

EMILE MAUSNER

---

**Exhibition Review:** *The Heart's Knowledge: Science and Empathy in the Art of Dario Robleto*


---

*The Heart's Knowledge: Science and Empathy in the Art of Dario Robleto.* The Block Museum of Art, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois. January 26–July 9, 2023.

Decades before geometric abstraction and medium specificity would boldly signal an advance of consciousness in the history of modern art, the first pulse waves were tenderly, exquisitely traced by a single human hair on paper sooted by candle flame. Another early cardiological instrument recorded fetal heartbeats from the vibrating shadows of bubbles pierced by silver-coated quartz threads. Indeed, it might have been with these sensitive tools of medical imaging that the most avant-garde portrait of life was created. Do the methods of science seem poetically deficient to us today? Technology in its original sense, *tékhnē*, expressed a fundamental intimacy between making and doing, engineering and art. *The Heart's Knowledge: Science and Empathy in the Art of Dario Robleto* at Northwestern University's Block Museum of Art remembered this kinship by honoring several transformational episodes in the history of scientific recording as undeniably aesthetic



Still from *The Boundary of Life is Quietly Crossed* (2019) by Dario Robleto.

---

*Afterimage*, Vol. 50, Number 3, pps. 119–124. ISSN 2578-8531. © 2023 by the Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press's Reprints and Permissions web page, <https://www.ucpress.edu/journals/reprints-permissions>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/aft.2023.50.3.119>

events. Salvaging precious archival materials, *The Heart's Knowledge* effected a transformation of scientific narrative in the artist's crucible of the melancholic sublime.

At the heart of it all was a line, the pulse wave, which undulated throughout half of the gallery and two major video installations with steady, somber grace. Intricately woven between narrative and material form, *The Heart's Knowledge* represented nineteenth-century innovations in pulse recording as daring attempts to acquire insight into the unobservable depths of the other. Traditionally understood as the domain of the immortal soul, in the late nineteenth century the heart was still considered verboten to the probing reach of scientists. Delving into the material culture of cardiology with archaeological precision, Robleto's work reveals how pioneers of medical imaging proceeded on the provocative intuition that thoughts, emotions, even dreams have material reality—thus they can be recorded, deciphered, and one day understood. Modern empiricists, like romantic lyricists, were yearning for empathic form.

It must certainly have been a holistic impulse to understand the nuance and complexity of consciousness—not merely the symptoms of disease—that inspired nineteenth-century physiologists to record experiences as diverse and metaphysically evocative as “religious guilt,” “eating chocolate,” and “fear from shouting of the word ‘snakes.’” Honoring the apparent poetic verve of these recordings discovered at the edge of legibility, *The Heart's Knowledge* foregrounded Robleto's resurrection of the cardiologist archive. In *The First Time, the Heart (A Portrait of Life 1854–1913)* (2017), the artist imagines a biography assembled from a selection of found heartbeats. This work comprised a series of painstakingly reproduced pulse waves, revived using similar techniques as those developed by early cardiologists. Printed in transparent base ink on hand-flamed paper, these photolithographic heartbeats embodied the ephemeral as ghostly ripples lifted from dusky clouds of soot. As part of the same work, wall text printed in the tender script of a human hand cataloged the selection from “First pulse, 1854” to “Being shamed/scolded (you behave like a child; you ruin everything for me), 1876,” “Smelling lavender, 1896” to “Flatline (dying of stomach cancer), 1870,” with many others in between.

Achingly subdued, these works on paper were complemented by sumptuous gravity in a series of sculptures on pedestals, characterized by *Unknown and Solitary Seas (Dreams and Emotions of the Nineteenth Century)* (2018). Nestled into shallow ebonized caskets and encased by vitrines, this array of gold-leafed, brass-plated pulse waves marked the gallery with an aura of devotion. Rhythmically gleaming from their cases, the golden wavelets represented traces of life, many anonymous, retrieved from archival oblivion and dignified by funereal display.

In 1877, the first recorded dreamer was afflicted not by anonymity, however, but by epilepsy. *The Aorta of an Archivist* (2021) remembers him. Elegantly layered with tenebrous visuals and a reverberating soundscape, this fifty-three-minute video work weaves together several curious breakthroughs: the first recording of a choral performance, the first heartbeat captured while listening to music, and the first effort to transcribe brain-wave activity in a dreaming subject. The story of that first recorded, eleven-year-old

dreamer, Giovanni Thron, expresses remarkable pathos in our human yearning “to wrest from life the secret grammar of its consciousness,” as told by the video.

