

Essay - Modern and Contemporary Art

This essay investigates Vincent Van Gogh's painting, *Vase with Sunflowers*, 1889 (see fig.1). I am interested in how it has been glorified and immortalised through kitsch mass production. I believe the consumeristic side of the reproductions of the painting can lead to harmful side effects on the environment, in which the waste also happens to be 'immortalised,' but in a different way. I attempt to relate it to relevant concepts such as the consumeristic fashion field and a series of photographs called *Waste Land* by artist Vik Muniz. By looking deeper into the kitsch side of the painting of *Sunflowers*, I hope to gain a deeper understanding of how the function of the throw-away culture plays in our lives, and to gain a better awareness of the environmental conditions we live in today.



Figure 1. Vincent van Gogh, *Vase with Sunflowers*, 1889

I was barely ten when I first saw Vincent Van Gogh's *Sunflowers* in Amsterdam, and the most I remember was the motion of the fervent crowd elbowing its way past the gallery corridors, eager to see the painting. Being of less-than-average height I must have only caught a few glimpses of the famous work, and my only memory is contemplating on how small the painting was in reality. Based on the glorifications and the extolled renditions I had seen of it through countless brochures, advertisements and reproductions, I was expecting to see a great yellow image that stretched from floor to ceiling, consisting of a godlike presence to some extent. I was prepared to be bedazzled by physically seeing what I had created in my mind with my strong insistent vision of a gullible ten year old .

Inevitably I was disappointed, and the blame partly goes to a reproduction of it that had been installed outside by the entrance, closer to the scale of my imagination and more intimate to the fantasising of the painting by the outside world.



Figure 2. Vincent Van Gogh Museum, Photograph of myself by the large-scale copy of the *Vase with Sunflowers*. 2009 (photograph by Parag Bhatt)

I inspected the work again at the motel on the '*Sunflowers*' postcards that my parents had purchased at the gallery shop. I remember asking who were we sending them to, but they said we were to keep them as souvenirs or mementos.

I feel Van Gogh's paintings of the *Sunflowers* themselves were a kind of memento in a way, to decorate his interiors and to "brighten up the whitewashed walls of his house."¹ Van Gogh painted one of his *Sunflower* paintings in order to pay homage to The Post-Impressionist French artist Paul Gauguin, who stayed with Van Gogh for some time. "Years later, in the South Pacific, Gauguin himself painted some sunflower pictures in apparent homage to his erstwhile housemate."²

Interestingly, that makes me think of the postcards we bought, how they are intended for swapping or sending to your friends or family as an update on where you are, or perhaps to send your wishes. But instead many times we keep them as a homage or something to remember or recall, appealing to our sentimentalities and emotional attachments to the objects.

¹Alastair Sooke, *Van Gogh's Sunflowers; The Unknown History*, 21 January 2014.

² Ibid

However, Celeste Olalquiaga argues in her book, *The Artificial Kingdom*, that "Like fallen angels, objects ruin their auras upon descent, arriving with little more than a crumbling, dusty shadow of their once iridescent haloes. Deprived of supernatural immunity, the shaken down aura falls prey to all vicissitudes of earth bound things: it can be touched, traded, copied and tampered with; it is but a fragment of its former existence. It is kitsch."³ In my opinion objects seem to gradually lose their authenticity once it becomes a reproduced item, becoming a 'kitsch' object, an overly sentimentalised item that has little to do with the context of the original, but often appealing to the majority.⁴

As Olalquiaga expressed her thoughts on how objects crumble in their deterioration, I think that point can relate to kitsch mass reproduction. Behind all the glorification and sentimentality exchange taking place over paintings like the *Sunflowers* and countless others lies a dystopia, a dark, disastrous and grisly world of unnoticed plastic waste, landfills, pollution of oceans, rivers and wildlife. Waste from wrappings, bags and redundant kitsch create waste that contributes to the environmental spoliation.⁵

³ Celeste Olalquiaga, *The Artificial Kingdom: On The Kitsch Experience*. (New York, Pantheon Books, 1999.) p 95

