

Commodity Production as Social Stimulus in Vik Muniz's Brazilian Art Practice

by

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Abstract

Through an examination of how the Brazilian-born artist Vik Muniz has sustained two distinct art practices that respond to two contradictory art historical contexts and sites of reception, Western postmodernism of the 1980s and the Brazilian avant-garde of the 1960s, I argue that his art practice provides an alternative reading of what constitutes a socially engaged art practice in global capitalism. By analyzing Muniz's art practice in relation to Grant Kester's and Hal Foster's opposing perspectives regarding contemporary political art, I demonstrate that the political locus of Muniz's Brazilian-based art practice is situated outside the aesthetic realm, and instead lies in how the international market circulation of this work enables him to stimulate social change in his collaborators' communities. In doing so, my analysis contributes to the larger contemporary theoretical debates concerning the political effectiveness of a contemporary art practice that embraces rather than opposes market economics.

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Introduction

The international circulation of *Waste Land* (2010), an Oscar-nominated documentary that chronicles the Brazilian-born Vik Muniz using his art practice to influence social change in Brazil, has served to consolidate Muniz's prominence outside the art world as a benevolent visual artist in the last several years. *Waste Land* documents Muniz's production and sale of a series of photographs entitled *Pictures of Garbage* that were made in 2008 in collaboration with a group of *catadores* (Portuguese for 'garbage pickers') from *Jardim Gramacho*, a landfill situated on the periphery of Rio de Janeiro. Functioning as the recycling system of the city, the *catadores* collect from the roughly 7,000 tons of waste dumped at *Jardim Gramacho* every day around 200 tons of recyclable materials (such as scrap metal and plastic) that are sold to corporations for reuse.¹ *Waste Land* provides insight into Muniz's collaboration with seven of these *catadores* who participated in *Pictures of Garbage* by posing for Muniz in the manner of Western art historical paintings and working in his studio to recreate their portraits by arranging recyclable items collected from the landfill to represent themselves. Most saliently for the issue of how his art relates to social change, Muniz explains at the beginning of the film that his collaboration with the *catadores* had a positive affect on their lives through his donation of the proceeds earned from the international sale of *Pictures of Garbage* to financially support the *catadores* and the Association of Recycling Pickers of *Jardim Gramacho* (ACAMJG).

¹ Rebecca E. Biron, ed., *City/Art: The Urban Scene in Latin America*. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2009), 9, and *Waste Land*, official website, www.wastelandmovie.com/jardim-gramacho.html (accessed October 2, 2011).

This paper critically assesses *Waste Land's* representation of Muniz's socially engaged practice and his conceptions of political art within a larger contextualization and re-evaluation of Muniz's twenty-year art practice. I argue that his practice offers a new lens with which to provide an alternative reading of what constitutes a political practice in late capitalism, in that Muniz does not create political *art* but engages in political *actions* through the production and circulation of his artworks. I further argue that by affirming, rather than negating, the commodity character of the art object, Muniz deploys a postmodern strategy of appropriation as a political strategy. It is not the aesthetic and social dimensions inherent in his artistic practice but rather the traffic of his Brazilian artworks, which enables his Brazilian collaborators to participate in and benefit financially from the international art market of a global capitalist economy, that is significant for an understanding of his art practice as socially engaged.

In order to situate this traffic in art, I examine in this paper how Muniz has developed and maintained two separate and contradictory approaches to his art practices that began with his production of two foundational photographic series, *The Sugar Children* (1996) and *Pictures of Chocolate* (1997-2003). In *The Sugar Children*, Muniz used sugar to create the portraits of six Afro-Caribbean children he met in St. Kitts; in *Pictures of Chocolate* he applied Bosco chocolate syrup to paper to represent Western art historical paintings and icons of American pop culture. In both, photographs of these "action" paintings produced from food constitute the final artworks that respond to two separate art historical contexts and sites of reception. *The Sugar Children* serves as the antecedent for Muniz's socially engaged practice in Brazil, in which his use of garbage to

represent marginalized Latin American groups recalls the strategies of the twentieth-century Latin American avant-garde of the 1960s. *Pictures of Chocolate* functions as the precursor for Muniz's American-based practice, which is inspired by Andy Warhol and positioned by Western critics within the surface aesthetics of postmodern discourse. While these two discursive sites of reception can be seen to be at odds with each other—in that Muniz's Warhol-inspired practice circulates appropriated icons of Western art history in the international art market while his representations of marginalized groups in the Caribbean and Brazil addresses social issues of poverty and inequality—I assert in this paper that Muniz's socially engaged practice ultimately serves to reinforce the surface aesthetics of his Warhol-inspired representations that have currency in the global market. By travelling internationally from the periphery to the center through exhibitions and sales, Muniz's works produced in Brazil serve a double role: to position Muniz as a participant in a Brazilian art context that is specifically related to that country's avant-garde practices of the 1960s while simultaneously sustaining Muniz's claim that his artistic practice is a quintessentially an American one anchored in the postmodernist strategies of appropriation of the 1980s.

In this respect, although Muniz is Brazilian, his international reputation as an artist was developed in the United States of America, enabling him to identify solely as an American rather than as a bi-cultural artist.² Born in São Paulo, Brazil in 1961 to

² In an interview with Muniz published in Silvia von Bunningsen, et al., *Global Art* (Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2010), 54, Muniz states, "I am an American artist, but I am a Brazilian person." The Brazilian art historian Aracy A. Amaral discusses Muniz as an artist who does not wish to be identified as a Latin American artist in the 1998 essay "Otherness and Identity in Latin America c. 1998" in *Textos do Trópico de Capricórnio: artigos e ensaios (1980-2005) - Vol. 2: Circuitos de arte na América Latina e no Brasil* (São Paulo: Editoria 34 Ltda., 2006), 149. In another essay included in this text written by the same

working-class parents, he came of age during a period of political repression and media censorship under the Brazilian military dictatorship (1964-1985).³ Muniz had begun to develop a career in advertising in Brazil when he moved to Chicago in 1983 with the money he claims he received from bribing a man who accidentally shot him in the leg.⁴ The next year he moved to New York and by 1987 he began to develop a sculptural art practice. Exhibitions of Muniz's sculptures received mixed reviews by New York critics, and it was with his first photographic series *Best of Life* (1989-1990) that he first achieved critical acclaim.⁵ After this initial success, he established an art studio in Brooklyn and began to build a reputation in the New York art world as an art photographer, critic, and curator. Six years later, Muniz achieved international acclaim for his *The Sugar Children* and *Pictures of Chocolate* series. After being invited to participate in the 1998 São Paulo Biennial, he began to exhibit consistently in his home country.⁶ Since then, he has become an international art star, frequently exhibiting in group and solo exhibitions, particularly in Western Europe, the United States and Brazil, with recent one-man shows in Japan (Tokyo, October 22 - November 20, 2010) and South Korea (Seoul, February 11 - March 13, 2011).

author entitled "Artes visuais sob a ótica de Jose Neinstein, c.2000," 167, Amaral states that the American art world recognizes Muniz as an American artist. The Brazilian curator Paulo Herkenhoff also describes Muniz as a "naturalized American" in *Vik*, eds. Paulo Herkenhoff, Leonel Kaz, and Nigge Piovesan Loddi (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil: Aparaizvel Edições e Arte, 2009), 30.

³ In *Vik Muniz, Reflex: A Vik Muniz Primer* (New York: Aperture, 2005), 9-10, Muniz states that when he was born, his mother worked as a switchboard operator and his father as a waiter in São Paulo.

⁴ Muniz, 12, and "Vik Muniz makes art with wire, sugar." *TED* talk filmed February 2003, posted April 2007, http://www.ted.com/talks/vik_muniz_makes_art_with_wire_sugar.html (accessed September 2 2011).

⁵ Jerry Saltz, "Dust to Dust: Vik Muniz (2001)," *Seeing Out Loud: the Village Voice Art Columns, fall 1998-winter 2003*, 173-5 (Berkeley: Small Press Distribution, 2003), 173. Also see Robert Mahoney "Vik Muniz at Stux" *Arts Magazine* vol. 64 no.5 (January 1990), 102-103, and Gretchen Faust, "New York in Review: Vik Muniz" *Arts Magazine* (May 1990), 112.

⁶ Marguerite Feitlowitz, "Vik Muniz: Between Illusion and Memory," *Americas* (English Edition) vol. 53 n.4 (July 2001): 6.

In deciding to focus on Muniz for my Master's research paper, it was not his stature as an art star that attracted me to his art, but the political and socially engaged dimensions of his practice that were documented in *Waste Land*. However, I quickly learned that most art critics, and the artist himself, position and contextualize his artworks within the Western discourses of postmodern art of surface aesthetics and commodification rather than as socially engaged art. Intrigued by Muniz's denial of a political dimension of his artworks and his negation of any influence of Latin American histories of art production, which given his Brazilian background is where I expected him to critically locate his work, I have undertaken in this paper to examine the contradictions Muniz sustains between Western discourses of postmodernism, the Brazilian modernist avant-garde, and participatory art practices in order to determine the significance of his practice for an understanding of political art in the twenty-first century.

Primarily informed by major publications on his work published in English in North America and Europe, which include *Vik Muniz, Seeing is Believing* (1998), *Vik Muniz: After Warhol* (2000), *Natura Pictrix: Interviews and Essays on Photography* (2003), *Vik Muniz* (Museo d'Arte Contemporanea Roma, 2003), *Reflex: A Vik Muniz Primer* (2005), *Vik* (Museu de Arte Moderna do Rio de Janeiro, 2009) and his catalogue raisonné *Vik Muniz: Obra Completa 1987 – 2009* (2009), my analysis of these key sources reveals that Muniz has consistently sought to position himself critically within an American postmodernist framework.⁷ When he has been questioned in interviews

⁷ The primary blind spot of this analysis involves the lack of accessibility of academic texts published in Latin America in languages other than English on the subject of Vik Muniz. I am thus unable to completely determine how Brazilian art critics and historians position Muniz.

regarding the influence of Brazilian art and culture on his artistic practice, Muniz consistently claims that he was never inspired by Brazilian art history.⁸ By providing a comparison of his Brazilian and American sites of production and reception, I demonstrate how the relocation of his American-based practice to Brazil functions as a political act that redefines what constitutes social engagement in contemporary art practice. In doing so, my analysis participates in and contributes to the larger contemporary theoretical debates concerning the political effectiveness of a contemporary art practice that embraces rather than opposes market economics.

