Compressibility and porosity modulate the mechanical properties of giant gas vesicles

Hedar H. Al-Terke2 a,1, Grégory Beauneb,c, Muhammad Junaid4, Jari Seitsonen4, Arja Paananen6, Jaakko V. I. Timonen4, Jussi Joensuu3, Françoise Brochard-Wyart4 d, and Robin H. A. Ras2 a,2

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Gas vesicles used as contrast agents for noninvasive ultrasound imaging must be formulated to be stable, and their mechanical properties must be assessed. We report here the formation of perfluoro-n-butane microbubbles coated with surface-active proteins that are produced by filamentous fungi (hydrophobin HFBI from Trichoderma reesei). Using pendant drop and pipette aspiration techniques, we show that these giant gas vesicles behave like glassy polymersomes, and we discover novel gas extraction regimes. We develop a model to analyze the micropipette aspiration of these compressible gas vesicles and compare them to incompressible liquid-filled vesicles. We introduce a scaling parameter to characterize the leakage of gas under aspiration through the pores of the protein coating. Utilizing this model, we can determine the elastic dilatation modulus, surface viscosity, and porosity of the membrane. These results demonstrate the engineering potential of protein-coated bubbles for echogenic and therapeutic applications and extend the use of the pipette aspiration technique to compressible and porous systems.

Significance

Gas vesicles are produced in bacteria to achieve cellular buoyancy. These air-filled protein structures were the inspiration for developing a similar system to serve as contrast agents for ultrasound imaging. To characterize their mechanical properties, we study here the micropipette aspiration of giant gas vesicles formed by coating microbubbles with surface-active proteins adsorbed on their surface. We observe a variety of behaviors, such as large or remanent deformations. We extend current theoretical models of vesicle suction to compressible gas-filled systems and introduce the measurement of bubble permeability with this technique. We highlight the possibility of using engineered bubbles for echogenic applications and therapeutic techniques.


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H.H.A.-T. and G.B. contributed equally to this work.

1To whom correspondence may be addressed. Email: francoise.brochard@curie.fr or robin.ras@aalto.fi.

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Gas vesicles | bubbles | viscoelasticity | compressibility | porosity

Gas vesicles (GV) that are produced in bacteria to achieve cellular buoyancy have opened new avenues in medicine, both for medical imaging and tumor treatment. They are air-filled protein nanostructures, hundreds of nanometers in size, which have been genetically encoded in cells and bacteria to serve as contrast agents for ultrasound imaging and as cell-killing agents by inertia-induced cavitation (1). If small unilamellar vesicles are used for drug delivery, all experiments to investigate the physics of membranes have been performed using giant unilamellar vesicles. Similarly, we study here the mechanical properties of giant gas vesicles (GGV) of sizes ranging from 10 to about 100 microns, formed by coating microbubbles with surface-active proteins adsorbed on their surface.

Ultrasound imaging is a well-established diagnostic method, and its use has grown rapidly over the past few decades due to several advantages, such as its safety, portability, real-time imaging capability, and cost efficiency (2). It has become the second most commonly used method after X-ray imaging (3). Ultrasound imaging is based on the exposure of a body to high-frequency sound waves, which are reflected at different interfaces. By calculating the propagating time and amplitude of the reflected wave (echo), an image can be constructed (4). As a mechanical wave, the echo of the ultrasound wave mainly depends on the physical properties of the medium and interfaces. To create a clear image using ultrasound, there should be clear differences in the mechanical properties between the investigated body parts. This could be achieved by using ultrasound enhanced contrast agents (UECA), which are substances with predefined mechanical properties, mainly micro and nano-GV (5, 6).

Currently, GV play a fundamental role in therapeutic techniques and diagnosis. They can be used as drug or oxygen cargo in therapy and as contrast agents in ultrasound reflection imaging (7, 8). The main challenge in the UECA development is finding the balance between the half-life of the GV and their echogenicity, which is the ability of a substance to reflect or transmit ultrasound waves to the surrounding medium (9). This balance depends on the nature of the gas core and interfacial properties of the shell. Due to their unique physical and chemical properties, perfluorocarbons (PFCs) are confidentially used in medical applications for diagnostics as well as therapy. PFCs are among the most inert and stable chemicals. Therefore, perfluoro-n-butane gas (CnF10) is one of the most commonly used gases for injectable ultrasound contrast agents (10). Getting insight into the shell properties is of fundamental importance for developing new contrast-enhanced agents. As cargos in therapy or as contrast agents in diagnostic, GV need to be injected intravenously. In this case, they must be robust, as it leads to a significant increase in the pressure of the gas inside, the pressure being the sum of Laplace pressure and blood pressure. The stability of GV is related to the physical properties of their shell, the nature (e.g., molecular size and polarity)
of the gas core, and the viscosity of the ambient liquid (11). On
the other hand, the echogenicity of GV is highly related to the
mechanical properties of the shell. For instance, bubbles stabil-
lized with phospholipids reflect ultrasound waves better than
bubbles stabilized with polymers (5, 12), yet are more fragile
than protein-coated bubbles. The lysis tension ranges between
2 and 15 mN m\(^{-1}\) for liposomes (13), whereas in our case GV
are subjected to tensions up to 55 mN m\(^{-1}\) without rupture.

Hydrophobins are a group of highly surface-active proteins
produced by filamentous fungi. They have a common structural
feature, which is a characteristic sequence of eight cysteine residues
in conserved order in their primary structure (14). These cysteine
residues create four disulfide bridges (S-S bond) that bind hydro-
phobin protein leading to a globular shape. In addition, a hydro-
phobin molecule can be pictured as a natural Janus nanoparticle
due to its non-centrosymmetric amphiphilic structure (15).
Hydrophobins are grouped into two classes: Class I and II (16).
Even though both classes share the main features such as surface
activity and surface adhesion, the main functional difference
between them is their solubility. The aggregates of class I hydro-
phobins are highly insoluble in buffer solution, while class II
hydrophobins aggregates dissolve more easily (17). In addition,
Linder et al. have reported that there are also differences related
to the interfacial structures of class II hydrophobins (18, 19) HFBI
and HFBII, which are small-sized proteins (7.5 and 7.2 kDa,
respectively), produced by Trichoderma reesei fungi (20). Even
though they are produced by the same fungi and share almost
the same amphiphilic structure, HFBI and HFBII have different
interfacial properties. The clearest difference between these two
hydrophobins is that even if both create a viscoelastic layer at gas–liquid
interfaces, HFBI layers are more glassy (21). This difference in
interfacial behavior is supposed to be related to the hierarchical
structure of the hydrophobin film (22). Then, coating microbubbles
with HFBI could lead to GV with high stability and mechanical
properties.

During the last few decades, one of the most utilized methods
for measuring interfacial mechanics is surface dilatational rhe-
ology based on axisymmetric drop shape analysis (ADSA)
(23–25). There are various advantages that make ADSA a corner-
stone technique in many laboratories doing interfacial research. In comparison with other methods, such as Langmuir
trough and Wilhelmy plate, ADSA is easy to handle, needs a
relatively small sample (that makes it very popular especially if
the sample is expensive), and can be done in challenging experi-
mental conditions such as high pressure and temperature. The
theory and the applications of the ADSA method are explained
in a number of review articles (26–28). This technique has been
used previously to approximate the surface tension of HFBI
films at the air/water interface. Also, the viscoelastic properties
of HFBI and HFBII films and HFBII macroscopic liquid drop-
lets have been reported using surface shear rheology (17) and
ADSA (29), respectively. Still, a challenge is to find a way to
measure the properties of glassy membrane-like HFBI layer
stabilizing microbubble. In this study, the mechanical properties
of HFBI hydrophobin layer assembled at the gas–liquid (C\(_4\)F\(_{10}\)-
water) bubble interface are measured using micropipette tech-
nique as an alternative to the traditional surface dilatational rheology technique, which failed to measure the storage and
loss modulus due to the glassy nature of the layer.

