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**Conservation through Conversation:
Material and Meaning in the Work of Dario Robleto**

Abstract

The art of contemporary artist Dario Robleto (b.1972) presents conservation challenges because he often uses historic material in his artworks, which is frequently transformed unrecognizably in the final design. The historic materials are thus divorced from any visible connection to their original context. Sensitive to this separation, Dario includes material lists, which he terms “liner notes,” that detail the origins of the artwork’s components. The final artwork is composed of two parts: an object and a written description of that object. It is an amalgam of transformed historic material that has both a new contemporary context represented visually and an original context represented in the liner notes. The conservation of his artwork must consider both the visual contemporary context and the written original context. Robleto’s method will be introduced, and the materials, technique, and conservation challenges of a single work, *A Defeated Soldier Wishes to Walk His Daughter Down the Wedding Aisle*, 2004, will be considered. Conservation solutions borne from interviews between the author and the artist conducted since 2013 will be presented.

Introduction

The art of contemporary artist Dario Robleto (b.1972) challenges conservation ethics and practice because he often uses historic and culturally sensitive material as the raw substance for his artworks. Often the historic materials are manipulated and transformed into an unrecognizable form. They are thus divorced from any visible connection to their original context. Sensitive to this separation, Robleto includes material lists, which he terms “liner notes,” that detail the origins of the artwork’s components and that are, according to the artist, as much a part of the artwork as the object itself. The final work is an amalgam of transformed historic material that has both a new contemporary context represented visually and an original context represented in the liner notes.

This paper will elucidate some intangible values in Robleto’s works in order to inform their future preservation. Robleto’s technique will be illustrated, with specific emphasis placed on the way in which he creates meaning through an incorporation of language. The materials, technique, and conservation challenges of a single work, *A Defeated Soldier Wishes to Walk His Daughter Down the Wedding Aisle*, 2004, will be considered in detail. Possible condition concerns of *A Defeated Soldier* will be presented and possible treatment solutions, brought about through interviews with the artist conducted by the author from 2013-2014, will be identified.

Robleto received his Bachelor of Fine Arts from the University of Texas at San Antonio with an emphasis on painting. He grew up in San Antonio and was raised by his mother and grandmother, who were born in Texas and Alabama, respectively. His Nicaraguan father was absent during his childhood, and the primacy of female role-models is reflected in his work. Robleto and his family moved frequently, ultimately twenty-seven moves from his earliest years through college (Dunbar 2008). His mother was a director of a hospice for nearly eighteen years, which gave Robleto an “understanding of death as a respectful exit through life” (Dunbar 2008) and exposed him to the processes people go through when mourning, both themes that would carry over into his work. There is a significant musical influence in his work, which originates partly from his father, but mostly from the honky tonk his mother ran before her job at the hospice. Robleto would sit on weekends and play the jukebox, where the impact of music on the environment around him would leave a lasting impression (Dunbar 2008). Throughout his career, he has had solo exhibitions at the Menil Collection in Houston, Texas, (2014), the Baltimore Museum of Art in Baltimore, Maryland, (2014) and the Whitney Museum of Art at Altria in New

York City (2003). His work has been featured in group exhibitions throughout Europe and the United States.

Artistic Method and Incorporation of Language

Robleto's artistic method includes an initial period of intensive writing, research, and collaboration that culminates in the creation of an art object. During the writing period, Robleto compiles extensive material and title lists and creates stories based on those lists. After he has established a list of materials, he seeks them out. Rare and often historic materials are gathered throughout this process for use as the raw materials of his artworks. When considering Robleto's method, the writing process equates to preparatory sketching before the production of a painting, as it anticipates and guides the creation of a final work. For example, when Robleto spoke of *No One Has a Monopoly Over Sorrow*, 2008, (figure 1), with Ian Berry on occasion of his exhibition at the Frye Art Museum, “Alloy of Love,” in 2008, he explained,

I make very few sketches, my equivalent is writing. My sketchbooks aren't filled with drawings; they are filled with variations on material lists and titles. What I'm doing when I sketch is like writing poetry or lyrics to a song. I am constantly writing titles, constantly writing little phrases, and then I edit and pick at them until it starts to make sense.

Robleto navigates through the material decisions of an artwork by the manipulation of language and words.

Ultimately, this written process is represented in the final work as “liner notes” displayed adjacent to the object. The notes are a distilled material list of an artwork's components, carefully lyricized and edited in a process described by Robleto as real poetry before its inclusion in the final artwork (Robleto 2013). The liner notes identify what materials are included in the artwork and often their origins, though not all materials are described, and the degree of detail varies. The liner notes for *No One* provide a representative example:

Men's wedding ring finger bones coated in melted bullet lead from various American wars, men's wedding bands excavated from American battlefields, melted shrapnel, wax-dipped preserved bridal bouquets of roses and white calla lilies from various eras, dried chrysanthemums, male hair flowers braided by a Civil War widow, fragments from a mourning dress, cold cast brass, bronze, zinc, and silver, rust, mahogany, glass (Robleto 2013)

He identifies bullet lead from various American wars and preserved bouquets from various eras,

but he does not share which specific wars or time periods. The details identify the materials and reveal their origins. A specific finger bone, the ring finger, from a male, not a female, was chosen. Men's wedding bands from American, not European, wars were included.

