

# DARIO ROBLETO

on Sampling  
& Manipulating  
Objects into Art



Dario Robleto (born 1972), *You Make My World a Better Place to Find*, 1996–1998

Lint, thread, various debris and particles, the artist's grandmother's antique wooden spool

For the past two years I have been secretly collecting lint, thread, etc., from friends, acquaintances and strangers (for example a piece of lint on someone's shoulder, a hair hanging on a forearm). I have connected all this debris into one long thread which I then spooled. From this spool of debris, I have repaired a blanket, a tiny pair of mittens, sewn buttons back on, repaired tears in clothes and various other things.

Dimensions variable

Gift of Peter Norton, 2014.7.18



On December 1, 2017, Skidmore students Teague Costello '19 and Emily Cooper '19 interviewed artist Dario Robleto as part of the course "The Artist Interview," led by Dayton Director Ian Berry. Robleto's *You Make My World a Better Place to Find* (1996–1998) from the Tang Teaching Museum collection was on view in the fall 2017 exhibition *Other Side: Art, Object, Self*.

#### Teague Costello '19

Could you start by discussing growing up, your influences, and becoming an artist?

#### Dario Robleto

I was a very curious kid. I still am a curious man. I have a deep passion for many subjects: music, science, history, poetry. I became a biology major, but I realized early on that art was the road to pursue if I couldn't choose a passion, and I just couldn't. Art is this umbrella term for me that allows me to pursue them all. And that has evolved into a practice that's wide-ranging as far as what I do and what I think an artist can or should do. I always make objects; I love materials. But my practice extends more broadly out and that comes from a deep-rooted, wild, broad curiosity as a little boy.

I'm really lucky to have had my mother and my grandmother, two beautiful, loving women, in my life. I like to say that whatever is good about me as an artist is because of my grandmother. When I was a little boy, my mother ran a honky-tonk in Texas. On occasions when she didn't have anybody to look after me, I would go with her and she would hand me a bunch of coins and I would plant myself next to the jukebox. As a six-year-old, I was choosing what songs to play in that honky-tonk.

This core thing I had learned—I couldn't have articulated it then, of course, but later I realized it—is that the lyrics coming out of the jukebox were not only metaphor, they were life, exactly what I saw happening in the honky-tonk. The lyrics were dictating broken hearts, cheating, crashing a truck, whatever, it was all right there, and a pretty dark side of it, too. I'm glad I saw that because I think then I realized art is life.

My mother moved on to running a hospice for twenty years, which also left a deep mark on me and my attitudes about art and art making. So somewhere between this honky-tonk and a hospice, I formed my worldview of art, and I'm still trying to uphold the values I learned from those experiences.

#### TC

Early on you did some deejaying and sampling with music. By becoming an artist, you still employ deejaying in some sense.

#### DR

I never let go of any passions; they are all still moving at some level. Some, like deejaying, have mutated into my practice as an object maker. Becoming a DJ started to form a

worldview that was technical like mixing two records together, sampling, splicing, song sequencing. There's an artistry to all those things of course, which I wanted to explore as a creative expression. But it became more of a worldview, especially sampling. Everything around me has a possibility to come to life again with some reorganization, some manipulation, some alteration. Hidden inside a groove of a ten-cent record at the bottom of a dusty record bin in a thrift store, if you know how to manipulate it, there is a whole universe to unlock. And that was a bigger principle: why not apply that to all of life?

#### TC

Can you speak about manipulating music and lyrics into a physical object?

#### DR

Early on I learned skills at a technical level, like scratching a record or splicing or beat matching—things that any DJ needs to know—and I brought that technical skill set over to the sculptural world. So, for example, I thought, what if I kept scratching a record until it literally turns to dust? Patsy Cline's voice just moving back and forth over and over until the stylus disintegrates her voice into powder? And then sweep up the powder, hold it in my hand, Patsy Cline's voice in my hand, all that she represents, all her power and beauty.

At its core, I was still sampling. I took one thing and through manipulation, I changed it into something else. But new meaning arose from the alteration, and that is the beauty of sampling to me, that you can tease something out of it in this unexpected way when you change its material composition. So it was pretty crucial to my early work to have that DJ background.

#### Emily Cooper '19

*You Make My World a Better Place to Find* is made by gathering an assortment of materials and then combining them into a single strand of thread. There is a subsequent scattering as you use the thread to repair mittens and other things. Could you speak to the relationship between the additive and reductive themes in your work?

#### DR

It's one of my earliest sculptures, and it arose from this problem many artists face—one I still face—which is whether your skill sets match the ambition of your idea. Early on I had such big ideas, and I did not know how to make them happen. I identified core strengths that I already possessed. For example, I have a lot of patience, and I thought, how do I harness my patience as an artistic tool?

That piece arose from a series of maybe fifty works that I called "Actions," and they were my attempt to grapple with this idea that I wanted art to change the world, but I didn't have any skills to do it, so how do I proceed? I did these small, incremental things that really anybody could do. It was very important to me that in principle anybody could do these.

A simple daily observation I noticed is how often we



carry lint on our shoulder, our jeans, wherever on our bodies, or a piece of thread that was kind of swept up with a ball of dust in the corner. It's just the residue of life around us. I started secretly picking the thread off of friends or strangers. Sometimes it's done as a caring act, and I did it that way as well. It took about two years, but I finally had enough to make this really long string and through the touch of glue, just barely any at all, I wrapped them together and spooled the thread around one of my grandmother's spools. But then to activate it into life I used it. I wanted it to be useful again. I'd fix a hole in a pair of socks or sew a button on a shirt.

