



**University of Brighton**

**SUSAN DIAB**

**AUTOETHNOS**

Understanding autoethnography in sculptural  
practice and exhibition

# RESEARCH OUTPUT



***Autoethnos: Stories from the Self***  
C&C Gallery, Forest Hill, London  
April - July 2018  
Exhibition view towards entrance

**Autoethnos** comprised an exhibition of artefacts curated by Susan Diab in 2018, displaying four original autoethnographically informed sculptures by Diab herself and work by artists Caroline Pick and Isobel Smith.

The exhibition *Autoethnos: Stories from the Self* was held at the C&C Gallery, Forest Hill, London, April-July 2018 <https://ccgallery.co.uk/current-3/> Diab also convened a symposium, 29 April 2018, exploring autoethnography and the comparative uses of word-based creativity and visual or haptic creation. She further disseminated findings at 'Re-imagining Experience', the Fifth British Autoethnography conference in 2018.

The curation and sculptures investigated the possibility and value of non-narrative forms of autoethnography and developed insight into autoethnographic practices in relation to object and material cultures.

The sculptures Diab produced for the exhibition were:

1. 'Tie-tongued'. Wall relief: silk ties, paper, inkjet photo, 150cm diameter.
2. 'Fur Cue'. Snooker cue, fur (found material), iron fixings, 140cm.
3. 'Tripot'. Fired earthenware shards from slip cast teapots tied together with string, displayed in perspex wall-mounted case, 40 x 30 x 30cm.
4. 'Motherboard' (renamed in December 2018, original name 'One Way of Understanding the World'): MDF, wool blanket, laser-cut acrylic, 200 x 150 cm.

# Autoethnos



***Autoethnos: Stories from the Self***  
C&C Gallery, Forest Hill, London  
April - July 2018  
Exhibition entrance

# Autoethnos



**Tie-Tongued**

Susan Diab

Silk ties, paper, inkjet photo  
150cm diameter

# Autoethnos



**Fur Cue**  
Susan Diab  
Snooker cue, fur  
(found material), iron fixings  
140cm

**Tripot**  
Susan Diab  
Fired earthenware shards from  
slip-cast teapots tied  
together with string, displayed  
in perspex wall-mounted case  
40x30x30cm

# Autoethnos



**Motherboard**  
Susan Diab  
MDF wool blanket,  
laser-cut acrylic  
200cm x 150 cm

# Autoethnos



(top) **Dirt's Eye View I, II and III**  
Isobel Smith

(bottom) **Nataraja**  
Caroline Pick

# RESEARCH QUESTIONS



***Autoethnos: Stories from the Self***  
C&C Gallery  
April - July 2018  
Exhibition entrance  
and Tie-Tongued, Susan Diab

**Diab's practice as an autoethnographer, sculptor and curator has emerged from her earlier work in language studies and narrative.**

Recognising that autoethnographic practices encourage and allow for restoring, she questions the relationship between word-based or visual narratives and more tacit understandings gained from artefacts. This applies both to the activity of practitioners and the curation of the works that emerge from practice.

She articulated two questions in particular:

- How can autoethnographic research processes translate into the making of new visual artworks for exhibition in a public space?
- What happens when physical materials, rather than words, are worked upon autoethnographically?

# RESEARCH CONTEXT

**Diab's curated exhibition symposium (29 April 2018) was introduced by Dr Alec Grant, editor of *Contemporary British Autoethnography and International Perspectives on Autoethnographic Research and Practice* (Short, Turner and Grant, 2013), who outlined the nature of the research methodology and considered the spectrum of current knowledge and practice.**

Autoethnography is a form of inquiry that connects the autobiographical and personal to the cultural and social in ways that prize subjectivity, emotionality and voice. It has its roots in a range of critical enquiry approaches employing qualitative methods and offers a means to scrutinise and critique experience that may be overlooked as banal elements of existence. It offers a framework through which culturally excluded and marginalised cultures can challenge master narratives.

Historically, it has predominantly favoured narrative approaches and text-based forms. For example Adams, Jones and Ellis's survey of the field, *Autoethnography: Understanding Qualitative Research* (2015) concentrates entirely on writing practices. Grant has also identified how 'autoethnography needs to broaden out from an almost exclusive focus on narrative/text-based work' (Holman Jones, 2013). This development of autoethnography as an expanded field has opened up the repertoire of possibility both for sculptural practice and autoethnography.