In section one, I provide an analysis of the development of Muniz's practice in New York from the late 1980s to the 1990s. I argue that his strategic positioning of his art within an American context led to Western and Brazilian art critics regarding Muniz as an American artist by the late 1990s.⁹ Through a discussion of two key photographic series, *Best of Life* and *Pictures of Chocolate*, I determine how his aesthetic strategies are aligned with those of the American pop artist Andy Warhol. I further analyze Muniz's series *After Warhol* (1999), *Pictures of Ink* (2000-2001), *Pictures of Color* (2001-2002), *Pictures of Magazines* (2003-2005) and *Pictures of Diamonds* (2004-2005) to show how he engages with the legacy of Warhol to effectively evade political readings of his work.

Section two examines Muniz's contradictory relationship to his home country of Brazil through an analysis of his socially engaged series *Aftermath* (1998), *Pictures of Junk* (2005-2009) and *Pictures of Garbage* (2008). By contextualizing Muniz's art within

⁸ Linda Benedict-Jones, "Interview with Vik Muniz," in *Vik Muniz*, ed. Germano Celant (Milan: Electra, 2003), 157-158. Also discussed in interviews with Danilo Eccher, "Interview with Vik Muniz and Danilo Eccher," in *Vik Muniz*, ed. Germano Celant (Milan: Electra, 2003), 27-28, and in von Bennigsen, et al., 54.

⁹ Amaral, 149 and 167, and Herkenhoff, Kaz and Loddi, 30.

the history of the Brazilian avant-garde of the 1960s, I reveal that his work paradoxically recalls the oppositional strategies of this avant-garde through his aesthetic use of garbage and engagement with Brazil's *favela* (Portuguese for a slum or shantytown) communities. Specifically, I undertake a comparison with the avant-garde Brazilian artist Hélio Oiticica to illuminate the similarities and differences between the two artists in order to demonstrate how Muniz has adapted the strategies of the Brazilian avant-garde of the 1960s to a capitalist art market.

In section three, I evaluate the political efficacy of Muniz's practice through an analysis and comparison of American art historians Grant Kester's and Hal Foster's theories of the relationship of contemporary art to politics. In Kester's book *Conversation Pieces: The Role of Dialogue in Socially-Engaged Art* (2004), he describes how socially invested art practices constitute a dialogical aesthetic that "challenge[s] dominant representations of a given community, and create a more complex understanding of, and empathy for, that community among a broader public" through public and process-based art activities.¹⁰ Kester argues that dialogical art practices "catalyze surprisingly powerful transformations in the consciousness of their participants" by facilitating conversation between cultural groups in a safe arena.¹¹ Using Kester's notion of dialogical art practice as an analytical frame to discuss the political implications of Muniz's practice, I examine how Kester's criteria delegitimizes the political efficacy of Muniz's participatory art. By comparing Muniz's participatory art practice in Brazil to those of the British artist

¹⁰ Grant Kester, "Conversation Pieces: The Role of Dialogue in Socially-Engaged Art," in *Theory in Contemporary Art Since 1985*, eds. Zoya Kocur & Simon Leung (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 83.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 79 and 77.

Loraine Leeson and Belgian artist Francis Alÿs, I further highlight the complexities of defining the role of collaboration in political art. I then turn to Hal Foster, who, distinct from Kester, argues in *The Return of the Real* (1996) that the avant-garde tactics of modernism that privilege the vision of the individual artist rather than the participatory dynamics of collaboration still constitute a critical and politically legitimate practice.¹² My consideration of Muniz within these two frameworks reveals that the political locus of his practice is situated outside the aesthetic realm and lies instead in how the circulation in the international art market of the work he has produced in Brazil enables him to effectively stimulate social change in the communities of his collaborators.

The Postmodern Player

American literary critic Frederic Jameson argues in his seminal essay “Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism” (1984) that postmodernism replaced modernism in North America in the late 1950s or early 1960s with the development of the late capitalist economy.¹³ He identifies a new artistic preoccupation with surfaces as the distinguishing formal feature of postmodernism, and argues that this characteristic coincides with a lack of critical depth in both visual cultural production and theoretical discourse.¹⁴ Jameson discusses Warhol’s “Diamond Dust Shoes” (1980-1981) as exemplary of this new depthlessness, blaming commodity capitalism for numbing what should be a strong

¹² Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real. The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996), 1.

¹³ Frederic Jameson, “Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” *New Left Review* 146 (July-August 1984): 59.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 65-66.

political statement in consideration of Warhol's working-class background.¹⁵ Jameson further identifies pastiche to be a symptom of this new historical period, also evident in Warhol's practice, as cultural producers freely imitate the past without credit or critique of the historical referent.¹⁶

Jameson identifies this postmodern form of cultural production as belonging to the simulacrum, a term describing the conditions of reception framed by mass media that was introduced by poststructuralist theorist Jean Baudrillard in *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981).¹⁷ Baudrillard claims that we process and extract the meaning of contemporary existence through simulacra, the signs and symbols of mass media culture, which do not represent, reference or hold any relationship to lived experience.¹⁸ Baudrillard and poststructuralist theorists including Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault cite Warhol as the exemplar producer of simulacra through his artistic use of commercial reproductive techniques.¹⁹ In "Absolute Merchandise" (1988), Baudrillard argues that Warhol's production of simulacra functions to assert art's "total objectivization" and commodification.²⁰ Barthes asserts in "That Old Thing, Art" (1980) that the referents in pop art become superficial and empty signifiers as they no longer hold symbolic or referential meaning, and thus "signify that they signify nothing".²¹

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., 70-71.

¹⁷ Ibid., 72-73.

¹⁸ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (University of Michigan Press, 1994), 6.

¹⁹ Foster, 128.

²⁰ Baudrillard, "Beyond the Vanishing Point of Art," in *Post-Pop Art* ed. Paul Taylor (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989), 173 for the quote, and "Absolute Merchandise," in *Andy Warhol: Paintings 1960-1986*, edited by Martin Schwander (Stuttgart: Verlag Gerd Hatje, 1995), 18-19. Originally published in French in *Artstudio* no. 8 *Andy Warhol* (Spring 1988).

²¹ Roland Barthes, "That Old Thing, Art," *Post-Pop Art*, ed. Paul Taylor (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989), 26.

It is within this North American tradition of postmodernism as defined by Jameson that Muniz's art practice has been positioned by critics and promoted by the artist himself. Muniz consistently maintains in interviews and essays that he draws his artistic inspiration from American and European movements of the 1960s and 1970s, and discursively links his practice to the legacy of pop art's empty signifiers and the photographic documentation of ephemeral performances, happenings and earthworks.²² He draws inspiration from the pop movement in his selection of everyday objects, Western art historical paintings, iconic historical events and pop culture referents as the subject of his photographs. Muniz states in a 2001 interview that he consistently chooses mass-produced images that have been endlessly reproduced and thus neutralized of their criticality by over-consumption: "I favor images that are mainstream... that people don't feel threatened by."²³ In this manner, Muniz intentionally mutes and de-emphasizes the "iconographic value" of the famous pictures he recreates by "emphasizing their perceptual output" through the untraditional material he uses to render the image in order to encourage the viewer's inquiry into the process of art-making rather than its content.²⁴ In this manner, Muniz does not intend for viewers to derive critical or metaphorical power from the referent. By choosing everyday objects and familiar images that he believes his Western spectators will easily recognize, he seeks to encourage them to instead focus on his unusual technical process, stating that he always aims to make

²² Discussed in Eccher, 27, and Charles Ashley Stainback, "Vik Muniz and Charles Ashley Stainback: a Dialogue" in *Vik Muniz, Seeing is Believing*, exh. cat. eds. James Crump and Charles Ashley Stainback (Santa Fe: Arena Editions, 1998), 16.

²³ Feitlowitz, 6.

²⁴ Stainback, 37.

explicit for spectators his choice of material and the process of production in his photographs.²⁵

Muniz also aligns his practice with the photographic documentation of ephemeral art movements of the 1960s and 1970s. He recalls that in the late 1980s he came to the realization that he was more attracted to the documentary images of his sculptures than the objects themselves because, “the photographs captured more of what the objects were as they first appeared in my mind, as an idea.”²⁶ Particularly fascinated by “the ways [in which] a performance gets recorded and the way in which the record affects the performance,” Muniz often emphasizes the performative aspects of his art-making process in discussions of his work.²⁷ In an extensive interview with Charles Ashley Stainback (curator and former director of the International Centre of Photography in New York) published in the exhibition catalogue *Vik Muniz, Seeing is Believing* (1998), Muniz explains that he considers his process of production as a performance, and considers his photographs as documents of his “little private happenings”.²⁸ “They are records of short performances,” he clarifies, “about a second long, enacted exclusively for the lenses of my camera”.²⁹

Muniz began to consolidate this approach to his art practice after the critical acclaim of his first photographic series *Best of Life* (1989-1990). For *Best of Life*, Muniz selected photographs reproduced in *Life* magazine that document significant events of

²⁵ Muniz, 40.

²⁶ Stainback, 14.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 15.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Peter Galassi, “Natura Pictrix: Peter Galassi and Vik Muniz, c.1999,” in *Natura Pictrix: Interviews and Essays on Photography*, edited by Vik Muniz (New York: Edgewise Press, 2003), 93.

twentieth-century American history and culture. For example, Muniz's version of the Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph *Trang Bang, June 1972* (1972) in *Memory Rendering of Tram Bang* (1989) evokes the former by representing in thorough detail the single iconic image of a nude Vietnamese girl running towards the camera, and a dark and unrecognizable figure standing in the background. For each of the photographs he selected, he used pencil and pen to draw these photographs from memory. He then photographed these drawings and printed the photographs using a halftone pattern in order to accentuate the photographic quality of the drawings.³⁰ In this manner, Muniz is able to claim that his exhibition of *Best of Life* successfully confused visitors into believing that they were witnessing bad reproductions of the original photographs.³¹ However, it can be argued that the halftone pattern complicates the viewer's attempt to determine how the image was created, whether by technological reproduction or by hand, as it is not apparent by looking at the photographs that they were originally drawings. Although Muniz's intent was to encourage viewers to visually interrogate the process of production, the viewers sought instead to reconcile their memory with the content of the original photographs. As a result, Muniz turned in subsequent series to make his referent less important than the surface materiality of the work through using unconventional materials as his artistic medium and printing high quality photographs.

Muniz's turn to the use of unconventional materials became the conceptual underpinning of his American-based art practice, in which he deploys a diverse range of non-art materials to recreate everyday objects and familiar Western imagery, photographs

³⁰ Stainback, 25, and Muniz, 32.

