

Irene Lusztig

The Worry Box Project: An archive of maternal worries: an ongoing participatory archiving project

<http://worryboxproject.net/>

The first dreams in this project are my own. I am not in the habit of remembering or recording my dreams, but my dreams when I was pregnant astonished me: I dreamed of giving birth to nine-pound pears and of struggling to hold shape-shifting rabbit babies. As I started asking other women to share their pregnancy and early motherhood dreams, I found the familiarity of their dream worlds comforting: their dreams, like mine, were populated with funny and grotesque images of birthing litters of kittens, supermarket chickens, and shapeless bags of water.

Our dreams often speak the unspeakable: will I love my baby? What if my baby is deformed, sick, or abnormal? Will I be the same person after having a baby? Anxiety -- both in dreams and in waking life -- seems to be at the core of many of our experiences learning to be mothers. *The Worry Box Project* began as an attempt to archive, catalog, and make visible the anxieties that we are so often asked to suppress.

This participatory web project is based on the concept of a collective worry box. Visitors to the website are invited to submit, anonymously, a written worry (either an anxiety dream or a waking anxiety); visitors are also able to view the anxieties of other women, either in chronological order or grouped thematically by topic, category, or keyword tag. As anonymous anxieties are collected, I hand-transcribe each submission onto a sheet of paper that is placed inside an actual physical box. This participatory stage of the project is ongoing, updated regularly with new worries until the box is full. The handwriting process is documented on video, and the resulting videos are returned to cyberspace to be viewed online.

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Studies in the Maternal, 5 (2), 2013, www.mamsie.bbk.ac.uk

Inspired by public spaces of collective yearning and wishing rituals like the Wailing Wall and the Fontana di Trevi, I imagine this project as a revision of those spaces of hopeful iteration: posited against a contemporary motherhood culture that has become relentlessly optimistic and positive, the virtual worry box provides a safe public space for women to express private worries and negative feelings about motherhood, a taxonomy of our shared fears. By moving from the virtual, anonymous, and intangible to the embodied, concrete, and handmade, the project also contemplates issues of translation. The time-consuming process of writing and videotaping the anxieties invests each submitted text with the labor of craft and a kind of sustained attention different from the automated posting of text onto an online bulletin board or forum. The entire visual interface of the website gestures towards this idea of making the virtual embodied (buttons are literally buttons, frames are literally frames). The transformation of invisible anxiety into material object articulates a polyvocal narrative space of women's experience that is both intimate and communal.

Since launching this project two years ago, I have been able to contemplate my exercise in 'slow social media' in a more prolonged way, in terms of process and duration. The project requires patience (both on my part and on the part of my anonymous participants, who sometimes wait weeks before they see their submission appear on my site). As a busy mother who struggles to carve out time and space for art-making, there are months where all I am able to do in my creative life is this – reading, absorbing, processing, and transcribing the worries of other anonymous women. I find it strangely soothing. The work feels like an exercise in engaging deeply and meditatively with ideas of repetition, accumulation, waiting, and growth: sometimes ritualistic, sometimes boring -- not unlike mothering itself.

User Guide and Technical Specifications

This project requires a computer web browser with an up-to-date version of Flash installed. If your version of Flash needs to be updated to view the piece, the project will prompt you to do so. This project does not currently work in an iOS environment and will not work on many tablets or smartphones. This project uses streaming video intensively, and will work best on a computer with a high speed Internet connection. For optimal viewing, fullscreen mode and audio are recommended.

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To explore the project, open the box to enter. Use the side buttons to navigate the project as well as to submit your own waking or dreaming anxiety. Any text that you submit will be completely anonymous – there is no author information attached to any of the texts that I receive. Use the slider underneath the box to scroll through the project's history. Clicking on the paper scrolls inside the box will bring you into viewing mode where you can read the worries submitted by other participants (click on a paper scroll to open it), or browse the worries by category by using the measuring tape on the left.

Project Credits

Project concept, design, box, handwriting, and video by Irene Lusztig.

Technical collaboration and programming by Noah Pedrini.

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