In *Vibrant Matter*, Bennett stressed the need to rewrite the language of materialism: 'I have come to see how radical a project it is to think vital materiality. It seems necessary and impossible to rewrite the default grammar of agency, a grammar that assigns activity to people and passivity to things' (Bennett, 2010: 119). Within the field of visual media, photography has been used as an autoethnographic medium (Suominen, 2004; Cosier, 2008), while Denshire and Lee (2013) posit autoethnography as 'assemblage' or a bringing together of otherwise disparate elements within occupational therapy practice. The practice context for Diab included styles of autoethnography and creative autobiography used for elucidation of large-scale issues (Forker, 2007), health and inclusion art practices including that of Sussex artist Tony Gammidge <https://www.tonygammidge.com> and animation as a tool for self-inquiry (Blair, 2015).

Within the discipline of sculpture, autoethnography has been used as a tool to understand and evaluate a sculptor's work (Martineau, 2001), and been used alongside participant interviews to demonstrate the structural possibilities and metaphoric potential of materials (Pape, 2018). Pape's work from the same year as *Autoethnos* reinforces findings through some similarities but focuses on processes rather than finished forms and their exhibition.

The engagement of the human with the actuality of matter was central to all the work in *Autoethnos*; the actuality of being in the flesh in the same space with the artwork, rather than encountering it in or as documentation. With *Autoethnos*, Diab sought to connect her prior written autoethnographies with her fine art sculpture and visual art origins. She made the decision not to use writing as a way to illuminate experience, returning rather to intuitive making processes and using visual forms alone to convey the autoethnographies or 'stories from the self'. Diab drew on this to develop an understanding of the relationships between fine art practice and its exhibited form, the autoethnographer's non-narrative creation and the ways in which this leads to improved understanding of the autoethnographic methodology.

# RESEARCH PROCESS

**The exhibition *Autoethnos* was devised and developed by Diab as a collaborative group show that would allow the artists, individually and collectively, to examine the nature of autoethnographic art forms and the cultural systems in which they might operate.**

Diab invited two other artist-sculptors to work with her, Caroline Pick and Isobel Smith. Pick's background in yoga and sculpture is underpinned by a commitment to intuitive processes in the making of art, combined with a knowledge of and curiosity about autoethnography. Smith, graduated from the RCA's Performance-Sculpture pathway, has a sculpture-performative practice.

The project concept had material making as its starting point but was motivated by a wish to show the wider social relevance of the individual's experiences. The process of making involved visits to each other's studios and places where the artists made work, gave active critical feedback about the stages of the development of the work.

The artists working on *Autoethnos* discovered that studio play with materials formed the basis for the autoethnographic investigation. The specific nature of the individual experiences was not made explicit, either as a starting point for making work nor in the accompanying textual material within the exhibition. This was so as not to foreclose viewers' interpretations either of the individual works or of their meaning in relation to each other within the exhibition. The individual experiences and stories of the artists were transformed into material form and were then further transformed through the viewers' interpretations.

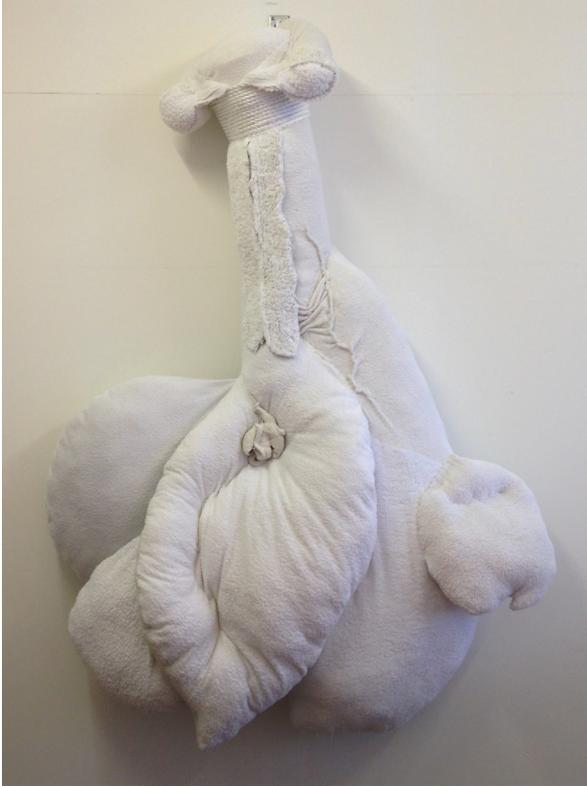
Using a direct, visual autoethnographic mode unmediated by text was an important and significant motive for *Autoethnos*. The visual aspect of the work was primarily brought into being for exhibition itself. As curator, Diab outlined the processes, aims and ideals of autoethnography to Pick and Smith. Thus a consciousness of autoethnography as understood by each of them permeated their respective approaches.