The pipette aspiration technique has been developed to char-
acterize mechanical properties of GUV (13), in particular the
membrane tension, the dilatation elastic modulus, and the
membrane viscosity. Its use has been extended to a wide variety
of soft matter objects from living systems such as single cells
(30–32) or cellular aggregates (33), to artificial systems such as
liposomes (13, 34–36), emulsions (37–41), or polymersomes
(42, 43). The new features of the GGV studied here include
that their interior is compressible and that their membrane is
slightly permeable to gas, which requires the development of a
new model. We started from a preexisting model used for the
analysis of incompressible capsules, which is then expanded to
the case of compressible porous capsules. As a result, the aspi-
ration of GGV with a micropipette allowed us to determine not
only their elastic modulus and their surface viscosity, but also
their porosity. Micropipette aspiration has previously been used
to measure the water porosity of liposomes (44, 45). A liposome
initially in an observation chamber at low osmolarity is aspirated
in a micropipette and then transferred in another one with a
higher osmolarity. The tongue length of the liposome in the
micropipette is monitored. Because of the osmolarity change,
the reduction of the volume of the vesicle gives rise to an excess
area, which is incorporated in the tube, and the length of the
aspirated tongue increases. For GV, the leaking out is induced by
the Laplace pressure acting on the sucked bubble.

Model of Aspiration of GGV: Role of Compressibility and Porosity

The mechanical parameters of the bubbles can be deduced from
the micropipette aspiration method developed by Evans (35).
A pressure difference \(\Delta P\) is imposed between a liquid medium
and a pipette, and the capsule penetrates the pipette forming a
tongue of length \(L\). We describe the statics and the dynamics
of suction for four cases: 1) incompressible, 2) compressible, 3)
porous GV (Fig. 1 A–C), and 4) ultra-rigid GV (Fig. 1 D–F).

Incompressible Vesicles

Let us first describe the classical case of an incompressible vesicle.
When a suction pressure \(\Delta P\) is applied, the very narrow micropi-
pette allows us to amplify the variation of the surface, while the
vesicle size is almost constant. As the penetration length \(L\)
increases, the surface area \(A\) of the vesicle increases, as well as its
membrane tension \(\sigma\) from the initial tension \(\sigma_0\) at rest to a plateau
value \(\sigma^e\).

The increase in tension \(\Delta \sigma = \sigma - \sigma_0\) is related to the increase
in capsule area \(\Delta A\).

\[
\Delta \sigma = E_d^* \frac{\Delta A}{A_0},
\]

where \(E_d^*\) is the dilatation modulus.

The surface of the tongue \(\Delta A = 2\pi R_p L\) leads to

\[
\Delta \sigma = \frac{E_d^* LR_p}{2R_0^2}.
\]

The driving force \(f_{\text{AS}}\) on the hatched region (Fig. 1A) is the sum of capillary and pressure forces

\[
-f_{\text{AS}} = 2\pi R_p \sigma - \pi R_p^2 P_i + \pi R_p^2 (P_e - \Delta P),
\]

where \(R_p\) is the pipette radius, \(P_i\) is the pressure inside the capsule,
and \(P_e\) is the external pressure. \(f_{\text{AS}}\) can be written as
where $\Delta P_C = 2\sigma_0 \left( \frac{1}{R_p} - \frac{1}{R} \right)$ is the threshold aspiration pressure before the deformation of the protein network. Notice that this expression is valid only if $L$ is larger than the pipette radius because the curvature radius of the liquid/GV meniscus involved in the Laplace law used to derive Eq. 4 is $R_p$.

At equilibrium, $f_M = 0$ leads to the Laplace relationship relating $\sigma_e$ to $\Delta P$, $\Delta P_C = 2\sigma_e \left( \frac{1}{R_p} - \frac{1}{R} \right)$ which can be written as

$$\Delta P - \Delta P_C = 2\sigma_e \left( \frac{1}{R_p} - \frac{1}{R} \right).$$

From Eqs. 2 and 5, we get

$$\Delta P - \Delta P_C = 2\sigma_e \left( \frac{1}{R_p} - \frac{1}{R} \right).$$

leading to

$$L = \frac{R_0^2 \Delta P - \Delta P_C}{E_d^* \left( 1 - \frac{R_p}{R} \right)}.$$
\[ f_{iv} = 4 \pi \eta_i \left( 1 - \frac{R^2}{R^2} \right), \]  

where \( \eta_i = \eta M e \) is the surface viscosity of the membrane of thickness \( e \).

\[ f_M = f_{iv} \] leads to the dynamical equation for \( L(t) \)

\[ \pi R_p^2 (\Delta P - \Delta P_C) = \pi E_d^2 \frac{R_p^2}{R^2} L \left( 1 - \frac{R_p}{R} \right) \]

\[ + 4 \pi \eta_i \hat{L} \left( 1 - \frac{R_p}{R} \right) \left( 1 + \frac{R_p}{R} \right). \]

This equation involves a characteristic time \( \tau_M \)

\[ \tau_M = \frac{4 \eta_i R^2}{E_d^2 R_p} \left( 1 + \frac{R_p}{R} \right) \sim \frac{4 \eta_i R^2}{E_d^2 R_p}. \]

if \( R_p \ll R \) and the solution \( L(t) \) is given by

\[ L(t) - L_i = (L_e - L_i) \left( 1 - e^{- \frac{R_p}{R \tau_M}} \right). \]  

Compressible GV

For a liquid droplet, the volume is conserved. For a gas bubble, the internal pressure of the gas increases as \( \sigma \) increases and the volume of the compressed gas decreases. For the internal gas, \( P_1 V = N k T \) is constant, with \( N \) the number of gas molecules and \( k \) the Boltzmann constant.

Before the GV’s suction, \( \Delta P = 0 \) and \( P_1 = P_e + \frac{2 \eta_p}{R} \). As the GV is sucked, \( \Delta P \neq 0 \), the membrane tension \( \sigma \) decreases, and \( P_1 = P_e + \frac{2 \eta_p}{R} \). This ideal gas law leads to \( (P_e + \frac{2 \eta_p}{R}) \frac{R^3}{(R - R_0)} \ll 1 \), we get

\[ \frac{3(R - R_0)}{R_0} = 2 \frac{\sigma - \sigma_0}{R_0 P_e}. \]  

The compression of the gas leads to a decrease of the capsule area \( A \), which is now given by \( A = 2 \pi R_p L + 4 \pi R^2 \).