⁴ Henry Symonds. *Kitsch and Camp*, Lecture. Whitecliffe College of Arts and Design, Auckland. 8/05/18

⁵ Julia Teale, *Utopia Dystopia*, Lecture. Whitecliffe College of Arts and Design, Auckland. 22/05/18

Olalquiaga states, "Kitsch is an object whose decayed state exposes and deflects its utopian possibilities, a remnant constantly reliving its own death, a ruin." Interestingly, Olalquiaga claims the item is *already* 'decayed,' even though she is not talking about literally decayed items. She indicates that kitsch is 'decayed' from the moment it is born, and is not absorbing any 'utopian possibilities' —perhaps referencing things that can be more compassionate to the Earth and the environment — because it is part of a dystopic culture. Olalquiaga also declares that objects that are kitsch could be thought of as 'failed commodities'.⁶ I believe the sentence on how kitsch can be a 'failed commodity' makes a statement about the commodity item being something we may wish for but it has 'failed' to live up to our hopes and expectations. We then decide it is no longer needed and becomes the 'debris' we discard.

In Walter Benjamin's essay of '*The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*,' he talks about reproductions as means of bringing an item closer to you, to satisfy your longing and desire for that item by "accepting its reproduction."⁷ For instance if we take the postcards of the *Sunflower* painting, we buy them as a keepsake and perhaps as a remedy to fulfil our hunger to possess a part of the artwork. I think Benjamin is referring to what we think are our emotional needs to buy and spend, to shop as a way of giving us an emotional lift. However, from my experience the buying of kitsch objects could also be the desire to be 'fashionable' or to follow a current trend,

⁶ Olalquiaga, *The artificial kingdom*. p291

⁷ Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. Edited by Hannah Ardent, (New York, Schocken Books, 1969). p 05

in which I believe there is more loss than gain. As the trend declines, a new one emerges and the now futile items that were brought becomes the excess of the past. It relates to the idea of commodity fetishism, and as Olalquiaga claims, "this is why kitsch may have seen as the debris of an aura; an irregular trail of glittering fairy dust whose imminent evanescence makes it extremely tantalising."⁸ I think she is also referencing environmental factors, the 'aura' possibly being nature, (animals, humans) and the 'debris' alluding to our waste from 'trending' commodities and our indulgence in kitsch objects. May I point out here that I am not attempting to say that kitsch objects *themselves* are bad, but rather what our unawareness of the indulgence of the objects bring to the pollution of the environment, and how that can be a factor that will affect the way we live on this planet.

These ideas of the commodity fetish, trends, a desire to buy and having things that are in 'excess to what you need' relates to the fashion element directly, based on a paragraph from an article in *Fashion Theory, A Reader*, "Dress is the best example of conspicuous consumption and conspicuous waste [in Veblen's account] because what we wear is 'always in evidence and affords an indication of our pecuniary standing to all observers at the first glance'. Dress is the clearest way of demonstrating that the wearer can consume 'valuable goods in excess to what is required for physical comfort'. But is also a way of demonstrating that not only one can consume freely and

⁸ Olalquiaga, *The artificial kingdom*. p291

wastefully but one need not work at all —that one is not oneself productive."⁹ In my opinion the above quotation speaks about how we, as consumers of products unashamedly live on what is produced by companies using unsustainable resources. We buy clothes made from quick production methods and cheap materials such as polyester (which is derived from plastic) to fulfil our desire to dress ourselves to the latest trend.¹⁰

In my understanding, we do not get a first-hand experience of the production of the item and therefore do not think of the procedure. As pointed out in the quote above, we may dress to make an impression on society of our status and consider that notion as an achievement without regarding the environment, due to our lack of awareness on current environmental issues.

"The global fashion market is facing a major environmental crisis. Today's linear economic model of take, make and dispose is reaching its physical limits as the earth's natural resources are increasingly under pressure" states Anika Kozlowski, Lecturer of School of Fashion in Ryerson University, Canada.¹¹ I believe this consumerist approach fuels our desire to buy, but as fashion is one of the top polluting industries, items sooner or later navigate their way into rubbish dumps, rivers and seas.