Significant experiences for Diab's own sculpture were her mother's death in 2016, psychotherapeutic counselling and new insights from work by Juliet Miller on the interrelationship between female creativity and anger (Miller, 2008) and Andrew Sparkes' work on allowing life events into one's autoethnographic practice and working with it as material.

Diab deliberately took a particular set of feelings into her processes of devising and then making objects out of physical materials and out of that the works came about. She became conscious of being both in the midst of the story she was trying to tell as well as in the role of storyteller and therefore set out, with this high level of difficulty, to see how those experiences could be re-imagined in visual ways and forms. Miller (2008) was key in explaining how feelings of rage and destructiveness, often central to the creative process can be problematic for some women making art where socialising processes have inhibited or blocked such feelings. Diab's research practice was, in part, a means to understand how these could be released and worked with. As well as a driving feeling of rage, at times threateningly overwhelming, another was a sense of betrayal causing physical symptoms of bodily pain and feelings of disintegration. She found ways to create for herself analogous sets of actions which she could carry out on objects relating to unfolding events, or as substitutes for protagonists, and exact force, in a range from gently persuasive shaping to violent destructiveness.

Diab cast teapots out of slip in a mould then squashed them out of shape. She then photographed these, drew over them then remade them as large-scale sculptures. The pattern of creation, destruction and rebuilding, of disintegration followed by rehabilitation resulted in Diab's sense as an artist that the work had begun to have a life of its own, leading the attentive artist to its own shape. She found that wrestling with material stuff was key to the process, as was working from a broken down place.

# Autoethnos



(top left) **Convergent form** (not exhibited)  
(top right, bottom left) **Studio development of 'One Way of Understanding the World'**  
(bottom right) **'One Way of Understanding the World'** exhibited under new title, **'Motherboard'**, Susan Diab

## Autoethnos



### **Tripot, exhibited work and developmental stages**

Susan Diab  
Fired earthenware shards from slip-cast teapots tied together with string, displayed in perspex wall-mounted case 40x30x30cm



# RESEARCH INSIGHTS

## **The exhibition brought insight into the ways the comparatively new method of autoethnography operates in non-narrative and non-textual forms.**

The visual works in *Autoethnos* were displayed without textual accompaniment other than the exhibition title. This resulted in discussion on the received meaning of the works when the symposium was conducted. Diab considered this as a collaborative suggestiveness in the mind of viewers. The transcript of the symposium includes, for example, one member's comment: 'I'm faced with things that are very familiar but that actually speak to me in a very unconscious level'. The audience's interpretation of the artefact thus became an important part of the dialogue between individual artistic activity and experience and the dynamics of a shared experience and the implications on culture.

Deeper understanding of the work arose from subsequent personal contemplation of the works after the exhibition's close, from viewing of the documentation photos of the exhibition, from later Open Studios discussions with visitors and other artists where the work was on show separate from the formally curated exhibition, for example at the Art Producing Economic Community (APEC) Open Studios on 7 December 2018.

The collaborative set of works and the process of exhibition led to a range of new understandings of how making and thought relate, how embodied practice encompasses and embraces entangled interrelating in so many new ways. This included new articulations in materialities, presences, existences in physical space, poetics of shape and form, texture and colour and how embodied processes of making work through materials is experienced by the artist and in the viewer and vice versa.

Diab recognised the difficulty of creating an artefact from the diversely-influenced set of thoughts and feelings she worked from. At the symposium, she spoke of the 'entangling and assembling of the human with the materials of which the work is made, the inter-responsiveness, unfathomability, the intensity of thought interfering in a making process, the ludicrousness of the notion of non-conceptual making.' Partly because of this, she

gained insight on the importance of the significance of the collaborative support of artists' friendships and supportive practice within autoethnography. Subjectivity under differing socio-political conditions had been allowed or discouraged in turn through the process, and was in keeping with prevailing narratives and structures. Diab recognised the dissonance of this, and the ways in which autoethnography emerged as a way of giving subjective work gravitas and import whilst also excavating the socio-political significance of subjectivity.

Diab and her collaborators gained insight into the ways the self operates as a number of selves during autoethnographic practice, where components of the self in psychic breakdown intermingle with the elements of other materials. They recognised a psychic transformation when working with materials whilst thinking through them and afterwards investigating what this meant. *Autoethnos* pointed to a reconfiguration of the terms of the notion of transformation, with psyche as part of the assemblage.

