



**AN ARTISTIC AUTOETHNOGRAPHY
ON THE PUBLIC FETUS**

FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES

Anna Gonzalez Suero



'This is a fascinating story of how an artist's keen eye translates a deep cultural understanding of the public fetus into an image needing deconstructing, politicizing and a controversial re-think. The story is heartwarming, believable and engaging.'

—**Elizabeth Ettore**, *Emerita Professor of Sociology,
University of Liverpool, UK*

'*An Artistic Autoethnography on the Public Fetus* takes the reader on a series of imaginative, surprising and thought-provoking journeys. The image of the fetus and the practices of ultrasound on non-pregnant bodies provide entry points into a diverse range of topics: creativity and how it can be blocked; debates around reproductive rights; explorations of hybridity and liminality in relation to the self and others. Ultimately, Gonzalez Suero finds both critical and creative possibilities in her autoethnography, revealing new feminist perspectives on the image of the fetus, and a deeper understanding of the artistic process.'

—**Catherine Grant**, *Reader of Modern and Contemporary Art,
Courtauld Institute of Art, UK*



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An Artistic Autoethnography on the Public Fetus

An Artistic Autoethnography on the Public Fetus explores artistic work with the iconic image of the fetus and the personal consequences of the image by analyzing the so-called public fetus within a feminist approach.

This book develops a deeply interdisciplinary body of research, engaging with feminist debates on reproductive technology and imagery, art theory, visual histories of anatomical imagery, cultural critiques of the myth of the artistic genius, Gestalt understandings of perception and memory, and anthropological theories of liminality. Through blurring the artistic with the scientific, it explores the potential of autoethnography to serve as a form of conscious raising through which to create new images and stories that counter the public fetus in support of reproductive autonomy and social justice.

This book will be useful to feminist scholars who work with issues related to gender, reproduction, sexuality, and autoethnography. At the same time, the book will be of value to undergraduate and graduate students in gender studies as an example of how an autoethnographic process can make unrecognized experiences of gender known to a person.

Anna Gonzalez Suero is an artistic autoethnographer working in an interdisciplinary way to expand on feminist theories of the body.



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An Artistic Autoethnography on the Public Fetus

Feminist Perspectives

Anna Gonzalez Suero

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1 Introduction

Opening again a closed box

One morning in 2019 I found my box with fetus forms.

When I opened the box, I wanted to see and feel them again. I had been carrying cardboard boxes from one corner of my bedroom to the other, when I decided to open this box that was not labeled. Inside of this box I found some of my fetus forms made of paper and wood.

Up until a few months before, I had had lots of them on my desk. There are still some hanging on the walls of my apartment. Over the years I have worked with the iconic image of the fetus, creating artistic variations of this form in videos, photographs, drawings, and collages. I have exhibited this work in art galleries, some of which I have sold. Most people identify my work by this form. I am among the few artists whose work incorporates this form. It is not that my work contains the form, my work is the fetus form.

The artistic fetus forms I found in this box were some of my earliest variations of the iconic image of the fetus. I had not seen them in a long time and had partly forgotten about them. On my knees on the floor next to the box, I looked at these paper cut-outs for a while. They looked very used, and then I started thinking about how I had used them in the past. How often I had traced around their worn edges to create new forms. The texture of the paper was particularly smooth, almost slippery. I remembered the art supplies store where I had purchased this special kind of paper. I also remembered another detail about the tiny scissors I had used to cut into and through the paper. Looking at these paper cut-outs, which I had held so many times in the past, I still felt the drive to make more variations of them. But at the same time, I felt the impossibility of creating another one. I had thought about the deeply political nature of the iconic image of the fetus. I also had learned more about the complex and conflictual history of the iconic image I had been working with for years. But then I got stuck. Eventually, I had to place my practice on hold. As I stopped my entire artmaking practice, I started the autoethnographic process of this book. I wanted to understand my situation.

Can we walk the rest?

“I won’t be doing any art for now. I will stop making art.”

“Why? No!” she says to me.

This morning in 2019 I’m jogging with an artist friend on the east side of the German city of Cologne.

“Why?” she asks again.

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Until now I have always known that I am an artist. But for some time I have been feeling incapable of creating art. I have enjoyed making art for many years. I have studied art at well-known universities, and I have shown my work at exhibitions. But I can't continue with this.

"Yes," I say. "I think it's for the better."

I know that now is not the right time to tell her about it, but I tell her anyway. We are jogging, as we often do, along the Rhine River.

"This isn't good for you. Now tell me why."

"I have to stop, I don't know why, it's a feeling."

"What kind of feeling?"

"A feeling I can't describe."