Robleto's artworks have a story to tell. *No One* originated as a title and broadened into a story that Robleto realized in the final artwork. Robleto clarifies,

...that piece originated as a title then came the core story about the widows on the battlefield, and then a list of very unusual materials that was originally triple the size of what you see in the final version...I imagined what the women would have taken out onto the battlefields with them. They probably would have taken a basket; maybe they would have lined the basket with a bouquet that they had been preserving. Maybe they would have used their mourning clothing as lining (Dunbar 2008)

Nora Burnett Abrams, curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Denver, observes, "Dario Robleto is a storyteller. Like history's great weavers of fables and lore, he brings his tales to life by rooting them in the details of everyday customs and traditions" (Abrams 2011). The core of the story is formed during his initial writing phase and is then crystallized in the finalization of the liner notes and the creation of the object.

In addition to representing the type and context of the materials, the liner notes are a verbal and visual representation of the artist's intent. Robleto has the information pertinent to a material and its origins but selectively limits the facts revealed to the viewer. The final notes are the result of an involved process of editing and manipulation. When considering how much detail to include in the liner notes for *No One*, he explains:

I like the directness of listing "bullet lead excavated from various battlefields," rather than giving a long inventory of each war. That supplementary information is crucial to me because I need to know all of that when I'm making the work, but its not necessarily as important for the viewer...I do have this information and consider it while I am making my work, but when the material is fully incorporated into a new artwork it becomes supplementary (Dunbar 2008).

Thus, the information that is shared, and *not* shared, shapes the story of the piece and reveals elements of Robleto's intentional focus in the work.

By withholding certain specificities unique to each work, Robleto creates a realm for oral storytelling that exists outside the artwork. He explains:

The oral storytelling tradition comes into play ... I have always loved that an oral tradition requires a responsibility from the listener that the fate of a story hinges on others participating. This fragile mode of communication suits my work

(Dunbar 2008).

In order for a viewer to know specifically which American wars served as excavation sites for the bullet lead, she must seek additional information in the artist's publications and online discussions. The artwork provides part of the entire story and Robleto provides the rest. Thus, language exists in Robleto's artworks in three ways: the written language of the liner notes, text embedded within the object itself, and verbal language in Robleto's discussions of his works.

In addition to writing, the other element of Robleto's initial method is intensive research. Occurring at libraries, museum collections, or over the internet, and "at least half of what [he does] on any given day," (Dunbar 2008) Robleto's meticulous research grows out of the story that inspires a specific artwork's creation and the unique materials needed to narrate that story. Practically, the process of finding such materials requires a large investment of time and energy that results in a limited quantity of rare, specific, and historic materials. Since Robleto is using such sensitive materials, including excavated bullet lead and human remains, extensive research anticipates the art-making process in order to avoid using excessive material. He explains, "For me, the issue involves responsibility and respect. It is very important to me to honor the materials I use, which means I need to know them inside and out... I can't really afford to mess up too much" (Dunbar 2008).

Collaboration occurs to varying degrees depending on the exotic nature of an artwork's materials. For *No One*, Robleto excavated the wedding bands from various battlefields, for other works he has been given source materials, while for other works he has culled the attics of collectors. The sourcing of his materials depends on collaboration, and it carries through to the process of art-making in certain works. To create *Atheist with a Twist (I'm Not Sure About Magic)*, 2002, (figure 2), Robleto commissioned a wand from a practicing witch and presented it together with one made by his own hand under the witch's guidance. In order to learn the practice of creating a wand, Robleto resided with the witch for a length of time.

The collaborative aspect of Robleto's work speaks to his interest in human connections, a theme that adopts new dimensions in his recent work. For his exhibition at the Menil Collection, "Dario Robleto: The Boundary of Life is Quietly Crossed," (August 16- January 4, 2015), Robleto organized five events that occurred throughout the show. They include a lecture by Robleto, a documentary screening from the Menil archives, and discussions with various figures whose lives and work feature prominently in the pieces Robleto created for the exhibition.

Collaboration is critical for the collection of the source materials, the creation of an artwork, and the conveyance of meaning after an artwork's production.

Once they have been gathered, Robleto's technique of material manipulation is marked by the alteration of source materials into new forms. This includes grinding up record albums into dust that can be mixed with a binder and cast anew, re-pulping letters as new paper, and stretching, pulling, or melting audio tape into a new visual form that is no longer functional as an audible medium. All of these techniques are found in the following examples: *War Pigeon With a Message (Love Survives the Death of Cells)* 2002, *A Dark Day for the Dinosaurs (U.S. Mix)* 2007, *Melancholy Matters Because of You*, 2012 (figures 3-5 respectively). In *War Pigeon*, "pulp made from human ribcage bone dust and a Civil War era letter that a Union soldier's wife wrote to a Confederate General" composes the rolled up paper carried by the pigeon skeleton (Robleto 2014). In *Melancholy Matters*, various vinyl and shellac records, ranging from 33 rpm to 78 rpm, have been pulverized, bound with other materials, and cast and carved into hand bones. In *A Dark Day*, an audiotape recording of melting glaciers has been melted and fitted to Woolly Mammoth marrow that has been hand-carved.