Since \( A_0 = 4 \pi R_0^2 \) Eq. 1 now leads to

\[ \Delta \sigma = E_d^2 \frac{A - A_0}{A_0} = E_d^2 \left( \frac{L R_p}{2 R_0} + 2 \frac{R - R_0}{R_0} \right). \]  

Inserting \( R - R_0 \) (Eq. 11) in Eq. 12 leads to

\[ \Delta \sigma \left( 1 + \frac{4 E_d^2}{3 R_0 P_e} \right) = \frac{E_d^2 L R_p}{2 R_0^2}. \]  

At equilibrium, \( \sigma = \sigma_e \) is given by the Laplace law

\[ \Delta P = 2 \sigma_e \left( \frac{1}{R} - \frac{1}{R_0} \right) \quad \text{and} \quad \Delta P - \Delta P_C = 2 \Delta \sigma_e \left( \frac{1}{R} - \frac{1}{R_0} \right). \]

Inserting \( \Delta \sigma = \Delta \sigma_e \) in Eq. 13 leads to

\[ \frac{R_0^2}{E_d} \left( \Delta P - \Delta P_C \right) \left( 1 + \frac{4 E_d^2}{3 R_0 P_e} \right) = \frac{R_0^2 (\Delta P - \Delta P_C)}{E_d \left( 1 - \frac{R_p}{R} \right)}. \]  

with \( E_d^2 = \frac{4 \eta_p}{1 + \frac{2 \eta_p}{R_0}} \).

The compression of the bubble reduces its area, leading to a more elongated tongue. The increase of \( L_e \) due to the gas compression is \( \frac{\Delta L}{\Delta L} = \frac{4 E_d^2}{3 R_0 P_e} \). This will be an important correction if \( E_d^2 \) is large, which is the case of HFBI coating layers where the Laplace pressure of the bubble is comparable to the atmospheric pressure \( P_e \). The dynamics of penetration of the compressible GV \( L(t) \) is still given by Eq. 10, with

\[ \tau_M = \frac{4 \eta_i R^2}{E_d^2 R_p} \left( 1 + \frac{4 E_d^2}{3 R_0 P_e} \right) \left( 1 + \frac{R_p}{R} \right) \]

\[ = \frac{4 \eta_i R^2}{E_d^2 R_p} \left( 1 + \frac{R_p}{R} \right). \]

Aspiration of a Porous Vesicle

As shown in Fig. 1B, the length of the tongue does not reach a plateau value but instead increases with time. It shows that the vesicle is permeable. In the case of a porous vesicle, the increase of the Laplace pressure \( \Delta (P_i - P_e) \) leads to a leak-out of the internal gas. The flux \( J \) through the \( n \) pores (47) is

\[ J = \frac{2 n a^3 \Delta \sigma}{3 \eta_L R}, \]  

where \( \eta_i \) is the viscosity of the ambient medium and \( a \) is the radius of the pores.

If we want to determine the porosity \( P_M \) of the GV, we can write the flow \( J \) in terms of the porosity as follows

\[ - \frac{dV}{dt} = J = P_M \frac{A v_0 \Delta (P_i - P_e)}{k T}, \]

where \( P_M = \frac{n a^3 k T}{3 \eta_L A v_0} \), with \( v_0 \) the volume of a gas molecule. This leak-out leads to a decrease of the internal volume

\[ -4 \pi R^2 \dot{R} = J, \]

While the leak-out leads to a decrease of the vesicle area \( 8 \pi R \dot{R} \), the suction of the tongue leads to an increase \( 2 \pi R \dot{L} \). The total change of the area of the vesicle per unit time is thus given by

\[ \frac{dA}{dt} = 2 \pi R_p \dot{L} + 8 \pi R \dot{R} = 2 \pi R_p \dot{L} - \frac{2 J}{R} = 2 \pi R_p \dot{L} - \frac{4 n a^3 \Delta \sigma}{3 \eta_L R^2}. \]
When the stationary regime is reached $\frac{d\Delta}{dt} = 0$, $\sigma$ tends to $\sigma_{\infty}$ and $\frac{d\Delta}{dt}$ tends to a constant $\tilde{\Delta}\infty$. The length $L(t)$ of the tongue increases at constant velocity. $\tilde{\Delta}\infty$ and $\Delta\sigma_{\infty}$ are related by

$$R_p L_{\infty} = \frac{2na^3 \Delta\sigma_{\infty}}{3\eta_L R^2},$$  

[19]

given by Eq. 18 for $\frac{d\Delta}{dt} = 0$.

We now calculate the dynamics of suction. The insertion of $\frac{d\Delta}{dt}$ in the derivation of $\Delta\sigma$ given by Eq. 12 leads to

$$\frac{d\Delta\sigma}{dt} = \frac{E_d}{A_0} \frac{dA}{dt} = \frac{E_d}{A_0} \left(2\pi R_p L - \frac{4na^3 \Delta\sigma}{3\eta_L R^2}\right),$$  

[20]

with

$$\tilde{\Delta} = \frac{\pi R_p^2}{4\pi \eta_L R^2} \left[\frac{\Delta\sigma_0 - 2\Delta\sigma}{\eta_L R^2}\right] = \frac{\pi R_p^2}{4\pi \eta_L R^2} \left[\Delta\sigma_0 - 2\Delta\sigma \left(\frac{1}{R} - \frac{1}{R_p}\right)\right] = \frac{\pi R_p^2}{4\pi \eta_L R^2} \left(\frac{\Delta\sigma_0}{\eta_L R^2}\right)$$

derived from the force balance $f_M = f_L$. That leads to

$$\frac{d\Delta\sigma}{dt} = \frac{E_d}{A_0} \frac{2\pi R_p^3}{4\pi \eta_S} \left[\Delta\sigma_0 - 2\Delta\sigma \left(\frac{1}{R} - \frac{1}{R_p}\right)\right]$$

[21]

which can be written as

$$\frac{d\Delta\sigma}{dt} + \Delta\sigma - \frac{\tau}{\tau_L} = \frac{E_d}{A_0} \frac{2\pi \eta_S R_p^3}{4\pi \eta_S R_p^2} \left[\Delta\sigma_0 - 2\Delta\sigma \left(\frac{1}{R} - \frac{1}{R_p}\right)\right],$$

[22]

where $\tau = \frac{1}{\tau_M} + \frac{1}{\tau_L}$, by setting $\frac{1}{\tau_M} = \frac{E_d^* \pi R_p^2}{4\eta_S R_p^2}$, where $\tau_M$ is the viscous membrane flow relaxation time, and $\frac{1}{\tau_L} = \frac{E_d^* 4na^3}{3\eta_L R_p^2}$, where $\tau_L$ is the leak-out flow relaxation time.