Giovanni’s epilepsy resulted from a traumatic head injury that left him developmentally disabled since infancy. Soon after the accident, Giovanni’s family committed him to an insane asylum in Turin, Italy; he was only eighteen months old. With spacious, unobtrusive sentimentality, *The Aorta of an Archivist* speculates whether the boy’s closest access to empathy might have been with the resident nurses and physicians who observed him. Among those caregivers was physiologist Angelo Mosso, whose innovative attempts to record the cerebral pulse sought nothing less than to demonstrate the materiality of consciousness. The tragic circumstances surrounding Giovanni’s inhabitation at the asylum also made him dearly cherished: Mosso was fortunate to find a portal to the pulsing brain in the boy from whom small shards of skull once had been removed. In the stillness of one winter’s night, beholding Giovanni in an unusual state of repose, Mosso secured his experimental recording device to the boy’s restful head. When Giovanni’s pulse quickened to excited leaps, without apparent cause or change in his external conditions, Mosso realized he may have found the first physiological evidence of dreams.

Magnifying dreamlike visuality with metamorphosis and vignette, *The Aorta of an Archivist* features shadowy interlacing of graphic waves and dimming arteries, fibrous tissue and cosmic ruffles, stellar dust and wisps of smoke. The viewing room, sealed from light, deepened the video’s umbra of feeling. Amid a haunting visual transition from scintillating neural branches to bare trees in hibernal sleep, Robleto’s voice gently ponders what might have filled the dreams of the boy’s remote soul.

Isolated and aphasic, Giovanni’s use of language was limited to a single desire, voiced with heartbreaking clarity: “I want to go to school.” Unburying this yearning sentence from the threshold of extinction, *The Aorta of an Archivist* intimates how reparative gestures of art can modulate the force of technological abstraction. Ambitiously, audaciously perhaps, the larger agenda of Robleto’s involvement with Northwestern posed to practice reparative gestures within the university itself. Preceded by five years of engagement as an artist-at-large in the McCormick School of Engineering, Robleto’s exhibition featured substantial programming with poets and astronomers, scholars of neuroscience and media studies, a pioneer of regenerative medicine, and two experimental magic lanternists. *The Heart’s Knowledge* represented the culmination of meaningful interdisciplinary encounters where the ethos of enlightenment was shared.<sup>1</sup>

Why is it so easy to assume artists and scientists in opposing roles? As technologies of scientific observation advanced significantly throughout the nineteenth century, so too did the discursive rift between arts and sciences. But it remains true that, at the edge of the knowable, openness and uncertainty characterize the practices of artists and scientists alike. “We both agree,” Robleto affirmed, “that if we can become more aware, more

1. See “Dario is our Socrates’: Northwestern’s McCormick School of Engineering and the Block team-up on innovative Artist-At-Large Program,” McCormick School of Engineering News, Julianne Hill, October 3, 2019, <https://nublockmuseum.blog/2019/10/17/dario-is-our-socrates-northwesterns-mccormick-school-of-engineering-and-the-block-team-up-on-a-innovative-artist-at-large-program-video>.



Detail of *American Seabed* (2014) by Dario Robleto.

observant, more detailed, and more importantly, more present with each other, that this can lead to new types of discoveries and forms of truth.”<sup>2</sup>

Resounding the solemn invocation of *humanitas*, a classical ideal that shaped the Age of Enlightenment, *The Heart's Knowledge* offered a profound meditation on compassionate learning as meaningful participation in the world. With each delicate form, from pulse waves traced in smoke to intricate assemblages of coral, fossils, and butterfly antennae made from spun audiotape of Bob Dylan's 1965 song “Desolation Row” (*American Seabed*, 2014), the exhibition emphasized sensitivity in how the limits of human understanding are explored. The fundamental questions of recording bear out this yearning to know more: To what extent can subjective experience be encoded, translated, and read? How sensitively can we attune ourselves, and our instruments, to what remains unseen?

To experiment with the possibility of exceeding human limits is the task of enlightenment, which asks the heart to be bold. When asked “What is Enlightenment?,” Immanuel Kant famously responded that we should “dare to know.” This audacity to become wise is *Aufklärung*, our “way out.” Returning to the old question, Michel Foucault defined enlightenment as requiring a certain “limit-attitude,” explaining, “We are not talking about a gesture of rejection. . . . we have to be at the frontiers.”<sup>3</sup> And none have gone further, or more boldly, than Ann Druyan, whose heart has exited our solar system.

