

Timeless: The Egg Freezing Pop-up Shop

[Lucy van de Wiel](#), March '16

On a Monday night, through the restless commuter crowds of London's Old Street underground station, I catch my first glimpse of Timeless: a new pop up shop devoted entirely to stimulating debate on egg freezing. Located right behind the ticket gates, a constant stream of travellers pass by its brightly-lit shop windows, which say:

Don't let your eggs age another day...

Now you can really FREEZE TIME!

A large glittering hourglass turns behind the window. The same symbol is printed on the aprons of the various shop assistants, who welcome me with cocktails served in test tubes. I drink the yellow-purple substance, which is sweet and slimy—are those passion fruit seeds?—and strangely delicious, as I take in the shop's various displays of fictional beauty products.

There is a perfume line of "Bespoke Blends for the Perfect Future," with scents bearing names like "When? When? When?" and "Promotion or Procreation." We can spray them on and smell how they, or so the information panel tells us, "come with base notes of ticking clock and are infused with delicate layers of competing pressures, just for women." There are moisturisers in a range that offers "3 simple steps to freeze your fertility" whose pastel packaging describes medical terms like "trigger shot" or "follicle stimulate." An array of shining diamond-shaped jars contain a single, golden bath pearl. And perhaps most striking is the large mounted display of dozens of bottles filled with decreasing amounts of deep red fluid.



An odd shop indeed. One of the aproned shop assistants tells me some visitors were shocked at the suggestion that women could come here to freeze their eggs. "Tell me this isn't what I think it is," one concerned woman had said. Others had recognised the feminine branding of the products and came in looking for a Mother's Day gift. Yet most people, including myself, were drawn in by curiosity and found themselves reflecting on egg freezing, reproductive ageing and fertility as they discovered the strange beauty products.



This is precisely what the creators, Sarah Douglas and Amanda Gore were aiming for when they created Timeless: “a fictional beauty brand” that would “unlock the facts around egg freezing whilst also raising public debate on how these advances in biomedical science may impact on the world of work, relationships and wider society.”

Timeless’ branding as a shop, rather than a gallery or event space, is significant here. The shop setting plays on the new ways in which this technology brings together commerce and reproduction—whether by its inclusion as a “perk” in Apple and Facebook’s health benefits or by its promotion in egg freezing [cocktail parties](#) organised by brokers who wish to advertise a non-clinical setting. The emergence of egg freezing revives the familiar, gendered work-life balance discussions that selectively ask whether women can “have it all”—also the subject of one of three evening debates

Timeless hosted.

Timeless’ clever use of the aesthetics of cosmetics marketing invites visitors to touch, taste and sniff the issues. Mimicking the sensory appeal of commercial beauty departments, visitors can smell the dozens of custom-made perfumes of the “Eau So Pressurised” range while working out the relation between the scents’ witty names and the related blurbs from social science research displayed alongside each bottle. The “Penalty Perfume,” for example, tells us that “a year of delayed motherhood increased women’s career earnings by 9%.”

Avoiding the customary imagery used to market fertility treatments, the shop is devoid of smiling women and babies. Rather than the potential *outcome* of the “take home baby,” the shop’s slick design foregrounds the *process* of egg freezing treatment, which, Timeless emphasises, “may not be as easy as it sounds.” The “3 Simple Steps” display, for example, comprises a range of 9 moisturising products with titles like “hormone suppress,” “sedate” and “retrieve” that represent steps in the treatment. Visitors can try on some body lotion and pick up the packaging to read about the egg freezing treatment steps as if they were product ingredients. In an interesting reversal, Timeless uses the codes of cosmetics branding to reveal what conventional marketing seeks to conceal.



Instead of drawing on model women and babies, Timeless appeals directly to the visitor to convey the relevance of its central concerns. Tall mirrors superimpose the viewer on statements like:

STOP THE CLOCK

Time is ticking... for the best results freeze now*

* Your fertility declines with age. [...] Freeze early for a higher likelihood of a take-home baby.

Oscillating between hyperbole and pedagogy, Timeless' message on the mirror is clear: this is about you.



Throughout, the exhibition invites a reflection on one's own fertility and the possibility of egg freezing. Although men are enthusiastically welcomed, Timeless' citation of a highly gendered discourse of beauty brands and direct appeal to "your fertility" and "your eggs" on its information panels speak directly to the visiting women.

The invitation towards these women to position themselves in the exhibition is most strikingly made in a large display of fluid-filled bottles that are numbered 12 to 50. The volume of blood-red liquid represents the number of eggs, and their gradual dilution to a urinous yellow, their quality. The bottles of "Timeless Age-Defying Serum" resemble cosmetic displays' luxuriant choice to suit consumers' individualised and age-specific needs. Combined with the juxtaposed information panel describing "your age," the display invites viewers to locate one's own egg-age in this liquid downward graph. Within the consumerist logic Timeless so effectively adopts, in which abundance is the norm, the empty bottles look out of place—like exhausted testers ready for replacement. For most visitors—as there are few teenage girls present—the take-home message is that most eggs have already been lost.



