

Background to the Viewing of Vik Muniz's Project Filmed as the Documentary: WASTE LAND (Lucy Walker, 2010)

Prof. Janet Maher, Studio Arts, August 2016

Through the centuries artists have addressed social concerns in a great range of approaches. Many have intentionally used art to raise the consciousness of their viewers. Their work has created a lineage from which others continue to find inspiration and add their own contributions to influence productive change.

In 1968 the New York City sanitation workers went on strike, refusing to pick up trash for nine days. This inspired artist **Merle Laderman Ukeles** to write her now famous ***Manifesto for Maintenance Art, 1969!*** and begin to do performances about the work of cleaning up after others. In 1977 Ukeles became Artist in Residence at New York's Department of Sanitation and performed a series of public works that pointed out to the community their own contributions to the city's garbage problems. Among the actions she performed was shaking the hand, thanking and conversing with more than 8,500 sanitation workers during one year (1979-80), and covering garbage trucks with mirrors to reflect the people on the streets who created the garbage. She is a major example from the 1970s **American Feminist Art Movement** that formed the roots of much breaking-of-traditions art that brought a wealth of topics and materials into what is now common practice in art-making.

The social and political struggles of countries around the world have been brought to the attention of audiences through the work of artists who engage directly with communities, collaborating to create artworks that would not have been possible without the input and assistance of the people that the work focused upon, addressing their issues from the inside out.

In 1982 artist and educator, **Tim Rollins**, founded the **Art and Knowledge Workshop** and began collaboratively creating mixed media collage paintings and other types of artwork with his students in response to their study with him of the classics and a range of other printed materials. His **Kids of Survival (K.O.S.)**, formed in the Bronx in 1984, evolved as an entity that exhibited internationally and their works were collected by major museums. The students gained skills that opened futures for them beyond their difficult beginnings.

The illusive French photographer, a former graffiti artist, **JR**, created a project between 2004 and 2006 called ***28 Millimeters, Portraits of a Generation***, when he photographed young people from housing projects in Paris. The individuals posed in ways they wished to be depicted and JR printed their portraits in large format and pasted them illegally throughout Paris suburb areas where riots had occurred in 2005. Two years later his similar project, ***Face 2 Face***, involved Palestinians and Israelis posing as they wished, with their portraits pasted on opposite sides of the wall that divides their communities. JR's massive work, ***Women As Heroes, 2008***, honored women of Rio de Janeiro, acknowledging that women have often been the

victims of violence there (as they have everywhere in the world). While his works began independently, they became widely acknowledged and exhibited in major venues, and productive conversations resulted among the participants and those who saw his works.

This kind of background should be considered in relation to the production of American artist **Vik Muniz's** series, *Pictures of Garbage*, 2008. Muniz, a native of Brazil himself, who emigrated in 1993, has achieved great success. He became known for his incorporation of unusual materials into his various series, interpreting something known in a manner that caused it to be reconsidered. He layered portraits of people in a painterly manner with such things as chocolate or dirt, and he punched small holes in paper to create images. Often his choice of materials were visually symbolic or metaphoric in relation to the subjects, such as when he made up the details of a soldier's portrait with clusters of plastic toy soldiers or when he layered sugar onto the faces of young black children, contemplating whether they would later have difficult lives that might take away their happy "sweetness."

In 2005 Muniz formed an organization to work with young art students. With them in **Centre Especial** he created *Pictures of Junk*, using the methods he would also use in his work in Brazil. When he had the idea to turn to from "junk" to "garbage" as a source material, the project we are about to see came to be. At one point in the film we see his assistant alert him to the work of someone else—likely JR—and his idea that had begun simply as a means to adopt a new material into his artwork began to evolve organically into a powerful socially-conscious work that ultimately gave back to a community in need.

In *Waste Land* we hear the words "favelas," which are the makeshift groupings of shelters in poor areas of Brazil (in this instance, Rio de Janeiro), and "catadores," the pickers of recyclable materials from the open-air garbage dumps outside the city. This documentary focuses upon **Jardim Gramacho**, which was as large as 244 American football fields. It was closed in 2012 as Brazil prepared to host the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development that year (which may seem an irony), followed by the Fédération Internationale de Football Association World Cup in 2014 and the recent Summer Olympics, 2016. (JR created a piece during and about the Olympics this year, and Tiao Santos, featured in this documentary, helped carry the torch in the 2012 games in London.)

While Rio de Janeiro is famous for its tourist industry and beaches, the areas Ipanema and Copacabana (about which one song won three Grammy awards in 1965 and another was a disco hit in 1978), its annual pre-Lent *Carnaval* (like New Orleans' *Mardi Gras*), and an enormous statue of *Christ the Redeemer* that looks out over the city from 1,299' high Sugarloaf Mountain, it is also among many places in the world where immense wealth disparity, hardship, political corruption and violence exists.

Please see the image-based pdf that accompanies this handout in preparation for what you will see. While watching **Waste Land**, consider some of the following questions, and jot down in your notebook other thoughts you may have:

- Vik Muniz said, "I have the material. I have to go look for an image."
How do he and his crew interact with the catadores, such that certain ones trust him and are willing to work with him? Consider why he selects who he does and how he establishes relationships with them.
- How does this documentary illuminate issues of class disparities? Can you see parallels in America, in your hometown? What is hidden from view for the sake of tourists?
- Tiao Santos notes that the catadores are not *garbage* pickers. They seek out particular types of materials that can be sold as *recyclable* material. Think about your own recycling or lack of it. Where does your garbage go? How is it sorted? What happens to it after it leaves your house, your room? Why should you care?
- How do you feel about what Santos and his friends have accomplished through their **Association of Pickers of Jardim Gramacho**? What might you accomplish if you put all your heart into it and worked with similar dedication as Santos?
- Consider the similarity of issues that arise in working with people who are materially less privileged than others, whether in this project or in your volunteering through CCSJ or somewhere else. Muniz said that he never felt poor when growing up. His father spoke proudly about the progress the family made, "We have everything we need. We got here, with dignity."
- There were delicate issues for Muniz and his assistants to consider. What do you think about their role as outsiders interacting with people who would remain in poverty after they left?
- Irma said, "We see ourselves so small, but people out there see us so big, so beautiful." Recall how proudly she explained her participation and the result to her grandchildren, and how proud she was to be the cook for her friends at Jardim Gramacho, her importance to them. What positive changes occurred due to this art project?
- Consider the Brazilian individuals and how each found and traveled their own path, finding their purpose. How can you relate to these examples as you walk your own path?
- Note how the assemblage artworks were de-constructed at the end, like the completion of Tibetan sand mandalas or Native American healing sand paintings. How did the artwork for this project become more than a mere art product?

Valter dos Santos – “Let’s say each household generates one kilo of garbage and one kilo of garbage generates 500 grams of recyclable material. So a thousand homes generate 500 kilos of material that could be recycled... That’s 500 kilos less of material that would pollute the rivers, the lagoons, that won’t clog the sewers or be buried here in the landfill doing such great harm to nature and the environment...People sometimes say, ‘but one single can?’ One single can is of great importance. **Because 99 is not 100, and that single one will make the difference.**”

Vik Munoz – “I’d rather want everything and have nothing than have everything and want nothing. Because at least when you want something your life has a meaning, it’s worthwhile. From the moment that you think you have everything, you have to search for meaning in other things.”