



Dario Robleto's Cardiosonic Chronicle

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Menil Show Traces the Human

Heartbeat's Hidden Aural History

IMAGE ABOVE: Dario Robleto found a couple of Andy Warhol *Sunset* prints while studying the Menil Collection for works to include in his show. The one on the right is one of the exhibition's "anchor pieces," he says. Photo: Devon Britt-Darby

Sounds and their embedded cultural histories have long figured in the work of conceptual artist Dario Robleto. His upcoming Menil Collection exhibition, *The Boundary of Life is Quietly Crossed*, was commissioned and developed through a joint research residency with the Menil and the Cynthia Woods Mitchell Center for the Arts, University of Houston. A lightly edited version of Robleto's conversation with A+C's Devon Britt-Darby follows.

A+C: The human heartbeat has shown up in your work before, for example in certain recordings of heartbeats that you melted down and used as sculptural elements, but this is the first time it's a stand-alone topic.

DARIO ROBLETO: It all started when I was a Smithsonian artist fellow, so I'm entering my fourth year with this as a topic. I had specifically gone there to study the first artificial heart ever implanted in a human, which was very famously done here in



Dario Robleto visited the Menil Collection's treasure rooms to find works to juxtapose with his own for his upcoming exhibition, *The Boundary of Life is Quietly Crossed*. Photo: Devon Britt-Darby.

town by Dr. Denton Cooley, who's still here. So there's a real connection to Houston's history. I had gone to study it with the curator who manages that collection, and it turned into this now much bigger project. I've been trying to trace what I really think is the lost or unknown history of the human heartbeat, but specifically as a sound experience. I've heard some really incredible things that I'm positive nobody's ever heard before. I'm often trying to find materials that skirt the edge of possibility. And with this project, I really realized that I could do that with sound.

There are three pillar records. At this point I have about 30, but the whole story revolves around three. The first one is: Who, how, what, where was the first human heartbeat ever recorded, and how did it happen, and why did we try to do it? It's an experience we all take for granted that we can know, but it occurred to me one day that someone, somewhere, had to have been the first, and what happened to that story? Where is it? And it's one of those stories that's like, why do we not all know this? It's just beautiful, and you could argue that it was a milestone in human history, because the notion of recording your heart as actual medicine and as poetic possibilities, metaphor—we crossed that line. It was a very important moment.

A+C: When was that moment?

1853. It was the first attempt ever to record the human pulse and the heartbeat. Anyway, the story that led up to it, what eventually happened, and how they did it just blows my mind every time.

Fast-forward to 1977, and the heartbeat that just last year officially crossed the edge of the solar system—the Voyager and the Golden Record. On board is a heartbeat recording, and it's an incredible, beautiful story. It was the heartbeat of a 27-year-old woman who had just fallen in love, and they kind of snuck her heartbeat on board in a sense. Her name is Ann Druyan, and she's the inspiration for all of this, because just meditating on the notion that somebody's heart crossed the edge of the solar system is an incredible thing to ponder, and it took 38 years. She's the only human being on the planet who can say, "My heart is on the other side of the solar system," and (the recording) is from a moment in her life when she had just fallen in love with the man of her dreams, Carl Sagan, who has since passed away. It's just incredible, the knowledge she holds, so she's one of the ones



Dario Robleto
Things Placed in the Sea, Become the Sea (detail, in production), 2014
Mixed media
Courtesy Inman Gallery.

I've secured for the programming. Our representative of a heart floating in space forever, maybe holding the story of the abstraction of human love, if anything ever finds it—she's still alive on the planet right now, and it's incredible we don't all realize that.

She's the reason I really started this project, because I wondered about the history that led up to the day when she could have even done this. How did she record herself, and why would she want to do this at all? Why the heart? So that opened this line of thinking that I need to know where the first recording of a heartbeat was, and why they did it, and then you have to go into a cultural history of the heart, and why the heart matters—specifically the sound. I'm really focused on the actual movement that produces sound in the heart.

So I wanted to be able to show: Here's the whole arc of history that led to 1977, where you could confidently walk in a room and be hooked up to an EKG machine and fully expect not just medical knowledge; for Ann and Carl, there was more. They were banking on the fact that there was some other type of emotional knowledge in the recording as well, which they're hoping some future technology will have the capability of deciphering. On board Voyager, the only notion of human love is Ann's heartbeat and brain waves. Everything else they chose is very matter-of-fact and straightforward, so there's a lot riding on this recording getting somewhere and someone being able to pull information back out of it as an audible experience. That's a big, big if, but it's beautiful and, to me, a great art act that she even tried it at all.

A+C: So that's the second pillar.

That's the second, and I thought everything was leading up to her, but then I had this question: When Ann's heart gets to wherever it's going, can we assume our own heartbeats will still sound the same? I think I've found a possible answer that very directly relates to Houston history. That's where the artificial heart comes in.