Intangible Values

Rarity — as a criterion by which one material is measured and chosen over others— has been the preferred value of raw materials chosen by artists for thousands of years, with gold a classic example. Robleto's raw materials are rare, but they are distinguished because of their historicity. These materials begin with an intrinsic historical value before any manipulation by the artist; they encapsulate a culturally revered moment in history, whether that moment is the war of our forefathers, the musical revolution of the 1950s-70s, or the time of our ancient ancestors when woolly mammoths still roamed. The original dates of creation for the raw materials illustrate the temporal breadth of Robleto's works, which range in the aforementioned examples from approximately 7500 BCE for the woolly mammoth marrow (Vartanyan, Garutt, Sher 1993) to the recent past for the vinyl and shellac records.

In addition to our collective history, Robleto's personal history exists explicitly in certain artworks, as their source materials are often from his private or family collection. In *Melancholy Matters Because of You*, records from his grandmother's, mother's, and personal collection provide the pulverized powder to make the fetal, adolescent, and adult hands respectively

(Robleto 2014). Similarly, *Our Sin Was in Our Hips*, 2002, is composed of records from his mother and father's collections (Robleto 2014, figure 6). The sentimental quality of these materials imbues the artwork with intangible values that affect the conservation of the piece.

As the raw material is often manipulated beyond visual recognition and thus divorced from its historic context, it is necessary to consider the role of the liner notes as its sole witness. The liner notes reveal alterations. The object cannot be understood in its most plenary sense without the material origins in the liner notes. The artwork consists of two parts: the object and the liner notes. The viewer is presented with an object and a written description of that object, such that an understanding of the artwork is gleaned from an exchange between the tangible material and its intangible description.

In Robleto's work, the objects are not what they seem and the liner notes signify what is and is not in the image. *Melancholy Matters Because of You*, 2012, presents what appear to be three different sizes of human hand skeletons (figure 5). Only after reading the liner notes are the hands revealed as: "Hand-ground and powderized vinyl and shellac records, cast and carved melted vinyl records, bone calcium, resin, pigments, dust" (Robleto 2014). The visual impact of the object undergoes a transformation by the mental image presented in the liner notes: solid bone dissolves into a multi-component powder that is then reformed into a new solid that looks like bone.

In this above example, the transformation is primarily visual, though it can be multi-sensory as well. In the work *I Miss Everyone Who Has Ever Gone Away (The Suite)*, 2000, (figure 7) twelve screen prints on paper are presented next to the names of twelve musicians and their albums. For the viewer familiar with these albums, a mental performance of the artist's voices, musical melodies, and lyrics may accompany and enrich the visual images presented in the screen prints.

The importance of the liner notes, and language in general as a conveyer of meaning within Robleto's work, is reflected in their increasing materiality in exhibitions. For example, in his recent exhibition at the Menil Collection, "Dario Robleto: The Boundary of Life is Quietly Crossed," August 16, 2014- January 4, 2015, takeaway booklets were printed for visitors, which included the liner notes and Robleto's description of the exhibits' story. For most of Robleto's artworks, however, the liner notes travel with the art object in the form of word documents that are at risk of manipulations by a receiving museum's staff. The artist is aware of this, but a

systematic approach to the liner notes and their presentation within an exhibition has yet to be established (Robleto, personal communication, 2014).

When considering the nature of the exchange between liner notes and object, it is useful to identify the most basic relationship between word and image. As the scholarship of the second half of the twentieth century illustrates, an understanding of the distinction between word and image is complicated, as the very qualities that distinguish them become increasingly blurred with increasing levels of analysis (Mitchell 2003). At their most fundamental division, an image *represents* while a word *signifies*. As W. J. T. Mitchell succinctly clarifies in *Critical Terms for Art History*, a drawing of a tree conveys a tree because it *looks* like a tree, while the word “tree” means such because its arbitrary union of shapes *signifies* a tree. This distinction begins to break down when we consider pictographic languages such as hieroglyphics, in which pictograms represent both language and the object being signified, or abstract images, which do not have a readily visible representation in the world but are still categorized within the visual realm. The interwoven experience of the written and visual is illustrated by Ludwig Wittgenstein’s example in *Philosophical Investigations*, 1953, which presents an image that can be interpreted as a duck or rabbit. Wittgenstein argues that the ability to see the dual diagram of duck and rabbit switch back and forth is predicated by the ability to coordinate visual experiences and language.

It is tempting to identify the liner notes existence within the realm of language as a more direct appeal to our perception of meaning than the object’s existence in the visual. The process of seeing is intuitive and simultaneous, while the process of reading is cerebral and linear; reading has a defined beginning and end while looking does not. As Stephen Dykstra identifies in “The Artist’s Intentions and the Intentional Fallacy,” however, both visual and written works experience varying levels of engendered separation after their creation: the artwork and literary work each exist independently of the artist or author and are subject to the same manipulative interpretations by viewers (Dysktra 1996). Though our experience of the liner notes as language is different, its role as an indication of the artist’s intent is comparable to that of the object.