³¹ Stainback, 25.

the result, and then destroys the original, often in order to economically reuse the medium to produce another image. In the two series that followed the *Best of Life*, entitled *Equivalents* (1993) and *Pictures of Wire* (1994-1995), Muniz photographed animals and objects he shaped from cotton and wire. In his 1995-1996 series, *Pictures of Thread*, Muniz used thread as a medium to recreate canonical artworks from Western art history that he would then photograph. For example, in *16,000 Yards (Le Songeur, After Corot)* (1996), he specifies in the title that he required 16,000 yards of thread to recreate the French landscape painter Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot's glass print *Le Songeur* (1854). Muniz then turned to food as his artistic material in *The Sugar Children* and *Pictures of Chocolate*. In *The Sugar Children*, Muniz's use of sugar to recreate the portraits of six Latin American children from personal photographs he took in St. Kitts marks the first time Muniz deviated from recreating a referent that would be familiar to a Western art audience. In this series, sugar links the children's Afro-Caribbean identity to the colonial legacy of slave labour in the sugarcane fields of the Caribbean and sugar's global circulation as a colonial commodity.

In contrast, *Pictures of Chocolate*, begun closely after *The Sugar Children* in early 1997, continued Muniz's primary conceptual approach to his photographic practice of using unconventional materials to represent familiar Western referents, and became the most successful of his photographic series, the largest in number and longest running. For six years, Muniz used chocolate syrup to remake iconic Western photographs, including *Action Photo, After Hans Namuth* (1997), a photograph by Hans Namuth that captures the action painting of Abstract Expressionist artist Jackson Pollock in his studio, and

photographic portraits of famous Western individuals such as *Sigmund Freud* (1997). He also recreated in chocolate syrup iconic works from Western art history including *Olympia, After Manet* (2000) and *The Kiss, After Rodin* (1999). In his discussions of *Pictures of Chocolate*, Muniz places emphasis on the importance of the intense, physical process of creation since the material of chocolate syrup challenges him to work quickly to recreate his referent and photograph the image before it hardens.³² He also contends that the large size of these works encourages the viewer to physically respond to them and engage in a process of reception focused on how the work has been rendered rather than with the meaning of the original referent.³³

When asked by the art critic Stainback to discuss the importance of the relationship between the medium and referent in his practice, Muniz compared Warhol's *Oxidation* paintings (1977-78) and Andre Serrano's *Piss Christ* (1987) to discuss his affinity with the former:

I am not that interested in the nature of the material that I photograph as much as in the way the viewer recognizes the material in the photograph. Serrano's work relies on the viewer's awareness of information about the subject; Warhol, on the information about the process. ...[My] choice of subject... often comes after the choice of the process.³⁴

Although Muniz clearly allies his fixation with the technical process and use of referents as empty signifiers to Warhol's practice, he does not entirely empty his referents of symbolic meaning. Rather, the incongruence between the materiality of the process and the subject matter diminishes the relevance of the meaning of the original artwork. For

³² Muniz, 76.

³³ Ibid., and Galassi, 93.

³⁴ Stainback, 30.

example, in *Las Meninas, After Velázquez* (2003) from *Pictures of Chocolate*, what is compelling about the photograph is the material of chocolate and not the original painting by Spanish painter Diego Velázquez. This is also the case in his *Pictures of Wire* and *Pictures of Thread* series. For example, in *16,000 Yards (Le Songeur, After Corot)*, the viewer is not concerned with determining a relationship between the material and the original 1854 artwork by Corot, but rather is attracted to the unique use and visual effect of the thread, which mimics conventional pencil drawing.

As early as 1999, Muniz also began to directly reference Warhol in his photographic art practice, adopting Warhol's silkscreen works as his subject matter in the series *After Warhol* (1999) and referencing Warhol's silkscreen aesthetic and artistic techniques in *Pictures of Ink* (2000-2001) and *Pictures of Diamonds* (2004-2005). In his description of *After Warhol* in his catalogue raisonnée *Vik Muniz: Obra Completa 1987-2009* (2009), Muniz explains that the concept for the series was developed in correspondence with his Parisian art dealer Xippas Renos, the nephew of Warhol's first European dealer Alexander Iolas.³⁵ Muniz also delineates the link between *Pictures of Chocolate* and *After Warhol* by explaining that after the commercial success of *Pictures of Chocolate*, the "work of Andy Warhol, for its emptiness and for being easily recognized, became the perfect vessel for a series of experiments with foods and other substances."³⁶ For *After Warhol*, Muniz experimented with edible substances such as peanut butter, jelly and ketchup, and grainy materials including spices and glitter in order

³⁵ *Vik Muniz: Obra Completa 1987 – 2009*, organized by Pedro Corrêa do Lago (São Paulo: Capivara, 2009), 306.

³⁶ Muniz, 79, 81.

to evoke the visual effect of Warhol's silkscreens. He created four portraits of Elizabeth Taylor using different spices to produce *Liz (Cayenne, Black Pepper, Curry, Chili Pepper)* (1999); in *Double Mona Lisa (Peanut Butter and Jelly)* (1999) he used peanut butter and jelly to recreate Warhol's famous *Double Mona Lisa* (1963), a silkscreen reproduction of Leonardo da Vinci's even more famous oil painting (c. 1503–1506).

Muniz states that Warhol and the pop movement also inspired his subsequent series entitled *Pictures of Ink* (2000-2001). In this series, he appropriated iconic twentieth-century photographs originally reproduced in newsprint to make works such as *Disaster* (2000), referencing the Hindenburg explosion, and appropriated art photographs that responded to the condition of film and photography, such as *Race Riot* (2001), which re-appropriated Warhol's appropriation of a newspaper photo in *Birmingham Race Riot* (1964).³⁷ To produce these works, Muniz meticulously applied small dots of ink to paper in order to replicate the dot matrix of newsprint and commercial photography.³⁸ For example, in *Disaster* he allowed the ink to freely clot and create pools of ink in order to delineate the darker areas of the original photograph. The choice of medium is apparent in Muniz's photograph as light reflects the thickness of the ink to produce a three-dimensional effect. However, it is unclear whether the rendering was produced by hand or reproduced mechanically, as the ink clearly sits atop of the support in the photograph. In reflecting on these works in *Reflex: A Vik Muniz Primer*, Muniz identifies Warhol and the pop movement as influences that informed both his choice of referent and process, stating "most of what I do combines a pop art attitude toward subjects" that drains the signifier of

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 83-86.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 85.

symbolic or referential significance.³⁹ Muniz also explains that he was inspired by the formal aesthetic of the pop artists to produce *Pictures of Ink*, citing Roy Lichtenstein and Sigmar Polke as key influences in contributing to his interest in exploring the significance of the halftone pattern, which can be seen in how monochromatic photographs of *Pictures of Ink* more closely resemble the effect of Polke's raster-dot technique than Warhol's silkscreens.⁴⁰

The Warhol and pop-inspired series of *Picture of Ink* was produced concurrently with Muniz's series *Pictures of Color* (2001-2002), in which he continued his practice of recreating familiar Western art historical imagery but drew upon the formal innovations of *Pictures of Ink*. To produce the *Pictures of Colour*, Muniz used a computer to simplify the color compositions of modern and contemporary Western paintings. For example in *After Van Gogh* (2001), Muniz scanned a reproduction of a painting of sunflowers by Vincent Van Gogh, and reduced the number of pixels to identify its main colors.⁴¹ He then purchased individual Pantone color swatches that correspond to its pixelated color composition and meticulously pasted each swatch onto a grid he printed from the computer. From a distance, this grid of pure color swatches evokes the impression of the pixelated painting. The influence of pop art can also be detected in a subsequent series, *Pictures of Magazines* (2003-2005), in which Muniz remade art historical paintings by creating collages of small hole-punched fragments of magazines, as typified in *Still Life with Three Puppies (After Gauguin)* (2004). Due to the significant size and aesthetic, this

³⁹ Ibid., 84.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 84-85.

⁴¹ Ibid., 145.

photograph appears to be an imperfect reproduction of the original painting from a distance. Only upon closer scrutiny does the work begin to recall an impressionist or pointillist aesthetic, until the spectator can clearly identify the choice of medium and seemingly meticulous process of production that creates this illusory effect.

In *Pictures of Diamonds* (2004-2005), Muniz continued his strategy of consciously positioning his work in relation to Warhol's pop art legacy. Muniz claims that a friend and collector of Muniz's work, a diamond dealer, asked him to create a series of works using diamonds to be sold at a charity auction. Muniz selected old Hollywood actresses such as Grace Kelly and Bette Davis as his subject matter and used diamonds to render their portraits on a black support, which he then photographed. The entire series successfully sold at the auction, and has continued to succeed on the secondary art market.⁴² *Pictures of Diamonds* distinctly recalls and effectively realizes a series of artwork originally conceptualized by Warhol in the 1980s to create a series using solely diamond dust. To create the *Diamond Dust Shoes* series, Warhol had to resort to using primarily crushed glass enhanced with diamond dust to realize his concept.⁴³ By "completing" Warhol's intention through *Pictures of Diamonds*, Muniz's photographed portraits of Hollywood icons recreated with diamonds trumps Warhol's original objective to signify the glamour and superficiality of stardom through conflating the medium and the referent.

⁴² Ibid., 97.

⁴³ "Catalogue Notes and Provenance, Andy Warhol, Diamond Dust Shoes," *Sotheby's Catalogue*, Contemporary Art Day Sale New York, 12 November 2008, URL in bibliography (accessed January 10, 2012).

In so doing, Muniz's alignment with Warhol clearly functions as a market-driven strategy and supports his contextualization of his work within a postmodern surface aesthetics. It also has enabled Muniz to evade political readings of his work. Warhol famously claimed that he reproduced and repeated images with the sole intention of draining them of significance and critical effect. "When you see a gruesome picture over and over again, it doesn't really have any effect," he affirmed in a 1964 interview.⁴⁴ In 1980 he confirmed his affinity for repetition: "the more you look at the same exact thing, the more the meaning goes away, and the better and emptier you feel."⁴⁵ It is this dimension of Warhol that Muniz embraces when he states his claim that he does not believe that art should be political. In turn, this negation also enables him to link his refusal to accept political interpretations of his art to his Brazilian background. Muniz states in a 1998 interview that growing up during the Brazilian dictatorship influenced and affirmed his perception that political art was a "government thing."⁴⁶ "Poor people need money," Muniz stated in 2007, "[y]ou need to help them directly. I don't believe in political art. Raising awareness: You have the newspaper for that."⁴⁷

Although Muniz denies political readings of his work, he does position his work as ethically engaged with the viewer. He consistently maintains that he seeks to raise his spectators' awareness about the manipulation of images through his work, in the hopes of influencing them to adopt a critical approach to looking that they will apply to their

⁴⁴ Gene Swenson, "What Is Pop Art? Answers from 8 Painters, Part I," *Art News* 62 (November 1963): 60, quoted in Foster, "Death in America," *October* vol. 75 (Winter, 1996): 41.

