



Oliver Elliot Grubb plays and I admire his ideas materialize in music. Photo by Tom Ehrlich.

Everything went into the pot on 26 August 2023 at Kuumbwa Jazz Center delivering the latest live-recorded 90-minute installation of the Tuna Can Cabaret in my hometown Santa Cruz, California. My personas present were: organizer, community-builder, entertainer, jazz singer, ukulelist, mother, bubble performer, performance artist, bicyclist, and on. It fulfilled the now dead butoh dancer Mas Busrok's description of me as puppet master, as dalang in Javanese wayang theater. The first installation was delivered in The Ugly Mug—a local cafe—one month earlier. The next installation is 4 November 2023 at R. Blitzer Gallery in Santa Cruz, California with two of my favorite musicians. The Tuna Can is a bike club of middle-aged (mostly) tech family men who enjoy world class trails in the mountains above and between the University of California, Santa Cruz and the small towns of Felton and Bonny Doon on their electric Specialized mountain bikes. Before dying Tuna Can member and longtime hardcore former pro bike rider Scotty D brought me into the fold to ride the Tuna Can's extra Frankenbike. The Tuna Can name describes the very small size of member Keith's penis. It is an intense set of parameters I put up with as a gendered female to ride with the Tuna Can. Between 40 and 48 people attended the performance. Audience members were given a hand-numbered paper ticket designed by my daughter and I and edged with gold.

Advance Preparation

In casual conversation with my patron I vocalized that if I died tomorrow I wanted to perform in the legendary Kuumbwa Jazz Center. There, many performers informed me since the late 1990s. With the patron's verbal promise to fund, I followed up with: the venue, supporters, libretto writing, promotion and documentation. I called the photo documentarian Walter Wagner recognized at Bay Area jazz performances and the San Jose Jazz Festival. His images of my Pete Escovedo performance in the early 2000s with select musicians were included in my second book on improvisation beadwork printed in 2011 by Interweave Press titled *Rachel*

Nelson-Smith's Bead Riffs. Walter admitted he could no longer face the ambulatory challenges of photographing live performances and referred me to Tom Ehrlich, the photographer of international bandleader Jon Santos and long-time documentarian of the 66-year-old Monterey Jazz Festival.

Pre-concert

Zachariah Shook was with me. I parked my car in the Kuumbwa Jazz Center and Bagelry parking lot where the patron handed me cash. I put the cash in envelopes for Elliot and Tom and later distributed them. The venue was paid in advance. Zachariah and I were early and went for a walk. We entered the venue where a handful of people prepared the kitchen and bar. Venue Manager Jessi Butler was present as was Dave Eagan who we mainly worked with. Dohn Grube, Oliver Elliot Grubb, and Tom Ehrlich were present. Drummin' Dave Dreyfus arrived before the house doors opened.

First Set

Dohn Grube was first on stage. The introduction was 10 minutes long and ended with an acapella "I'm Going to Go Back There Someday"—Gonzo's campfire song from the 1979 film *The Muppet Movie*. Dohn left the stage and I entered wearing a long light pink sequin gown—the one from the two promotions and NPR photos by Carolyn Klein Lagattuta—a documentarian of my work since 2016. Music mentor Joya Winwood and Alene Smith sat in the front row. Between spoken word and jokes I sang songs and played my tenor Kamaka ukulele gifted to me around 1994. For a second time in public, I delivered L.M. Bogad's "Manifesto" from his 2021 book *Performing Truth: Works of Radical Memory for Times of Social Amnesia*.

Second Set

It began with a piano-voice duet and was primarily composed of voice-ukulele songs including "I Can't Wait to Get Off Work" by Tom Waits used by me to rail against work. As with the first Tuna Can installation at The Ugly Mug and all my live concert social media posts, the concert ended with my version of another Waits song "Always Keep a Diamond in Your Mind."

Tricks: *Oliver Elliot Grubb*, *Three Volunteers*, *Blue Juice*

Tricks I enact force the spectator to push their knowledge of what to expect from me. Groups of people know me separately as: a jazz singer. Other groups of people know me as: The Bubble Lady. Groups of people know me as Rachel Nelson-Smith the master beader. Groups of people know me only as a mother and/or as an academic visual artist. It is an impossible task for an audience to fully know a performer and through my tricks audience expectations are forced to oscillate between personae.

The first trick was a gift to three volunteers. Amidst the first set I paused and said, may I have volunteers. The audience seemed unable to move and no hands raised. I said, by a show of hands I need three volunteers. More than three hands raised and I pointed out the first three I saw—Dr. Qi, Redhead Deb, and Autumn Mendoza. They were all friends to me and not strangers. I said, meet me in the courtyard during the break I have a gift for you, and continued the concert to the end of the first set. Two days before the concert electric pedicab driver Aidan

Hosler confirmed he was available at 8:15 P.M. to enact the trick we devised a month earlier. He was unable to commit at first but I waited and prayed to the cosmos. The set ended at 8:15 P.M. The volunteers met me outside the venue and we all boarded Aidan's fur- and LED-covered pedicab for a tour of Downtown Santa Cruz. Aidan was dressed as a pirate and encouraged us to wave his sword in the air and cry out like a pirate. After 10 minutes we returned to Kuumbwa Jazz Center, I went to the bathroom, and returned to the stage for the second set. Redhead Deb later said, I expected you to force the volunteers to sing.