The relevance of artistic intentions in the appreciation of art has become a controversial topic since Wimsatt and Beardsley’s seminal essay, “The Intentional Fallacy” (1946) challenged the validity of such a notion within literary criticism. Ursula Schädler-Saub in “Theory and Practice in the Conservation of Modern and Contemporary Art” argues, however, that “the preservation of concepts and ideas as well as the conservation or substitution of materials

requires a highly sophisticated knowledge of artist's intentions" (2010). Though disputed, to overlook artistic intention in the conservation of Robleto's work would be to overlook an element that pervades every part of the production and components of the final artwork. As mentioned before, the material lists, and eventual liner notes, *precede* the assemblage of an object, so the materials are intrinsically tied to Dario's foresight, deliberation, and planning. He conceives them, decides to incorporate them, and then creates with them. The material is not included without the intention of its inclusion.

Thus, the challenge of the conservation of Dario Robleto's work is rooted in the complex relationship between object and liner notes, image and word. Should a damage occur to the object in which part of the original material is lost, the compensation of the original material must consider how the type of material affects the object's representation in the liner notes because the story of the piece hinges on their simultaneous existence. The introduction of new material risks an unfaithful representation of the artistic intent and intangible values as described in the notes. The artist has described the materials, placed the description adjacent to them, and called their unified existence the "work." This inextricable link necessitates creative solutions that consider not only the materiality of the artwork but its intangible values as well.

The broadened material, and immaterial, languages from which modern and contemporary art builds meaning demands new methods for understanding the intangible values of a work of art, and the field of conservation has increasingly turned to artist interviews as a tool for understanding the artist's material approach and conceptual intentions. For the conservation of Robleto's works, artist interviews are an exceptionally appropriate tool to employ for two reasons. First, an interview can more successfully capture the oral element of Robleto's trio of language incorporation that is not present in the object or the liner notes. Second, the method reflects his own process of oral storytelling and can be considered a sympathetic technique to those found in the artwork.

Case Study

In order to more specifically highlight the importance of artist interviews when conserving Robleto's artworks, *A Defeated Soldier Wishes to Walk his Daughter Down the Wedding Aisle*, 2004 (figures 8-10) will be examined in detail. Possible condition issues, such as the inherent instability of plastic or the hygroscopic nature of gelatin, were discussed with the

artist in order to bring about mutually acceptable solutions. In the work, a pair of boots and a homemade tincture encapsulated in a brass vial rest on either side of an aisle composed of ballistic gelatin. Rice and rose petals dot the gelatin and a chunk of wood protrudes from one of the boots.

The work is one of a series of sculptures born from a direct response by Robleto to the events of September 11, 2001, and the ensuing wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. In the series Robleto imagines a soldier transported through time and the experiences he and his loved ones might encounter throughout such a journey; it is Robleto's response to a soldier's experiences of war and its radial effects on those around him. The liner notes offer crucial details to the artwork's story:

Cast of a hand-carved wooden and iron leg that a wounded Civil War soldier constructed for himself, made from The Shirelles' "Soldier Boy" melted vinyl records and femur bone dust, fitted inside a pair of WWI military cavalry boots made from Skeeter Davis' "The End Of The World" melted vinyl records, oil can filled with homemade tincture (gun oil, rose oil, bacteria cultured from the grooves of Negro prison songs and prison choir records, wormwood, golden rod, aloe juice, resurrection plant, Apothecary's rose and bugleweed), brass, rust, dirt from various battlefields, ballistic gelatin, white rose petals, white rice (Robleto 2014)

The ballistic gelatin, a substance used for ballistic trail observation during firearm manufacture because of its approximate density to human and animal flesh, is a particularly jarring visual pun; its sand-like appearance conjures associations of weddings, warmth and comfort but the liner notes identify its materiality as a measurement of man's destructive capacity.

In *A Defeated Soldier*, the soldier has traveled through the Civil War, as represented by the prosthetic leg. Such an amputation happened without anesthetic, and was considered respectable if it was completed under ninety seconds, but this was rare. At the time, there was no government infrastructure in place to support amputee veterans, so men carved their own. The soldier has also endured WWI, as indicated by the boots. Their composition of Skeeter Davis' "The End of the World," highlights the devastation of WWI, as it was known contemporaneously as the War to End All Wars.

Inspired by a Civil War era letter in Robleto's collection in which a veteran amputee expresses his desire to walk his daughter down the wedding aisle, the work embodies Robleto's quest for art to finish something that was never completed. Robleto identifies this goal in a

discussion of *Daughters of Wounds and Relics*, 2006, (figure 11), when he explains, “I took these stories ... years, years later, recollecting. And could I, like I was saying, finish something that never got finished” (Robleto to Mancusi-Ungaro 2006).

In *A Defeated Soldier*, themes of sacrifice, pain, and tragedy are countered by themes of perseverance, healing, and selflessness. The work captures the unimaginable strength of the human spirit in the face of tremendous physical and emotional pain, involving loss of brethren, family, and time. Soldiers left knowing that in the course of the war they could miss formative, irreplaceable moments in their family’s lives, such as a daughter’s transition from an adolescent to an expectant bride. If news of such an event were successfully delivered to frontlines, it likely hearkened anxieties of an unforeseeable end and a certain desire to return. These doubts and certainties are reflected in the tread lengths of the ballistic gelatin, as they extend past halfway but short of the complete length of the aisle. The work offers an unresolved meditation on the shattering experiences of war across generations.

