



**Artists Documentation Program
Video Interview Transcript**

**DARIO ROBLETO
OCTOBER 21, 2006**

**Interviewed by:
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Artists Documentation Program,
and Associate Director for Conservation and Research, Whitney Museum of American Art**

Video: Ronald Bronstein | Total Run Time: 01:26:20

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About the Artists Documentation Program

Throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, artists have experimented with an unprecedented range of new materials and technologies. The conceptual concerns underlying much of contemporary art render its conservation more complex than simply arresting physical change. As such, the artist's voice is essential to future conservation and presentation of his or her work.

In 1990, The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation awarded a grant to the Menil Collection for Carol Mancusi-Ungaro, then Chief Conservator, to establish the Artists Documentation Program (ADP). Since that time, the ADP has recorded artists speaking candidly with conservators in front of their works. These engaging and informative interviews capture artists' attitudes toward the aging of their art and those aspects of its preservation that are of paramount importance to them.

The ADP has recorded interviews with such important artists as Frank Stella, Jasper Johns, and Cy Twombly. Originally designed for use by conservators and scholars at the Menil, the ADP has begun to appeal to a broader audience outside the Menil, and the collection has grown to include interviews from two partner institutions: the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Center for the Technical Study of Modern Art, Harvard Art Museums. In 2009, The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation awarded a grant to the Menil Collection to establish the ADP Archive, formalizing the multi-institutional partnership and making ADP interviews more widely available to researchers.

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[Speakers (in order of appearance): Carol Mancusi-Ungaro, Director, Artists Documentation Program and Associate Director for Conservation and Research, Whitney Museum of American Art; Dario Robleto, Artist]

[BEGIN RECORDING]

[00:00:49]

CM-U: Today is October 21, 2006. I am here with Dario Robleto at his exhibit at the D'Amelio Terras Gallery in New York, "Fear and..."

Dario Robleto: "...Tenderness in Men."

CM-U: "...Tenderness in Men."

Dario Robleto: It's the title of the show ["Dario Robleto: Fear and Tenderness in Men," D'Amelio Terras, New York, September 8-October 28, 2006].

[00:01:06]

CM-U: Okay. Dario and I have spoken earlier, a couple of years ago, when the work was very different in terms of the materials that you were using.

Dario Robleto: Um-hum.

CM-U: And so some of the questions that I want, which may lead right into this, is, do your choice of materials...

Dario Robleto: Um-hum.

CM-U: ...or what you find with materials, suggest the concept? Or do you have the idea and then search for the materials?

Dario Robleto: It could be both, but generally it begins with extensive writing, and for an object maker, I let language play a pretty important role. And so often I will write pretty elaborate stories that – I have no idea at that point about materials or object. It's simply about good storytelling, or good story *writing*. And this show has taken it – this is actually Part 4 of a series of shows.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Dario Robleto: And this took it to a whole new level of scriptwriting, basically. And I had a character, story arc, like all the things that would make a good story. And then when I get the story written, the objects start to come pop out to me. And then – so, for example; to give you quick examples – this show, these four shows roughly are based on this wandering American soldier that I’ve imagined what would happen if you could pluck him through time and deposit him on every battlefield to date, from the Revolutionary War to the Gulf War. What would happen to him in two ways? Physically and psychologically.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Dario Robleto: So the story is much more elaborate than that, but that’s the core. So I have this sort of core idea. Then, for example, in the story I had imagined him, what if he had been recording his journey? So then that leads to, “Well, what would that look like? What would the recording device look like? What would the cassette tape that he’s recorded possibly two hundred years of warfare – what would that look like? What should it be made of? If it had suffered two hundred years of warfare?” So then all these things start to fall into place.

Dario Robleto: And then the materials start to come into place. So in the story, the effects on the body are pretty horrible, and that often means literally turning to dust, which leads to the usage of bone. I have this whole section of the story that is just imaging what’s going on underground after all these wars, and we really don’t realize how much material has shifted sides during conflicts.

CM-U: Hmm.

Dario Robleto: But there is tons and tons of material that we walk over every day. All over the world. In the story I have imagined, you know, the earth is sort of regurgitating it and, like, different eras are compressing on top of others. Lead from one war is, you know, no longer distinguishable from lead from another. Actual bone and lead are merging in weird ways underground. Lockets – I mean, there’s just all kinds of stuff. So then I start making – and the story is dictating that, so then I start thinking about – bullet lead and shrapnel are a big element in this show. So that can lead to that material. So it’s this chain of events that will get me there.

[00:04:35]

- Dario Robleto: And then there's even one other further step where, before I even know if I can get the material, I get to what I consider really my "liner notes." This format that artists are given of title, media, date, dimension...
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- Dario Robleto: ...I really consider it a full literary form at this point. And I think it has evolved to that without anyone really realizing it. It's got its own structure. It's like a haiku. So then I get to the point where the descriptive – or the poem or liner note is what I consider it – it still has to completely work as language to me. So even the sequencing of materials, the way they roll off the tongue. Bone dust, bullet lead, resurrection plants. I mean, it could – you know, you've seen my list.
- CM-U: Um-hum. Um-hum.
- Dario Robleto: So at the point I still don't even know if I can get them. It's still about sequencing language on the page.
- CM-U: So you've made these lists of media description before you actually have the media?
- Dario Robleto: Yes, and then, because I still wanted that to be to the level of poetry, it has to satisfy me on that level, so there's "extraterrestrial lava" or "Icelandic lava." There's – I mean, there's just all kinds of things that I'll play around with and language. And then the challenge is to go find it. And I really am proud of my sort of ability to find things. I really think there is an artistry to finding things.
- CM-U: Oh, it's astonishing! Really. That's one of the questions that I'd like to ask you.
- Dario Robleto: So, I really feel that those skills were honed with my background in music, especially DJ culture. To me, going out and finding some rare old sample or musical source is just – there's just an attitude, I mean, of looking and looking until you find it. And the more rare the sample, in music often has a lot of cachet to it. But all those skills have just now been transferred to these other materials. So I really know how to find things. I'm pretty proud of the sort of web I've created at this point of contacts on where to go to look for this or that. And then that often leads me to very fascinating subcultural collecting circles.

CM-U: Hmm.

Dario Robleto: And, you name it, there's a collecting circle for it somewhere.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Dario Robleto: And that – you know, I was a huge rock and mineral...

CM-U: Yes, I remember.

Dario Robleto: ...nerd when I was young, and still very much into that stuff. But those communities – like there's a fascinating metal detecting community in the country. Weekend metal detectors, you know, who are, you know, amateur archeologists in a way.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Dario Robleto: So there's this kind of spirit that I very much identify with. So that's how I get there. And to date, it's pretty rare that I can't find something that I've come up with as language already on the page.

[00:07:47]

CM-U: What happens to those pages? Are they part of the work, in your view, or not?

Dario Robleto: Those, to me, are devices to get to the object.

CM-U: Okay.

Dario Robleto: I'm still very much an object maker...

CM-U: Um-hum.

Dario Robleto: ...and I'm always looking for new ways to get to that spot. It's not important to me that that script be available as language. But of course my texts are. I mean, I really – talking about them as poetry or liner notes is the best way to conceptualize them. You know, like, a great piece of music – for me, as a music fan, one of my greatest pleasures was always to get home and open the record and get to sing along. And where – who produced it? Where was it produced? All those things informed the appreciation of the art, which was the song. And I always wondered if sculpture could have a similar

relationship with its language. Like, could someone get home and sing along with their sculpture right away? And want to know where this came from, or that? And it's always – but it's still back to informing the object. So that's...

CM-U: Do you see those scripts as part of the objects?

Dario Robleto: No.

CM-U: Or are they just studio materials that are around?

Dario Robleto: Yeah. They are just – they are tools for me to get to the objects.

CM-U: Okay.

Dario Robleto: But, you know, the role of catalogues, or the sheets people walk around with in the show. To me, it's the same relationship to, like, an album cover. When you're listening on your stereo, you – or I do, anyway – I know a lot of fans, music fans, will have that there with them...