At short time, $R_p^2 R_0$ and Eq. 22 leads to $\Delta\sigma(t) = \Delta\sigma_{\infty}$

$$= \frac{1}{\tau} \left(\frac{E_d^*}{A_0} \frac{2\pi \eta_S R_p^3}{4\pi \eta_S R_p^2} \left[\Delta\sigma_0 - 2\Delta\sigma \left(\frac{1}{R} - \frac{1}{R_p}\right)\right]\right)$$

[23]

where $Q$, the scaling parameter, is defined by the ratio $Q = \frac{\tau}{\tau_M}$

$$Q = \frac{\pi R_p^2 3\eta_L R_p^2}{4\pi \eta_S R_p^2} = \frac{3\pi \eta_L R_p^2}{4\phi_S \eta_S \phi}. $$

[24]

by setting $\phi_S = \frac{na^2}{R_0}$. We can also express $Q$ in terms of the porosity $P_M$ using

$$Q = \frac{R_p^2 kT}{16\pi \eta_S R_p^2 P_M}.$$

[25]

The sealing parameter $Q$ controls two regimes:

A) In the limit of a low porosity membrane $Q \gg 1$ ($\tau_M \ll \tau_L$) and the relaxation time $\tau \simeq \tau_M$, we have a weak leak-out and $\Delta\sigma_{\infty} = \frac{\Delta P - \Delta P_C}{2}$. The velocity of extrusion given by Eq. 19 is

$$L_{\infty} = \frac{na^2 (\Delta P - \Delta P_C)}{3\pi \eta_S R_p^2} = \frac{4P_M R_0^2 (\Delta P - \Delta P_C)}{kT}. $$

[26]

B) In the limit of a highly porous membrane, $Q \ll 1$ ($\tau_M \gg \tau_L$), we have a strong leak-out and $\sigma_{\infty} = \frac{\Delta P}{2}$. This is a new regime, which could be obtained if the mesh size of the coating network is loose or for Pickering bubbles, when microparticles coat the interface.

In that case, $\tau = \tau_L = \frac{5\pi \eta_S R_p^2}{E_d^* na^2}$, and

$$L_{\infty} = \frac{R_p^2 (\Delta P - \Delta P_C)}{4\eta_S}.$$

[27]

C) In the intermediate case, $L_{\infty}$ is given by Eqs. 19 and 23. This leads to

$$L_{\infty} = \frac{Q}{1 + Q} \frac{3\pi \eta_L R_p^2}{3\eta_L R_p^2}, $$

[28]

which can be written in term of porosity as

$$L_{\infty} = \frac{4P_M R_0^2 Q (\Delta P - \Delta P_C)}{kT}. $$

[29]

### Aspiration of Liquid Porous Compressible GV

We summarize here the results of the previous parts of the model to describe the aspiration length $L(t)$ assuming that the vesicles are in a liquid state, i.e., $\Delta P > 2\sigma / R_p$ for glassy vesicles.

A) The aspiration length tends to a plateau value if the porosity of the polymer coating is extremely low, corresponding to $Q \to \infty$

$$L_c = \frac{R_p^2}{E_d^*} \left(1 + \frac{4E_d^*}{3R_0 P_c} \right) (\Delta P - \Delta P_c).$$

This length $L(t)$ tends to $L_c$, exponentially (Eq. 10).

B) For intermediate values of $Q$, $\tau_M < \tau_L$, the dynamics $L(t)$ can be written as

\begin{align}
L_c - L_i = \frac{R_p^2}{E_d^*} \left(1 + \frac{4E_d^*}{3R_0 P_c} \right) (\Delta P - \Delta P_c) \left(1 - e^{-rt/\tau_M}\right) \nonumber
\end{align}
\[ L(t) - L_i = (L_e - L_i) \left(1 - e^{-\frac{t-t_0}{\tau_M}}\right) + \dot{L}_\infty t, \]  

where \( L_\infty \) is given by Eq. 26.

**Aspiration of Ultra-Rigid GV: Gas Extraction Regime**

Glassy regimes are observed for bubbles below a radius \( R_0^* \). Both \( R_0^* \) and the rigidity of the coating depend on the incubation time. These GV are characterized by a yield stress \( \sigma_y \). If \( \Delta P < \sigma_y \), the coating cannot expand and \( \sigma \) remains equal to the initial tension \( \sigma_0 \). We show here that a tongue of gas can form if \( \Delta P \geq \frac{2 \gamma}{R_p} \), where \( \gamma \) is the surface tension of the medium equal to 64.5 mN m\(^{-1}\) for a glycerol solution (50% w/w in distilled water) and 72 mN m\(^{-1}\) for pure water. We study the regime \( \sigma_y > \Delta P > \frac{2 \gamma}{R_p} \) illustrated in Fig. 1D–F.

In this case, \( \sigma \) is constant (\( \sigma = \sigma_0 \)) and the driving force on the tongue is given by

\[ f_M = \pi R_p^2 \left[ \Delta P - \frac{2 \gamma}{R_p} + 2 \sigma_0 \right]. \]

As soon as \( \Delta P > \frac{2 \gamma}{R_p} \), a tongue of gas is formed and expands. The gas pressure decreases and may lead to a deflation of the capsule. The tongue ultimately stops when all the gas is sucked in the pipette. We have \( \frac{2 \gamma}{R_p} \sim \) 18 kPa for \( R_p = 7 \) \( \mu \)m and \( \gamma = 64.5 \) mN m\(^{-1}\).

The dynamics of the tongue is extremely fast. \( f_M \) is balanced by the friction force \( f_V = 8L_t \eta_L \pi \dot{L} \), due to the viscous flow inside the pipette induced by the expansion of the tongue of gas, where \( L_t \) is the length of the micropipette and \( \eta_L \) the medium viscosity. It leads to

\[ \dot{L} = \frac{R_p^2}{8L_t \eta_L} \left( \Delta P - \frac{2 \gamma}{R_p} \right). \]  

Considering \( R_p = 7 \) \( \mu \)m, \( \eta_L = 6.5 \times 10^{-3} \) Pa s, \( L_t = 1 \) cm, and \( \Delta P - \frac{2 \gamma}{R_p} \sim 2 \) kPa, it leads to an aspiration velocity \( \dot{L} = 200 \) \( \mu \)m s\(^{-1}\). This value is in agreement with the experimental data, where the very fast aspiration of the tongue can be seen in the plot in Fig. 1F.

**Results and Discussion**

**Formation of GV.** The GV are produced by mechanical agitation. 15 min after their formation, a single white phase is observed. Afterward, they migrate according to their size and we observe the formation of a very diffuse layer on the top containing the larger GV, while the rest of the sample, less diffusive and opaque, contains the smaller ones (SI Appendix, Fig. S1).

![Fig. 2.](https://www.pnas.org/content/35/53/8247/F2.large.jpg) Structure of the protein coating at the gas–liquid interface of GV. (A) 3D structure of an HFBI protein. The yellow color shows the hydrophilic part, and the red color shows the hydrophobic part (PDB ID 2FZ6, image created using Chimera software, version chimera 1.15). (B) Cryo-TEM image of GV consisting of C₆F₁₀ stabilized with HFBL. (C) Thickness of the shell measured from the cryo-TEM images using ImageJ software. (D) AFM image of an HFBI layer at the air–water interface. This image shows the crystalline structure and the porosity of the film [the large dark areas could be sample defects, while the small dark areas represent the areas between the HFBI molecules (pores)].
Structure of GV. Due to its amphiphilic nature (Fig. 2A) and its high affinity to self-assemble at hydrophobic–hydrophilic interfaces, HFBI creates an amphiphilic shell around C₄F₁₀ bubbles, resulting in spherical GV of nanometer to micrometer size (SI Appendix, Fig. S1). The structure of these GV studied by Cryo-Transmission Electron Microscopy (cryo-TEM) (Fig. 2B) shows that for all sizes encountered (up to 1 µm), the membrane thickness is 2.7 ± 0.4 nm (n = 8, Fig. 2C). As this value is comparable to the size of an HFBI protein (21), we can deduce that the bubbles are covered by a protein monolayer. We are not able to measure larger GV by cryo-TEM, but we assume that their membrane thickness also corresponds to a protein monolayer.