⁴⁵ Andy Warhol and Pat Hackett, *POPism: The Warhol '60s* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), 50.

⁴⁶ Stainback, 33-34.

⁴⁷ Allen Strouse, "For the Price of a Chocolate Portrait..." *Artinfo*, posted October 24, 2007, <http://www.artinfo.com/news/story/25896/for-the-price-of-a-chocolate-portrait> (accessed April 15, 2011).

everyday lives.⁴⁸ “There is a definite ethical structure to what I do as an artist,” Muniz explained in a 2001 article, “[because you] go through two types of recognition: of the [referent]... and the way it is being rendered. It makes you highly conscious of the act of looking, the mechanics of seeing.”⁴⁹ In doing so, he states that he aims to create the “worst possible illusion” by using illusion as a critical tool in his practice: “...illusion *informs* my work, making illusions is not what my work aims to achieve... [because I am] more interested in making the viewer confront his own incompetence in resisting an illusion” (author’s emphasis).⁵⁰ In this way, Muniz claims that his imperfect illusions educate viewers through their experience of “feeling” vision that provokes them to dissect the illusion and comprehend how his images have been constructed.⁵¹ He frequently compares this production of affect to what the viewer would experience by watching a bad performance in a theatre that prevents him or her from being drawn into the narrative of the play.⁵²

While Muniz’s comparison of the reception of his work with “bad” theatre and the deliberate alignment of his practice with Warholian strategies of appropriation enables him to make the claim that the criticality of his work lies solely in its surface materiality, the production in 1996 of *The Sugar Children* before he articulated the legacy of pop art’s empty signifiers as the interpretative key to his aesthetic strategy belies this claim. As the first photographic series Muniz has made that does not rely on a postmodern strategy of appropriating existing referents, *The Sugar Children* both typifies Muniz’s preoccupation

⁴⁸ Stainback, 16, Feitlowitz, 6, and von Benningsen, et al., 59.

⁴⁹ Feitlowitz, 6.

⁵⁰ Stainback, 16, 33.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 16-17, Muniz, 84, and Galassi, 91.

⁵² Stainback, 36.

with surface and conveys a socio-political message through the relationship between his choice of material and referent. In *Reflex: A Vik Muniz Primer*, Muniz recounts that the idea for this work originated during a trip to St. Kitts in 1995 when he befriended and photographed a group of local children, and also met the children's parents who work in the island's sugarcane fields. Upon returning to New York, he decided to recreate his photographs of each child smiling for his camera with sugar upon reading the words of the Brazilian poet Ferreira Gullar: "It is with the bitter lives of bitter people that I sweeten my coffee on this beautiful morning in Ipanema."⁵³ Applying granulated sugar to black paper to capture their likeness, he then photographed the resulting images and identified each child by name through titles such as *Valentina, the Fastest* (1996) and *Big James Sweats Buckets* (1996). Muniz also collected into six jars the sugar used to compose their likenesses and labeled each jar with the original photographs he took in St. Kitts.

These jars, which were exhibited alongside *The Sugar Children*, served to heighten the significance of the original referent for the work rather than empty it of meaning. Through the choice of sugar, Muniz simultaneously evoked the children's future destiny as cane-cutters and recalled the historical enslavement, subjugation and exploitation of Africans by the European colonialists to fuel the sugarcane industry in Latin America.⁵⁴ The intimate portrayal of the children in bust-size portraits coupled with the personalized titles and jars of sugar labeled with the original photographs insinuate a referential relationship between the subject and medium, the body and its photographic

⁵³ Muniz, 60.

⁵⁴ Vanessa Silberman, "Vik Muniz's Ten Ten's Weed Necklace," *Gastronomica: The Journal of Food and Culture* vol.7 no.3 (Summer 2007): 8.

re-presentation. In this context, Muniz's refusal to engage with referential readings of his work and his denial of political intent contradict the social dimensions of his practice that were embodied in *The Sugar Children* and which became central to his art-making after 1998 when he began to adopt garbage as an artistic material and collaboratively produce work in Brazil.

Reception in Brazil

Muniz's adoption of garbage as his artistic medium began with an invitation to participate in the 1998 São Paulo Biennial by the Biennial's artistic director Paulo Herkenhoff.⁵⁵ The major theme of the Biennial was cannibalism or *antropofagia* in Portuguese, a Brazilian modernist concept that continues to hold cultural currency in contemporary Brazilian art.⁵⁶ Written by the Brazilian poet Oswald de Andrade in 1928, the *Manifesto Antropofago* declared cultural cannibalism as a subversive strategy for the local avant-garde to assert a modern and national identity.⁵⁷ As a theory of culture and cultural strategy, the manifesto states that Brazil gains strength from its ability to consume and absorb foreign influence.⁵⁸ In relation to this theme, Herkenhoff included *The Sugar Children* in the section committed to Contemporary Brazilian Art and commissioned Muniz to replicate in chocolate Théodore Géricault's *The Raft of the Medusa* (1819) and

⁵⁵ Feitlowitz, 6.

⁵⁶ Ivo Mesquita, "Brazil" in *Latin American Art in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Edward J. Sullivan (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1996), 201.

⁵⁷ Leslie Bary, "Oswald de Andrade's 'Cannibalist Manifesto'," *Latin American Literary Review*, vol. 19 no.38 (July-Dec., 1991): 35.

⁵⁸ Herkenhoff, "The Contemporary Art of Brazil: Theoretical Constructs" in *Ultramodern: The Art of Contemporary Brazil*, exh. cat., eds. Aracy Amaral and Paulo Herkenhoff (Washington D.C.: The National Museum of Women of the Arts, 1993), 36.

Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux's *Ugolino and His Sons* (1865-67) for their portrayals of cannibalism.⁵⁹ He also commissioned Muniz to create a new series, *Aftermath* (1998), which marked the first time Muniz would work with garbage as the primary material for his photographs.

Aftermath encompasses a series of five photographs that directly responded to the plight of homeless children in Brazil. The idea for this series took hold when Muniz was visiting São Paulo in early 1998 to research his commissions for the Biennial, and became disturbed by the lack of public concern for Brazil's homeless children. He relates that:

I was a little shocked to notice that—despite the inescapable misery surrounding artists in Brazil—there was little or no art that spoke about it, even in the subtlest way. Misery only appeared in images as an aesthetic challenge to be vanquished by the artist's tastefulness. The stereotypical artist, who photographs the underbelly of society but manages to turn those appalling images into beautiful, painterly abstractions, was always anathema to me—but I had to start with something, so I took my camera to the streets and set out to look for those five thousand invisible children.⁶⁰

Once Muniz had decided on this focus for his commissioned work, he found it difficult to earn the trust of the homeless children, who hide and camouflage themselves in the streets in order to survive.⁶¹ He also emphasizes their reticence in having their photograph taken and their inability to strike a “happy” pose for the camera: “When I asked them to evoke a good feeling or memory so I could take a picture of it, they could think of nothing worth remembering that wasn't a cause of pain or sadness. They did not know how to ‘look good’ in a picture because they did not know what it was to look good, period.”⁶² In

⁵⁹ Muniz, 63.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 64.

⁶¹ Feitlowitz, 6.

⁶² Muniz, 64.

response to their lack of trust and reactions to being photographed, Muniz offered the children food and clothing and provided them with art history books from which they chose a character from an artwork to pose as for the camera by mimicking the character's facial expressions.⁶³ Muniz then collected dirt and garbage from the streets of Rio de Janeiro on Ash Wednesday, the day after Carnival, in order to augment the children's portraits with the residue or "aftermath" of excess, overindulgence and cheerful celebration.⁶⁴ Returning to his New York studio, he added an opaque layer of the dirt, colored confetti, cigarette butts, deflated fragments of balloons and broken glass to the photographs, and then re-photographed the results to produce a grainy rendering of their likenesses similar to the quality of old or unfocused photographs, as evident in *Emerson* (1998) and *Angélica* (1998).

Although Muniz expressed his aversion towards the aesthetic transformation of "appalling images into beautiful, painterly abstractions," *Aftermath* arguably contains an aesthetic filter of abstraction.⁶⁵ The art historical references are not evident from looking at the work, nor does he insert information regarding any artwork in the titles, as he did in his previous series that appropriated iconic paintings, for example *Las Meninas*, *After Velázquez* from *Pictures of Chocolate*. Instead, viewers derive meaning in the work from the visual relationship Muniz establishes between the starkly rendered garbage, which sits clearly on the surface, and the hazy likeness that emerges from the garbage to evoke the illusion of depth of form. This imprecise portrayal of the children as nestled amongst a

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ *Vik Muniz: Complete Works 1987-2009*, 298.

⁶⁵ Muniz, 64.

mirage of garbage recalls their survival strategy of camouflage. The representation of their likenesses, which appears delicate and fragile because of the brittle materials, as if a light wind could shuffle the rubble and their image would be lost, evokes their indeterminate future.

Despite the obvious social dimensions of these portraits of street kids, Muniz has repeatedly denied that he had a political intent in creating *Aftermath*. After the Biennial, he began to consciously reference Warhol in his subsequent series *After Warhol* (1999) and *Pictures of Diamonds* (2004-2005), which effectively enfolded *Aftermath* into his deliberate privileging of surface aesthetics. In a 2001 interview, Muniz claims that he did not produce *Aftermath* “as a political statement” because “I think artists make very poor political assessments. Our job as artists is to orchestrate surfaces.”⁶⁶ He also states in *Reflex: A Vik Muniz Primer* that “I was never fond of art that sets up to be political from the onset. I have always believed that true political ideas happen out of necessity, not theory, and usually become associated with politics only after their execution.”⁶⁷ Moreover, despite exhibiting in the São Paulo Biennial and creating *Aftermath* in relation to the theme of *antropofagia*, Muniz consistently claims that Brazilian artists or art practices have never inspired him, and that he dislikes the Brazilian movements because he finds them elitist and divorced from everyday life in Brazil.⁶⁸

Despite Muniz’s protestations that *Aftermath* had no political intent and his embrace of Warhol following *Aftermath*, he undertook to produce a second major series

⁶⁶ Feitlowitz, 6.

⁶⁷ Muniz, 64.

⁶⁸ Benedict-Jones, 157-158.

