

NOV 30 2012

HONG KONG

INTERVIEW WITH VIK MUNIZ

BY NOELLE BODICK



Vik Muniz sitting in front of his work *Green Monkey, after George Stubbs (2011)* at Ben Brown, Hong Kong, 2012. Photo by Ann Woo for ArtAsiaPacific.

In a short story, Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges describes a point in space that contains all other points. He calls it—and the short story—the Aleph: “the only place on earth where all places are—seen from every angle, each standing clear, without any confusion or blending.” Before unfolding an account of the endless objects and acts contained by the Aleph, the narrator pauses, lamenting the task of translating “into words the limitless Aleph, which my floundering mind can scarcely encompass.”

In describing Vik Muniz’s 15 photographs from the series “Pictures of Magazines 2,” (2011-12) currently showing at Ben Brown Fine Arts in Hong Kong, a writer encounters the same semantic problem. How do you describe with successive language a seemingly endless number of things both simultaneous and distinct, held within a frame?

Muniz’s series reconstructs iconic paintings by Manet, Caravaggio and Carracci, among others, using thousands of magazine cutouts. The extended arm of the *Green Monkey, after George Stubbs (2011)* is depicted with images of a thick, blonde braid, an ape from *Planet of the Apes* and a gear from a yellow tractor. A pair of walkway model’s legs, an orange juice bottle, Mr. Fruit Punch and a proliferation of linguini

grow from a nondescript patch of ground in *Picking Flowers in a Field, after Mary Cassatt* (2012). Enumerating these cutouts—it should be said—make Muniz's works sound manageable to encounter. They aren't. The collages, which Muniz has photographed and enlarged, allow the gaze no rest. The eye flicks frantically from one point to the next, making a rapid series of associations.

Last week, Muniz, a Brazilian artist who is famous for exploiting unexpected materials, visited Hong Kong for the opening of his exhibition. He spoke with *ArtAsiaPacific* about his essential pragmatism and what it means to show iconic Western images in the East. He defended the sheer power of representation unburdened by meaning or language with a marked articulateness.

On November 19, the gallery showed the documentary *Waste Land* (2010) that follows your collaboration with the garbage pickers of Jardim Gramacho, a 321-acre open-air landfill bordering Rio de Janeiro. In the opening scene, you tell the camera, "I'm at this point in my career where I'm trying to step away from the realm of fine arts because I think it's a very exclusive, very restrictive place to be." What are we doing, almost five years after the making of the film, talking in a fine art gallery?

[In the film.] I was expanding into places where I could meet the public in a way that was more coherent with the meaning of art that we have today. The galleries and the museums offer the ultimate way for you to experience art as an object, the way it should be experienced. But maybe an artist should also take into account that art has a particle and wave effect. Art can bring people to have a physical experience, but it can also be sent out—it can be diffused and get more people involved.

Also, you know, in the last five years, I've become involved in a process of self-analyzing by doing catalogues for two enormous retrospectives. And in this process you start—and it's good and it's bad—rationalizing what you do, and I normally don't do that. You start asking questions not about *how* to do things, but *why* to do things. And ultimately, the idea of what it is that you are working for comes and then the question "what is art" comes.

Would you rather not ask that question?

No, sometimes you would rather not touch the subject because it keeps you from doing it.

After the screening of the film on Monday, you said that you aren't interested in being an artist like Alfredo Jaar—you don't want to create art that is *thinking* about politics or art that is *thinking* about social problems.

It is part of the malaise of creating or making art . . . that you have to fill a dialogical gap with a lot of little terms and "-isms." All the philosophical movements that come after the Second World War try to define and come up with words and think about thinking in a very ominous way. I really don't relate to that at all.

Is your distaste for theory informed by the history of art in Brazil? The legacy of Lygia Clark, Hélio Oiticica and Brazilian participatory art?