CM-U: Um-hum.

Dario Robleto: ...and be relating to the music that way. So those things, as objects, are important. As far as the catalogue as a thing, or a book, which I really try to spend a lot of time on that. And then the sheet, the liner notes to the show, that people can walk around with, are important. But the other part is important more for me to get to the object.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Dario Robleto: I don't need that read by every viewer. The script. The liner notes, I hope everyone reads.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Dario Robleto: But even that, you can't fully control.

CM-U: Yeah.

Dario Robleto: I wouldn't want to. So it's always – it's there if you want it, is my sort of attitude. All this other background information for each object.

CM-U: Well, it's interesting in the way you conceive it, because it certainly puts an emphasis on the materials.

Dario Robleto: Um-hum.

CM-U: Because, as you say, you've written them in the way that you want them to be perceived and understood as we go around and look at each object.

Dario Robleto: Um-hum. Yeah.

[00:10:25]

CM-U: Do you want to start by looking at something?

Dario Robleto: Yeah, let's look at this one [No One Has A Monopoly Over Sorrow, 2005 / 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, carved ivory, cold cast brass, bronze, zinc, and silver, rust, mahogany, glass.]

Dario Robleto: But on that note...

CM-U: Yeah.

Dario Robleto: ...my titles can get – I spend a lot of time on those, and I like the title to help suggest a reading of the work. But on my material lists, I'm very careful to – I write them very dryly. Things, although they're such strange materials, that you can't get too dry, because there's just this strangeness about the words anyway. But generally, my media list – I don't want it to tell the full story. It is very factual – this, this, this.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Dario Robleto: But there is a sequence that's very important to me. But I think it's just the nature of the materials make it seem more that I'm trying to direct it a bit more than is really happening on the page. Because it really is very dry.

CM-U: It is, yeah. But the language isn't dry?

Dario Robleto: The language, no. So it's always a balancing act.

CM-U: Right.

Dario Robleto: Because these words are going to be so strange on their own that the way I order them has to be pretty straightforward. So...

CM-U: Yeah.

Dario Robleto: This piece was in many ways the fuel to the rest of the show. And this – it's going to be five years of work now that's coming to a completion in this show. And the soldier that I mentioned earlier, that had directed the first three shows. Each show looked at some different point in the story that I imagined him going through. And this fourth part is best viewed through the lens of what was going on back home. And this is a really important element that I realized towards the end of my story. I added this section on, actually, 'cause I realized I hadn't fully explored everything. And specifically, what was going on with women and children back home.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Dario Robleto: And so I think, you know, that most everything I do, even the other work we've talked about, even though it looks very different, everything is always based on facts.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Dario Robleto: And history, and historical accuracy are important to me. Although the work seems like it's in this strange, unbelievable level – because of the nature of the materials – everything is always based in fact. So I like there's this weird tension of belief and doubt in each work.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Dario Robleto: So I bring that up because, in my story, everything that I imagined happening to him – and then everything I imagined the family doing to deal with their mourning – is all based on real historical incidences. This is – I'll explain what this – how that worked. How real historical stories influence material decisions as well.

[00:13:23]

Dario Robleto: So, for example, this piece is called *No One Has A Monopoly Over Sorrow*. During World War I, there was a fascinating story that I came across that is

pretty much lost to history with a capital H. And just quickly I'll point, too, that often when I'm looking for stories, they in a way fit the same criteria as my materials, in that they are just strange and forgotten often.

CM-U: Hmm.

Dario Robleto: And the role of the artist, I – or at least I think, is to shine light back on these things. So this story was based on World War I in France. And World War I had – was such a huge, unfortunately such a big leap in military technology, that for the first time there was literally nothing left of many soldiers on the battlefield of...

CM-U: Hmm.

Dario Robleto: ...like, our technology had gotten to the point where we could fully destroy somebody. And this produced incredible consequences in mourning processes, and in particular in France – especially in a more Catholic countries as well, who were very – people who were used to mourning some *thing*. Like, they need some material evidence of their loss. And World War I completely played havoc with this problem. So there was an amazing moment where many French women, mothers, sisters, daughters, wives, they petitioned the French government to do something about this. To send someone out in the field to bring something home. Anything. Like a scrap of clothing, whatever. Just bring it home so we can mourn properly.

Dario Robleto: You know, when this didn't really amount to anything, the women took it into their own hands. And so I can just imagine, you know, as the one front line of war and men are moving forward, there's a sort of counterattack on the field behind them of the loved ones who are suffering the consequence, who went out in groups to find pieces. Anything to bring home. But this really was a turning point in mourning culture and mourning history because, for the first time, people were realizing that there was no way to know who was who in their gesture to go find their person, their loved one.

CM-U: Hmm.

Dario Robleto: They realized that everything could be everybody. And this really shifted a lot of mourning practices. And it did – I think it did a few things. One, it – the title alludes to “No One Has a Monopoly Over Sorrow.” In war, knowing that you're the victim or the aggressor or the abused is very crucial to understanding your motivation for fighting. But I can imagine this moment

where all these families on the battlefield – there’s – not only can you not know if it’s your loved one – you don’t even know if it’s the enemy. So...

CM-U: And in a way, it doesn’t matter, I guess is the point, yeah...

Dario Robleto: Yeah. So mourning had to take on this communal effort, so that every piece represented every loss. And everybody had to shift the way they thought about who was the enemy. Is that my loved one or not? There’s just – [you] can imagine what was going on in people’s minds. So this story – that’s a real historical story. And so, for example, that fuels a lot of, then, my object production and material selection. So at that point I decide what would have been that thing that they would have taken into the field to do this activity, which is what – if you are looking at here – is my imagination of that.

[00:17:35]

Dario Robleto: This basket is made of bullet lead and shrapnel, excavated from very different wars, different eras. And oh, this is a crucial point in this story at least, is that using the actual materials of war to, in a way, counter the loss – to mend or repair or participate in your mourning process – every work that we’re going to look at today has some real example of everyday people doing that. And that’s a very big point to me – is when you upend the material that produced the loss, to help in your recovery. I think it’s a very beautiful gesture.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Dario Robleto: So, I’m imagining her, she’s crafted this basket out of the very bullet lead that’s taken these men. And what’s she’s collecting are – these are men’s wedding ring finger bones that have all been dipped in bullet lead, also excavated from various battlefields. And attached to each finger is also a men’s wedding band that was also excavated from a battlefield.

CM-U: Are these actual wedding bands that were excavated, or you’ve made these?

Dario Robleto: No, these are actual excavated bands...

CM-U: Um-hum.

Dario Robleto: ...from different battlefields. So earlier I was talking about, we just don’t have a sense of how much metal is under us.

CM-U: Right.

Dario Robleto: And when I started to think about the metal, of course, that caused the damage...

CM-U: Um-hum.

Dario Robleto: ...the destruction, there is – not equivalent, but there's a similar amount of metal that was – had a very different reason for falling under the ground.

CM-U: Yeah.

Dario Robleto: Wedding bands. Locketts. Picture frames. Tokens that soldiers were carrying. There's all this metal now is just merging into this weird rock forms. It's, you know, natural earth compression. It's almost like becoming a geological process. And so this is where I am imagining is, the lead has coated the bones...

CM-U: Um-hum.

Dario Robleto: ...but it's important that each – I'm imagining her picking these up as she finds them. Each – but she no longer knows, of course, like I said, is it her...

CM-U: Right.

Dario Robleto: ...loss. And so she just picks up all of them, so that it's everybody's loss.

[00:20:00]

Dario Robleto: And then you see – this lace down here is from actual mourning clothing. There was a very strict – this was definitely at the height of the Victorian period, and when the customs came over in Colonial times, and they started to change and adapt – but the basic point was that you – how did you show your loss through your clothing...

CM-U: Yeah.

Dario Robleto: ...and there were definite etiquettes on who you lost, how long have you been mourning...

CM-U: Um-hum.

