



Waste Land Discussion Guide

Director: Lucy Walker
 Co-directors: Karen Harley, João Jardim
 Year: 2010
 Time: 99 min

You might know this director from:

The Crash Reel (2013)
 Countdown to Zero (2010)
 Blindsight (2006)
 Devil's Playground (2002)

FILM SUMMARY

Oscar-nominated WASTE LAND demonstrates how art can transform the artist, the subject, and its viewer. Shot over three years, the film follows celebrated Brooklyn-based artist, Vik Muniz, as he returns to his homeland of Brazil. Muniz is famous for using unusual materials in his art, and for his next project, he plans to use materials gathered from Rio de Janeiro's Jardim Gramacho, the world's largest landfill, to create portraits of the catadores. Catadores are those who make a living by picking recyclables from the garbage. Their work is back-breaking and dangerous. Suelem, who's been working as a picker since she was seven, is proud that she works at the landfill instead of in prostitution or the drug trade. Zumbi, a picker since the age of nine, collects discarded books and creates a community lending library in his shack. Most memorably perhaps is Tião, who after reading political and philosophical texts found in the landfill, encourages the pickers to organize a cooperative. As president of the Association for the Pickers of Jardim Gramacho, Tião fights to improve the quality of life for his co-workers.

As Muniz gets to know these compelling figures, his project evolves and he invites the catadores to collaborate with him. The resulting portraits are powerful and beautiful, created by the catadores with recyclable materials they glean from the refuse. What is discarded by others is recreated into art, and everyone involved becomes transformed as well, especially the catadores who begin to see themselves in a new light.

Thoroughly unique and emotionally riveting, WASTE LAND is ostensibly about an artist and his ambitious project, but the film explores so much more about perception, class, the environment, faith in oneself, and the purpose and undeniable power of art.

FILM THEMES

Vic Muniz wanted to create an art project with a conscience that could influence social change. He did not expect to change himself, but he did. Muniz reconnects with his Brazilian roots, even relocating to Brazil after the film ends.

TRANSFORMATION

Muniz says, “The moment when one thing turns into another is the most beautiful moment. A combination of sounds turns into music. And that applies to everything.” The film captures these moments. Discarded items are collected and sorted and then transformed into valuable materials that support lives and feed children. The assemblage of recyclable materials on the floor when seen from above becomes an exquisite portrait and a work of art. When the pickers pose as famous figures of classical paintings, they become echoes and participants of an artistic narrative. The re-interpreted artworks actively breathe new life and immediacy into the old paintings.

IDENTITY AND PERCEPTION

In the classist Brazilian society, catadores are seen from afar, de-individualized and sometimes dehumanized as poor scavengers. Muniz’s project seeks to highlight a picker’s individuality. More important than how the rest of Brazilian society views the pickers is how the catadores view themselves. On a talk show, Tião corrects the host, saying they are not pickers of garbage, but pickers of recyclable materials. This is an important distinction, because the catadores gather valuable materials and help to preserve the environment. For some of the catadores, their self-perception changed as they helped create art and saw themselves as beautiful, meaningful works of art. Realizing their self-worth allowed them to see the world in a new light and embrace “the will to change.”

ART AND SOCIETY

Muniz wanted to get away from the restricted and secluded world of fine art, whose extremely wealthy patrons often view art as a financial investment with elitist, societal value. In contrast, the catadores with whom Muniz collaborates have not been to a museum and never expected to see themselves hanging on gallery walls. The film challenges viewers to consider for whom art is created and how it can impact society. It’s also worth considering how art is appraised and valued. Is it the high auction price of Tião’s portrait that marks it a success?

ENVIRONMENT

Considering the work the pickers have done since Jardim Gramacho’s opening in 1970, the catadores have contributed enormously to extending the life of the landfill and helping Jardim Gramacho to have one of the highest recycling rates in the world. The film challenges viewers to consider where one’s trash “disappears” to, the consequences of landfills to our environment as contaminants seep into the soil and water, as well as the high cost of our rampant consumption.

“The really magical things are the ones that happen right in front of you. A lot of the time you keep looking for beauty, but it is already there.”