⁹ Malcolm Barnard, *Fashion Theory, A Reader*. (London and New York, Routledge,) 2007.

¹⁰CitySmart. *The unsustainable impacts of fast fashion*. April 3, 2017

¹¹ Anika Kozlowski, *Fashion designers respond to environmental crisis*. July 4, 2017

However, on the opposite scale to this world of a plentiful and sickeningly sweet 'utopia' is, as I mentioned previously, a ghastly 'dystopia'. In a way, that references the *Sunflower* painting once again in terms of paintings being some kind of utopic therapy to Van Gogh, who is famously known for being mentally unstable and in a dystopic condition. In Julia Teale's lecture on *Utopia Dystopia*, she stated that buried underneath every utopia is a dystopic realm. Regardless of however much we are familiar with this truth we choose to ignore the fact that the commodities we consume begin and end in a dystopic world, while we strive to construct our own small realm of a utopia.¹²



Figure 3. Rodarte. Unnamed fashion collection for Spring/Summer 2012 collection, Vincent Van Gogh *Sunflowers* theme. 2012. Location unknown. Courtesy of vogue.co.uk.

¹²Julia Teale. *Utopia Dystopia*, Lecture

This 'dystopia' I am now putting forward to present alongside this utopic state is a section from a photographic series by Brazilian artist Vic Muniz.



Figure 4. Vik Muniz, *Marat (Sebastiao) –Pictures of Garbage*. 2008



Figure 5. Vik Muniz, *Atlas (Carlão)–Pictures of Garbage*. 2008

Figures 4 and 5 are photographs of *catadores*, or workers who earn their living at a recycling site called Jardim Gramacho, located in the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro. It is the world's largest rubbish tip, with 7,000 tons of waste arriving every day, making up 70% of the rubbish disposed by Rio de Janeiro and neighbouring districts (see figure.6). Around 3,000 *catadores* pull out 200 tons of recyclable material daily. The community there, made up of more than 13,000 people is "entirely dependent on an economy that revolves around the trade of recyclable materials."¹³ “These people

¹³ *WASTE LAND*. (<http://www.wastelandmovie.com/index.html>)



Figure 6. Jardim Gramacho landscape with vultures. 2008. Photograph by Vik Muniz. Courtesy of Vik Muniz Studio.

are at the other end of consumer culture,” says Muniz.¹⁴ In my opinion the communities' lives are the underlying dystopia from which the sickening consumeristic utopia including the idea of commodity fetishism and the hoarding of kitsch objects sits upon.

As I observed from the documentary of these events (*Waste Land*, directed by Lucy Walker), Muniz travelled from his base in Brooklyn to Jardim Gramacho in order to make an art project about this community. He spent his time there observing, documenting, communicating and developing a relationship with the *catadores*. After describing his intentions, he proceeded to construct portraits from materials collected from the recycling site, along with help from a few *catadores* whom he had chosen to photograph. They were taken with the workers mimicking a certain position,

¹⁴ Paul Moakley, *Portraits with Purpose: Vik Muniz in Waste Land*, 22/03/ 2011. time.com

referencing famous western artworks such as *The Death of Marat* by Jacques-Louis David and Pablo Picasso's *Woman Ironing*. I think he may be attempting to place the workers in the history of art, making them into something that is of a lesser known feature as the *catadores* are into a famous context. It is a way of bringing hope, inspiration and pride into their commitment to making a better future for humankind. It raises awareness of their labour around the world and also perhaps pays a 'homage' to them, relating to how the *Sunflowers* painting was a homage.¹⁵

While watching the documentary the most heartwarming part for me is how Muniz interacts with the people in a way that it doesn't come to view as if he is the authority figure, (as I discussed previously with the fashion aspect, about how we dress to show our authority to society). It did not seem like he was 'helping' the community in a way that they feel in debt to him. The portraits were assembled by both him and the workers, so that the artwork became a collective intervention, constructed with the efforts of the community as well as the artist.