17-year-old Oliver Elliot Grubb was at the heart of the second trick. *Oliver Elliot Grubb is a performance work in and of itself.* The work was an outing to publicly demonstrate my acumen as a musician, improviser, and community-builder. Grubb was playing an accordion on Pacific Avenue of Downtown Santa Cruz in front of the local bookstore when we first met. My daughter was inside reading books in the children's section. I listened to the music. The music was fine and nuanced and the musician addressed each tune in earnest with a real beginning and real ending. Grubb's social media included clips of him at a baby grand piano making sounds that were storytelling. With the Kuumbwa concert coming up the idea seized on me to make music for the audience with this young man in as tight a vacuum as possible. Clearly, the young pianist had capacious musical imagination and willingness and access to many styles of music, from memory. I engaged Grubb in an Instagram Messenger conversation. After the concert while greeting his parents, his mother recognized me as the Pacific Coast Manor receptionist—a 24-hour skilled nursing facility where I worked in 2022—and they admitted their son had only told them about the concert earlier in the day. The seal on our first public performance was broken during sound check with Dave Eagan who needed to get our levels right. We ranged through a variety of tunes to find one we could both complete and settled on "Summertime" from the 1935 musical *Porgy and Bess*—a tune called by singers ad nauseum—beautiful as it is. The more we tried to find a tune in common the closer we got to it, as a sort of last try I said, do you know Summertime. Instead of returning the conductor role to the singer, it remained with the musician at the end of the tune. Even though it was his second time on the stage and only my first—and, my show—I leaned into this new idea and listened to Grubb make gorgeous art and enjoyed his ending. His parents thanked me for giving him the opportunity.

The third trick drew from my reputation as a bubble performer. "We want to make sure you're not going to bubble," Keith Wieland Patron Services and Development Coordinator stated as I walked in the Kuumbwa Jazz Center door in July to plan a possible concert with him. It was my turn to perform in Kuumbwa—the legendary world class music performance venue against which I compared New York's Blue Note and Oakland's Yoshi's. Leading up to the meeting I did not suggest I would make bubbles or reference my practice. Dohn and Dr. Qi were there to back me up. Wieland shook my hand after assuring him no bubbles would be made during the performance. Why would soap films thinner than a human hair be a concern? The equipment in Kuumbwa Jazz Center has increased in quality and expense since the days when Tom Noddy ran vaudevillian shows in the space. The liquid of a popping soap film is a threat. Bubble mix is blue and thick! The day of the show a variety of tools and props were brought onto the stage. Some were very functional like my rugged black metal music stand and some were less functional like my personal bicycle with iridescent handle bars.

Load-in was executed by Zachariah Shook, my lover at the time. In the final throes of preparation he assisted me and knew what the half-full gallon jug of blue juice was for. In the last moments I doubted the trick and decided not to do it. When Zachariah plopped the jug onto stage while I was locked into Eagan's gaze for sound check I knew what had to be done. Near the beginning of the second set, after *Oliver Elliot Grubb* I walked over to the jug and drank a deep draught of the blue liquid. Someone in the audience gasped. Later I learned sound engineer Dave Eagan and paterfamilias bubble performer Tom Noddy co-surmised what the blue liquid was doing on stage and agreed that I probably was not going to make bubbles with it.

I took great pleasure in being surrounded by people present to meet my ends. and filming. Tom Ehrlich did the photo documentation. Dohn Grube was stage manager and master of ceremonies. Drummin' Dave Dreyfus worked the front door. Zachariah Shook manned the back door. Oliver Elliot Grubb participated in the sound check and broke the second set with me. Aidan Hosler appeared at the break to whisk us away on his pedicab. Dave Eagan did the sound. Among the dear strangers, friends and family of the audience were Tom Noddy and Nancy Abrams and her husband Emeritus Professor of Physics Joel Primack who allows me to engage him in conversation on cosmology and dark matter and bubbles. I learned later Tom visited with his old friends Joel and Nancy as well as with my daughter Maryam West Cliff Smith who was present with her father Colin Smith, my former partner of decades.

Aftermath

By others' accounts the performance was a success. There were points that nagged at me and overall I was satisfied. There is only so much one can do in a 90-minute performance under unblinking eyes and attentive ears. Immediately following the performance I greeted waiting audience members, half of them were strangers to me. Dave Eagan began to break down the stage and we discussed the delaminating table of my ukulele and how the sound of my arm and dress dragging against it would sound in the recording. Dave motioned to the ukulele saying, may I. I passed the instrument to him and he proceeded to beautifully noodle on my instrument as we talked about it, about music, technique. The next time we met, Eagan was doing the sound for the large outdoor stage at the 66th Annual Monterey Jazz Festival. Within a few days after the installation I delivered a large capacity thumb drive to the venue and after a few days more, Eagan invited me to pick up the sound and video recording from his Midtown Santa Cruz home. Photo documentarian Tom Ehrlich attempted to transfer the images to me online but we ultimately met in his home to put them onto the thumb drive. His embedment as a jazz photographer was immediately clear viewing the multitude of press badges and large print concert photos hanging on the walls and strewn on the floor and leaned against furniture. The next time I saw Ehrlich he was photographing at the 66th Annual Monterey Jazz Festival. He will photograph my next concert. In follow-up phone calls to Tom Noddy, Nancy Abrahms, and Joel Primack I learned they were all longtime friends seeing each other for the first time in 10 years at the performance and that Tom had visited with my daughter during the break.

There was no encore and it ended with the audience singing. Dave Eagan's documentation is enough to make a film.

Add length of performance.



The square meme used to promote the performance. Photo by Carolyn Klein Lagatutta