I like to say that I'm a tragic optimist. And adding and subtracting fits along those lines. If something's gone then I'll replace, if there's too much I'll take away. I remember being startled that some of the early criticisms of my work interpreted it as destructive, and that made me think

about how we define the difference between construction and destruction.

There can really be culturally biased ways to define an action. If I turned Billie Holiday's records into buttons that I sewed on shirts all over town, technically I lost something in the melting, but my focus is on what I gained. What I gained was honoring her voice in a brand-new way and giving it a new function in the world that wasn't just auditory. It was something as simple as keeping your pants up or holding your shirt together. In my mind, nothing can be destroyed. Matter and energy are always just changing. This is a fundamental law of all matter in the universe.

So to say that we've destroyed something becomes a very specific human interpretation and loses sight of what was gained in the process. My work is not about vandalism. It's about this point of teasing out new meaning through the alteration. Always, to me, it's construction, not destruction.



Dario Robleto (born 1972), *Falsetto Can Be a Weapon*, 2001

Arrow: melted and carved vinyl record of The Carpenters' "Hurting Each Other," carved wood, turkey feathers, sinew

Spears: hand-carved fossilized mammoth ivory, each tip laced with melted vinyl record from Tammy Wynette's "Stand By Your Man," carved driftwood, leather pouch, twine

Boomerang: melted and carved vinyl record of Jan and Dean's "Dead Man's Curve"

Hand knife: melted and carved vinyl record of Loretta Lynn's "The Pill," carved antler, sinew

Tomahawk: melted and carved vinyl record of Roberta Flack's "Killing Me Softly with His Song," wood, beads, fur, teeth, hair, sinew

27½ × 32½ × 3¼ in.

Gift of Peter Norton, 2014.7.19





TC

There's a side of your work that lies within the beauty and poetry of the title.

DR

I operate a little backward here in that the language comes first to get to the object. I generally don't feel I'm ready to get to the construction of an object until I have a lot of the language worked out. I will write materials that I imagine may exist. I don't even know if they exist, but it doesn't matter at that point because I'm just trying to write an interesting word. And then that will lead me to wonder if this really exists and I'll go look for it—all because I pushed myself to write that poetic phrase.

I remember something that sounds simple but so beautiful like "Icelandic lava," and I just wrote it down one day. I love it: Icelandic lava, you know? Hot and cold. And of course, there is Icelandic lava and I got some and I used it. But I don't think I would have stumbled on that. Or I'll write a more complicated phrase like "men's wedding ring finger bones coated with melted bullet lead from every American war." It's just something I'm writing as a sentence. And then I go out and see if this is true, if I can do this, if I can find it and make it happen. So language always opens a door for me.

EC

Could you talk about *Falsetto Can Be a Weapon* (2001), another work in the Tang collection?

DR

It's an early vinyl work. I've always been intrigued with the male falsetto because of its complicated gender issues. It seems effeminate for a man to be singing that way, but it also can be really radical. That's where the title came from. The piece is this series of weapons, a tomahawk, little spears, a knife, a boomerang, other weapons. In each case, the blade or the source of the violence has been remade with melted vinyl records. Each song I chose for very specific reasons, not only because of the texture of the singer's voice, but also the radical nature of what they were singing about and when they were singing it.

For Tammy Wynette's *Stand By Your Man* (1968), there's a little spear gun carved from mammoth ivory, and

on the tip of each carved mammoth-ivory blade, I dipped it in her voice, melted vinyl, as if it's the poison. And so some of it's humorous about standing by your man while you're shooting him with poison. Who knows how much has been written about *Stand By Your Man*, but no one's ever talked about it as poison at the tip of a mammoth-ivory spear. And that's where art can go somewhere different.

EC

You incorporate performative, mathematical, and scientific aspects into your work that bring in a more contemporary perspective. How does your work fit into changes in the art world? How do you think the definition of art is changing?

DR

That an artist can freely operate across different disciplines is in itself not so new anymore, but in the grand arc of art history it's pretty radical. And it could be even more radical going forward. In my practice I try to get away from referencing another field. Many artists use science as a reference point in their work, and I'm not against that. But to me, the more difficult and interesting question is, How can I actually change heart surgery by interacting with art? How can my practice in the studio change by interacting with a heart surgeon, or an astronomer, or a neuroscientist?

I have examples in my own practice that I can point to, to say that science actually changed because of something I asked. It's really hard to get there, but I love it because it's difficult. I think in our time and moving forward, that the types of problems we have ahead, you have to have multiple points of views on a single problem. You have to inject problems with a different energy to solve them.

Dario Robleto was born in San Antonio, Texas, in 1972 and received his BFA from the University of Texas at San Antonio in 1997. He lives and works in Houston, Texas. Robleto has had numerous solo exhibitions, including, in 2008, a ten-year survey exhibition, *Alloy of Love*, organized by the Tang Teaching Museum, and group exhibitions across the country. He has received the International Association of Art Critics Award, a Joan Mitchell Foundation Grant, the United States Artists Rasmuson Fellowship, and in 2016 was named the Texas State Artist Laureate, among other awards. He is artist-in-residence in neuroaesthetics at the University of Houston Cullen College of Engineering and artist-at-large at Northwestern University's McCormick School of Engineering and the Block Museum of Art.