The Atomic Force Microscopy (AFM) image of the HFBI layer at the air/water interface (Fig. 2D) shows a crystalline arrangement of HFBI molecules with a regular roughly hexagonal pattern of holes. These nanosized holes represent the structural porosity of the shell. The large dark areas in the image are empty and most probably are sample preparation defects. The layer structure in this image matches the structure reported in the literature (21, 22). Even though the molecular size and polarity of C₄F₁₀ and air differ, we assume that the HFBI layer structure could be the same because both gases are hydrophobic.

Surface Tension σ₀ of GV. A non-polar gas bubble (C₄F₁₀) is initiated on the tip of a hooked needle inside a solution consisting of 0.01 mg mL⁻¹ of HFBI (Fig. 3). The surface tension versus time plot shows the three phases of the self-assembly process. First, the HFBI molecules diffuse to the bubble surface. Second, the molecules adsorb at the interface, and finally, the surface reaches the saturation state, whose surface tension value represents the static surface tension of the HFBI solution at the gas surface. The value is about σ₀ = 55 mN m⁻¹, which is significantly lower than the surface tension of pure water (72 mN m⁻¹). It means that we have a layer of HFBI adsorbed at the interface. Also, the figure shows that at the end of the surface tension curve, there is some increase in the surface tension value. This phenomenon does not indicate a true increase but is rather due to a misfitting of the Laplace equation, as the software was not able to calculate the correct value of the surface tension. The best interpretation of this case is that a quite rigid HFBI layer is formed, which does not obey the liquid properties required by the Laplace equation. Furthermore, when sinusoidal volume changes were applied on the same GV, the software failed to measure the mechanical properties of the layer. As shown in SI Appendix, Fig. S3, the volume curve does not fit the surface tension curve and has some values that are not correct. Therefore, finding an alternative method to measure the mechanical properties of the protein layer represents a fundamental priority to complete this study and any similar future works related to self-assembled rigid layers.

For comparison, surface tensions ranging from 30 mN m⁻¹ to 50 mN m⁻¹ were found performing equilibrium surface tensiometry experiments for similar HFBI concentrations (17) and shape analysis of deflated capsules (29). Also, the determination of the surface tension for high concentrations has to be taken with caution due to the formation of the glassy film of HFBI (17). The difficulty in determining the surface tension of HFBI layers is confirmed by Szilvay et al. (21) who failed to determine it using the ADSA method due to the unexpected deformation of the drops. Details about the ADSA method can be found in SI Appendix, Fig. S4.

Micropipette Aspiration of GV. To study the elastic and viscous properties of the GV, we use the micropipette aspiration technique. The details of all the main parameters determined and calculated for the experiments performed in distilled water are given in SI Appendix, Table S1.

As we will see, it is necessary to apply high pressures to aspirate these GV. It is then cumbersome to use a classical pipette setup in which the pressure is controlled by modifying the height between the observation chamber and the water reservoir. Instead, we use here a piezoelectric pressure controller allowing to easily exceed 10 kPa, otherwise requiring classically a displacement of the water tank higher than 1 m.

GV range in size from the nanoscale to the micrometer scale. Since we are limited by the minimum radius of the micropipettes that can be prepared, we consider GV with R ≥ 15 µm when their
The dynamics of aspiration is studied, and $R \geq 10 \mu m$ when only the observation of their behavior is needed (i.e., without parameter determination). We apply a pressure $\Delta P$ between 12 and 20 kPa, which is extremely large ($\frac{\Delta P}{\gamma} = 0.1 - 0.2$), meaning that the gas compression will be an important factor.

We aspirate a GV for about 10 to 60 s so that the length of the tongue in the pipette is at least 3 times the pipette radius (Fig. 4A–D). The parameters are chosen individually for each GV to apply sufficient pressure to aspirate the vesicles and sufficient time so that we observe both the initial elastic deformation followed by a steady flow in the pipette. As the GV is aspirated, its shape becomes less and less spherical. At that point, we stop the applied pressure and observe two types of behavior: either a liquid-like behavior where the tongue retracts completely, and the bubble recovers completely with spherical shape as before the aspiration (Movie S1) or a glassy behavior (Movie S2) where the tongue does not relax and retains the sleeve shape, while the vesicle keeps a pear-like shape (Fig. 4E and Movie S3). The tongue remains after expulsion from the pipette (Movie S4). The phase diagram liquid versus glassy as a function of the size and aging times of GV is shown in SI Appendix, Fig. S6. The liquid-like behavior is observed for “young” and large GV, whereas the solid-like behavior for small and mature GV.

We also successively aspirated the GV, changing the position of the micropipette on the surface of the same vesicles between several consecutive aspirations. For liquid-like GV that showed no deformation during the first aspiration (Movie S1), there was still no change after several successive aspirations. On the other hand, for the more rigid GV that were moderately deformed after the first aspiration, the deformation is increasingly pronounced. Finally, for glassy GV with a strong remanent deformation after the first aspiration, we observe the aspiration of a new tongue accompanied simultaneously by the retraction of the first one (Fig. 4E–H and Movie S5). This feature has also been observed for glassy lipid vesicles and glassy polymersomes, which flow above a threshold pressure named the yield stress (42). The remanent deformation disappears when we apply a pressure higher than the yield stress, which ranges from 8.1 to 13.1 kPa, $n = 8$, with a mean value 10.5 kPa.

These behaviors differ greatly from what we would have obtained with uncoated bubbles. They would have been completely aspirated as soon as $\Delta P$ is larger than a critical pressure $\Delta P_C = 2\gamma \left( \frac{1}{R_p} - \frac{1}{R} \right)$ (Movie S6), related to the surface tension $\gamma$ of the liquid, which is constant. In the presence of the hydrophobin coating of the bubbles, $\gamma$ is replaced by the membrane tension $\sigma$, which increases when the vesicle is sucked into the pipette.

To interpret the role of bubble size in the liquid-like or glassy behavior of GV, we postulate that this transition is a result of the larger vesicles needing more time to reach the saturated state of the adsorbed layer. If we assume that the proteins are deposited by diffusion, at a time $t$ the proteins in a volume $(D_t)^3$ will cover the surface area $4\pi R_0^2$ of the bubble, where $D$ is the diffusion coefficient of the proteins. This simple argument shows that the equilibrium coating time $t_e$ given by $(D t_e)^{3/2} c = 4\pi R_0^2 c_s$ is proportional to $R_0^3$ and is shorter for smaller vesicles. In the phase diagram representing liquid versus glassy behavior for GV of different radii versus time, we should be able to fit the coexistence curve using the following equation

$$R_0^* = D^{\frac{1}{4}} c_0^{\frac{1}{2}} c_s^{\frac{1}{2}} t_e^{\frac{1}{2}},$$

where $c$ is the initial protein concentration and $c_s$ is the protein density of the shell at saturation.

To test this model, we study $R_0^*$ versus $c$ for different initial protein concentrations (0.2, 0.067, and 0.02 mg mL$^{-1}$). We set $t = 0$ the time when the bubbles are prepared, and we first consider $c = 0.2$ mg mL$^{-1}$ (Fig. 5). During the first 3 h after their formation, all GV, regardless of their size (within the low size limit that can be aspirated with the micropipettes), show no deformation after aspiration. Between 3 and 7 h, the smallest aspirated vesicles show persistent deformation, and then the GV that remain deformed are increasingly larger, with a radius of up to 20 $\mu m$. At longer times, persistent deformation of much larger GV is observed, for example with radii up to 100 $\mu m$ after 3 d (SI Appendix, Fig. S5).

