

Owner: Missouri Historical Society	Acc #: 2004.058.0001	Date: 06/03/2023
Object: ACT UP Prop Coffin	Materials: Duct tape, cardboard, foamcore, posterboard, spray paint, acrylic paint	

## Description and Value

The AIDS Coalition to Unleash Powder (ACT UP) was founded in 1987 as the fear of the AIDS/HIV epidemic started to take control of the general populace. It is a non-violent activist organisation that intends to expand knowledge regarding AIDS and associated issues. The St. Louis chapter was founded in the early 1990s as the death toll of the disease rose exponentially. This prop was created by Gregory Gerheart, a St. Louis ACT UP activist as a “conversation starter” and was brought to numerous protests and parades up until 2002 when the object was donated to the Missouri History Museum.

Beyond its representation of ACT UP and the AIDS epidemic, but also a prime example of vernacular memorial art. “American vernacular memorial art” is memorial art by common people, not commissioned artists, which has developed a multitude of new forms of expression in the United States. (Farber, 2005). It represents the shift in memorialisation from private, personal displays, to demonstrative and public ones. This coffin represents the growth of this movement not only as a general statement against the mass death of American men in the 1990s due to limited education, effective treatments, and stigma towards AIDS. However, it was also noted in both the recount of Gerheart that there was a medical bracelet within the coffin in order to memorialise a close friend who ultimately succumbed to the disease. This was confirmed, as the damage to the object offered a minimal opportunity to investigate the inside of the object.

## Materials

Usually these would be in forms prescribed by the culture of the times, such as jewelry made from a lock of the deceased’s hair, or a child’s drawing displayed at home, or a special headstone or statue at the cemetery. (Faber, 2005) Now, however, people are using an unlimited, imaginative range of materials, media, and visual forms (ibid).

The coffin is primarily made of foam-core board and duct tape. Foam Core board is a polystyrene foam that is sandwiched between two sheets of clay coated paper. The chalk or China clay is bound to the paper with synthetic viscosifiers, and natural organic binders such as starch. Duct tape is composed of a waterproof low density polyethylene sheet coloured with powdered aluminium adhered to a cotton cloth scrim webbing with a natural rubber adhesive (3M™ 2023).

The outside of the coffin was spray painted black and white, demonstrated by the lack of brush strokes on the surface and the aerosol droplets along the stencilled edge of the white. Craft spray paint is typically manufactured using acrylic-based primers and dyes combined with a propellant (either

compressed air or natural gas) and aliphatic hydrocarbons (Best Spray Paint, 2021). Black spray paint is made using carbon black dyes and white is made using barium sulphate.

On both sides and the top and bottom of the coffin, there are triangles cut from a pink poster board. Red acrylic paint handprints and fake blood have been applied to several of the surfaces. On the interior of the coffin, a cardboard support system was found, also adhered using duct tape.

## Condition

Despite the belief that duct-tape and other plastics are forever, after twenty years in the collection, the coffin demonstrates serious deterioration. The duct-tape adhering the foam board together has failed throughout the piece, leaving it at risk for deformation and complete breakage. This is most noticeable at the foot of the coffin, where the foam core had detached so far as to see the interior of the object. The two shorter side panels of the coffin demonstrate minor warping due to pressure created by the manufacture of the object, however it is made more obvious due to the loss of adhesion between the board and the duct tape. The duct tape failure was likely caused by fluctuations in humidity over time, causing the deterioration of the adhesive. Furthermore, general exposure to oxygen can break the bonds of the plastic component in duct tape (Blank, 1990). The flexibility and constant manipulation of the duct tape layers has caused paint to flake, and loss is evident on the majority of the duct-tape covered surfaces.

Beyond the adhesive failure, the coffin is generally dirty and demonstrates a few dents and scratches. This is likely due to the static susceptibility of the materials, as well as its use in various outdoor settings. The matte paint over the polystyrene also lends itself to static charge, causing dust and soiling to accumulate easily.

## Conservation Treatment

### Stabilisation

Due to the instability of the paint layers present on the duct tape, it was determined that the consolidation of these areas was necessary prior to any other work on the object. This was performed by flushing areas using ethanol in order to ensure the proper flow of the 20% isinglass in deionised water solution between the paint and the polyethylene surfaces. This proved successful, as the isinglass allowed for a reasonable drying time and did not alter any surfaces. Furthermore, in areas where the paint was clearly not attached to the duct tape following consolidation attempts, the adhesive was reactivated using a heated spatula, applied through a mylar silicone release paper to ensure cohesion between the materials.