Brazil using garbage, *Pictures of Junk* (2005-2009), which was begun in the same year as *Pictures of Diamonds* was completed. Whereas for *Aftermath* Muniz collected small-scale debris from the street to add a residue of garbage to his photographs of street children, for *Pictures of Junk* he borrowed larger objects and materials from a local junkyard, including tires, metal cabinets and cans, plastic buckets, fridges and rusted chains, to recreate paintings from the canon of Western art, for example *Oedipus and the Sphinx, After Jean-Auguste Dominique Ingres* (2006).⁶⁹ In these and other works in the *Pictures of Junk* series, garbage functions as negative space by surrounding and outlining the figures, and dirt and rubble serve as residue to delineate the musculature, clothing and facial features. Unlike *Aftermath*, *Pictures of Junk* was first exhibited in North America, premiering at Rena Bransten Gallery in San Francisco in April 2006, followed by a showing at Sikkema Jenkins & Co. in New York in September 2006. It was first seen in Brazil as part of his 2007 solo exhibition *The Beautiful Earth*, held in two venues across São Paulo (Paço das Artes and Galeria Fortes Vilaça), and was included Muniz's travelling solo show *Reflex* that travelled to various cities in the US and Canada between 2006 and 2007 before concluding in Mexico City in 2008.

Pictures of Junk follows the conceptual formula solidified in *Pictures of Chocolate*, in which Muniz uses unconventional materials to recreate versions of art historical paintings, and closely adheres to his American-based aesthetic strategy to deploy these materials to reduce the signifying power of the referent for the artwork. Both series also operate as commodities in the global art market. What distinguishes them from

⁶⁹ Rena Bransten Gallery, "Pictures of Junk Series: An Interview with Vik Muniz," video uploaded March 31, 2011, <http://vimeo.com/21780105> (accessed March 10, 2012).

each other is the process of production. In contrast to Muniz's American-based practice of solely producing commodities for sale, *Pictures of Junk* serves a unique role in the community of Rio de Janeiro by incorporating the participation of student youth as his studio assistants who attended the *Centro Espacial Vik Muniz*. Founded by Muniz in 2006 as part of the NGO arts school *Galpão Aplauso* of Rio de Janeiro, the centre is dedicated to visual literacy and art education through the organization of educational projects for low-income and lower-class youth who reside in the densely populated *favelas* that border the peripheries of Brazil's city-centers. Accommodating around 300 students from over 100 different *favelas* annually, Muniz's centre is similar in its mandate to Brazilian NGOs such as *Viva Rio*, which aims to "encourage the empowerment and social development of people living in the favelas."⁷⁰ Rather than simply raising or donating money for Brazil's at-risk youth, Muniz's *Centro Espacial* provides students with artistic education and training to provide them with skills that will prepare them for future employment, and thus enable them to become self-sufficient outside the *favelas*.⁷¹ The centre also promotes a non-violent lifestyle for impoverished youth, who are easily recruited into the drug trade, a primary source of employment in the *favelas*.⁷²

To financially sustain his centre, Muniz organizes corporate projects and commissions in which the students assist in designing and producing the work.⁷³ Most of the core funding for his centre comes from international corporations, including

⁷⁰ Emily Poenish, "Beauty and the Beat," *Vanity Fair* is.574 (June 2008): 78, and Frits Gierstberg, "Visual Culture in Brazil," in *Brazil Contemporary*, ed. Paul Meurs (Rotterdam: NAI Publishers, 2009), 148 for the quote.

⁷¹ Strouse.

⁷² Gierstberg, 148.

⁷³ "Vik Muniz conta como juntar arte, cinema e trabalho social," *TEDxSudeste*, filmed 8 May 2010, posted February 26, 2011, URL in bibliography (accessed April 10, 2011), and Strouse.

Lancôme, Louis Vuitton and Neiman Marcus. For example, in 2007 buyers could commission a personalized chocolate portrait by Muniz for \$110,000 through Neiman Marcus's Christmas Book, with the proceeds donated to the *Centro Espacial Vik Muniz*.⁷⁴ In 2008, Lancôme commissioned Canadian model Daria Werbowy to produce a limited edition collection of cosmetics inspired by her 2007 trip to the *Centro Espacial*, and two dollars from each sale were donated to the school.⁷⁵ In a 2009 project funded by the Health Ministry of the Brazilian government, Muniz and his students produced and starred in a television commercial promoting AIDS-HIV awareness.⁷⁶ Muniz also supports local non-profit NGOs such as the *Fundação Roberto Marinho*, and most recently SPECTACULU, a non-profit arts and technology school based in Rio de Janeiro dedicated to underprivileged youth. Under Muniz's direction, students from this school created an exhibit in 2011 for the opening of a Louis Vuitton store in Miami in return for a donation to SPECTACULU.⁷⁷ In light of these collaborative initiatives with nonprofits and corporations organized by Muniz to financially support the *Centro Espacial Vik Muniz* and other art educational NGOs in Rio de Janeiro, *Pictures of Junk's* role in the art market can be seen as radically diverging from his American-based series such *Pictures of Chocolate*, in which the surface aesthetics of the work is framed by the depth of his political commitment to supporting the art education of marginalized youth in the *favelas* and incorporating them into his art practice through a collaborative process of production.

⁷⁴ "Vik Muniz conta como juntar arte, cinema e trabalho social," and Strouse.

⁷⁵ Poenish, 78, and "Model Artist," *MindFood*, posted June 11, 2008. <http://www.mindfood.com/at-m-daria-werbowy-model-artist.seo> (accessed April 16, 2012).

⁷⁶ "Vik Muniz conta como juntar arte, cinema e trabalho social."

⁷⁷ "Vik Muniz Collaborates with Louis Vuitton to Enhance Shopping Experience for Miami Customers," *ArtDaily.org*, posted August 6, 2011, http://www.artdaily.org/index.asp?int_sec=2&int_new=49635 (accessed March 1, 2012).

Pictures of Junk also served as the inspiration for Muniz's production of his series *Pictures of Garbage* (2008), which became subject of the documentary film *Waste Land* (2010) that was directed by British filmmaker Lucy Walker and financially supported by British-American producer Angus Aynsley.⁷⁸ This series combined the parameters of Muniz's collaborative processes in *Aftermath* and *Pictures of Junk*, in that the seven *catadores* or garbage pickers from *Jardim Gramacho*, a landfill site located on outskirts of Rio de Janeiro, were hired both to pose for his camera and to work as studio assistants to help create their portraits using recyclable materials they had collected from the landfill. *Pictures of Garbage* also conjoined Muniz's aesthetic strategy of representing iconic art references with the representation of the daily labor of the *catadores* in the landfill. For example, *The Bearer (Irmã)* (2008) portrays an elderly Afro-Brazilian woman named Irmã balancing a large basket of recyclable objects on her head. In *The Sower (Zumbi)* (2008), Muniz instructed the male *catadore* named Zumbi to pose as a sower in the landfill by holding a bag in his left hand and outstretching his right arm as if he were scattering seed. Through the title of the work and his subject's pose, Muniz references the Christian parable of the sower, a popular figurative convention in canonical Western art history. Muniz intentionally evokes another Western convention in *Atlas (Carlão)* (2008), for which Muniz requested Carlão to carry an enormous bag of garbage on his shoulders in order to visually reference the Greek myth of the enduring Titan named Atlas, who was condemned to bear the universe on his shoulders.

⁷⁸ Michael Slenske, "Vik Muniz's Trash Pick Up," in *Art in America*, posted October 28 2010, <http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-opinion/finer-things/2010-10-28/vik-muniz-waste-land/> (accessed April 1, 2012).

For three other *catadores*, Suellen, Sebastião and Isis, Muniz asked each of them to pose in the manner of specific art historical characters in order to reference their personal struggles. In *Mother and Children (Suellen)* (2008), Muniz appropriates the canonical Western Christian tradition of the Virgin Mary and baby Jesus enthroned. In his studio, he dressed the *catadore* and teenage mother Suellen in a long shawl, and postured her to face the camera while embracing her two young children. For *Marat (Sebastião)* (2008) Muniz instructed Sebastião, President of the Association of Recycling Pickers of *Jardim Gramacho (ACAMJG)*, to lie in a discarded bathtub in the landfill in order to mimic Jacques-Louis David's 1783 painting *The Death of Marat*. Muniz chose to associate Sebastião with Jean-Paul Marat, a radical politician during the French Revolution, to draw an analogy between the struggles in the past and the present to achieve political reform in order to support and alleviate the conditions of society's working classes. Finally, to create *Woman Ironing (Isis)* (2008), Muniz instructed the female *catadore* Isis to visually imitate the subject of Pablo Picasso's painting *Woman Ironing* (1904) in order to represent Isis's personal struggles that led her to *Jardim Gramacho*. Once a housewife with two children, her family abandoned her after her youngest child suddenly passed away.⁷⁹

While the art historical references in *Pictures of Garbage* enabled Muniz to convey a socio-political message in a similar manner to *Aftermath* by depicting intimate portraits of marginalized Brazilians with the objects they work with every day, they also ensured the works' art market appeal. For example, *Waste Land* documents the

⁷⁹ *Waste Land*, directed by Lucy Walker, co-directed by Karen Harley and Joao Jardim (London, England: Almega Projects, and Brazil: O2 Filmes, 2010), DVD.

international auction of *Marat (Sebastião)* in London, England in June 2008, which sold for roughly \$50,000 US. Some of the proceeds from the market of sales of *Pictures of Garbage* were returned to the community. Muniz donated \$250,000 to ACAMJG to support the *Jardim Gramacho* community and to assist in finding new jobs and housing for the thousands of *catadores* in light of the impending closure of the landfill in 2012.⁸⁰ The seven *catadores* were incorporated into the economics of the art market in several ways. Muniz gave each of the seven *catadores* a limited edition print of their portrait and paid them an undisclosed amount for working in his studio. With the premiere of *Waste Land* at the Sundance Film Festival in Utah in 2010, an additional site of reception for the work was created by the film's international distribution that provided Muniz with a platform to explain how market economics served as the social motivation behind *Pictures of Garbage*. While he continues to negate a relationship of aesthetics and politics in the work, he now positions the series as a vehicle of social change to the degree that it incorporated the *catadores* into the market system. In this context, it is important to note that while *Waste Land* serves to communicate and represent Muniz's social commitment to his collaborators in *Pictures of Garbage*, the proceeds earned from the international distribution of the film were not donated to *Jardim Gramacho*.