The liner notes attest to the historical moments captured by the installation. They address important details that might be lost to the average viewer, such as the boots’ form as military cavalry WWI boots and the dark form within them as a hand-carved, historic wooden and iron leg. Yet they address invisible alterations as well, such as the boots’ and leg’s composition of melted records and femur bone dust. Additionally they transform the homemade tincture, a salve carried by the soldier to ease his wounds, into a symbolization of the nation’s scar of enslavement conveyed by its composition of “bacteria cultured from the grooves of Negro prison songs” (Robleto 2014).

The specific records chosen for the composition of the boot and the leg are supporting elements to an overall theme. The Shirelles “Soldier Boy” vocalizes the devotion of loved ones awaiting the return of their soldiers with lyrics such as “Wherever you go, My heart will follow...To any port or foreign shore.” The Shirelles’ hopeful dedication is tempered by Skeeter Davis’ “End of the World” as she sings, “Why does my heart go on beating...Don’t they know it’s the end of the world, It ended when you said goodbye.” Together, the songs give voice to home front— perhaps a daughter awaiting a father’s arm to deliver her down the aisle, or a wife anxious for a husband’s return.

The record choices highlight relevant musical and cultural underpinnings of the 1960s and 70s. Skeeter Davis’s (1931-2004) biography bears themes of perseverance through loss.

Davis began her career as a duet with high school companion Betty Jack Davis in the Davis Sisters, but in 1953 the duo were involved in a major car accident in which Betty Jack perished. Davis was a successful solo artist, with five grammy nominations and multiple *Billboard* top hits. The Shirelles, the first African American female group to top the *Billboard* top 100, represent the early success of the American Civil Rights movement through their acceptance by black and white audiences. Each artist provides a female counterpart to a male character of a similar theme elsewhere in the work. Skeeter Davis's career mirrors the time-traveling soldier's continuous journey in spite of loss, and the Shirelles' musical success as a harbinger of increasing national equality counters the Negro prison songs' representation of a nation divided. Materially, the records capture the emotion of the artists and their life stories while historically they capture the chronological depth of the artwork's story.

From a conservation perspective, the complexity of the materials and their installation within *A Defeated Soldier* create specific challenges. The most salient of these is the inherent vice of the materials, including the hygroscopic nature of gelatin and the instability of plastic. Since its creation the piece has already undergone material alterations, as rose petals are no longer included in installations due to their inevitable decay over the course of the exhibition (Robleto, personal communication, 2014). Robleto does not foresee including them in the future and would prefer to change the liner notes (Robleto personal communication 2014). The liner notes have not been altered and it is unknown whether a replacement material has been included.

The hygroscopic nature of gelatin creates the potential for a considerable conservation challenge. If sufficient moisture is present in the environment surrounding the gelatin, it will absorb moisture and gelatinize. In the forensics industry, ballistic grade gelatin refers to gelatin with a specific solubility, gel strength, viscosity, and clarity (VYSE Gelatin Company 2014). This type of gelatin is a particular risk because it is specially formulated to solubilize quickly in order to avoid the formation of foam that could interfere with ballistic trail observation.

The gelatin composes an aisle through which the phantom soldier has trudged, and the peaks and valleys left by his boot serve as a visual marker of his journey. If moisture were absorbed in the area of the boot's tread, details of his movement captured by the fine powder would be lost in a gooey aggregate. Effectively the "sand" would appear more similar to "mud." Visually, the powdered gelatin serves as a record of his motion. As written in the liner notes, it highlights the honed efficacy of modern warfare. The liner notes explicitly say ballistic gelatin,

not just gelatin. Since gelatin is only useful for ballistic trail observation in its hydrolyzed form, it is actually a *more* faithful representation of the liner notes. Yet, does its hydrolyzed form adequately represent the meaning of the piece?

It is tempting to identify sand and mud as likely territorial elements through which a soldier might tread and therefore acceptable material changes that align with the concept of the piece. According to Robleto, however, this is unacceptable and any material that underwent such a change must be replaced (Robleto, personal communication, 2014). When posed with the idea of a mud-like aesthetic, Robleto explained the tread must bear the boot's detailed impression. For him, the process of guiding the boot through the sand is an emotional enactment of the imagined soldier's journey of perseverance, for which Robleto must adequately prepare himself before committing. Each of the three times *A Defeated Soldier* has been installed, Robleto has personally pushed the boot through the gelatin (Robleto, personal communication 2014). How far down the aisle the boot rests and the amount of gelatin displaced are factors that are carefully considered. A gooey gelatin loses crucial conceptual components that are effectively captured by its powdery antecedent.

An additional inherent vice of the materials is the potential instability of the plastic used in the casts of the prosthetic leg and boots. According to Robleto, water extendable resin mixed with femur bone dust and melted musical records compose the cast of the prosthetic leg (Robleto personal communication 2014). There is plastic in two forms: the records and the resins. Records are composed of a copolymer of polyvinyl acetate (PVA) and polyvinyl chloride (PVC). PVC is one of the four plastics identified as most vulnerable to degradation. Degradations of plastic are noticeable in museums by their appearance, odor and/or feel typically within 5-25 years of collection (Shashoua 2008). According to John Hirx, Head Objects Conservator at the Los Angeles County Museum of art, *A Defeated Soldier* has already begun off-gassing (Hirx, personal communication 2014). The source of this off-gassing is unknown but the boots or the homemade tincture are likely candidates.