# DISSEMINATION

## ***Autoethnos: Stories from the Self***

Exhibition  
C&C Gallery  
April – July 2018  
12,000 visitors

C&C Gallery is part of Canvas & Cream. Built by the public as an artistic project, Canvas & Cream is a community hub at 18 London Road, Forest Hill London, SE23 3HF, combining a café, restaurant, events space, therapy room and is home to C&C Gallery. <https://ccgallery.co.uk/>

C&C Gallery is a contemporary art gallery that collaborates with curators, gallerists and artists to promote and exhibit work by emerging and mid-career artists, particularly those who share an interest in narrative, identity and personal and cultural histories. The programme attempts to address the under-representation of women artists within the mainstream artworld by providing young women artists with exhibition opportunities alongside more established artists.

## ***Autoethnos: Stories from the Self***

Symposium  
C&C Gallery  
29 April 2018  
Invited panel:  
Dr Joanna Gore, Director C&C Gallery  
Juliet Miller, Jungian psychoanalyst and writer  
Dr Alec Grant, independent scholar and autoethnographer  
Dr Jessica Moriarty, writer, and academic  
Exhibiting artists: Susan Diab, Caroline Pick and Isobel Smith

Diab, S. (2018) 'Autoethnos: stories from the self' a visual art exhibition and talk'. Session Nine: Sculpting an Artefact of Selves. *Re-imagining Experience: the Fifth British Autoethnography Conference*, Bristol, 23-24 July 2018. <http://boomerang-project.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Full-Programme-5-pages.pdf>



***Autoethnos: Stories from the Self***  
Showing artworks in the single room space

# REFERENCES

- Adams, T., Ellis, C. and Jones, S.L.H. (2015). *Autoethnography: Understanding Qualitative Research*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bennett, J. (2010) *Vibrant Matter*. Durham NC: Duke University Press.
- Blair, J. M. (2015) 'Animated autoethnographies: Stop motion animation as a tool for self-inquiry and personal evaluation'. *Art Education*, 67(2), pp. 6-13. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00043125.2014.11519259> (Accessed November 2020)
- Cosier, K. (2008) 'Gender, queers and teaching identity: The private and public lives of Adrienne/ Leo and the photographic journey of Rebecca Schmidt Kupietz'. *Journal of LGBT Youth*, 5(3), pp.4-10. [10.1080/19361650802162136](https://doi.org/10.1080/19361650802162136).
- Denshire, S. and Lee, A. (2013) 'Conceptualizing autoethnography as assemblage: Accounts of occupational therapy practice', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 12(1), pp. 221- 236. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/160940691301200110> (Accessed February 2020).
- Forker, M. (2007) 'The Role of Motherhood Symbols in the Conflict Imagery of Northern Ireland'. *Visual Culture & Gender*, 2. <http://vcg.emitto.net/index.php/vcg/article/view/21>
- Holman Jones, S., Adams, T.E. and Ellis, C. (2013) *Handbook of Autoethnography*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Martineau, J. (2001) 'Autoethnography and Material Culture: the Case of Bill Reid', *Biography*, 24(1) pp. 242-258. [www.jstor.org/stable/23540321](http://www.jstor.org/stable/23540321) (Accessed November 2020).
- Miller, J. (2008) *The Creative Feminine and her Discontents: Psychotherapy, Art and Destruction*. London: Karnac Books.
- Pape, K. S. (2018). *An autoethnographic approach to material as form and meaning in sculpture and printmaking*. M.A. Thesis. University of Witwatersrand. Available at: <http://wiredspace.wits.ac.za/handle/10539/27383> (Accessed November 2020)
- Reed-Danahay, D. E. (1997) *Auto/ethnography: Rewriting the Self and the Social*. Oxford: Berg.
- Short, N.P., Turner, L. and Grant, A. (2013) *Contemporary British Autoethnography and International Perspectives on Autoethnographic Research and Practice*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.
- Smith-Shank, D. and Keifer-Boyd, K. (2007) 'Autoethnography and Arts-Based Research'. *Visual Culture and Gender*, 2, pp.1-5.
- Sparkes, A.C. (2013) 'Autoethnography at the will of the body'. Short N.P., Turner L. and Grant A., eds. *Contemporary British Autoethnography. Studies in Professional Life and Work*. Rotterdam: SensePublishers. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-6209-410-9\\_13](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-6209-410-9_13)
- Suominen, A. (2004) *Writing with photographs, re-constructing self: an arts-based autoethnographic inquiry*. Ph.D. Thesis. Ohio State University. Available at: <https://jaselic.files.wordpress.com/2012/06/suominen-anniina.pdf> (Accessed February 2020)

## Photography credits

Bernard G Mills. Photography pages 1-10, 11 (bottom right), 12 (bottom), 16 and 18.

Susan Diab. Photography pages 11 (top, bottom left), 12 (top).

(overleaf)

**Tie-Tongued (detail)**

Susan Diab

Silk ties, paper, inkjet photo  
150cm diameter

# Autoethnos