The radical divergence between how Muniz situates his American-based practice in relation to the critical ethics of reception, and his Brazilian-based practice in relation to his commitment to fostering social change through economically supporting his

⁸⁰ Ibid., and Carol Kino, "Where Art Meets Trash And Transforms Life," in *NY Times*, posted October 21, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/24/arts/design/24muniz.html?ref=metropolitanmuseumofart> (accessed October 11, 2011).

impoverished collaborators, raises the issue of whether the latter shares an affinity to other Brazilian art practices that Muniz claims have never inspired him, and that he finds elitist and divorced from everyday life. In the English-language literature on Muniz, the only critic who addresses this issue is Herkenhoff, the curator of the 1998 Sao Paulo Biennale, whose commission of *Aftermath* initiated Muniz's engagement with using garbage as an aesthetic material to represent the marginalized classes in Brazil. Herkenhoff argues in a 2009 catalogue essay entitled "Vik Muniz: A View from Below the Equator" that by simultaneously encouraging the participation of and symbolizing Brazil's lowest classes with garbage, Muniz's art practice references the history and discourse of modernist art practice in Latin America.⁸¹ To support his argument, Herkenhoff compares Muniz's use of ephemeral and found materials and engagement in Brazil's *favelas* in *Aftermath* to the avant-garde practices of Antonio Berni, an modern Argentine artist, and Hélio Oiticica, a Brazilian artist who produced works in the 1960s.

In Herkenhoff's comparison of Muniz and the Argentine artist Antonio Berni, he identifies a thematic affinity between *Aftermath* and Berni's *Juanito Laguna* series of paintings (1958-1978) in how both address the struggle of abandoned children to survive on the streets of the slums through their use of garbage as a medium. Berni, whose portrayals of proletarian and peasant scenes on giant canvases in a social realist style in the 1930s positioned him as an overtly political artist, began the *Juanito Laguna* paintings

⁸¹ Originally printed in Portuguese under the title "Vik Muniz: A Vista Abaixo da Linha do Equador" in *Vik*. I have based my analysis of this text on my own translation. It is also worth mentioning that a 1994 article by Lisa Roberts briefly compares Muniz's sculptural practice to the principles of the Brazilian movement Neoconcretism within a larger analysis of the critical neutralization of Brazilian art in North America. This is the only other text to my knowledge to consider Muniz within Brazilian art historical practice. See Lisa Roberts, "Expatriate Art: How Brazilian Is It?" *Polyester* vol. 2 no. 8 (Spring 1994): 46.

in the 1950s.⁸² Made over a span of twenty years, these paintings critiqued the social inequality of Argentina by featuring the invented character of Juanito Laguna, a young boy who lived in a shantytown on the outskirts of Buenos Aires. These paintings typify an aesthetic use of garbage, as Berni depicted the character's daily life through individual collages of found objects and discarded items he collected from the slums of Buenos Aires and pasted onto his canvases.⁸³ An incredibly successful series that has had lasting relevance in Argentina, Berni's series of paintings produced a social impact by representing Juanito's everyday activities and personal fantasies that viewers could identify with.⁸⁴

At first glance, Herkenhoff's comparison of Berni and Muniz appears apt, in that Muniz similarly amasses garbage to render the image of the children in *Aftermath*. However, Muniz does not exhibit the collage of garbage itself but a photograph of it, which numbs the sensorial and material experience of the work. *Aftermath* also portrays the subjects sitting statically for a traditional portrait derived from art historical references rather than depicting them in their everyday environment or providing a narrative. In this manner, he does not privilege the individuality and economic conditions of the children like Berni does by creating the character of Juanito. In Muniz's subsequent series *Pictures of Garbage*, he places the *catadores* behind a screen of art historical content that was not visually evident in *Aftermath*. This additional layer of representation interferes in the construction of meaning between the *catadores* and the medium of garbage, as the

⁸² Jacqueline Barnitz, *Twentieth-Century Art of Latin America* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007), 84.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

metaphorical references to Marat or Picasso's *Ironing Woman* distracts from the social message, and, more importantly, does not effectively translate the *catadores'* daily experience into the arena of reception.

Herkenhoff's text also retroactively validates Muniz's participation in the 1998 Biennial by positioning *Aftermath* within the avant-garde lineage of the Brazilian avant-garde artist Hélio Oiticica.⁸⁵ He aligns *Aftermath* with Oiticica's sculptural *box bólides* (1963-1966), which Oiticica developed as a member of the modernist Brazilian movement neoconcretism. Formed in 1959 in Rio de Janeiro, the neoconcrete movement advocated the political and social relevance of avant-garde art to everyday Brazilian life through "experimental approaches that directly involved the body of the spectator and its place in social space."⁸⁶ Anna Dezeuze, in the 2004 article "Tactile Dematerialization, Sensory Politics: Hélio Oiticica's *Parangolés*," states that Oiticica's *box bólides* epitomize the neoconcretist principles for its "mobilization of several senses rather than a disembodied gaze," as he intended for viewers to handle and explore the drawers and panels of his cube-shaped constructions to discover colorful substances and objects within.⁸⁷ Oiticica's work became increasingly political after the US government, suspicious of the Brazilian President's socialist sympathies, supported the 1964 military coup d'état that deposed Brazil's democratic government and replaced it with a military

⁸⁵ Herkenhoff, "Vik Muniz: A Vista Abaixo da Linha do Equador," 139-141.

⁸⁶ Catherine David, "The Great Labyrinth," in *Hélio Oiticica*, exh. cat., eds. Guy Brett et al. (Minneapolis: The Walker Art Center, 1993), 249.

⁸⁷ Anna Dezeuze, "Tactile Dematerialization, Sensory Politics: Hélio Oiticica's *Parangolés*," *Art Journal* vol.63 no.2 (Summer 2004): 62.

dictatorship.⁸⁸ Herkenhoff establishes a link between *Aftermath* to Oiticica's *Box-Bólide 18, Box-Poem 2, Homage to Cara de Cavalo* (1966) in relation to its representation of social injustice, and intended sensorial reaction through viewer participation.⁸⁹ In this *box bólide*, Oiticica contrasted a bag of red pigment with a photograph of Cara de Cavalo, a well-known bandit and friend of Oiticica, whose murder by the police inspired the work.⁹⁰ Herkenhoff allies Muniz's and Oiticica's methods of expressing a social message through the symbolic marriage of material and portrait. Whereas Oiticica intended the blood red pigment to represent the unjust death of his friend represented in the photograph, Muniz uses the street garbage to represent street children, who will also likely meet their fate on the streets. However, Muniz's photographic documentation of his garbage portraits do not encourage an interactive or sensorial response by the viewer equal to Oiticica's neoconcretist sculptures, as they only function on a visual level, produced for the "disembodied gaze".⁹¹

Although Herkenhoff solely addresses *Aftermath* in relation to the neoconcrete movement, *Aftermath* also can be seen to have an affinity with the Brazilian "aesthetics of garbage" movement. Originally devised as a cinematic strategy by Brazilian filmmaker Glauber Rocha and then adopted by Oiticica in his art practice, the "aesthetics of garbage" emerged from the radicalization of the documentary-style Cinema Novo movement in the early 1960s, which sought to "renovate a film aesthetic appropriate to

⁸⁸ Thomas E. Skidmore, *The Politics of Military Rule in Brazil, 1964-1985* (Oxford University Press, 1988), 3-4.

⁸⁹ Herkenhoff, "Vik Muniz: A Vista Abaixo da Linha do Equador," 141.

⁹⁰ Ibid., and David, "Hélio Oiticica: Brazil Experiment," in *The Experimental Exercise of Freedom*, exh. cat., eds. Susan Martin and Alma Ruiz (Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 1999), 188.

⁹¹ Dezeuze, 62.

contemporary Brazil where poverty, starvation and violence were the daily diet of most.”⁹² The films associated with this movement highlight the plight and alienation of the lowest classes of Brazilian society by capturing the lives of those who make their living in society’s trash, in the *favelas* and landfills of São Paulo.⁹³ After the military coup of 1964, the “aesthetics of garbage” also became an aesthetic strategy of resistance against an increasingly repressive military dictatorship.⁹⁴

Oiticica’s association with the “aesthetics of garbage” movement began when he became involved in the *favela* of Mangueira and started to incorporate recycled materials as his art medium in his avant-garde practice. The Brazilian poet Ferreira Gullar, whose poem on the bittersweet nature of sugar inspired Muniz to create *The Sugar Children*, also heavily influenced Oiticica’s rejection of oppressive nature of high art to work with the vernacular materiality of the *favelas*.⁹⁵ In the early 1960s, Gullar had aligned himself with popular Brazilian culture to advocate a socially committed popular art dedicated to addressing social and political inequalities afflicting the masses.⁹⁶ Oiticica’s time spent in Mangueira fostered his questioning of “the aesthetic act in its ethical and emancipatory dimension,” and inspired the development of his interactive and antipolitical *parangolé* capes.⁹⁷

⁹² Susan Hayward, *Cinema Studies: The Key Concepts* (Oxford: Routledge, 2006), 65.

⁹³ Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, “Narrativizing Visual Culture: Towards a Polycentric Aesthetics” in *Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff (New York: Routledge, 1998), 43.

⁹⁴ Shohat and Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (London: Routledge, 1994), 310.

⁹⁵ Dezeuze, 64.

⁹⁶ Ibid., and Claudia Calirman, “Art and Politics in Brazil: En Route to an Artistic Vocation,” *ReVista, the Harvard Review of Latin America* vol.8 no.21 (Winter 2009), <http://www.drclas.harvard.edu/revistaweb/1960s/perspectives/calirman> (accessed 4 December 2011).

⁹⁷ David, “The Great Labyrinth,” 248.

Created primarily between 1964 and 1968 using recycled plastic and fabric, *parangolés* are performed and embodied by a spectator in public space who thereby becomes a participant who is fundamental to the aesthetic act.⁹⁸ Some *parangolés* explicitly expressed Oiticica's revolutionary intentions for his art with inscriptions such as *Incorpo a Revolta* or "I Incorporate Revolt."⁹⁹ With the debut of his innovative installation *Tropicália* (1967) in Rio's Museum of Modern Art in 1967, Oiticica called for artistic strategies to be engaged against art institutions and the artistic elite, and committed to representing sociopolitical issues of poverty and oppression.¹⁰⁰ To create *Tropicália*, he arranged *penetrables*, which consist of freestanding panels of wood or brightly coloured cloth, to construct a labyrinth of corridors and rooms for spectators to penetrate and meander.¹⁰¹ To immerse his spectators in a sensorial experience of a *favela*, Oiticica incorporated into the installation foliage, his *parangolés*, discarded clothing, and found objects such as gravel, sand and soil from the streets of Rio.¹⁰² The potential social impact of Oiticica's practice was short-lived. Only a year later, stricter governmental control, censorship, and institutionalized violence had swiftly silenced the countercultural movement associated with the "aesthetics of garbage".¹⁰³

While Herkenhoff links Oiticica's and Muniz's art practices aesthetically, the political intent that lies behind their aesthetic use of garbage and the historical contexts in which they worked are completely different. Oiticica attempted to stimulate revolutionary

⁹⁸ Dezeuze, 59.