It is difficult to predict what possible degradations may occur to the boots and prosthetic leg in *A Defeated Soldier* because of its nature as a composite object. The PVA/PVC copolymer will react differently now that it is mixed with bone dust and encased in a different resin. Based on the aging characteristics of other plasticized PVC objects, possible degradations include cracking, and color and tactile changes, as plasticizers migrate out of the material and deposit in

a tacky substance on the surface. These sticky surfaces trap dust, which may contain moisture and pollutants, resulting in subsequent chemical degradation of the polymer. Additionally, other materials, such as lubricants added to prevent the plastic from adhering to the mold during manufacture, separate and migrate from the material due to chemical incompatibility. With PVC, this often appears as a whitish, powdery deposit on the surface (Shashoua 2008).

In the event the plastic cracks to the extent that the structural stability of the sculpture is compromised, material reinforcements may be necessary. In an email exchange that began in April 2013, Robleto made the distinction between a structural damage and a more substantial loss to material. Regarding a “basic structural problem” he explains, “If you could get the objects back into the physical, spatial relationship I originally had them in, then I don’t think that undermines anything conceptually.” New material introduced for structural reinforcement does not compromise the concept and does not necessitate mention in the liner notes.

A more substantial compensation of material, however, is more complicated. Any material other than melted records, femur bone dust, and resin threatens a faithful depiction of the liner notes. According to the American Institute for Conservation’s (AIC) *Guidelines for Practice*,

Any intervention to compensate . . . should be reversible and should not falsely modify the known aesthetic, conceptual, and physical characteristics of the cultural property, especially by removing or obscuring original material.

At risk with Robleto’s work is the false modification of known conceptual characteristics of the work. The use of identical materials is not a viable option because they include human remains. Additionally, grinding records into powder conflicts with additional ethical standards set forth by the AIC, as they are arguably historical materials in their own right. Statutes VI and VIII direct: “The conservation professional must strive to select methods and materials that, to the best of current knowledge, do not adversely affect cultural property,” and “The conservation professional shall recognize a responsibility for preventive conservation by endeavoring to limit damage or deterioration to cultural property” (AIC 1994). Under these limitations, melting one object of cultural heritage in order to conserve another is not ethically feasible.

When presented with possible solutions for the compensation of the boots and prosthetic leg in April 2014, Robleto favors letting the age become part of the artwork’s story, and would prefer no direct manipulation of the materials. Robleto has expressed his acceptance of aging on

multiple occasions. For instance, when asked about the role to which time is allowed to add its own patina on *A Century of November*, 2005 in an interview in 2006, Robleto accepts the continuation of a mechanism already in motion, explaining, “I have full acceptance of it because it is continuing what it was already doing...look at an old bone, or this really old dress... another fifty years of patina to me enriches it even more” (Robleto to Mancusi-Ungaro 2006). This acceptance of age reminds us of the transformative themes present in *A Defeated Soldier* through the melting of records and their eventual reintegration as boots and a prosthetic limb.

Robleto’s acceptance of age for *A Defeated Soldier* carries over to potential cleaning posed by the migration of plasticizer to the surface. If the surface became tacky and attracted dust and dirt, these would be acceptable aesthetic changes to Robleto. If, however, droplets of plasticizer were to accumulate on the surface, he would prefer the droplets cleaned (Robleto personal communication 04/17/2014).

Robleto was presented with a scenario that necessitated a conservation fill. Printed lyrics cast in a stable plastic was offered as a potential compensation material, with the embedded lyrics a way of preserving the musical qualities of the original records. Instead, Robleto suggested an audiotape, or some other form of recording, should be melted and used as fill material. The printed lyrics are inadequate because they do not capture the emotional quality associated with the singers’ voices. He explains, “To keep the spirit of how emotional content is transferred into material is very important to me and should be considered from a conservation perspective” (Robleto personal communication 04/17/2014).

There is a distinction between the levels of emotional content held within the printed lyrics and the record that contains the songs. Skeeter Davis’ and the Shirelles’ experiences are in their voices, and that conceptual component must be retained in whichever new material is chosen. Furthermore, the type of recording material is important. A compact disc was suggested but Robleto did not approve of using materials from the digital age. He suggested rather an audiotape, or a new record cast in more stable plastic onto which the songs are recorded. These conclusions reflect the sentimental and historical value presented by the records. Sentimental value exists in two capacities: Robleto’s emotional experience of the music and the emotions of the artists as reflected in the music. The historical value exists in a preference for the era when records and audiotapes were common methods to play music before the digital age. The ideal treatment solution is casting a new record strictly for the conservation treatment, recording the

songs onto this new record, and then melting that newly recorded material for a fill material (Robleto personal communication 04/17/2014).

It is important to note that these comments were made specifically in reference to the imaginary aging scenarios posed to Robleto with respect to *A Defeated Soldier Wishes to Walk His Daughter Down the Wedding Aisle*. These comments cannot be broadened into an all-encompassing theory under which the conservation of his art may always be treated. As with the conservation of any work, and especially with other highly complex, conceptual contemporary artworks, the appropriate treatment must be determined on a case-by-case basis. These comments can, however, provide a framework for the identifying the conservation challenges present in other works.