Vik Muniz

“I like to take people into places they can’t access on their own. If you can get inside worlds that are closed to people, it’s an opportunity to give audiences a window they can’t get anywhere else.”

Lucy Walker

FURTHER DISCUSSIONS:

1. Which of the catadores did you empathize with most and why?
2. What do you think Muniz was trying to achieve or say by having the catadores pose as famous figures of art?
3. Before viewing the film, how much did you believe in the ability of art to create social change? How has the film changed your understanding of art and its possible role in changing lives?
4. How did Muniz's art transform the pickers' self-perceptions? How about their life circumstances? Which is more important: material change in someone's life or change in perspective?
5. Is there a difference between fine art that is sold at auctions and displayed in museums and street art? What is public art and what does it contribute to society?
6. Is it necessary to understand art in order to appreciate it? What is the value of art education?
7. Vik Muniz and his wife argue about whether the project will hurt the catadores by taking them out of their environment, showing them another life, and expecting them to go back to their old lives. Whom do you agree with more? What are the ethical responsibilities of Muniz in this case?
8. What is the ethical responsibility of filmmakers who interfere with their subjects' lives, focus attention on them for a brief time, document their lives in film, and then leave?
9. Jardim Gramacho closed in 2012. What do you imagine are the biggest challenges for former catadores as they transition into other jobs? What kind of support do they need?
10. Ultimately, how did the project transform Muniz by the film's end? What statement does the filmmaker make by capturing Muniz in his study and kitchen in Brooklyn?

NOTES:

FILM FACTS:

- Jardim Gramacho, “Gramacho Gardens,” was established in 1970. A squatter community developed around it, becoming the favela of Jardim Gramacho. At the time of the film, this favela was home to over 20,000 people.
- At the time of the film, Jardim Gramacho received more trash every day than any other landfill in the world. 7,000 tons of garbage arrived daily. 70% of the trash produced by Rio de Janeiro and surrounding areas went there.
- At the time of the film, an estimated 3,000–5,000 people lived in the landfill. Around 15,000 people supported themselves with work related to the landfill and its recyclable materials. Some of the pickers Muniz met were third-generation catadores of Jardim Gramacho.
- The work of the catadores was often dangerous. They were victims of dengue fever, respiratory ailments, and infections. They received no benefits, and medical waste from all the hospitals in the area were discarded at the landfill, which was unstable and filled with glass. Before filming, the director got so many vaccinations she could barely move her arm.
- Over a decade ago, it was discovered that Guanabara Bay was not safe because of contaminants leaching from the landfill. The city announced the landfill’s closing many times, but did not do so until 2012.
- When the film was nominated for an Oscar, Tião attended the Academy Awards as director Lucy Walker’s date.
- With Tião’s leadership, ACAMJG has created a “decentralized system of recycling collection in neighboring municipalities; the creation of a recycling center, professional recognition of the catador, enabling catadores to be contracted for their services, the creation of a 24 hour medical clinic, and the construction of a daycare center and skills training center. In addition to their community initiatives, ACAMJG leads a national movement for greater professional recognition for the catador and support from the federal government and has teamed up with other movements across South America to hold the first international conference of catadores in São Paulo in November 2009.”
- Engineers have drilled a network of 300 wells in Jardim Gramacho to extract methane generated by the trash. Over the next 15 years, about 75 million cubic meters of methane gas will be collected. The plan is that after 15 years, the landfill will be transformed into a park.
- Part of the profit from sales of the methane will be used to rehabilitate the drug-infested favelas around the landfill. Rio de Janeiro Mayor Eduardo Paes considers the closing of Jardim Gramacho as an end to “the crime that Rio has committed for the last 40 years.”

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. Share this film, so others can also learn about the transformative power of art.
2. Visit the official WASTE LAND website to learn more about the catadores and how you can support their transition into more qualified jobs within the new recycling plants. Donations go towards education.
3. Seek to reduce your garbage output. Consider what you can reuse or recycle. Try composting at home.
4. Visit an art museum and try looking at art the way Muniz describes: leaning forward to examine the materials used, then leaning back to take in the image as a whole. Share your experiences with others and discuss how perception can change depending on context and viewpoint.