Dario Robleto: ...all this sort of stuff. So in many works we are looking at today, there is a real – I wanted to combine real, lived-in material that has been mourned in...

CM-U: Um-hum.

Dario Robleto: ...uh, merging with my alterations here. So this is some lace from a dress...

CM-U: Um-hum.

Dario Robleto: ...the inside of a mourning dress. And then you see this – these are real examples of hair, these hair flowers. You can see several of them here.

CM-U: And these are hair flowers that you fabricated, right?

Dario Robleto: There's – it's always going to be a combination of...

CM-U: Uh-huh.

Dario Robleto: ...either fabricating, using the original, or mending an original.

CM-U: Okay.

Dario Robleto: And I had...

CM-U: Because this was a tradition of using hair to...

Dario Robleto: Yeah.

CM-U: ...to do this, right?

Dario Robleto: Yeah. It was – again, it was a way of fighting back, in a sense. Because the custom was usually – a soldier would leave a locket of hair behind, before leaving for war. And only after being notified that he had died would the family braid them into these amazing hair flowers. And the varieties are just amazing. But the techniques, the skills, the craft skills to do it were very specific, and they were actually taught to the daughters.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Dario Robleto: And you can imagine a culture of mourning like...

CM-U: Right.

Dario Robleto: ...you are already being taught at an early age very specific mourning skills for future loss.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Dario Robleto: I mean, all these things have gone dormant, of course. People mourn in different ways. It's always evolving. But these are all real examples of hair flowers braided by widows at some point. From different wars. And there was also one last – so I'm imagining she's doing this activity. I've mended many of them. I relearned the skills, which I'll show in some other works, to do this. To continue on. Because I have this idea about art of – can art finish something that never got finished? Can a creative gesture begun a hundred years ago – can I pick up where they left off? Can I continue with the same spirit that the original intention? So I'm always thinking about that, too. It's a bigger, overarching art philosophy I have, which shows up in each project in a different way. So...

CM-U: Are you developing insight into that?

Dario Robleto: Definitely, yeah. It definitely – this project has taught me a lot about it. And I believe in art so much that I do think it can do this, and that it can succeed at continuing lines of discussion, or efforts at healing, or mending, that have just been cut off through time and misuse. Or just people forgetting. And I really do believe that it – that the artistic gesture can pick up and continue those lines of conversation. So part of the – on a technical and material level, one of my goals is often to seamlessly merge the activities so that you don't see where – for example, where did her activity leave off and mine begin?

CM-U: Um-hum.

Dario Robleto: I want there to seem – I want it to seem as if the conversation is smoothly entering a new time. You know. But sometimes I will make it more abrupt, depending on the project. But in this case, I really wanted there to be a blending of all these gestures plucked from the different moments, merging with my additions.

Dario Robleto: So the one last touch is, I was imagining what was she – what would she have used to sort of nestle the objects she's finding? And so this – there was a practice of preserving your bridal bouquets, and dipping them in wax. So these are white calla lilies, roses, chrysanthemums, all from different eras, all bridal bouquets that were dipped in wax. So they would have been a, you

know, a symbol of – a memento of the man that the ring would have represented, as well.

CM-U: So these are actual fragments that have been dipped in wax and been preserved?

Dario Robleto: They were – yeah, I didn't – these are originals.

CM-U: These are originals? Okay.

Dario Robleto: Yeah, and these are very old. Many of them...

CM-U: Amazing.

Dario Robleto: ...they are plucked from different times.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Dario Robleto: That's why the browning – you notice the browning – the wax is naturally aging.

[00:25:15]

Dario Robleto: But, yeah, so it's really – this is the weird chain of events I can get to the object, is, somehow fusing all those things. My story that I am writing, but merging with real historical facts...

CM-U: Um-hum.

Dario Robleto: ...which will lead me on to obtaining all these materials. Because all the bullet lead, all the shrapnel – if I want it from a certain war or a certain battlefield, I get that specific...

CM-U: And you are able to find this with your culture of people who...

Dario Robleto: Yeah. Definitely.

CM-U: Do you have people out there looking for you?

Dario Robleto: I definitely – at this point, definitely have people who will even call me to say, you know...

CM-U: “This is what I have.”

Dario Robleto: ...like, something I didn't even know. And that's what I meant earlier about the – I'm proud of this sort of web...

CM-U: Um-hum.

Dario Robleto: ...I've created, where it's really like it's on a – it's got its own momentum now. People send me things. I am continually amazed. Every time I think, “Okay, there just can't be much more of these very strange materials in life,” every time I find ten more that are – that just blow my mind. And that – going that deep into materials – we can get into more, but I don't – since we last talked, I definitely have more things to say about why I do it. And one, briefly, is just that I really think the world is pretty – it is not pretty, it is amazing in its own right already. This is – my ideas about magic merge into this philosophy. And so what I mean by magic is, you know, the form of magic that we all grew up with as kids and understand as being something that amazes you, but you look behind the screen and you realize it's not true...

CM-U: Hmm.

Dario Robleto: ...but I have always thought, “What if you looked behind there, and there's nothing fooling you, and that you've gotten to the elevated state of magical thinking, and it's real?” So I think art can do that. It can function in that way. That has partly fueled my intense relationship with materials because we are – I mean, we just, as humans, are constantly dealing with, you know, how does meaning find its way into materials? We all have something we love in some precious way. The *Shroud of Turin*, to a pincushion your grandmother gave you. I mean, there's a wide range of materials that we all understand. And I'm very – it's an age-old philosophical problem, too; and I definitely want to continue in thinking that. So this thing about magic, of, “What if one of art's roles could be to shine light on these incredible moments in the world right now, that we don't need to make it up, it's already amazing. And it's accessible by all of us.” And there's a more liberating spirit to that way of thinking about magic, that I'm very fond of. So that's really partly fueled why my intense fascination with the materials. And ones that are real. It's always important that they seem to be on the cusp of not being real, but they're – it's always real. And...

CM-U: Um-hum.

Dario Robleto: ...and I like working in that weird territory. So that's that piece. And so, conceptually, that hand that I made was meant to imply that it made everything else in the room.

CM-U: Hmm.

Dario Robleto: So I will often make works that I imagine others through the lens of.

CM-U: Okay.

Dario Robleto: So making this hand – how would it move? The weight of history on it? How would it affect the production of other objects? – is an important conceptual tool. So which is what everything else can kind of be viewed through.

CM-U: Okay. We'll follow you.

Dario Robleto: Okay. Well, let's see. Let's go and talk about this one.

CM-U: Okay.

[00:29:37]

Dario Robleto: Trying to find these cutoff points in history is another ongoing project of mine. What I mean by that is that when history leaves the land of the living and becomes history – and when there is no longer any firsthand knowledge of an event...

CM-U: Hmm.

Dario Robleto: ...by someone who lived through it. And I'm fascinated by those moments in history. Everyday, of course, a little bit more goes. And there's crucial moments in the past that I'm very curious that someone catch them. Did someone have the foresight or accidentally catch them in some media form? And not as writing, but as video, audio, or other forms, did somebody capture it before they died?

Dario Robleto: So that's an ongoing project, and this is an example of one of those. This piece is called *Daughters Of Wounds And Relics* [2006, Hair braid made of stretched and curled audio tape 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.] And so I was looking for – and during the Civil War, which, you know, really was a time when our country was almost going to split in two, and the parallels to now are very similar to me in many ways. Just the fact that a country can fracture over politics and beliefs, and the kind of wounds that open up, and how do we even begin to think about healing them. And so I am very curious about civil wars, thinking about it on that level, and relating, of course, to today.

Dario Robleto: So I wanted to see if I could find the last soldier and the last widow of the war. Did somebody capture them before they died? So what I found is the last Union veteran and the last Confederate widow of the war. They – someone did capture them before they died; and so I had – there are these beautiful sound recordings of them telling the story, their firsthand knowledge of the war. And they were both very old before they died.