Approximating a value of $c_s = a_s^{-1}$, where $a_s$ is the surface area per protein of order $9 \text{ nm}^2$, $c_s = 10^{11}$ molecules per $\text{m}^2$, the fit of Eq. 30 leads to $D^{3/4} c_0^{1/2} c_s^{-1/2} = 1.2 \times 10^{-8}$ ms$^{-3}$. We can deduce a diffusion coefficient $D = 10^{-14}$ m$^2$ s$^{-1}$. By performing similar
experiments with lower initial protein concentrations, the transition is still observed but is shifted toward long times and for smaller GV as $\epsilon$ decreases (SI Appendix, Fig. S6). For $\epsilon = 0.067$ and 0.02 mg mL$^{-1}$, we find, respectively, $D^{3/4}e^{1/2}e_{s}^{-1/2} = 1.1 \times 10^{-8}$ and $9.5 \times 10^{-9}$, which is in agreement with the scaling relationship for $R_{0}$ versus $\epsilon$.

Using the model developed in the theoretical part, we can analyze the data to determine the mechanical properties of the GV. We plot the aspiration length of the tongue inside the pipette over time. Upon application of suction pressure $\Delta P$, we observe a rapid increase in length during the first few seconds corresponding to the regime described by Eq. 10 that is followed by a penetration at constant velocity $L_{\infty}$ due to the permeability of the porous membrane, leading to the leakage of gas molecules. The data can be fitted with Eq.

$$L(t) = L_{i} = \left(L_{e} - L_{i}\right) \left(1 - e^{-t/\tau_{M}}\right) + L_{\infty},$$

with $L_{i}$ the initial tongue length, $L_{e}$ the final tongue length expected in the absence of gas leakage, $t_{i}$ the time at which the pressure was applied, $\tau_{M}$ the characteristic relaxation time of the compressible GV (Eq. 15), and $L_{\infty}$ the aspiration velocity in the pipette.

We also observed on many occasions that GV prepared with an initial protein concentration of 0.067 mg mL$^{-1}$ presented a fragmentation of their tongue in the pipette during their aspiration (SI Appendix, Fig. S7). That phenomenon is called budding. It has been mentioned for GUVs and polymer-coated bubbles and is known to be caused by the minimization of the bending energy (48, 49).

### Role of Compressibility

With the fit $L(t)$, we can obtain the value of $L_{0}$, which leads to a derivation of the dilatation modulus $E_{d}^{s}$. According to Eq. 14, $L_{e}$ is given by the classical model for incompressible capsules with an effective dilatation modulus

$$E_{d}^{s} = \frac{R_{c}^{3} \left(\Delta \rho - \Delta \rho_{c}\right)}{L_{i} \left(1 - e^{-t/\tau_{M}}\right)}.$$  

We find average values of 0.18 N m$^{-1}$ (from 0.01 to 0.91 N m$^{-1}$, $n = 22$) and 0.32 N m$^{-1}$ (from 0.14 to 1.38 N m$^{-1}$, $n = 18$) for liquid-like and glassy bubbles, respectively.

From $E_{d}^{s}$, according to Eq. 14, we can derive the elastic modulus $E_{d}^{s}$, that is larger than $E_{d}^{s}$, with average values $E_{d}^{s}$ of 0.24 N m$^{-1}$ (from 0.01 to 1.87 N m$^{-1}$, $n = 22$, Fig. 6A) and 0.40 N m$^{-1}$ (from 0.16 to 1.92 N m$^{-1}$, $n = 18$, Fig. 6A). With these values of $E_{d}^{s}$, we can estimate the increase $\Delta L_{e}$ of the tongue due to the compressibility from Eq. 14.

$$\frac{\Delta L_{e}}{L_{e}} \cong \frac{4E_{d}^{s}}{3R_{p}} \approx 0.09$$

for liquid GV and 0.16 for glassy GV, which shows that the compressibility should be considered. This is due to the high rigidity of the coating, giving rise to a large membrane tension compressing the bubble.

The values of $E_{d}^{s}$ are high, but it makes sense giving the high pressures of at least 12 kPa needed to aspirate the GV. We can notice that a few articles reporting elastic properties of similar systems are comparable to ours. First, millimetric bubbles coated with HBFI were found to have an area compression modulus evolving between 0.16 and 2 N m$^{-1}$ using wrinkle analysis of a pendant capsule (analysis based on the formation of wrinkles on the surface of the protein membrane as the capsule is deflated) (29). Second, the surface expansion modulus of polymer-coated air bubbles has been reported using the classical model for incompressible systems (49). Depending on the polymer used, values from 0.075 to 0.65 N m$^{-1}$ have been reported which are also quite similar to those presented in our work. Finally, HBFI monolayers at air/water interface have been studied using the surface shear rheology, and a surface shear elasticity $G'$ equal to 0.7 N m$^{-1}$ has been determined (17).

With $E_{d}^{s}$ and the characteristic time $\tau_{M}$ found using the fit, we determine an average surface viscosity $\eta_{s}$ of 3.2 mN s m$^{-1}$ for liquid-like bubbles (from 0.06 to 8.7 mN s m$^{-1}$, $n = 22$, Fig. 6B) and 8.9 mN s m$^{-1}$ for glassy bubbles (from 0.4 to 24.9 mN s m$^{-1}$, $n = 18$, Fig. 6B) using the equation $\eta_{s} = \frac{E_{d}^{s} \tau_{M} R_{p}^{2}}{4R_{c}^{3}}$. Since we determined the thickness of the hydrophobin membrane, we can approximate a bulk rigidity and a bulk viscosity. Considering the membrane thickness $\epsilon = 2.7 \pm 0.4$ nm ($n = 8$) determined by cryo-TEM, we obtain rigidities $E = E_{d}^{s}/\epsilon - 8.9 \times 10^{10}$ Pa and 1.5 $10^{11}$ Pa, as well as bulk viscosities $\eta = \eta_{s}/\epsilon - 1.2$ $10^{7}$ Pa s and 3.3 $10^{7}$ Pa s for liquid-like and glassy GV, respectively. By comparison, we have

![Fig. 5. Behavior of the aspirated GV over time (n = 83). Either they show a liquid-like behavior (no apparent deformation, blue dots, and area), or a glassy behavior (they remain deformed, green rectangles, and area). The brown-dashed line corresponds to the fit Eq. 30.](image-url)
$E^*_d$ (glassy) $= 1.7 E^*_d$ (liquid) and $\eta_s$ (glassy) $= 2.8 \eta_s$ (liquid). These results indicate significantly higher mechanical properties of glassy GV compared to the liquid-like one, which can be explained if we consider that glassy GV have a denser protein network than their liquid-like counterpart. This is in agreement with the higher coating density of glassy GV.

For comparison, our average values of $\eta_s$ are similar to that of giant liquid crystal polymersomes using the micropipette aspiration technique where 4.0 and 7.9 mN s m$^{-1}$ have been found (50). Also, Cox et al. reported surface shear viscosities $G'' = 0.2$ N m$^{-1}$ (for $7.5 \times 10^{-2}$ mg mL$^{-1}$ and $\omega = 1$ Hz) and 0.04 N m$^{-1}$ (for $0.75$ mg mL$^{-1}$ and $\omega = 1$ Hz) that are 1 order higher than our values (17).