The first attempt to install it was in 1969; fast-forward to 2011 and 2012, when Dr. Bud Frazier, who had been a young doctor studying under Cooley all those years ago, had a really radical breakthrough suggesting that perhaps the way forward with artificial hearts is that we need to let go of the notion of a beating heart. With his colleague Dr. Billy Cohn, he designed and implanted the first beatless heart in a human here in town a few years ago. Medically, it's groundbreaking, but in my opinion this is a story where artists should be involved, because Dr. Frazier has opened a can of worms, philosophically. He proved something no one has ever proved in the history of our planet—that you can live without a beating heart. The patient he installed it in was the first human who had no EKG, no heartbeat and no pulse; he was a flat line on the monitor, and by every indication he should have been dead, but he was fully alive. It's never happened before.



Dario Robleto uses an image of "Caterina X," an early cerebral pulse test subject, in a book he made telling part of her story and as part of the record sleeve design of an audio "box set" dedicated to his history of the human heartbeat. Image courtesy of the artist.

It raises beautiful questions, like what's the poetic price of a beatless heart? That's a question I think an artist needs to ask philosophically—are we okay with letting go of a pillar of how we've defined ourselves if that means saving the life of a loved one or yourself? Dr. Frazier would absolutely say yes, and I agree with him, but there are these incredible questions to ponder along the way.

I've been trying to convince him that as sound history, this would be a remarkable moment. When you say "beatless heart," that doesn't mean that it's silent, but nobody has recorded it as sound, so I've been trying for almost two years to build a relationship with him and explain the process that I'm going through and to convince him that we should record it as sound history. So in January I finally got the recording. It's incredible. It's brimming with meaning, but just as a sound experience, it's truly stunning.

A+C: Are you using these actual recordings as sound elements that people will hear in the show?

Yes, which is unusual for my work, but this time they've got to be. They're incredible sounds. At the Menil, there will be a window devoted to this sculptural box set I've made of the unknown history of the human heartbeat. All of the 30 recordings are all being pressed to vinyl; they'll all have their own liner notes and record sleeves. The idea was that someone would open this box and have this audible historical experience of milestones in the history of heartbeats with these incredible stories attached to them.

I've chosen five to highlight. There are 30, but the viewer will have access to five recordings that are chosen for a reason. A mini-narrative forms from the larger body of 30 recordings, with all different types of milestones. Someone could literally walk through more than 150 years of milestones of heartbeats as an audible experience.



Dario Robleto
Fossilhood Is the Only Forever (detail, in production), 2014
Mixed media
Courtesy Inman Gallery.

A+C: Are they listening to headphones?

Yes. It's not my first choice, but it's the only real solution here. So there are three windows, and then I'll have two sculptural floor works, and then a number of works I've chosen from the collection will be in the windows with other artifacts I've made. There will be a handful of things on the wall as well.

A+C: Tell me about the sculptural work.

One is talking about the history of the artificial heart. It's often not known at all, but it was in parallel with the Apollo program. When President Kennedy made his famous speech about how America would get to the moon by the end of the decade, what has been lost to history is that we essentially made the same argument for the heart, and with the same goal—that America would be the first country to build a heart from scratch by the end of the decade. So it was actually as much of a race to the heart as a race to the moon.

A+C: Help me visualize it.

For me it's definitely a more abstract side of my work, but it feels like some kind of underwater city, or some very busy port, or a potential platform for rockets to take off from. It hovers in between all these zones, but the essential point is that it's about some sort of exploration that's about to occur. One of the key materials of this piece is vinyl records that have been salvaged from the bottom of the deep sea. It plays nicely off the Golden Record—the idea that we've thrown it up into a different type of sea, just hoping it floats away and something catches it someday.

A+C: Are you melting down these records and using them sculpturally the way you have before?

That's right; you wouldn't identify them as records. And in this case I don't need to mention every song title; it's just the notion that records have been gathering geologic and medical meaning at the bottom of the sea. And the notion of barnacles living in the groove of a record was so beautiful to me.

A+C: What works from the collection are you including?

I've discovered that I really like Max Ernst. I didn't quite know that until I dove into the collection, so there are three Ernst pieces, including one called *The Boy with the Fluttering Heart*, which is perfect for the show. There's a Warhol print that I'm pretty sure they've never shown. It's a beautiful silkscreen sunset. It looks like the sunset from another planet. Those are the anchor pieces that I've been building off of, and then there are several more obscure things that they've also never shown.

A+C: We've touched on the broadest outlines of the history you're exploring. How will you flesh them out, given that you're showing at the least didactic museum on the planet? Is there where the public programs come in?

Absolutely, and this is the first time I've approached programming as an actual extension of my practice. So it is really curated, and new sound recordings will have their public debut at each event. So I do have plans for each night, but who's coming is what's really special. Ann Druyan will be there the first night, and I feel my role is to reframe her as an artist and what she did as a great subversive art act. To me, everyone who's coming crosses those lines between what they do professionally and art, even if they didn't say that to themselves.

—DEVON BRITT-DARBY