No, that work did not influence me at all. When I left Brazil, I could not deal with abstract art in any sense. I am not interested in hermeneutics—I don't think art is about closure or interpretation. Art is about transcending the prison house of language. Art is about perhaps receding into the pre-linguistic, into a world where you are not limited by attention or by the compartmentalization of meaning. You can have access to a sense or sensation that is immediate for you. Perhaps momentarily, you have a glimpse of what reality really feels like. Because what we live is not reality. [What we live] is fragmented; it's biased; it's subjective; it's edited; it's processed in different ways. Reality is everything at once all the time. It would be unbearable. It would be like the Aleph that Borges mentions. [It would be like] a sort of autistic state.

Looking at your current work, one might be reminded of Borges's Aleph. In *Summer in the City, after Edward Hopper* (2011) the woman's knee is made of an image of Kate Moss's face, a pink petunia, imagery of a cell, a mint candy lozenge. The yellow carpet is composed of a series of smiling blondes, a dainty teacup, macarons and light bulbs.

Yes, I think it's our tendency and desire to go back to this state. I have an eight-month-old daughter and her sense of reality is much clearer than mine because she sees everything at once. She is not limited by attention. She just sees the confusion. She devours meaning—she is not making sense. She just grabs. But what we experience is like gold prospecting in a river. You just get little bits here and there and you try to make something out of it. But she gets everything at once, and I sense that we long to return to that state. It is a state that obviously would not allow us to communicate.

Right, we would not be having this conversation.

No, we could not hold this conversation. But our tendency and desire is to go back to it. And that is what our media environment moves [us] towards, too—a sense of everything. But we forget that when we see through everything, we are just as blind as when we see through nothing. And yet, we long for a moment when we can see through everything.

After creating these works, do you see the original painting you have reconstructed differently?

Yes, by sheer, full interaction. You play with it, so know every single piece of the painting by observing it very carefully. Any time I work with anything, it gives me the chance to understand it better—to figure out the process, what was done first and then later.

And why do you choose these iconic works?

What interests me is figuring out how the historical iconography relates to our days. This is the most important thing. How is this painting, painted in the 19th century, relevant to today? In which ways is it relevant? Why do I still like this picture? When I pick a painting, I am never trying to appropriate its meaning. I am always trying to harp back to where it started and to retrace the way it was done. I am showing how [the painting] can be made by adapting visual rituals.

I am doing the exact same thing that Cézanne did when he went into the woods with an easel to paint Mont Sainte-Victoire. If you were to

look at Mont Sainte-Victoire, you would see that it doesn't look anything like what he painted. Cézanne painted the way a modern man of his time would see—with the freedom that was entitled to him to see what he wanted to see. [. . .] In my case, you could imagine that I am still an easel painter, but that the landscape has changed. It used to just be the mountain that signified a mountain with perhaps different hues and colors. Perhaps 500 years ago, a picture of a mountain maybe only meant a mountain. But today, every picture of a mountain means many other mountains—perhaps a mountain that you read about in a book. No single picture exists by itself, but through a web of millions of references that amount to that particular image. And every time you think of an image you think not only of the million images that look like that, but also of the many times you thought of that image before, the situations in which you were involved in looking at those images.

How do these images engage a Hong Kong audience? They are of course iconic in the West. But what does it mean to show them in Asia?

Oh, it is a test. The making of this [pointing to a photograph] is empirical. Every time you put on a piece of paper, you try several times so you get each one. The same way goes with shows. You just do things because you want to see them done. And the main reason you do an exhibition is because you have not done it yet. And then you do it twice, if it was nice. [. . .] My first impression of Hong Kong is that it is halfway in-between. I tend to like cities like Venice and Berlin or Istanbul because they mark frontier sensibilities between West and East. And I realize in the Far East, you have a place with [this] same spirit. I leave Hong Kong very confused by its complexity. I gather from many of the people who live here that they are excited by this confusion. It is something that motivates them to be here. You have all these weird encounters all the time. And well, this is one weird encounter, and I'm enjoying it.

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