"Remember," she says, "what you told me when we had our exhibition in Berlin? You also had doubts back then. And then everything was fine."

"I had my doubts, but not like this," I tell her.

"But after the opening of our exhibition you felt much better."

"This is different, I'm not sure what it is."

"Can we walk the rest?" she asks.

"Oh no," I answer. "Let's at least reach the bridge."

I like jogging with her even though she runs slowly. She is very slow. Sometimes our jogging pace is more of a walking pace. We joke about it sometimes, about how she's moving at a snail's pace.

"Come on, let's get going!"

It took us some minutes to reach the bridge. We look up at the stairs and I say to her, "Come on, don't walk up this time, continue running up the stairs."

"Okay," she says, "if you really want."

I hear her heavy breathing while we are running up. When we reach the top of the stairs, we continue jogging down the long bridge over the river.

"Why didn't you tell me earlier?" my friend asks me.

"Let's not talk about it right now, okay?"

We are on a six-lane bridge. There's always traffic on the Mülheim Bridge. While jogging on the walkway I can smell the stinky exhaust fumes coming from the cars and trucks. This bridge is rusty at some parts. I think the city should repaint it.

"So when do you want to talk about it?" she asks.

"Please not now," I say.

"Why not? When, if not now?"

To stop art is not a rational decision. My decision is based on a strong feeling. I have really tried to get over this feeling. But I can't get rid of it. I can't make art anymore.

"You know you can talk to me about anything," she says after a while and slows down.

"Hey we're jogging," I say and pick up my pace.

I simply want to keep moving. But I ask myself whether I'm acting distant again. I don't know how to talk about it. The last project I made was four years ago. Since then, I have not made any new work, except for a short video clip.

I say again, "I have to stop my art now."

We are halfway over the bridge. I see the river below us and notice how much water is flowing down the river. A container ship is passing by. The ship is moving with the current of the river to the north.

"No, you can't do this," she says to me once more, this time out of breath. The cars are now so loud that we have to shout at each other while jogging down this bridge.

"Watch out for the bike," I shout back at her and move toward her to leave room for a cyclist.

We reach the end of the bridge and stop. Standing there for a moment, we look back at the other side of town, the side we were just on. I have to go back now. We live on opposite sides of the river.

"It means a lot to you," my friend tells me.

"What do you mean?" I ask her.

"Art," she says.

As always, we hug each other. I turn around and start jogging back.

I thought I should go deeper into one thing

People were always impressed when I told them I was studying art at Cooper Union in New York. This art school had and still has a huge reputation in the art world. And so people were surprised when I told them I wanted to leave that art school.

At Cooper Union, as part of the foundation program, there was the cardboard box project. We had to build a box, or some sort of a closed form, out of cardboard. It was a requirement for first-year art students. The professor who gave us this assignment used words like simplicity and harmony when he spoke about it.

At the time I was living in an on-campus dorm with three other students in a small room with two bunk beds. The Resident Hall in which I lived had a communal working area. In the dorm there was no space to work on the cardboard box project. My professor didn't call it a box. He spoke of a three-dimensional form. But I thought of it as a box. We would receive a grade depending on how well we could follow the criteria of the project.

I didn't know how to proceed. Cardboard as a material intrigued me. But I remember that I wanted the material to speak to me rather than me telling the material what to do. Forcing this material to take the form of a box was not the way I wanted to explore my creativity. When I moved there from Miami, I had not expected such a formal assignment.

My sketches were expressive, rendered in an abstract style. In my sketches there was no box. On the night before the deadline I felt unprepared. Sitting in the communal working area, I still could not imagine my box. I cut many small pieces of cardboard and drank coffee. I made a mess. I could not put the pieces together as the professor had asked us. I stayed up all night trying to close my box.

The next morning I arrived late to class. My professor spoke about the beauty of form and then he looked at the hole in my box. He tapped it with his foot and said that it was not good. I consequently got a bad grade for this box. This was a frustrating experience.

I already had my own box before moving to New York. Back in Miami, I had spent my teenage years carrying around my art box full of many materials and I was always making art with my then best friend. We connected with each other through art. We didn't think of our art in terms of good or bad.

My early experiences of artistic creation came close to daydreaming, often getting lost in the process. I didn't have the art world in mind until I started attending art school. Only then did I start asking myself questions like: Who is my audience? How shall I present myself as an artist? As an art student, I began to view my teenage experiences of artmaking as romantic and naive.

In my teenage years, I could not imagine studying anything else but art. I wanted to be experimental. I felt I could better express myself with visual images rather than with written or spoken language. I remember how much I wanted to go to art school when I was a