Permeation of GV. Measuring the aspiration velocity $\dot{L}_\infty$, the micropipette aspiration technique allows us to determine the permeability of gas across hydrophobin membranes. This method is convenient because it can be determined along with $E^*_d$ and $\eta_s$ and does not require additional experiments.

As demonstrated previously, the permeation parameter can be determined using Eq. 26 $\dot{L}_\infty = \frac{4P_m\delta(\Delta P - \Delta P_c)}{kT}$ assuming $Q > 1$, where $\delta$ is the volume of a gas molecule inside the bubble. If we approximate the C$_4$F$_{10}$ volume to 35 nm$^3$ ($\rho = 11.21$ kg m$^{-3}$ and $M_w = 238.028$ g mol$^{-1}$), we obtain average permeabilities of 1.5 $10^{-7}$ m s$^{-1}$ for liquid-like GV (from 5.5 $10^{-9}$ to 1.9 $10^{-6}$ m s$^{-1}$, $n = 18$, Fig. 6D) and 1.3 $10^{-8}$ m s$^{-1}$ for glassy GV (from 1.6 $10^{-9}$ to 4.5 $10^{-8}$ m s$^{-1}$, $n = 18$, Fig. 6D). It shows that liquid GV are more permeable than glassy GV as expected by our model on the dynamics of protein adsorption. In comparison with the literature, our average values are three to four orders of magnitude lower to that obtained for vesicles with aquaporin pores ($6.6 \times 10^{-5} \pm 1.5 \times 10^{-5}$ m s$^{-1}$) (51). It is also equivalent to the porosity of (liquid-filled) polymersomes where the porosity varies mainly between $10^{-9}$ and $10^{-6}$ m s$^{-1}$ depending on the systems studied (50, 52, 53). Considering that polymersomes are usually made of several layers of charged polyelectrolyte while in our case the membrane is made of a single layer of protein, it means that our protein membrane has a pretty good impermeability, which is very interesting considering the echogenic applications we are aiming at.

To check the model of permeation, we vary the medium viscosity and aspirate GV either in distilled water or a glycerol solution (50% w/w in distilled water). We measure the viscosity of distilled water

![Fig. 6. Main characteristics of the liquid-like and glassy GV calculated using the pipette aspiration technique. (A) Elastic modulus $E^*_d$ ($n = 22$ for liquid-like GV and $n = 18$ for solid-like GV), (B) surface viscosity $\eta_s$ ($n = 22$ and 18), (C) sealing parameter $Q$ ($n = 18$ and 18), and (D) permeability $P_m$ ($n = 18$ and 18). For the sake of visualization, the two highest $P_m$ points for liquid-like GV are not represented.](https://www.pnas.org/content/10.1073/pnas.2211509120)
and the glycerol solution, and we obtain values of $\eta_{water} = 0.92$ mPa s and $\eta_{glycerol} = 6.5$ mPa s (SI Appendix). We determine the permeability from the velocity of extrusion given by Eq. 26. The average value of $P_M$ is $2.910^{-9}$ m s$^{-1}$ (from $1.610^{-9}$ to $5.210^{-9}$ m s$^{-1}$, $n = 9$) and is significantly lower than the median value obtained in distilled water.

Since $P_M = \frac{\eta L}{\sqrt{4\pi L^2}}$, we expect to obtain values of $P_M$ that about 7 times higher in water than in the glycerol solution. We found $P_M$ (water, liquid) = 52 $P_M$ (glycerol) and $P_M$ (water, glassy) = 5 $P_M$ (glycerol). This decrease of the permeability in glycerin confirms our model and is strongest than expected, which may be explained by a modification of the protein coating in glycerin.

Materials and Methods

Materials. HFBI hydrophobin protein is produced and purified as described in Linder et al. (21). C$_4$F$_{10}$ 98% (CAS 355-25-9) was purchased from ABCR (Karlsruhe, Germany). Water was purified using a Milli-Q system (Millipore) with resistivity around 18.2 MQ cm.

Formation of Bubbles. The bubbles used in this study were created by a mechanical agitation method. The desired amount of HFBI (0.02, 0.067, or 0.2 mg) was solubilized in 1 mL of phosphate buffering saline (1×) placed inside a 2.5 mL glass vial. The vial was sealed using an aluminum cap and a septum, and the air inside was replaced with C$_4$F$_{10}$ using a 50 mL Hamilton syringe. The vial was placed in a VialMix shaker (Lantheus) and agitated for 45 s, forming a white-colored suspension consisting of micro- and nanobubbles (SI Appendix, Fig. S1).

Cryo-TEM. A 5 µL droplet of nanosized bubble dispersion was deposited onto a plasma-treated lacy carbon-coated copper grid (Electron Microscopy Sciences). The droplet was blotted with filter paper, plunged into liquid ethane (–170 °C) using an automatic plunge freezer (EM GP2, Leica), and stored in liquid nitrogen. The samples were inspected using a JEM-3200FSC (JEOL) microscope with an accelerating voltage of 300 kV, and images were acquired using Digital Micrograph software (Gatan, version 1.83.442).

AFM. The AFM measurements were carried out using a Dimension Icon AFM (Bruker AXS, France; formerly Veeco) with ScanAsyst-air cantilevers (sharp silicon nitride tips with a nominal radius of 2 nm for PeakForce Tapping in air). The scan size was set to 100 nm × 100 nm with a resolution of 256 pixels × 256 pixels, and the scanning was performed with a scan rate of 1 kHz. ScanAsyst Auto control was set to “individual” for the sample with PeakForce Amplitude of 170 nm. The spring constant and peak force frequencies were 0.4 N m$^{-1}$ and 2 kHz for all samples. Individual scans for each sample were taken at multiple locations on the surface.

Sample Preparation for AFM. A 100 µL droplet of HFBI solution (0.2 mg mL$^{-1}$) was placed on a parafilm substrate for about 1 h to get a flattened area on the top of the droplet and confirm that we had a monolayer at the interface. After that, a highly ordered pyrolytic graphite substrate was brought into contact with the top of the droplet. The substrate with the hydrophobin monolayer was gently washed with 200 mL of Milli-Q water. The sample was placed on the AFM stage, and we waited for about 30 min to ensure that the sample was dry. Finally, the sample was imaged.

Cryo-TEM.AFM. The AFM measurements were carried out using a Dimension Icon AFM (Bruker AXS, France; formerly Veeco) with ScanAsyst-air cantilevers (sharp silicon nitride tips with a nominal radius of 2 nm for PeakForce Tapping in air). The scan size was set to 100 nm × 100 nm with a resolution of 256 pixels × 256 pixels, and the scanning was performed with a scan rate of 1 kHz. ScanAsyst Auto control was set to “individual” for the sample with PeakForce Amplitude of 170 nm. The spring constant and peak force frequencies were 0.4 N m$^{-1}$ and 2 kHz for all samples. Individual scans for each sample were taken at multiple locations on the surface.