Dario Robleto: And I had transferred these firsthand recollections to audiotape. So what we are looking at, this is stretched and pulled audiotape of their stories...

CM-U: The hair is.

Dario Robleto: The hair.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Dario Robleto: And so this – you know, I am always working on new – besides materials, strange materials, I am also always using everyday materials and trying to find...

CM-U: Modern, contemporary materials.

Dario Robleto: Yeah. Like with the vinyl records.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Dario Robleto: But trying to find new, unexpected ways of using them. Of course the sound recording still informs what I've turned them into.

CM-U: Right. Right.

Dario Robleto: So the act of braiding, as I mentioned with the hair flowers, is an incredibly symbolic gesture. Especially from this time period. And it was always, you know, it was a caring act. It was – even on a very literal level, it was merging two things together.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Dario Robleto: Or three things, depending on the braid. And so I took these stories of two very different people, on different sides of the war, years, years later, recollecting. And of course the nature of memory can change over that much time as well. And could I, like I was saying, finish something that never got finished. Could just this act of braiding stories of the last two people who had any firsthand knowledge of that moment – could it continue and the repairs – that I would argue we are still very much going through in our country.

Dario Robleto: So this is them.

[00:33:41]

Dario Robleto: And so it's a technique of just – I heat the tape, and cool it down at a very – you know, it takes a lot of – I know we talked about this last time, about the role experimentation plays in my work. I'm constantly experimenting because I don't know – there's no one to ask, often, on how to do the things I come up with. I just have to figure it out.

CM-U: Right.

Dario Robleto: So, getting it to do this is – was a big part of the project.

CM-U: Hmm.

Dario Robleto: Able to perfect it enough to get these strands long enough. So that's what we're looking at here. Then everything...

CM-U: Because part of the challenge must be very much appealing to you as an artist, too...

Dario Robleto: It really is.

CM-U: ...to work with this material.

Dario Robleto: The history of the tinkerer is very important to me, you know.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Dario Robleto: I really think – especially the American version of the tinkerer, and all that is tied up in that symbol...

CM-U: You mean the idea of playing with different things to see if they'll work?

Dario Robleto: Yeah, the Edisons, or the Teslas of the world. Like just these – you know, the idea goes beyond the technical capability, but that doesn't stop them from trying it. And what I like is that this tradition of tinkerers, they are right outside, you know, accepted science. And that often is why they remain tinkerers; but it also, on a creative level, it also allows them to think in ways that science wouldn't allow...

CM-U: Um-hum. Right.

Dario Robleto: ...because they think outside the box, often. So there's a give and take, you know. And they often don't make groundbreaking discoveries, but they make these really weird things in the process. And that's definitely the tradition that I admire, as an artist.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Dario Robleto: So...

CM-U: If I can interrupt.

Dario Robleto: Yeah. Of course.

CM-U: I'm going to have to ask this question again, as we went through before.

[00:35:41]

CM-U: If something happens to this...

Dario Robleto: Um-hum.

CM-U: ...and it needs to be restored. I remember when we spoke years ago, I said to you, "Dario, I would try, if some of that broke, I would try to use a material that would look like this to replace it." And you were pretty horrified by that, and said, "No, it has to be the material – in this case, it would have to be that vinyl. It would have to be that tape..."

- Dario Robleto: Uh-huh.
- CM-U: ...“in order to retain the meaning. Because the meaning is so much a part of the material.”
- Dario Robleto: It really is. Yeah, go ahead.
- CM-U: Are you saving material like this?
- Dario Robleto: Um-hum.
- CM-U: Do you ever consider giving extra material to whoever might buy it? Or to a – well, I don’t know, my Center at Harvard?
- Dario Robleto: Yeah.
- CM-U: I mean, do you – what do we do about this in the future?
- Dario Robleto: Well, I would definitely – I definitely make more than I use.
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- Dario Robleto: And even since our last talk, I have rethought a lot of things about keeping spares around.
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- Dario Robleto: And because it is true – I mean, using any – just replacing it would not work for me, as an artist, because I have so much riding on the fact that things are what I say they are.
- CM-U: Right.
- Dario Robleto: And, you know, all my philosophies of art are about – like I said, are how meaning finds its way into materials, is part of the process I go through to get to the final thing.
- CM-U: Right.
- Dario Robleto: The process is imbuing it with that meaning. So, you know, on a core level, putting something else in there...

CM-U: Would destroy it?

Dario Robleto: To me. Yeah, to me, it takes the power out of it.

CM-U: Right.

Dario Robleto: So that's me. And so I have – I do want to take more precautions on having extras. But I have thought even more since we last talked, too, about – most of the materials, if you really break it down – I was thinking about this. They really are like – let's say, like lead. I mean, lead is lead. You know, I'm using a lot of the materials in unexpected ways, but if you break the materials down, they are still materials that, I think, are preservable. Like hair, for example. Hair is so durable, and it's used by pretty much every culture in their mourning practices because it's the part of your body that doesn't decay. So even the hair, at a level, is going to survive most things. Lead – you know, the metals I use, the woods, the fabrics. I think those things come under the same kind of problems that other things would, but I think it's because of their unexpected use that it seems that way. But then there are things like the audiotape, like you're right...

CM-U: Well, I mean, it's true that they've lasted, which is why you are able to use them, and reconfigure them. I mean, you use materials that last. Lead, hair, so on. But it can't just be any lead. It has to be lead from the shrapnel?

Dario Robleto: Yeah.

CM-U: So, right?

Dario Robleto: And you asked me the greatest question last time about, you know, if you can't find that – I think you asked me, "If we can't find this James Brown record..."

CM-U: Right.

Dario Robleto: ...did I have other selections?

CM-U: Yes.

Dario Robleto: And it's such a great question because, in my DJ-ing beliefs, I did have other song selections that were different but conceptually got to the same point. And I think having those, you know, some of those other selections on hand,

or I think you even suggested should you buy a few of these James Brown records now...

CM-U: Um-hum. Because this was the piece that the Whitney bought, so it's – yeah.

Dario Robleto: Yeah. Which I thought was a great idea. But then now I'm getting into – my sound sources are getting even more strange, or not readily available, even in the way an old James Brown record would be. And in that case, I think this definitely needs replacements available...

CM-U: Um-hum.

Dario Robleto: ...that I would, of course – that I am being conscious now to supply and have on hand.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Dario Robleto: So that – everything else has got some story, but as far as materials and production – but that's the core. It's, of course, the hair.

[00:40:13]

Dario Robleto: And, but we can talk about maybe this one next [*A Century Of November*, 2005, Child's mourning dress made with homemade paper (pulp made from sweetheart letters written by soldiers who did not return from various wars, ink retrieved from letters, sepia, bone dust from every bone in the body), carved bone buttons, hair flowers braided by a Civil War widow, mourning dress fabric and lace, silk, velvet, ribbon, WWII surgical suture thread, mahogany, glass.]...

CM-U: Okay. Sure.

Dario Robleto: ...because there's elements in there that I could talk about in this. So paper has really taken on a, a big role in this body of work. Homemade papers. The production of making these new batches of pulp. And even at that level, when I get down to the final presentation, I do what I can as far as preservation, like you would any typical paper...

CM-U: Um-hum.

Dario Robleto: ...as far as the glue used. Sometimes if I have to use a filler, I'll use acid-free cotton, things like that. So I'm trying to be more aware of that as material.

And I do like this idea that the nature of the materials I use are often themselves very, very old. And like you mentioned there, they are here now, so they did survive at some level...

CM-U: Um-hum.

Dario Robleto: ...but how do I assure that that keeps happening, while maintaining the fact that decay is at some core level part of what I do – on a conceptual level. Just the nature of time moving, and the effects time has on anything – an abstract thing like memory, or a real material, like a bone.

Dario Robleto: And so I've – for, you know, many years, have liked that sort of hardwired into my work is the fact that, if you see decay occurring in it, it's an aesthetic thing. On a visual level, on a conceptual level. But I do want them to preserve longer on a more practical sense, too.