Conclusion

A remark by Robleto on May 2, 2013 speaks more generally to the conservation of his work. He addresses the parallel relationship between artist and material and conservator and artwork, explaining:

If you think of this process as a baton through time, of the original incident that produces the material (a widow braiding her husband's locket of hair), its eventual arrival and alteration in my hands, and the hope I place in art as a transformative, additive power, and then its resting place in your hands and others who are now responsible for its care, then each step asks something different from each of us, and I like to ponder what that is. What makes each step meaningful and authentic to each of us? (Robleto personal communication 2013).

Robleto's reflections bring to mind the artist George Brecht's observation that an object is an event. Generally the first life intimately involved with an artwork is the artist, and then the artwork travels on to an owner, a viewer, a conservator. In the case of Robleto's works, however, sometimes these artworks began with a bison that roamed 10,000 years ago or a Civil War veteran writing of his desire to walk his daughter down the wedding aisle. In this way, his artworks are time capsules of our universal connectedness.

Robleto as the artist must have an intimate understanding of the historic, emotional values associated with his materials in order to convey the story he chooses, and so too must the conservator seeking the appropriate conservation of his artworks. His attention to detail, from an artwork's initial conception to its final manifestation, demands a sophisticated understanding of artistic intent for the tactful conservation of his works. Artist interviews make the discovery of

intangible values that are indirectly present in the work possible. Without the interviews, it is likely crucial concepts captured in subtle details, such as the ballistic gelatin's delicate treads or the emotive power of Skeeter Davis and the Shirelles' voices, would be overlooked. As the "details are where the meaning resides," conservation through conversation proves essential for the work of storyteller Dario Robleto (Robleto personal communication 2013).

Figures:



Figure 1. Dario Robleto, *No One Has a Monopoly Over Sorrow*, 2005, 11 x 10 x 9 in.,
Collection of Julie and John Thornton, Austin, Texas
Men's wedding ring finger bones coated in melted bullet lead from various American wars,
men's wedding bands excavated from American battlefields, melted shrapnel, wax-dipped
preserved bridal bouquets of roses and white calla lilies from various eras, dried
chrysanthemums, male hair flowers braided by a Civil War widow, fragments from a mourning
dress, cold cast brass, bronze, zinc, and silver, rust, mahogany, glass

Courtesy dariorobleto.com/works



Figure 2. Dario Robleto, *Atheist With A Twist (I'm Not Sure About Magic)*, 2001-2002, 10 x 10 x 64 in., Collection of Helen Hill Kempner, Houston, Texas

Carved pine, quartz, amethyst, leather, spell, UV filtering Plexiglas, lights, pedestals

A custom made wand was commissioned from a practicing witch and a duplicate wand was made by the artist mimicking the witch's.

Courtesy dariorobleto.com/works



Figure 3. Dario Robleto, *War Pigeon With a Message (Love Survives the Death of Cells)*, 2002, 8 x 11 x 5.5 in., Collection of Garret Siegel, Arlington, Vermont

(Berlin Wall rubble, WWII era pigeon I.d. tag, pulp made from human ribcage bone dust and a Civil War era letter that a Union soldier's wife wrote to a Confederate General pleading for the release and return of her P.O.W. husband)



Figure 4. Dario Robleto, *A Dark Day for the Dinosaurs (U.S. Mix)*, 2007, 1/8 x 1/8 x 2 1/4 in., Hand-carved glacially released Woolly Mammoth marrow, melted audiotape of field recordings of the sound of glaciers melting (2005-06), extinguished with runoff water from Grinnell Glacier (Glacier National Park, Montana)

Courtesy dariorobleto.com/works



Figure 5. Dario Robleto, *Melancholy Matters Because of You*, 2012

Overall, with pedestal:
38 x 23 x 16.25 in.

Hand-ground and powderized vinyl and shellac records, cast and carved melted vinyl records, bone calcium, resin, pigments, dust

Fetal hand bones made from grandmother's 78 rpm vinyl records

Adolescent hand bones made from mother's 45 rpm vinyl records

Adult hand bones made from artist's 33 rpm vinyl records)



Figure 6. Dario Robleto, *Our Sin Was in Our Hips*, 2002, 12 x 9 x 9 in.,
Collection of Peter and Linda Zweig, Houston, Texas

Hand-ground and powdered vinyl records, melted vinyl records, male and female pelvic bone
dust, polyester resin, spray paint, pigments, dirt, concert spotlight

Female pelvis made from Mother's Rock 'n' Roll 45 rpm records
Male Pelvis made from Father's Rock 'n' Roll 33 rpm records