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Surface Tension and Surface Dilatational Rheology. Measurements of the surface tension and mechanical properties of the HFBI adsorbed layer were carried out using an optical tensiometer (Theta tensiometer, Biolin Scientific, Finland), and the obtained data were analyzed using the instrument software (OneAttention). A hooked needle filled with C$_4$F$_{10}$ using a Hamilton syringe was immersed in a solution of HFBI (0.01 mg mL$^{-1}$). Then, a 10 µL gas bubble was created on the needle tip, and the bubble was monitored for about 3 h until the surface tension reached a steady state. At that point, the static surface tension was measured by applying a sinusoidal volume disruption using an integrated pulsed droplet module (PD-200, Biolin Scientific, Finland). The change in bubble volume was monitored for 40 s (SI Appendix, Table S2).

Density and Viscosity Measurements. Density measurements of distilled water (as a reference) and a glycerol solution (50% w/w in distilled water) were performed in triplicate using a handheld density meter (Mettler Toledo, DensitPro model) (SI Appendix, Table S3).

The viscosity of these solutions was then measured using a homemade setup consisting of a piezoelectric pressure controller (OBO MK3, Elveflow) connected to a balance via a reservoir. The reservoir was filled with the solution to be characterized and connected to the balance via a tubing inside a glass vial placed on the balance. The flow rate $Q$ of the liquid was deduced by observing the increase in mass of the vial after a 30 s increase in pressure in the reservoir and using the density of the solution. Pressures of 125 Pa were applied for distilled water and 500 Pa for the glycerol solution using Elveflow pressure controller (software ESI v3.06.05). Measurements were performed at room temperature ($T = 23 ± 1$ °C) and were repeated 15 times for each solution. The flow rate was then used to determine the viscosity of the solution using the Hagen–Poiseuille equation

$$\eta_L = \frac{\Delta P \pi r^4}{8 L Q},$$

where $\Delta P$ is the applied pressure, $r$ is the radius of the tubing, and $L$ is the length of the tubing (SI Appendix, Table S4).

Pipette Aspiration Setup and Microscopy. Micropipettes were prepared by pulling borosilicate capillaries (WPI, 1 mm/0.5 mm outer/inner diameter) using a puller (PN-31, Narishige). Afterward, the micropipettes were sized to a few micrometers in diameter and bent using a microforge (MF-900, Narishige) to introduce the pipette horizontally in the observation chamber. The pipette was connected through tubing to a water tank attached to the piezoelectric pressure controller mentioned previously and then filled with water. The observation chamber was made of two glass coverslips separated with a few layers of parafilm and was filled with the solution containing the bubbles. The micropipette was brought into contact with a GGV (HFBI-coated microbubble) and a negative pressure was applied, resulting in the suction of the microbubble with the formation of a tongue of liquid ($L(t)$). The experiments were performed at room temperature ($T = 23 ± 1$ °C), and aspirated microbubbles were visualized with an inverted microscope (Nikon Eclipse Ti). Bright-field images were recorded with a cSOMOS camera (ZYIla-4.2 CL10, Andor) at a time interval between 0.2 and 1 s and operated using μManager (2.0 beta) open-source microscopy software (SI Appendix, Table S1 and S5).

Conclusion.

The mechanical properties and stability of GVs are crucial as they play a fundamental role in therapeutic and diagnostic techniques as contrast agents for ultrasound imaging. In addition, they can be used as a drug and oxygen cargo for therapy. It has also been shown that they can serve as agents for cell destruction and tissue disruption through ultrasound-induced inertial cavitation (54). This property is enabled by GV produced by bacteria, which are protein nanostructures filled with gas to achieve cellular buoyancy. They have given rise to bacterial therapies since the genes that encode GV can be expressed in mammalian cells. The GV studied here are not protein nanostructures but microstructures, which allows to study their mechanical properties. It will also be interesting to form GV with proteins from bacteria.

We have demonstrated that the hydrophobin-coated bubbles formed here have improved mechanical properties, which will enable them to be used for echogenic applications. Their stability is ensured by the adsorption of proteins at the liquid–gas interface. This surface film can be in the liquid or solid state depending on the amount of hydrophobin adsorbed at the interface. In the first case, the surface tension can be measured by the hanging drop technique by analyzing its shape. Alternatively, the response of the surface tension $\sigma (V, \omega)$ to a periodic modulation of the volume of the bubble can be measured. This allows to highlight the viscoelastic properties of the surface film from the phase shift between the volume change and the response of the protein film tension.

We show here that the micropipette aspiration technique is the most efficient because it allows the study of GV in both liquid and glassy states. If the film is glassy, it presents a transition to a liquid state if a stress higher than a yield stress is applied to it. It corresponds to a threshold suction pressure above which the GV enters the pipette in a liquid state, forming a sleeve that adapts the shape of the pipette. In all cases, the vesicles penetrate only if $\Delta P$ is larger than the Laplace threshold $\Delta P_C (\sigma_0)$. Contrary to the suction of simple bubbles or liquid drops, the GV penetrates only partially because the membrane tension increases with the size of the sleeve, and the penetration stops when $\Delta P = \Delta P_C (\sigma_0)$. In the glassy case, the tongue penetration is achieved under both conditions (σ larger
than the yield stress and the aspiration Laplace pressure threshold) are met. When the aspiration is stopped, the bubble becomes glassy again and keeps its shape. It can be resorbed by sucking the deformed vesicle beyond the yield stress. We have discovered a new regime where a very long tongue is formed at ultra-fast velocity. It corresponds to the aspiration of gas from the glassy vesicles. In this case, the stress acting on the protein shell is smaller than the yield stress and larger than the Laplace pressure to aspirate a bubble of gas. This extraction of gas from solid GV may have applications in ultrasound-induced inertial cavitation.

GGV aspiration was modeled by introducing both gas compressibility and film permeability. We demonstrate that pressure build-up in the gas increases the order of 12%, which is not negligible due to the high value of the dilatation modulus $\frac{4\varepsilon}{3kR_0}$. In addition, membrane permeability gives rise to new laws relating the membrane tension to the applied pressure.

Thanks to the model, we were able to measure the static and dynamic properties of the interfacial film: its elastic stretch modulus, its viscosity, and its porosity.

We have shown that the membrane tension $\sigma$ is not always given by the Laplace formula relating the tension $\Delta P^t$ to the radius $R$. We defined the sealing parameter $Q$ that separates two regimes of low and high porosity, where the bubble tension almost vanishes in the steady-state regime. It would be interesting to investigate the case of more porous systems, either by varying the mesh size of the surface protein network, or by looking at the case of Pickering bubbles where the pores have sizes comparable to the size of the particles adsorbed at the interface.

Finally, the mechanical properties we were able to measure indicate that the GV developed in this project can be used as a multifunctional platform for both targeting for molecular imaging and for drug delivery after modification of the shell with specific targeting agents.

**Data, Materials, and Software Availability.** All study data are included in the article and/or SI Appendix.

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Author affiliations: *Department of Applied Physics, Aalto University School of Science, Espoo, Aalto FI-00076, Finland; *VTT Technical Research Centre of Finland Ltd., Espoo, FI-02044 VTT, Finland; †Institut Curie, Université Paris Sciences et Lettres, Sorbonne Université, CNRS UMR168, Laboratoire Physico Chimie Curie, Paris 75005, France; and ‡Department of Bioproducts and Biosystems, Aalto University School of Chemical Engineering, Espoo, Aalto FI-00076, Finland