CM-U: Well, that's an interesting – we're getting to an interesting issue here. I mean, you look at this paper that you're reconfigured...

Dario Robleto: Uh-huh.

CM-U: ...and it has age to it. It doesn't look brand new.

Dario Robleto: Uh-huh.

CM-U: Fifty years from now, it – from this stage – will age.

Dario Robleto: Right.

CM-U: So what is your acceptance of that?

Dario Robleto: Well, my – on a visual level, I have full acceptance of it because it is continuing what it was already doing...

CM-U: Uh-huh.

Dario Robleto: ...before I ever got to it, as a material. And I really like that idea. Plus, a lot of the work looks so old, anyway, that I wonder if, you know, a darker shade of yellowing really harms it in a conceptual sense. And so I'm talking about conceptual level.

CM-U: Right.

Dario Robleto: To me, that it continues to age is a plus to me. But I am trying to understand this other practical side of it. But number one is that side for me, is look at an old bone, or this really old dress, it's – another fifty years of patina to me enriches it even more.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Dario Robleto: As idea, mainly. But I'm still working on these other issues.

CM-U: Well, that's fine. I mean, you know, when it enters into a museum, for example...

Dario Robleto: Um-hum.

CM-U: ...I mean, that's sort of the moment at which we take it; and we try to preserve it. But if it continues to age within a parameter without disintegrating, you know...

Dario Robleto: Yeah. Yeah.

CM-U: ...it would be allowed [sounds like]...

Dario Robleto: And not disintegrate, yeah.

CM-U: Right.

Dario Robleto: And so what – your role in that with art fascinates me, too, because we are – in a similar, in kind of a similar way, we are doing – we are trying to preserve something against time, but know that we can't really ever beat that problem. But it's always this effort to slow it down a bit. And that's really, on a conceptual level, that's really what I think a lot of the art I make does, too.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Dario Robleto: Things that are on these very long trajectories of decay. For a moment I can slow it down and tell the story again in that material or that object that's been forgotten or lost through time. But then I'm always knowing that at some point it's going to continue on, on the road it was going on already. So I really like those ideas.

CM-U: Um-hum.

[00:44:42]

Dario Robleto: So this is – as far as using paper as a material, this is really the starting point. Pushing paper on a real conceptual level. You know, my – again, I don't have any papermaking background or – you know, I do what I – I do my homework as well as I can on a new project, but at some point it goes back to that tinkering thing. And I like that I don't know the rules yet, so I can get to these spots that I hope are thinking a little differently. So there's many works in the show that have paper in it, but this one, I think, is the best example. It's called *A Century of November*.

Dario Robleto: And so the story that motivated this, again, how do I get from story to object? And this is an interesting trajectory. From story, to material, to object is – when I was doing my research for all the wars, and all the real catastrophe and damage that we've inflicted on each other at this point, you really – I really got a sense of just how much life has been lost. I mean, it is staggering, the numbers we're talking about. But I had started to also imagine what about all the lives that were on the cusp of being alive, that didn't – because of war – didn't come into being. And when you add that figure in, it's really astronomical.

CM-U: Hmm.

Dario Robleto: And so it's thinking about history, alternate roads of history, that our activities cut short. So then I have the challenge of, "How do you take such an ephemeral abstract idea of someone on the cusp of existence? How do you find a material equivalent to that idea?" And that's – these are the challenges I'm always trying to come up with.

Dario Robleto: So I had thought about it for a long time, and I – this, my answer that I came up with was, the amazing amount of letters that have been written at this point, in a time of war, between specifically brides, fiancées, people who that, it's clear within the letter that if he had returned home, more than likely would have resulted marriage, and children, these possible new people. So finding letters that were specifically written between two people in a time of war, a soldier and someone back home, that I know through research he didn't make it back, and their – and that history was cut short. So finding – these are the letters that I searched for amongst – and again, I was talking about the lead, and we don't have a sense of just how much there is of it – letters, in a time of war, are just – I mean, there's a staggering amount of letters that cover every possible topic you can think of.

[00:48:14]

Dario Robleto: So what you're looking at. This is a child's mourning dress, and this would have been based on a real design. So, I mentioned earlier about the mourning clothing...

CM-U: Um-hum.

Dario Robleto: ...and even the children – down to your children, had to wear clothing that reflected the mourning state they were in. So this is – this would have been an accurate example. But it is made of specifically sweetheart letters that were written during war from soldiers and fiancées that, he did not return home from war. So I wanted this imaginary child, who was right on the cusp of being, to – in a way, she's mourning her own nonexistence. She is wearing the dress of all the implied life that she was going to have.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Dario Robleto: ...but she's wearing it to mourn herself. And my idea with – I have this idea about ghosts that – instead of ghosts being people who've died, who are wandering for whatever, for various reasons, that perhaps ghosts are people who were on the cusp of being, that got cut short. That the longing that we associate with a spirit or a ghost is longing, on not getting their chance to live, rather than having lived.

CM-U: Hmm.

Dario Robleto: So it's, you know, it's another way of me merging an idea with some other research I'm doing that will help me get to that material, imagining that material, and then getting the material to work in with real historical facts as far as being accurate on dress and this pattern. So the pulp is – I make a new batch of pulp from the letters, and nothing, nothing ever goes to waste. Even in these letters, I've begun to – in a variety of techniques, removing the ink from the paper so that I can make just enough of it, again, to reuse...

CM-U: The ink?

Dario Robleto: ... the ink. So even the ink has been reused in some of these of these coloring, spots, on the dark, the black areas. So everything that was there is still there, just telling the story in a totally different way now.

CM-U: So some of the inks have been used to make this dark...

Dario Robleto: Yeah.

CM-U: ...material? Okay.

Dario Robleto: And so, you know, this – this is a variety of, you know, forensic techniques...

CM-U: Um-hum.

Dario Robleto: ...all the way to just cutting out sections very slowly, that I can reconstitute as ink, as a colorant. It's more of a colorant.

[00:51:10]

CM-U: So you are constantly developing new techniques, depending upon what the challenge of the material is?

Dario Robleto: Yeah. Definitely. 'Cause I – I wanted those – all the language that's ever been written on that page, I wanted to like, if you could shake it and reshuffle it, would this new pattern come out on the page, which is what I have here.

CM-U: Hmm.

Dario Robleto: So it's merged with, again, real hair flower examples. This is a real, another section of a real mourning dress. These are carved bone buttons. So everything's really in a state of lived-in mourning, and then my new twists and turns to it. So I should add – because I know it comes up, and we may have talked about it last time, just about the nature of, is this destroying some archival material?

CM-U: Hmm.

Dario Robleto: It's an important point, and, you know, I have a lot of opinions on it.

CM-U: Good.

Dario Robleto: And I – so a few things that are very important to me are, I would never, ever use something that, you know, some museum or archive is eagerly awaiting. My work is not about defacing historical material at all. To me, I don't believe that at all. So I make – I take great pains and strides to – I find things that are literally gathering dust in a basement. Completely forgotten. Nobody wants. The stories would not have been told otherwise. And I fully believe art can retell a story.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Dario Robleto: Or, in many cases, things are given to me now, which is really great. People who fully know what I'm going to do, and who believe that the transformation process is a creative one, not a destructive one. So that's a very big issue to me. And part of the confusion comes with – that we, like I mentioned several times, we just don't understand how much of the stuff there is. I mean, like using bullet lead. That's not the last bullet, believe me. It's – I mean, the Civil War was a hundred and fifty years ago, and every year, routinely, tens of thousands of bullets are excavated. And that was a little blip of a war, when you compare it to other wars.

CM-U: Hmm.

Dario Robleto: Uh...

CM-U: May I interrupt, just a question?

Dario Robleto: Um-hum.

CM-U: So you're not buying from dealers that would have historical – I mean, dealers that would be selling to major collectors or museums?

Dario Robleto: Yeah. No, no.

CM-U: You're dealing from this network of – web, did you say – is it, are you actually using the eBay kind of thing? I mean, how are you finding some of that stuff?