(image by [Zeynep Gurtin](#))

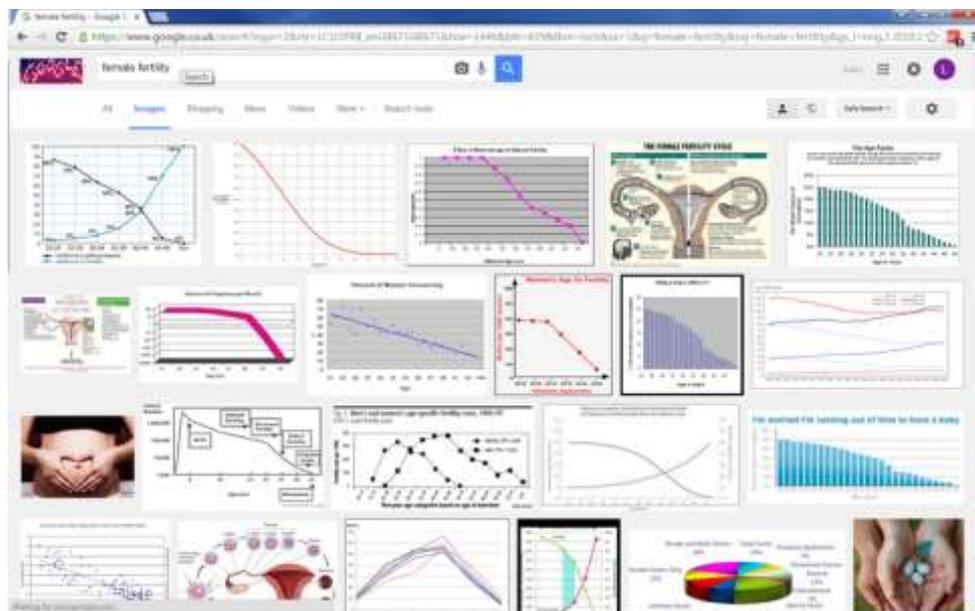
The mild mocking of anti-ageing sentiments characteristic of the other displays is lacking here. The Timeless people tell me that “these are the facts,” and show me the [journal article](#) that provided the basis for the liquid measurements. On the website, it is written in all caps that “*THIS IS A FICTIONAL PRODUCT BUT THE FACTS DESCRIBED ARE COMPLETELY TRUE.*” The “12” bottle is virtually full but has dropped to half its contents by number “20.” By bottle number “30” only a pitiful amount remains—leaving little to represent the so-called “fertility cliff” popularly associated with age 35.

In the bottles’ appeal to the factual is the assertion that egg quality and quantity represent fertility. Indeed, the website states that “each bottle of Timeless Age-Defying Serum shows average fertility related to a specific age.” The display’s “egg-based” model of fertility resonates with the egg freezing context, which is after all a procedure that holds the promise of maintaining fertility by cryopreserving these cells. It also makes sense on in the context of reproductive technologies like IVF, which enact the separation of body and egg by relying on the former as an *in vitro* proxy of female reproductivity and visualising the egg in the process of doing so. The number of eggs matured, retrieved, frozen, thawed, fertilised represent affectively-charged numbers in IVF and egg freezing procedures. In egg freezing discourses, projections of the number of frozen eggs—here quoted 15—required for one baby are common. Timeless’ display illustrates how the centrality of eggs in fertility treatments informs a conceptualisation of *in vivo* fertility as primarily reliant on, or even reducible to, eggs.

However, if we follow the display’s logic that eggs—or the remaining volume of scarlet serum—translates into fertility, babies would be more fertile than 20-year olds. In fact, if the baby or fetus had been included, they would have had to dangle another bottle, over twice as large, on the left side of the box. On the other end, with the average childbearing age in the UK close to 30, the pathetically small volume left in the bottle is apparently still sufficient to produce a great number of babies.

The issue with this popular equation of eggs and fertility—apart from the erasure of hormones, ovulation, uterine health and other relevant bodily factors—is that it presents a grimmer situation than need be. If the display had instead reflected chances of pregnancy within a year of trying, the bottles would be much fuller in the mid-section. [Rothman et al.](#), for example, found that in their cohort of almost 3000 heterosexual couples attempting to conceive, 87% of women in the 30-34 age group got pregnant, compared to 72% in the 35-40 group. In a study of 770 European women, [Dunson et al.](#) report that 86% of women between 27 and 34, compared to 82% of those between 35 and 39 got pregnant within the year.

While Timeless productively parodies the anti-ageing discourses of beauty brands throughout its shop, the display's liquid drop echoes a familiar framing of female fertility as characterised by worrisome decline and failure. [\[1\]](#) Just Google images for "female fertility" and behold the downward graphs.



These contrast strikingly with the results for "male fertility," consisting mainly of sperm animations. This contrast signals more than differing biology; it points to the way in which the former has become almost synonymous with loss and decline—particularly so in discourses of egg freezing.

And future incarnations there should be, as the shop's sensational displays provoked fascinating exchanges, between professors and Mother's Day shoppers alike, about life in the time of frozen eggs.

Timeless was open from 29 February to 5 March 2016 in Old Street station, London (www.timeless.org).

[1] See Emily Martin's [presentation at ReproSoc](#) last year on the history of the association between women's reproductive bodies and failure.