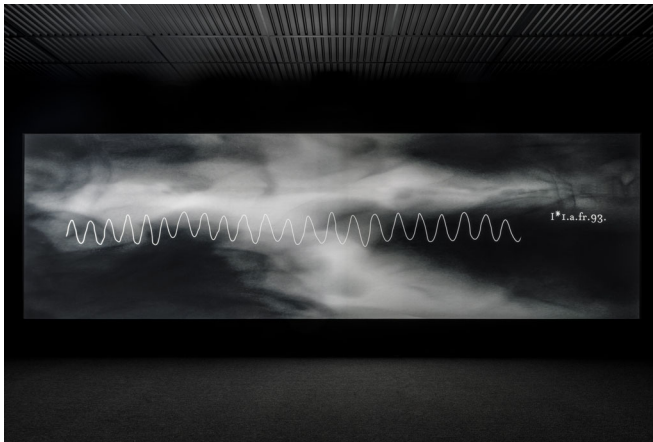
A monumental video installation titled *The Boundary of Life is Quietly Crossed* (2019) shared the story of this first interstellar heart. In 1977, as creative director of NASA's Golden Record project, Druyan was tasked with designing an audio portrait of Earth to be mounted on the *Voyager* spacecraft exteriors. Plated with just enough gold to preserve its surface for one billion years, the Golden Record was intended to establish dialogue if NASA's probes ever encountered intelligent life. Beside sounds of crickets, bubbling mud,

2. Dario Robleto, “The Art of Scientific Storytelling,” virtual talk from Dean's Seminar Series presented by Northwestern Engineering and the Block Museum of Art, April 8, 2021, [https://youtu.be/wU8\\_Oy8WRWU](https://youtu.be/wU8_Oy8WRWU).

3. Michel Foucault, “What is Enlightenment?” in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. P. Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 32–50.

laughter, and a pulsar, Druyan decided to include a recording of her own heart and brainwave activity as she reflected on the history of Earth and the story of humankind. After mentally accounting for the human devastations of ignorance, exploitation, and war, Druyan meditated with prayerful sincerity as she was recorded—hoping, she said, “to bear witness to the fact that we had some self-awareness, that we knew what was happening to us . . . and that we had yearnings to straighten ourselves out.”<sup>4</sup>

Druyan’s EEG and EKG on the Golden Record are labeled simply, anonymously, as “Life Signs.” Here, Robleto unearthed the story of Druyan’s most daring contribution, unintelligible to human ears: secretly included in the recording was her contemplation of romantic love, still fresh with the euphoria of revelation. The mastering process of the Golden Record was already underway when Druyan and NASA collaborator Carl Sagan, having never so much as kissed, suddenly realized their deep affection. It was Druyan’s visionary experience of love that then inspired her to ask whether her feelings could be shared with other intelligences, as yet distant and unknown.



Installation view (2023) of *The Aorta of an Archivist* (2021) in *The Heart's Knowledge: Science and Empathy in the Art of Dario Robleto* at The Block Museum of Art.

The courage of Druyan’s gesture cannot be overstated. “Women in love offer to the world their inner gifts,” writes feminist philosopher bell hooks.<sup>5</sup> Druyan offered her inner gifts to extraterrestrials, as her consciousness was literally raised to the unknown. Sharing insight from her own consciousness-raising experience, hooks powerfully writes that we will not become truly wise, or truly loving, until we “begin to think of knowledge as an erotic space of connection, both self-understanding and understanding of the other.”<sup>6</sup>

4. From “Ann Druyan, The Golden Record, and the Memory of Our Hearts,” virtual conversation with Dario Robleto, Jennifer Roberts, and Ann Druyan, hosted by the Block Museum of Art, March 8, 2023, <https://vimeo.com/811095562>.

5. bell hooks, *Communion: The Female Search for Love* (New York: First Perennial, 2003), 244.

6. hooks, *Communion*, 241.

Touching the nerve of desire for connection, *The Heart's Knowledge* conveyed that if enlightenment has an attitude, romantic melancholy sets the tone.

Our critical Sisyphian task of understanding will never be complete. Surrounded by shells, claws, crushed glass, and glitter in a framed roseate assemblage titled *Sisyphus' Archivists* (2018), Robleto memorializes the visionary seekers of extraterrestrial connection with a cut-paper adage apropos to the age-old question, "What is Enlightenment?": "Hope, With No Guarantee." ■

---

EMILE MAUSNER is an American artist and writer whose work explores romantic underworlds and the flaming image. She studied painting at Yale School of Art.