Dario Robleto: Definitely the Internet. Although the work doesn't look high tech or anything like that, I definitely – you know, when the story is written one day about how did the Internet change artistic practice, definitely what I do...

CM-U: Hmm.

Dario Robleto: ...would have to be, I think _____ [word inaudible].

CM-U: Let's talk about that _____ [phrase inaudible].

Dario Robleto: Yeah. Because my research abilities, and my – and what I value, like this artistry of finding things, is completely aided by technology. But then it still becomes about real footwork to me.

CM-U: Right. Sure.

Dario Robleto: So I definitely use the Internet in my research or connecting ability. But then at some point I still need to get out in the field and do legwork.

CM-U: Well, it's a finding aid, but it's not getting it actually.

Dario Robleto: Yeah. Yeah.

CM-U: Right.

Dario Robleto: So that's – I mean, you know, there's ten thousand bullets – let's say this year alone, that are going to be dug up from the Civil War. And in a hundred and fifty years of doing this, you know, it – I mean, that's what I'm saying. We don't have a sense of just how much there is. And on a letter level, just imagine how many people have served in the military. And if they only wrote one letter, that's a staggering amount. And of course they wrote more than one letter, but...

[00:55:21]

Dario Robleto: This is – I think it comes up in my work, and it should, and I want it to, about how we value materials. But it's important to me as an artist to stress that I am not looking for things that have a historical value in an archive or a museum, which I really value. And things that a staggering amount of people have, are sitting in a basement somewhere...

CM-U: Um-hum.

Dario Robleto: ...whose story – the stories of which will never be told, ever.

CM-U: Right.

Dario Robleto: And then the second valuable point, to me, is to understand that I don't look at the transformation process as a destructive act. I mean, this is really, really rooted in my beliefs in alchemy. I've made, since we last talked – I don't know that I've brought this up – but alchemy, as a philosophy, as a belief, as a world view – of course, you know, many artists use it as a metaphor. It's a valuable metaphor. But I really challenged myself to stop using it as a metaphor and really do it. And what is that going to mean for me, what is it going to take out of me to do that? How do I need to reshift how I approach materials, and what I expect from the transformation? And, you know, I don't

– I hope I will always be grappling with that problem. I certainly don't have all the answers. But there has been a definite shift in thinking about – stop expecting it as a metaphor and start expecting it as reality.

Dario Robleto: So that is – you kind of – I think you have to kind of make that leap in that – you have to go back to this other form of logic to really get into what I think I'm doing as an artist. So the alchemical transformation is always a creative transformation. And we just have so much invested in the fact that – you know, like a piece of paper with language on it, that's the only way to understand it. And nobody ever – we just don't even question, is there some other way to tell the story? And to me, the transformation of materials allows all these varieties of ways of telling the story that aren't strictly rooted in the original construction that we're handed. So with the dress, to me, all those individual stories are still here and telling that in a new way. In a way that wouldn't have been told otherwise. But that's a key thing. So that people would think I was defacing things, or that I'm destroying things, are two points that I'm very much not about...

CM-U: Um-hum.

Dario Robleto: ...and try to point out. 'Cause I think sometimes the interpretation of the work can get locked up in those two things...

CM-U: Um-hum.

Dario Robleto: ...without understanding these other points.

CM-U: Without understanding? Yeah.

Dario Robleto: Yeah. And so you have to understand that transformation is not a destructive process.

CM-U: It's a creative process.

Dario Robleto: It is the ultimately creative act...

CM-U: Um-hum.

Dario Robleto: ...to me, in my beliefs. So that's that. That piece.

CM-U: Okay.

[00:58:51]

Dario Robleto: You know, I think we're losing our ability to mourn creatively and healthfully.

CM-U: Yes, we are.

Dario Robleto: So I mean, I think it's clear that I'm talking about the past, but of course I'm – this is all about today, and it's all those sorts of things, that are really bothering me.

CM-U: Oh, major. Okay, where should we – where would you like to go next?

Dario Robleto: Let's go over here.

CM-U: Okay. I love this piece. I do. I absolutely do.

Dario Robleto: It's got some – don't record this part (uses shirt sleeve to wipe dust from Plexiglas bonnet).

(laughter)

CM-U: Yeah, get the dust off. I absolutely love this piece.

Dario Robleto: So, let's see. This piece is called *A Sadness Silence Can't Touch* [2005-06, Casts of Civil War era "pain bullets" (bullets used by soldiers to bite on during surgery) made from dissolved audio tape recordings of poets' voices, lace and fabric from mourning dresses, ink dyed yellowheart and ash, nickel, silver, milk paint, typeset. / Walt Whitman - "America;" / Lord Alfred Tennyson - "The Charge of the Light Brigade;" / Sigfried Sassoon - "Died of Wounds;" / T.S. Eliot - "The Wasteland;" / Robert Graves - "In Procession;" / Dylan Thomas - "A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London;" / David Jones - "In Parenthesis."]. So the term, "bite the bullet," it originates in the Civil War. It was due to – on the battlefield, in the surgical sites, anesthesia was just getting going, just starting. Definitely not widely available to the front lines. So surgeons would literally stick a bullet in a soldier's mouth while they're being operated on. And this is where the term "bite the bullet" originates from.

CM-U: Hmm.

Dario Robleto: But as – so, as I keep bringing up about – for me, as an artist, how does meaning find its way into a material? Is just a fascinating topic to me. But, as an artist, I’m trying to do that in the artistic act. But there are things, of course, in the world that get there on their own without it ever being thought of as art, or creative, even. And these objects do that for me in a way few others do.

Dario Robleto: And these are called “pain bullets,” and these are the bullets that were stuck in soldiers’ mouths that are – when excavated today, and they are always found around surgical campsites. They are chunks of lead that look like chewing gum. And when you think of politics, or real bodily pain, finding its way into an actual metal, every time you see an indentation, that is another tooth mark of a soldier who is more than likely losing a limb, having a bullet removed. Something pretty bad is happening to his body that’s being transferred to him biting down on that bullet. So just these little – they are incredibly collectible, these little pain bullets that are found, that have some real physical historical reminder of that moment in history. And these are all specifically from Union campsites as well, so this adds this other layer of what was the pain for, in the first place.

Dario Robleto: So this is a case where I wanted the form of the object. It’s a little different shift than some of the other objects I’ve used, where I’m retaining the actual material of the object.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Dario Robleto: This – in this case, I wanted the form. And can a form which is, you know, more abstract – does it have a physical substance – just the form, can that form retain some aura of meaning that I can use and add onto, as an artist.

CM-U: So the others we’ve been talking about, you’ve kept the material, but you reshaped it into something else...

Dario Robleto: Right.

CM-U: ...whereas here, the actual shape of the material itself has an importance [sounds like].

Dario Robleto: Yes, it’s the shape. Right. It’s this abstract, outer surface, that...

CM-U: Right.

Dario Robleto: ...can that be something that I investigate as well?

CM-U: Right.

[01:02:34]

Dario Robleto: So what you're looking at – these are all original pain bullets that I've cast for the form. And then each one has been remade by me, using the audiotape. So they are all made of dissolved audiotape.

CM-U: Oh. Uh-huh.

Dario Robleto: But these are all specifically poems in the poet's original voice. They are all specifically soldier poets. And as a genre of poetry, it's a fascinating genre, and one that is, unfortunately, really not prominent anymore. And that is the role of someone – again, this firsthand experience of an event. But there were generation – from almost every war – of poets who, on their return, addressed their experience through words and the power of language. So it was important that I find these poets. And, again, did someone record them in time because...

CM-U: How were they recorded?

Dario Robleto: Well, there's a wide range of wars here. And each one was recorded – like, there's one from the Vietnam War, so it was recorded, of course, more recently as the technology...

CM-U: On audiotape?