I believe the photographs can raise consciousness of the pollution, rubbish dumping and the destructive western consumer culture, but even so, how can it make a change in our life as consumers of these products? The catadore organisation at Jardim Gramacho was formed because a minority of the community were seriously concerned about the pollution of their area and were

¹⁵Alastair Sooke, *Van Gogh's Sunflowers; The unknown history*

distressed about the living conditions for the next generation. An increasing amount of people began to work there as the only means to earn a living. Many would work overnight as well as throughout the day.¹⁶ The *catadores* have been prolonging the life of the tip site by recycling items that otherwise would be embedded into the landfill permanently.¹⁷

The photographs of '*Portraits Made from Rubbish*' were exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art, Rio De Janeiro in 2009. When auctioned in London, hundred percent of the money gained went towards the community at Jardim Gramacho, to assist with the constructing of an education centre and to help bring an end to the dumping at the rubbish site. ¹⁸

I believe that by unpacking a subject such as the *Sunflowers* painting, we can look into the deeper extending layers of it and move nearer to the dystopic reality of commodity fetishism, metaphorically our 'evil shadow' that accompanies us everywhere and every time we indulge in commodities and kitsch objects. By exploring these three stages of the creation (*Sunflowers*), degradation (commodity fetishism and fashion) and recycling of commodities (*Pictures of Garbage*), we can discover how art forms a cycle of these processes, from the mass reproductions of *Sunflowers* postcards and kitsch items to the excess buying of unsustainable fashion clothing, and

¹⁶ Vik Muniz, *WASTE LAND*, DVD. Directed by Walker, Lucy. 2010

¹⁷ *WASTE LAND*. (<http://www.wastelandmovie.com/index.html>)

¹⁸ Vik Muniz, *WASTE LAND*, DVD. Directed by Walker, Lucy. 2010

then to the final, a Jardim Gramacho type dystopic condition. However, while most tip sites are not recycling stations, neither was Jardim Gramacho until a small number of the community began with an aim to provide a healthy environment for the next generation, and were willing to directly step in and commit themselves to the worst conditions in order to fulfil their vision.¹⁹

As Van Gogh himself quoted, "*Great things are done by a series of small things brought together.*"²⁰ I think that the *catadores* have set a living example for us, proving it possible to achieve anything you want, if we are intent on it and are willing to sacrifice our desire and attachments to make a beneficial impact on this planet. Redundant kitsch mass production and unsustainable fashion are overflowing in oceans and tip sites, and hidden behind famous artworks such as the *Sunflowers* painting is a dystopia of uncontrolled consumerism, in a world where the utopia of obtaining and possessing commodities governs the dystopic world of waste, pollution and degradation of nature. I believe if we care about the future and the earth, we should consist of having an activist attitude such as the *catadores* did, and commit a positive, assisting hand towards relieving nature from its human-given dystopia.

*"What would life be if we had no courage to attempt anything?"*²¹

—*Vincent Van Gogh*

¹⁹ Vik Muniz, *WASTE LAND*, DVD. Directed by Walker, Lucy. 2010

²⁰ *Vincent Van Gogh Quotes* - Goodreads

²¹ *ibid*

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Illustrations

1. Vincent van Gogh, *Vase with Sunflowers*, Arles, January 1889. Oil on canvas, 95 cm x 73 cm, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation), accessed 14/ 06/18
2. Gitanjali Bhatt, 2009, myself and a blown up reproduction of *Vase with Sunflowers*, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.
3. Rodarte's S/S12 catwalk show, Unnamed fashion collection for Spring/Summer 2012 collection, Vincent Van Gogh *Sunflowers* theme, 2012, Location unknown, [Images collaged and taken from Vogue.co.uk. Courtesy of vogue.co.uk], accessed 14/ 06/18, (<http://soulisrainingclothes.blogspot.com/2012/03/fashion-raindrops-happy-birthday-van.html>)
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6. *Sepia Jardim Gramacho landscape with vultures*, 2008, photograph by Vik Muniz, courtesy of Vik Muniz Studio, accessed 14/ 06/18, (<http://scalar.usc.edu/works/whats-in-a-name/media/jardim-gramacho-dump>)