⁹⁹ Calirman.

¹⁰⁰ Dezeuze, 64.

¹⁰¹ Barnitz, 225-226.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ David, "Hélio Oiticica: Brazil Experiment," 174.

politics and prevent the spread of commodity capitalism in Brazil through his unconventional use of recycled materials as art, such as his *parangolés* and *penetrables*. His transformation of the spectator into a participant and his engagement in the *favela* of Mangueira sought to enlist the masses in a political and cultural revolution. In contrast, Muniz's Brazilian art practice does not express a revolutionary or oppositional message towards the government nor art institutions. Instead, Muniz responds positively to the market-driven context of the Western art world and embraces capitalism in order to change the social conditions of his collaborators.¹⁰⁴ Rather than fomenting resistance to exploitation and oppression, Muniz adopts the market-driven modus operandi of his American-based practice to incorporate Brazil's *favela* communities in the production of his commodities. Whereas Oiticica enlisted his spectators to become participants in the artistic act, Muniz collaborates with Brazil's underprivileged solely to engage them in the physical production of the artworks rather than in the of their content and meaning. Oiticica reinvented the role of the spectator as an active participant with the intent to alter his or her political consciousness. In Muniz's practice, the spectator is an international consumer whose purchases of Muniz's portraits of *catadores* are far removed from the site of social and political struggle. Thus, despite Muniz's claim to a critical ethics of reception, the distribution and sale of his garbage series only serves to undermine any social impact of his work in the arena of reception.

This contextualization of Muniz's garbage series within the Latin American avant-garde tradition reveals that it effectively functions within two discursive sites of

¹⁰⁴ Dezeuze, 59 and 61.

reception, Latin American modernism and Western postmodernism. In Brazil, *Aftermath* and *Pictures of Garbage* aesthetically and thematically evoke Berni's "aesthetics of garbage" through Muniz's use of garbage to represent his marginalized subjects, the children and *catadores*. In relation to Oiticica's sculptural works and installations, Muniz's photographs of garbage do not provoke comparable interaction with the viewer, nor stimulate a sensorial or revolutionary response. In the context of his Western postmodern practice, Muniz's photographs of garbage operate in a similar manner to his use of chocolate or diamonds as another unexpected and unusual material adopted to represent a familiar Western referent. In this way, Muniz's visual and thematic references to poverty and social struggles cater to his established market for his postmodern work. Through adapting his market-driven postmodern surface aesthetics to the specific conditions of exploitation and poverty in Brazil, Muniz is able to claim a social motivation for his Brazilian produced series by donating the money earned from the international sale of *Pictures of Junk* and *Pictures of Garbage* back to the communities of his collaborators, and organizing corporate commissions to fund his participatory practice and non-art interventions, such as the *Centro Espacial Vik Muniz*. Muniz's politics thus do not function within the political trajectory and history of the Brazilian avant-garde as Herkenhoff posits. Rather, it is Muniz's market-driven, postmodern sensibilities that frame his aesthetics of garbage.

An Alternative Participatory Practice

In light of how Muniz's positioning of his Brazilian-based practice in the global art market has enabled him to make a claim for the social significance of his collaboration and support of marginalized groups, Grant Kester's and Hal Foster's opposing perspectives on the participatory nature of contemporary art provide pertinent analytical frames to evaluate the validity of Muniz's claim. Whereas Kester's theory of dialogical aesthetics emphasizes the collaborative process of production as the political catalyst, Foster argues for the contemporary efficacy of neo-avant-garde strategies that engage the spectator through the traumatic real. These two frameworks function as the dominant methods of analyzing the relationship of art to politics in the contemporary milieu. It is thus constructive to consider Muniz in relation to Kester's and Foster's theories in order to reinforce my contention that the political efficacy of his practice operates outside the aesthetic and ideological realm, and within social action through non-art interventions.

In *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (2004), Kester analyzes and promotes socially engaged practices that facilitate open dialogue and encourage the creation of a collaborative discourse between the artist and his or her participants and spectators. His criterion for dialogical aesthetics pivots on the opportunity that artists provide to alter the participant's and spectator's consciousness through the process of production and reception. Kester develops his theory in opposition to the strategies of the historical avant-garde, which he argues sought to shock and disrupt spectators in order to enable them to "perceive the hidden operations of political

power.”¹⁰⁵ As an example, Kester discusses how Bertolt Brecht’s self-reflexive plays were intended to raise his spectators’ awareness by preventing the traditional, uncritical consumption of theatrical illusion through his alienation technique.¹⁰⁶ Kester argues that avant-garde tactics employed by artists such as Brecht effectively produce an “orthopedic” aesthetic because they regard the spectator as “an inherently flawed subject whose perceptual apparatus requires correction”.¹⁰⁷ Thus the avant-garde artist does not assume the role of a facilitator but of a superior instructor who is able to “recognize this defect and remedy it” through exposure to the work of art.¹⁰⁸ In doing so, Kester argues avant-garde artists negate the potential for spectators to become effective participants in the construction of the artwork’s meaning. The artwork does not successfully provide an “emancipatory model of dialogical interaction” because it does not encourage conversational exchange and interaction, nor produce a discourse between the viewer and artist.¹⁰⁹ Hence, Kester critiques contemporary artists who aim to control the spectator’s reception and understanding of the art object and who direct the collaborative process of production, and promotes dialogical artists who leave the meaning of the artwork open to the spectators and collaborators to determine and interpret.

Kester identifies Loraine Leeson’s *West Meets East* (1992) as exemplary in its use of a dialogical aesthetic. Produced in collaboration with a class of Bengali girls and their teachers from Bow in London, England, Leeson engaged them in extensive dialogue

¹⁰⁵ Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (University of California Press, 2004), 84.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 87-88, and *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context* (Duke University Press, 2011), 35.

¹⁰⁸ Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*, 88.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 89 for the quote, and Kester, *The One and the Many*, 8.

concerning their common experiences and cultural backgrounds.¹¹⁰ Through this dialogue, Leeson and the school class decided to produce an image that symbolized the girls' experience of living between Bengali and Western cultures. The subject matter of this image incorporates the hands of a young woman decorated with traditional Bengali patterns in the process of sewing a denim jacket to a sari.¹¹¹ For Kester, the significance of this work lies in the ability of the group to establish a collective identity through the collaborative production of the image.¹¹² He praises Leeson for assuming the role of a facilitator of "shared visions... as she was able to organize a process that gave form, complexity, and some measure of clarity to the cultural ruptures and differences that her collaborators were dealing with in their daily lives."¹¹³ Kester emphasizes that "the starting point for their work is a dialogue with the community within which the work will be produced... [and the] particular idea, object, image, or experience then emerges from this situated dialogue," and notes that Leeson publically exhibited the artwork on a billboard outside of the city of London in order to further stimulate discussion in the everyday lives of the community.¹¹⁴

In comparison, Muniz does not facilitate dialogical exchange to conceptualize the art object in his participatory practice. He assumes a dominant role by single-handedly choosing the referent, medium and the process of production, as his studio assistants arrange the objects under his direction in order to relay the intended message and meaning of the artwork. Whereas *West Meets East* was produced for communal

¹¹⁰ Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*, 22-23.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 24.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

consumption and placed in a public space, Muniz displays his work in art institutions and private galleries. In doing so, his artworks encourage a predetermined experience and response from the viewer in a similar fashion to the strategies of the avant-garde as identified by Kester. Whether composed of sugar, chocolate or garbage, Muniz's artwork persuades the viewer to investigate how the referent has been rendered rather than focusing on the subject matter.

Another comparison of a 2001 project by the Belgian artist Francis Alÿs, which is discussed at length by Kester, with Muniz's use of garbage in his art practice illuminates how Muniz's art practice effectively denies the opportunity for creative agency of his Brazilian collaborators. For the 2001 Lima Biennial in Peru, Alÿs organized a large-scale performance in Lima entitled *When Faith Moves Mountains* that was extensively documented through film and photography. Alÿs hired hundreds of local volunteers who were mostly students from a nearby university to engage in a fixed task: a strenuous and futile process of shoveling a sand dune. Kester critiques this work and Alÿs's strategy on several levels to demonstrate how Alÿs "preserve[d]... the crucial distinction between art and *mere activism*" (author's emphasis).¹¹⁵ First, Kester argues that the volunteers were "summoned by Alÿs not as collaborators... but as *bodies* to illustrate a 'social allegory' about the inevitable failure of Latin America to successfully modernize."¹¹⁶ Second, he critiques the site Alÿs selected for its close proximity to a large shantytown that houses tens of thousands of immigrants and political refugees. Kester argues that the

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 21.

¹¹⁶ Kester, "Lessons in Futility: Francis Alÿs & the Legacy of May '68," full text PDF, <http://www.grantkester.net/resources/Third+Text.pdf>, 16-17.

representation of the shantytown and its inhabitants in the background of Alÿs' film and documentary photographs strengthen Alÿs' social allegory of underdevelopment by functioning "as a kind of backdrop, an image of the political 'real' (the impoverished, marginal space left to the victims of development and modernization)."¹¹⁷ Thus Kester concludes that it is, "precisely in refusing to engage the residents, by excluding them from the labour of the performance, they are all the more easily reduced to a generic abstraction, whose mute presence lends the work its aura of political authenticity."¹¹⁸

Kester further criticizes Alÿs' belief that he must hire student volunteers to participate in the task in order to preserve the sanctity of the artistic gesture. For Kester, Alÿs' adamant preoccupation with his original artistic concept and the translation of his intended allegorical message in the exhibition denied the potential to foster a collaborative and creative space for dialogue with his student participants, or the inhabitants of the shantytown. By ignoring the voices of the actual "victims" of modernization and instead choosing to evoke them through the students' futile act of shoveling the sand, Alÿs advertently created a visual and physical border between "us" and "them."¹¹⁹

While Kester does not address Muniz's practice, his critique of Alÿs' project enables us to identify how Muniz privileges a directorial vision and a preoccupation with the finished art object by controlling the process of production. Although Alÿs used volunteers from a local university and Muniz marginalized groups to produce his

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 20.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 22.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 21.

Brazilian-based artworks, the framework of their collaborations is similar. When Muniz entered the *favelas* of São Paulo in search of the homeless children to become the subjects of *Aftermath*, the children still functioned as actors who performed under Muniz's instruction in order to replicate the artist's vision. In *Pictures of Garbage* Muniz traveled to the *Jardim Gramacho* landfill to select garbage pickers as his actors, whom he then directed to dress-up and pose in the manner of figurative motifs and specific artworks from the canon of Western art history. He also removed the *catadores* from their regular work environment at the landfill and paid them to work as his studio assistants to recreate their photographic portraits. Similarly, the students from the *Centro Espacial Vik Muniz* worked as studio assistants who followed Muniz's direction to physically produce *Pictures of Junk*. By enlisting the labor of his participants to physically construct the artworks, and not solely to contribute to the artwork's intended meaning, they become functional elements in Muniz's practice.