Dario Robleto: Well, yeah. It could be on vinyl. I transferred to audiotape to get them here. But my sources come from different recordings. And then some soldiers are – who were predating being recorded, would recite the poem later in their life. But these are also specifically poems that the poet wrote addressing the war. So in a way I chose all these poems. They were their counterattack in a way to what they were experiencing on the field. And so, if you think about it, how does this all merge into a pain bullet? And so I – as I've been saying, I love language, and the power of language; and poetry as a genre, or a genre that could directly protest whatever the moment was, is really something that has died as a tradition. Although you could argue hip-hop is picking up in a different way those traditions. And I think it would be true.

Dario Robleto: But when was the – when did this die? How did it die? How did the power of language as a protesting stance to a catastrophe on the battlefield – when did this die, and how? These are things I was investigating. So each bullet, you can imagine the soldier is biting down. The force of his words are so strong that that’s producing the indentation in the lead.

CM-U: Hmm.

Dario Robleto: All poems that are fighting back in their own way. But he is biting down on the thing that caused the wound on his body, that was the inspiration for the poem. So there’s a kind of a weird loop I imagine going on with these new bullets I’ve made. To bite down on the thing that caused your pain, but is also this source for your protest, your fighting back.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Dario Robleto: So each of...

CM-U: So these are actual casts?

Dario Robleto: Yeah. They are casts. But they are the poet’s original – in his original words.

CM-U: Right.

Dario Robleto: Remade. So it’s like, how do you make poetry material, even.

CM-U: Hmm.

Dario Robleto: This is another way of me imagining that.

[01:06:18]

Dario Robleto: And this has a very rare recording. They are all very rare, but there’s one more than any. The only poet who didn’t have fighting experience, but he was a Civil War nurse. This is the only known recording of Walt Whitman, this very first bullet here.

CM-U: Hmm.

Dario Robleto: And on my liner notes, each poet and the poem is labeled, if you want to look later. And I’ll focus on that one for a moment, because it is a fascinating story. And so, when I look for sound sources, they often are – I mentioned that – that

they have – to the level of material selection, but sound is you know, of course different than material when we think about it. But are there sounds that can get to that cusp that I mentioned about? Is it really? Could it be, that we had – that someone has made that recording? So I have a whole library of these sounds at this point that I collect. Because I think of sound as material, as I think has been, you know, clear in another work that we talked about, too. I am always thinking about how sound becomes material.

Dario Robleto: So this Whitman recording gets to that unbelievable level to me. And this recording was made right at the end of his life, and it was right when Edison was really getting going on his cylinder technology. And apparently there was a moment where Edison and Whitman lived fairly close to each other. And Edison had moved on to some other experiments, I believe; and his assistants had taken over that project for a while, and they were – they had the foresight, I guess, to realize, you know, “This great American poet lives right here. Let’s get him on – let’s test him on this new technology.” And so it is – it’s – you can definitely tell Whitman’s very old and has lost the force that you – I don’t know. I’ve never heard – no one knows to compare it to...

CM-U: Right.

Dario Robleto: ...but you imagine him saying things in a very different way than he was at that point in his life. But this poem is called *America*, and he was a Civil War nurse and wrote about it in many poems. His experiences on the battlefield, through his poetry. But the way that recording has survived through time is really fascinating; and it fits all the sort of criteria that I need on materials about how do these amazing things survive through time. And so what happened was, this disc – I mean, this cylinder – was discovered years later, decades later, and kind of became a big story. This was in the 1950s that this cylinder was rediscovered. Several were rediscovered with all these really early recordings that nobody realized Edison had done.

Dario Robleto: So this recording was played on an American talk show in the fifties – to the viewers – and the cylinder very quickly after that really officially disappeared.

CM-U: Hmm.

Dario Robleto: Like nobody – someone stole it. Nobody knows. So now our only known recording of Whitman is based on a television show from the fifties, which is on a material itself which is now in a state of decay. And which will need its own preservation. So I’m very fascinated with these little snippets of sound

that somehow are finding their way through media and through time to stay alive.

CM-U: And how did you get it? What did you do?

Dario Robleto: Well now, the recording has been digitally transferred – like it's been properly...

CM-U: From the TV program.

Dario Robleto: Yeah, it's been properly saved. And that, that's easily available. But the others are poets that I found on vinyl that I will transfer to audiotape. And so just how something, how a little seed can survive through time like that is very fascinating.

CM-U: So sometimes you take the vinyl and transfer it to audiotape and make your work?

Dario Robleto: Yes.

CM-U: And sometimes you actually use the vinyl?

Dario Robleto: Um-hum.

CM-U: Okay.

Dario Robleto: And audiotape, as a material, is showing up a lot in this body of work.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Dario Robleto: Just as a medium. There's this real conversational feeling to audiotape that I really like, that I wanted that aura to be in a lot of the works. Just, you know, the – well, you know, I mean, recording on tape of a journalist's point of view, or – you mentioned the telephone [sounds like] – old tape messages.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Dario Robleto: There's just something about that medium now that's – that I really wanted the vibe in this show, too. So that's why the audiotape is showing up a lot.

CM-U: Um-hum.

[01:11:40]

Dario Robleto: So this is – each one’s got a similar story. Each bullet. Each from a different war. And then of course the way I’ve constructed all these other things also is based on similar stories and motivations that – the woods, all the woods I use, the paints, these are all homemade paints using recipes and techniques that would have been used in these other eras as well.

CM-U: So the actual makeup of the paint that you used is from different periods?

Dario Robleto: Well, they’re recipes. Like...

CM-U: Uh, like, for example...

Dario Robleto: Like milk paint was a common way of making paint. So, you know, I don’t know.

CM-U: Casein?

Dario Robleto: Yeah. And – but using the old recipes was important to go back and find the original way they would have been made. So why I did all that, it’s similar to relearning the hair braiding techniques.

CM-U: Right.

Dario Robleto: In the mourning traditions that are running throughout the show, the one – the big thing to me about that is that, how does loss propel creative leaps in thinking. And you could almost – well, you could write an alternate art history of artistic leaps that have been made just due to loss. A profound loss. And this is generally done by people who would never call themselves artists...

CM-U: Um-hum.

Dario Robleto: ...or never consider what they were making as art. But like the frame on the hair over there, this design – I mean, in this sort of design and presentation, all these things are being inspired by the logic of everyday people who were making – who needed to mourn in a creative way, and who took it into their own hands to make it. Even if they didn’t know how...

CM-U: Right.

Dario Robleto: ...that didn't stop them from making it. So you often find these objects that, when I look at them, they are just made very weird. The construction is very quirky. The materials are everyday things that people would use. So there's a – that spirit is running throughout every aesthetic decision in the show.

CM-U: The irony of it to me, as a conservator, is those people who are making that, they are doing it to release something within themselves. And so they are using materials at hand and so on. The idea of preservation is probably never in their mind. It wasn't about keeping it. It was about doing it at the moment, perhaps. And you come on...

Dario Robleto: Uh-huh.

CM-U: ...and you find it interesting. And in a way, they have a longer preservation than things that may have been made as professional artists at the time. So it's kind of an interesting idea, the way it comes around.

Dario Robleto: That's a great point, yeah.

[01:14:31]

CM-U: But I want to get very specific with you about the paints. So show me, point – different ones that you've made, as you can remember using different things – if you remember.

Dario Robleto: Yeah, so – the woods are...

CM-U: Is this part of the piece? The base.

Dario Robleto: Yeah. This is actually stained with ink.

CM-U: Stained with ink?

Dario Robleto: And the box is stained with ink. And then this is made with this homemade paint. The paint on this surface.

CM-U: This box – this black?

Dario Robleto: Yeah, this section here.

CM-U: Uh-huh.