At the base of the coffin, it was clear that the object was not able to support itself, and therefore required extra support added to the structure. A triangular prism of double thickness blue archival board was adhered to the inside of the two foam core sides using Jade 403 as an easily removable support. This helps support the weight of the top piece of foam core as well as aids in remedying deformation at the foot of the coffin.

After the paint layers were consolidated, the duct tape could be manipulated without the risk of severe loss. This allowed the duct tape to be re-adhered to the foam core board. Based on the nature of both the foam core and the duct tape, it was determined that a water-soluble adhesive would be the best option for adhesion. Work produced by the National Museum of Air and Space demonstrated the successful use of Lascaux 498HV to re-adhere duct tape to other plastic surfaces (National Air and Space Museum 2020). This provided an excellent tackiness to the adhesive that ensured an ease in the adhesion as well as reasonable strength following its application, limiting possible adhesive failure in the future. In the area at the base of the coffin where the duct tape was considerably stiffer and more deformed, a PEL Preservation Pencil was used in order to humidify and heat the plastic slightly so it could be manipulated back into place and re-adhered.

In several areas, the duct tape could not be re-adhered due to bowing of the foam core panels. It was decided that in order to ensure the stability of these panels as well as the overall aesthetics of the object, that these panels should be manipulated back into their original place (evidenced where duct tape would be flush with panels and previous adhesive present on the adjoining panels. This was performed by applying 40% Paraloid B72 in acetone to the flat surface of the adjoining panel before levering the bowed panel into place and using weights to create proper pressure for adhesion. One of the panels demonstrated continued bowing even with adhesive. A heat gun was used in order to reactivate the adhesive and a metal spatula was used to hook under the panel and keep it in place whilst the adhesive set.

## Cleaning

Surfaces were cleaned using a polyurethane cosmetic sponge. The majority of soiling was removable solely with mechanical action. However, this was aided by deionised water for more stubborn areas of soiling, particularly on the pink poster board and the top of the coffin.

## Restoration

During the reattachment of the duct tape to the foamcore board, it was obvious that part of the deterioration of the tape involved shrinkage, causing a stark contrast in areas that were originally covered by the tape, the original colour of the posterboard, and the black spray paint. It was determined that these areas could be filled with a toned paper in order to limit their distraction. Unbuffered tissue paper was painted with carbon black Golden acrylic and cut to fit exactly in the areas of loss using a sharp scalpel. They were then adhered using Jade 403 which provided good tack. This was successful, as the paint and paper demonstrated a similar shine to the original black spray paint, and the thick layer allowed for easy blending of the material. The tissue is also easily reversible both mechanically and using water or ethanol.

Along with this process, the pink poster board triangles were also reattached to the foam core using Lascaux 498HV.

Material	Details	Notes
Isinglass	20% Isinglass (sturgeon swim bladder glue) in deionised water. Heated prior to use	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Water soluble</li> </ul>
Jade 403	Acid-free polyvinyl acetate glue	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Water soluble</li> <li>• Chosen for tack</li> </ul>
Lascaux 498HV	Thermoplastic acrylic resin composed of a water-based emulsion containing butyl acrylate thickened with methacrylic acid (via MFA Boston)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Water soluble</li> <li>• Chosen for strength</li> </ul>
Archival Cardboard	Perma/Dur Corrugated Board is acid-free, lignin-free and alkaline buffered with 3% calcium carbonate added for an alkaline reserve	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Double thickness corrugated board chosen for stability</li> </ul>
Paraloid B72	40% Paraloid B72 in acetone	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Soluble in acetone</li> </ul>
Golden Acrylic Paint	Carbon Black Produced with soot from burning gas dispersed in acrylic resin	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does not off gas or interact with materials</li> </ul>
Unbuffered acid-free tissue	Thin paper with limited lignin	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• pH Neutral</li> <li>• Slightly shiny</li> <li>• Takes paint well</li> </ul>

## Further Considerations

The object is most stable flat, the added support aids in limiting bowing of the top foam core board. The medical bracelet attached to the interior could not be properly examined without further damage to the object.

Other supports within the object could not be adjusted, and thus handling should be further limited so loose elements do not cause further damage to the object.

Areas of paint loss on the duct tape were not restored, in part to demonstrate the substrate, as well as to promote reversibility.

## Storage Recommendations

- Object should be covered
  - Maximum 100 lux
  - Limit dust accumulation
- 13 - 20C with limited fluctuation

- 40-60% relative humidity with limited fluctuations

## Handling Requirements

- Handle by mount as much as possible
- Wear gloves whilst handling object
- Avoid areas of paint

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Before Treatment





HEALTHCARE  
NOT DEATHCARE

After Treatment