Although Muniz does support the communities of his collaborators after the process of production is finished through the sale of the series they helped produce, and provides educational courses for his student collaborators at the *Centro Espacial Vik Muniz*, he does not aim to change the consciousness of his participants through their participation in making the artwork. Thus according to Kester's criteria, Muniz's practice would not qualify as participatory. Rather, in Kester's understanding of what constitutes a dialogical art practice, Muniz is deploying avant-garde strategies that are no longer effective.

While a comparison of Muniz's practice with Leeson and Alÿs invalidates the social impact of his practice according to Kester's criteria for a dialogical aesthetic, another way to analyze the social relevance of Muniz's work is to draw upon the arguments of American art historian Hal Foster, who advocates for the contemporary political power of the postwar avant-garde. By reading Muniz's art practice through Foster's analysis of Warhol, there arises the potential to reevaluate the criticality of Muniz's practice. The foundation of Foster's argument relies upon his critique of Peter Bürger's argument in *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1974) that the neo-avant-garde artists of the 1950s and 1960s merely repeated the tenets of the historical avant-garde, by stating that this repetition "cancel[s] its critique of the institution of autonomous art," and further "turn[s] the anti-aesthetic into the artistic, the transgressive into the institutional."¹²⁰ Foster relies upon Lacan's assertion that "repetition is not reproduction" to revitalize the critical power of the avant-garde ethos.¹²¹ Foster employs Lacan and Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic models of deferred action to argue that the avant-garde is traumatic, or in other words, "*a hole in the symbolic order of its time that is not prepared for it*" (author's emphasis) that thus develops and only becomes fully registered in deferred action.¹²²

In the chapter "The Return of the Real," Foster positions Warhol as a neo-avant-garde artist who recalls the avant-garde legacy of surrealism through his production of the traumatic real. Foster locates Warhol's political engagement with the real through his repetition of shocking images coupled with the recurrence of unintended errors caused by

¹²⁰ Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*, 11.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 132.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 29.

the silk-screen process.¹²³ Foster argues that the *punctum* (the point of rupture where the gaze erupts, or Lacan's *tuché*) in Warhol is evoked "through the 'floating flashes' of the silk-screen process, the slipping and streaking, blanching and blanking, repeating and coloring of the images."¹²⁴ He argues that these flashes and pops, "such as a slipping of register or a washing in color, serve as visual equivalents of our missed encounters with the real" because they occur and recur "*as if by chance*" (author's emphasis).¹²⁵ The repetition of these technical accidents, Foster asserts, "*points* to the real, and at this point the real *ruptures* the screen of repetition. It is a rupture less in the world than in the subject—between the perception and the consciousness of a subject *touched* by an image" (author's emphasis).¹²⁶ The manifestation of the traumatic real is a political act because the real exists outside the symbolic order, and thus its rupture causes a concurrent collapse of the symbolic order in the spectator. This breakdown exposes the artifice of the symbolic order's authority and of all ideological structures that order the experience of reality to effectively release the spectator from its regulatory constraints.¹²⁷ Foster fundamentally locates the political in the aesthetic realm, as he argues that the combination Warhol's choice of shocking content, photographs of car crashes for example, and the repetition of technical errors enable the viewer to reach a new political consciousness through the experience of trauma. Thus in Warhol's neo-avant-garde

¹²³ Ibid., 136.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 134, and Foster, "Death in America," *October* vol. 75 (Winter, 1996): 43 for the quote.

¹²⁵ Foster, "Death in America," 43; the latter quote from Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans Alan Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978): 54.

¹²⁶ Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*, 132.

¹²⁷ Mark Bracher, "How Analysis Cures According to Lacan," in *The Subject of Lacan: a Lacanian reader for psychologists* ed. Karen Ror Malone (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2000): 163 and 201-202 respectively, and Todd McGowan, *The Real Gaze: Film Theory after Lacan* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2007), 16-17.

practice, the viewer functions as the locus of change through the shocking experience of the traumatic real.

While Foster validates Muniz's claim that criticality lies in the aesthetic realm and in viewer reception, Muniz does not similarly politicize this engagement through the traumatic real. Most obviously, Foster's analysis of Warhol seems appropriate to an understanding of Muniz's American-based practice because of his invocation of Warhol. In this context, although Muniz mimics the Warhol's silkscreen aesthetic in *After Warhol* and references works by Warhol that American art historian Thomas Crow argues constitutes Warhol's "political period" of the early 1960s, Muniz reduces the referential gravity and significance of Warhol's original artworks through the surface materiality of the work and choice of unusual materials.¹²⁸ The images neither appear to be mechanical reproductions because of the explicit appearance of the medium in Muniz's photographs, nor do they give the impression of unintended errors as these would impede the viewer's understanding of his hand-made process of production.

In terms of Muniz's art production in Brazil, Foster's analysis raises the question of whether Muniz's use of discarded objects effectively evokes the traumatic real through relay of his subjects' abject conditions to the viewer during his or her reception of the artwork. By recreating portraits of Brazil's marginalized who live and work in Brazil's *favelas* and the landfill of *Jardim Gramacho*, it would appear that Muniz is endeavoring to convey the abject reality of the homeless children in *Aftermath* and of the *catadores* in *Pictures of Garbage* by visually materializing their living conditions through the starkly

¹²⁸ Thomas Crow, "Saturday Disasters: Trace and Referent in Early Warhol" in *Andy Warhol*, ed. Annette Michelson (October Files, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001), 54-60.

rendered accumulation of detritus. However, these artworks fail to evoke the traumatic reality of Muniz's subjects' existence through production of the traumatic real because of Muniz's aesthetic preoccupation with his surface strategy. In the same fashion as his American-based series, the dominating aesthetic of garbage encourages a specific viewing experience in his Brazilian-based series. The unique choice and variety of material in *Aftermath* and *Pictures of Garbage* demands the viewer's attention and encourages his or her visual interrogation of Muniz's artworks in order to determine how they have been constructed. Thus, Muniz's claim for a critical ethics of engagement through the viewer's reception of the aesthetic qualities of his work does not function in *Aftermath* or *Pictures of Garbage* in the same manner as his American-based practice because his aesthetic treatment of his Brazilian subjects negates the reality of their social conditions, and further ethically implicates the viewer in this negation.

Pictures of Garbage raises the most pressing ethical questions because while Muniz claims that it is socially motivated, he reduces the referential and social gravity of his subjects' likenesses through his aesthetic treatment of their rendering and incorporation of art historical references. In doing so, Muniz distracts the viewer's initial interest in the subject, which is not an institutionalized and familiar image but a portrait of an individual, by directing the viewer's focus to a massive array of individual recyclable objects that construct the portrait, which counteracts the referential relationship or message between the material and subject matter. Muniz achieves this dis-identification through the additional layer of art historical content that serves to reduce the significance of the subject's rendering and neutralize the *catadores'* individual identity. This

additional content intentionally undermines the social impact of the work in order to thematically recall Muniz's superficial American-based practice and thus ensure its salability in the international market.

By reducing the social relevance and message of *Pictures of Garbage* to encourage the viewer's mere aesthetic consumption, Muniz also ethically implicates the viewer by preventing his or her critical engagement and inquiry in the issues of social inequality and underdevelopment in Brazil raised by the *catadores'* portraits. Muniz effectively anesthetizes the viewer's understanding of the *catadores'* miserable social conditions through their reception of the artworks. In doing so, the social relevance of Muniz's artwork lies not in aesthetic realm, where Foster locates it, nor in the process of production as Kester argues, but in his use of his garbage art as a commodity. It is the global circulation and consumption of Muniz's artworks that enable Muniz to affect his collaborators' lives through his organization of non-art interventions, rather than through the artistic process of production or through viewer reception.

Socially Engaged Merchandise (Conclusion)

I have demonstrated in this paper that the political dimension of Muniz's practice lies in his affirmation of the commodity structure of art that enables his collaborators to participate and benefit from the global market in a new way through the international circulation of his postmodern artworks. In doing so, this paper provides an evaluation of Muniz's practice that mines the complexities of politics in art in contemporary art

practice, and offers a new perspective on what constitutes socially engaged art production.

I firstly examined how Muniz has aligned his art practice to postmodern art discourse through his engagement with the work of Warhol, and how this positioning enabled him to build an international market for his artwork. I then explored the contradictory relationship between his American and Brazilian-based streams of art practice to determine that the latter conforms to his America-based surface aesthetics in order to ensure the salability of his Brazilian work on the market. By exploring Muniz's social commitment in Brazil through the development of his collaborative art practice and international corporate projects, I demonstrate that the political locus of his practice lies in the global traffic of his Brazilian art works. By considering Muniz's art practice within Kester's and Foster's frameworks, I illuminate how Muniz's politics lie outside the aesthetic and ideological realm, and instead promote social action through the collaborations and educational projects he fosters for his participants. He offers new opportunities for those who have few options to improve their social circumstances while his artistic and commercial projects with Brazil-based NGOs and international corporations ensure that there is consistent funding for the study of art for these communities.

Although Muniz undeniably provides his collaborators with new opportunities to potentially improve their social status and future social conditions by providing education specifically for vulnerable *favela* youth and financially supporting the *catadores*, Muniz's methods raise questions regarding the ethical implications of defining an art practice as

“socially engaged” that does not aim to change the participants’ lives through the actual process of art production. Muniz’s ethics of engagement became problematic when he claimed a social motivation behind *Pictures of Garbage* in 2010 with the release of *Waste Land* because it implicates Muniz’s continued preoccupation with his ethical commitment to the viewer in his Brazilian art practice, rather than developing an ethics of engagement with his collaborators. By privileging the international consumer over the lived experiences of his local collaborators, Muniz suggests that art has no social function in these marginalized communities other than through its distribution to the center, and the re-distribution of capital into these communities. In the end, it is not surprising that Muniz is largely regarded as an American artist and that his practice is positioned within American art discourse. While his very first series that addressed the lives of marginalized groups, *The Sugar Children*, promised the potential to develop an ethics of reception as well as production, Muniz has yet to realize this capacity in his Brazilian art practice. Beyond the claims he makes in *Waste Land* for the social relevance of *Pictures of Garbage*, there lies the reality that the *catadores* are still the impoverished workers of the periphery, whether as garbage pickers or studio assistants, and Muniz is very much an international art star at the center of a global art market who trades in commodities rather than in the ethics of social change.

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