- Dario Robleto: The box is a wood called yellowheart, and it is...
- CM-U: Yellow...
- Dario Robleto: Yellowheart.
- CM-U: ...heart. Okay.
- Dario Robleto: And the woods I choose – probably not a surprise – are very specific. And they're chosen either for their symbolic meaning in mourning customs, or their actual medicinal value...
- CM-U: Hm. Like?
- Dario Robleto: ...like the weeping willow tree is a very important symbolic tree in mourning practices.
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- Dario Robleto: And so many – there's a piece over here I'll show you that's made of willow. So I'm – when you read the checklist, the woods are all selected for that way.
- CM-U: The way that you described? Okay.
- Dario Robleto: And then using ink as a stain was important on this language level of – like I was talking about the dress – reusing ink in different spots.
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- Dario Robleto: This is contemporary ink, but, you know, enough – I used some of what was left over in these other projects to mix in with these.
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- Dario Robleto: But staining a wood with the material of language writing, to me, these are – I don't know if it's important or not; but for me, they are just more little conceptual jumps about how someone writes, and does it have to be legible necessarily, as language. But the material of ink can soak in. And the act of staining and soaking is very – a big deal in a lot of the works. This is – not in this piece, but there's another – I should mention that this show, there's actually two parts. There's another part up right now at the Weatherspoon Museum ["Dario Robleto: Falk Visiting Artist," Weatherspoon Art Museum,

University of North Carolina, Greensboro, September 24-December 17, 2006] in North Carolina that has part two to this show. And that piece – there’s a piece in that show that really takes this concept to a new level, as far as what I’m staining the wood, or bone, even, with. Is using recipes that would have been homemade to stain something, but adding my own medicinal touches to it, so that the staining process can act as a potential salve as well as an actual stain to get color.

CM-U: So, like what kinds of things would you add?

Dario Robleto: Oh, well, the resurrection plant is a very – it shows up quite a bit in my homemade medicines and potions. That’s another aspect of my art making that we haven’t touched on, that I think could raise some interesting material issues that you might want to talk about. But – so, briefly, the resurrection plant, which I do have an example in this show of the resurrection plant. It’s a plant that looks dead and dormant. It’s all brown and curled up, and it can lie dormant for decades, look like it’s dead. And with watering, it will bloom overnight.

CM-U: Hmm.

Dario Robleto: And you can do this several times. You can take it out of the water, and it will go back to this dead state. So it is a very symbolic plant in many customs.

CM-U: It grows in most climates?

Dario Robleto: Yeah. And it’s – because it is so – it is able to go dormant, basically. So this is the logic in medicine-making that I really admire. That a plant, or a bark, or an oil can be chosen as much for its symbolic purpose as any real medicinal or scientific fact. And so when I say that I’m using these old recipes, this is kind of what I’m implying, is that there was a logic in those recipes that was similar to the logic in making an object. And there were leaps in thinking.

[Robleto begins to discuss the work *A Beauty to Fatalism She Intends To Nurture*, 2006, Homemade paper (pulp made from military photographs of soldiers and brides from various wars, ground eternal flower, cotton), colored paper, World War II carrier pigeon message capsules filled with (battlefield dirt from various wars, carnivorous plant seeds, resurrection plant, excavated shrapnel), hair flowers braided by war widows, fragments of military uniforms from various wars, mourning dress fabric, silk, ribbon, typeset, poplar, ash.]

[01:19:12]

Dario Robleto Interview Transcript, Artists Documentation Program, D’Amelio Terras Gallery (Produced by Whitney Museum), 10/21/2006

Video: adp2006d_robleto_001va.mp4 / Interview #: V12000-020.2006d / TRT: 01:26:20

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Dario Robleto: So, you know, the resurrection plant does this. Then that must transfer to us if we ingest it. Like, that was the thinking.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Dario Robleto: And then the plants and barks and oils that have been chosen specifically for immortality, or to cheat death, or resurrection – I mean, it gets its name, and it's very clear why. So I just like – I love that thinking, that...

Dario Robleto: These little vials are the secret message capsules they would attach to pigeons' legs during many wars, especially World War II, World War I. The carrier pigeon was an important part of communications. Which amazes me.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Dario Robleto: I love – the history of animals in warfare is really a fascinating topic. And, you know, in today's – in a digital age, the idea that you'd throw a pigeon up in the air and hope it got there, it's just so amazing to me. But there was a very active pigeon division – it sounds strange – in the American military for years.

CM-U: Hmm.

Dario Robleto: And these are actual capsules from World War II that would have carried secret messages across enemy lines for any number of reasons. A little side note – but the Germans had actually invested time and money into producing a counter fleet of hawks that would...

CM-U: Hm. That would _____ [word inaudible] the pigeons.

Dario Robleto: Yeah, to attack the pigeons in the air.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Dario Robleto: So of all the – you know, all the destruction, all the plane fights going up there, there's also this other war going on...

CM-U: Warfare.

Dario Robleto: ...with birds. And I've seen pictures of both, and, you know, the hawks – I mean, they even dressed them like they were in – like there was swastika on the hawks...

CM-U: On the actual birds?

Dario Robleto: Yeah. And the carrier pigeons actually had, you know, little jackets they wore to stay warm, or – I mean, they really, like, dressed them like fighters. It's really amazing. (laughs)

CM-U: Ha.

Dario Robleto: So, anyway, these capsules are containing a new little homemade medicine I've made, using resurrection plant.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Dario Robleto: But I won't go into all these...

CM-U: Okay. That's fine.

Dario Robleto: But that has an example of it in there. So, I guess, what do you think?

CM-U: I think we're toward an end.

Dario Robleto: Okay.

CM-U: If you are, or if you are thinking this is...

Dario Robleto: I can go on and on, you know, but...

CM-U: Well, if there – is there any one aspect – we haven't talked about bone at all, other than – I mean, is there – unless there's only one aspect. Of course I don't expect this to be our last interview, so we can discuss some of these issues again.

Dario Robleto: The bone. The bone is – when I decided to talk about this, these topics, this has come – like, I think I mentioned, five years now, of work. Not just this show...

CM-U: Right.

Dario Robleto: ...but a series of other shows. And when I told myself, "Are you going to talk about this?" You can't go halfway. You have to go all the way, or just don't talk about it. About the real horror of war. And one of the horrors of war is the damage on a body. And on another level of how I get to material to –

from these other strategies I've used – I have always – I was intrigued by, you know, turning to dust.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Dario Robleto: It's pretty common – it's a cliché, even, in poetry.

CM-U: Right.

Dario Robleto: But when you read that on the page, it's one thing, turning to dust. When you see the pile of dust in front of you, something shifts.

CM-U: Hmm.

Dario Robleto: And so, on a material level, I'm very interested in what happened there. Why did – why is our reaction shifting from written word to material. And so that's a whole 'nother discussion...

CM-U: Okay.

Dario Robleto: ...but I'm fascinated by that. But the bone I've chosen to use, and for those reasons, to really talk about the damage on a body; but also to just – to not shy away. Because I just thought, "You can't talk about this in a roundabout way. Either you talk about it directly, or you don't." And that was kind of the decisions – making I got, to be able to use the material. And I had faith that I'd use it sensitively enough that – 'cause I didn't want the work to get into gore or shock.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Dario Robleto: I mean, those are definitely not tactics I'm interested in. And just had faith I'd use it in a sensitive enough way that it would talk about the fragility of all of us, not that it's some, you know, gross substance. And so that was how I kind of got there conceptually, to use the bone.

CM-U: My one last question is, do you sense – and you very well may not, and that's not your role to do necessarily, but – do you sense an evolution in the way you are using materials now, let's say, than from two, three, four years ago?

Dario Robleto: I definitely do, and it's definitely related to what I mentioned about the alchemy – from shifting my mind from metaphor to reality.

- CM-U: That, instead of the idea of an artist changing something, you are actually doing that?
- Dario Robleto: Yeah. And what ramifications does that have on – of course, the artwork, but also on me as an artist?
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- Dario Robleto: And it, you know, how I'm grappling with all of that is private and...
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- Dario Robleto: ...complicated, but it is definitely evolving...
- CM-U: You're still grappling.
- Dario Robleto: I'm still grappling. Definitely I am.
- CM-U: Thanks, Dario.
- Dario Robleto: Yeah, you're welcome...
- CM-U: It was great. Thank you very much.
- Dario Robleto: Thank you.

[END RECORDING]