Courtesy darioobleto.com/works

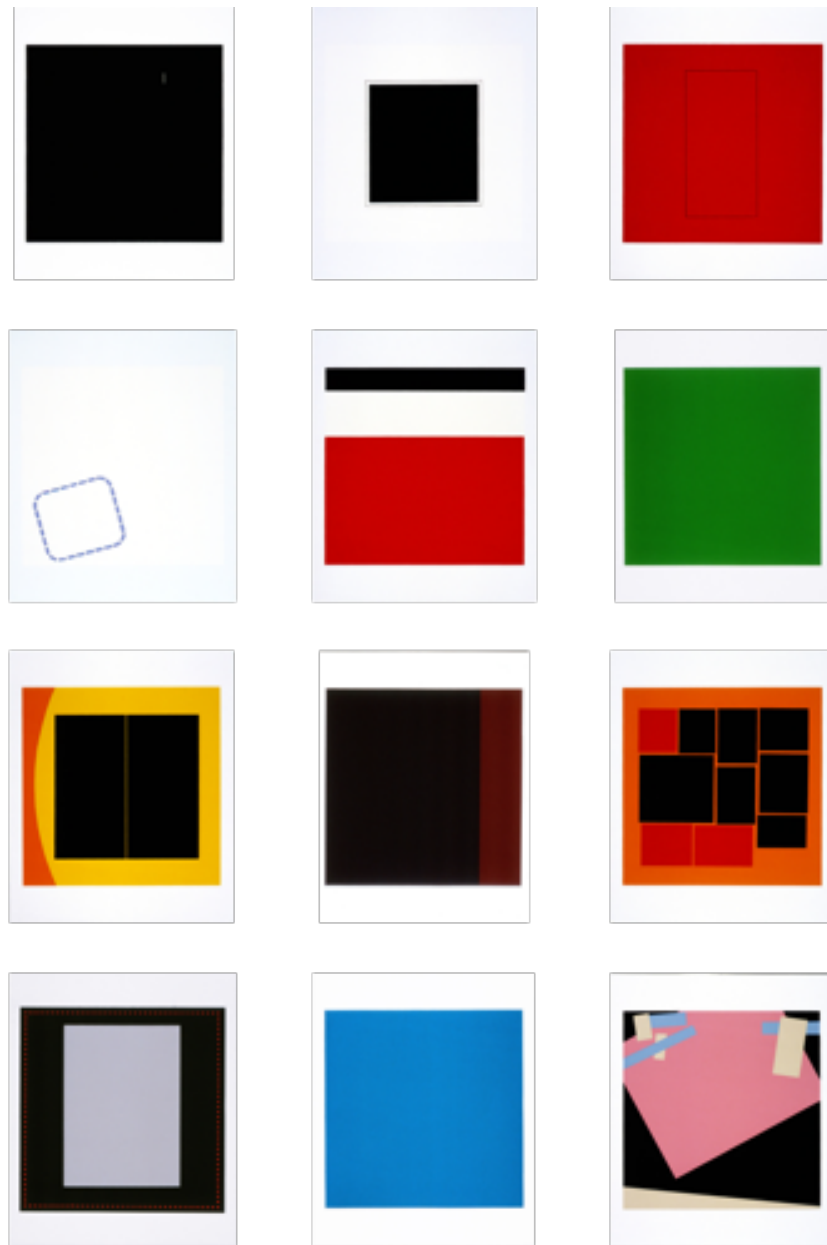


Figure 7. Dario Robleto, *I Miss Everyone Who Has Ever Gone Away (The Suite)* 2000

12 screen prints on paper, each 17 x 14 in.

Collection of Chris Mattsson and John McHale, Austin, Texas

Miles Davis – *Live Around The World*, Marlene Dietrich – *Live In London*, Maria Callas – *Carmen*, Jimi Hendrix – *NYC '68 (Live)*, Buddy Rich and Max Roach-Rich Versus Roach, Sun Ra – *Live At The Village Vanguard*, Ella Fitzgerald and Billie Holiday – *Live at Newport*, Charles Mingus – *The Complete Town Hall Concert*, Nirvana – *From The Muddy Banks Of The Wishkah*, Edith Piaf – *Live In Lausanne*, The Plastic Ono Band – *Live Peace In Toronto 1969*, Patsy Cline – *Live At The Grand Ole' Opry*

Courtesy dariorobleto.com/works



Figure 8. Dario Robleto, *A Defeated Soldier Wishes To Walk His Daughter Down The Wedding Aisle*

2004, 21 x 80 x 20 in., Los Angeles County Museum of Art

Purchased with funds provided by Tina Petra, Ken Wong and Gibson Dunn (M.2005.18a-c)

Cast of a hand-carved wooden and iron leg that a wounded Civil War soldier constructed for himself, made from The Shirelles' "Soldier Boy" melted vinyl records and femur bone dust, fitted inside a pair of WWI military cavalry boots made from Skeeter Davis' "The End Of The World" melted vinyl records, oil can filled with homemade tincture (gun oil, rose oil, bacteria cultured from the grooves of Negro prison songs and prison choir records, wormwood, golden rod, aloe juice, resurrection plant, Apothecary's rose and bugleweed), brass, rust, dirt from various battlefields, ballistic gelatin, white rose petals, white rice

Courtesy darioobleto.com/works



Figure 9.
detail of boots and recast, hand
carved wooden and iron leg, Dario
Robleto, *A Defeated Soldier
Wishes To Walk His Daughter
Down The Wedding Aisle*, 2004

Figure 10.
detail of homemade tincture, Dario
Robleto, *A Defeated Soldier
Wishes To Walk His Daughter
Down The Wedding Aisle*, 2004





Figure 11. Dario Robleto, *Daughters Of Wounds And Relics*, 2006, 30 x 19 x 3 1/4 in.

Hair braid made of stretched and curled audiotape recordings of the last known Union Civil War soldier's voice and the last known Confederate Civil War widow's voice, homemade paper (pulp made from sweetheart letters written by soldiers who did not return from various wars, sepia, bone dust from every bone in the body), lace and fabric from mourning dresses, hair flower braided by a Civil War widow, colored paper, silk, milk paint, ink-stained ash, glass, typeset

Courtesy darioobleto.com/works

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