheffield. The project has two aims, firstly to understand how parents/families who have experienced baby-loss feel about, and experience, the (MRI) post-mortem process, and secondly to explore the impact of this new technological application on professional practice and relationships between professionals from different fields. The university research team worked collaboratively with Hugh Turvey HonFRPS who is artist in residence at the British Institute of Radiology to curate the exhibition, based on key themes emerging from the research. The collection also features sound art produced by Justin Wiggan, and graphics designed by Lee Simmons.

The exhibition has, so far been shown in four different galleries across the UK. In 2017 almost 1000 people visited the exhibition when it appeared at Protein Studios in Shoreditch and at The Art House in Sheffield. Working in partnership with the baby-loss charity Teardrop the exhibition has since shown at the Thought Foundation in Gateshead in June 2018, and supported by Zephyr's, a Nottingham Hospital based charity it was exhibited at Surface gallery in Nottingham during baby-loss awareness week in October 2018.

#### *Challenging taboos and creating a space to grieve*

The exhibition has been identified in both visitor accounts and media reports as a vehicle through which to challenge some of the taboos and silences around baby-loss. *Remembering Baby* was aimed primarily at family members who had experienced the loss of a baby along with professionals working in a related field. Wider members of the public who had not directly experienced this particular form of loss, however, did also engage with it. They tended to feel that the exhibition 'looked interesting' and touched upon a 'fundamental but

often marginalised topic'. Our evaluation data appeared to show that while not all attendees had direct personal experience of baby-loss, many knew a friend or family member who had. This reinforces one of the key issues raised by *Remembering Baby* and that is that while baby-loss affects many of us in some way, talking about it in public continues to remain taboo.

The exhibition appeared to permit those who had experienced this form of loss the space to grieve and share private emotions in public. The value of having space to talk with others, to share experiences was something central to the feedback we have received, as the anonymised quotes from visitors below show:

'Such an important exhibition to highlight that the raw pain lives on for life. So beautiful to see people brought together to share their grief but also their positive memories'

'thank you for creating this space for people to remember, and talk, and cry and heal a little bit'

As well as offering an important space for people to grieve, the exhibition also appeared to foster the development of bereavement support communities. For example, some bereaved parents had been communicating with one another through social media prior to attending the exhibition. For some, *Remembering Baby* was a catalyst for them meeting face-to-face to share experiences. We also found incidences of exchanges taking place on Instagram between parents affected by baby loss. They discussed the exhibition and some of the issues it raised regarding post-mortem and bereavement care. *Remembering baby* therefore appeared to facilitate connections between bereaved families and acted as a talking point and a focus around which people could share and feel emotions 'together'. Figure 2 provides an overview shot of the exhibition as shown at Protein Studios in Shoreditch.



Remembering Baby

Photography: © Hugh Turvey HonsFRPS FRSA (lead artist)

### *Creating art with families*

We ran a series of creative workshops for bereaved families both prior to, but also during the exhibition. This was something which appeared to be particularly valued by families. One year before the first exhibition in London we ran a creative workshop entitled *Lasting Impressions* where we invited attendees to bring a memory object along with them to the workshop (for example, cuddly toy, locket, etc.). Participants attending this particular workshop had all experienced baby-loss in differing ways. While some were recently bereaved, others had experienced loss several decades ago. This latter group of parents felt that the *Lasting Impressions* workshop enabled them to do something that they had not previously been permitted to do and that is to create precious memories of their baby. Whilst parents talked about their objects and shared their experiences of loss with other parents, they also worked with artists Hugh Turvey and Justin Wiggan as well as with members of the research team, to create paper impressions of their memory items for the exhibition. This artwork was then framed, encased in light-boxes, and displayed with hand-written descriptions as part of the exhibition.

Figure 3 shows some examples of *Lasting Impressions* artwork created by parents.



Remembering Baby

Photography: © Hugh Turvey HonsFRPS FRSA (lead artist)

We invited parents who had participated in creating this art to visit the exhibition. Some of them talked about the ways in which participating in these workshops and seeing their artwork in the exhibition helped them with the grieving process. As can be seen from the visitor quote below:

What a beautiful collection of art, thoughts, images and sounds. Thank you so much for allowing us to be part of this. We are so thankful that these memories of our baby will live on.

Indeed, for many, the public aspect of displaying their artwork seemed to be significant in a bereavement context where families often find it difficult to carve out opportunities to speak about their deceased babies and to acknowledge openly what they might continue to mean to them.

We sought to encourage the participation of families in some way throughout the entire exhibition process. For example, at the start of the London leg of the exhibition, there was a feature about *Remembering Baby* on *Radio 4's* PM programme. After the feature had aired we were sent a range of images, and artwork from bereaved parents across the UK. We added these to our evolving memory frame on display at the exhibition so that visitors could see these personal tributes. During each exhibition families affected by early-life loss also had the opportunity to participate in a range of creative workshops including knitting, pottery and origami. Some of these workshops have been led by the artists involved in the exhibition, some by the research team and some by bereavement support charities. Most of the workshops however have involved parents creating something tangible as a way to remember

and/ or honour their babies. Again, this was something that parents told us they valued, and in some cases our work inspired bereavement support charities to consider ways of developing further creative workshops themselves.

### *Leaving memories and creating new ones*

Memory-making through the creation of footprints and taking photos is often identified in the baby-loss literature as a key part of the bereavement process (Garattini 2007, Keane 2009). Prior to the first exhibition opening, the research team worked closely with two baby-loss charities Lullaby Trust and SANDS to make sure we handled the issue of baby-loss as sensitively as possible. These charities emphasised the importance of giving bereaved family members the opportunity to leave a memory of their loved one at the exhibition, but also to take something away with them to represent the potential for new life. We made little packets of forget-me-not seeds available for visitors as a symbolic and simultaneous marker of memory and possibilities for new life or growth. During all the exhibitions parents could also create a personal fabric memory square for inclusion in an exhibition memorial quilt. The memory squares and quilt seen in Figure 4 below was something which was particularly highly valued by bereaved families attending the exhibition.



Remembering Baby

Photography: © Hugh Turvey HonsFRPS FRSA (lead artist)

As the exhibition has travelled we have collected more completed memory squares, and are currently working on a second quilt. We hope that all the quilts made as a result of this travelling exhibition will find long-term homes within various local hospitals across the UK- so that all these babies will continue to be remembered in public spaces for years to come.

Overall, we feel that this exhibition has highlighted the value of using art as a bereavement support tool, enabling people to come together to share their experiences and to grieve. With its very nature as a public exhibition *Remembering Baby* has sought to challenge some of the taboos surrounding baby-loss. Furthermore, by encouraging members of the baby-loss community to actively participate- through creative workshops or writing on memory squares- we also hope that the exhibition has helped to facilitate the productive processing of grief and, where desired, the negotiation of continuing bonds. This piece of research and the exhibition has had a profound and long-lasting effect on the research team. We are currently in the process of thinking through how we might archive the different art installations from the exhibition and also move forward with the work. Some of the installations featuring in the exhibition- such as our *Matter of Fact* video made using interview transcripts from the research project- are already beginning to be used by other organisations as professional training tools. We hope in the future to continue to widen and develop this work further, through a programme of outreach work in schools and memory-making work in palliative care contexts.

For more information about the exhibition, including media coverage please visit

<https://www.rememberingbaby.co.uk/>

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