Bulletin of Latin American Research
JOURNAL of the SOCIETY for LATIN AMERICAN STUDIES

Bulletin of Latin American Research, Vol. 41, No. 3, pp. 359–372, 2022

Decolonising Responses to 'Engaged Art': Disposability and Neoimperialism in Art, Activism and Academia

GIULIA CHAMPION
University of Warwick, UK

JESSICA WAX-EDWARDS
Royal Holloway University of London, UK

This article examines the limits of 'engaged art' via two case studies: Vik Muniz's photoseries *Pictures of Garbage* (2008, Brazil) and Alejandro Cartagena's photoseries *Carpoolers* (2011–2012, Mexico). Both highlight an ongoing need to decolonise the process of narrative creation and the scholarship/viewership that responds to this form of art. By exploring the different issues that arise when considering 'engaged art' alongside the urgent need to decolonise scholarly approaches to such works, the authors consider the literal and metaphorical toxicity of neoliberal societies, and the academic and media discourses analysing art produced in this context.

Keywords: artivism, Brazil, capitalism, decolonising, Mexico, waste.

In their 2012 seminal article entitled 'Decolonization is Not a Metaphor', Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang argue that their use of the term 'decolonisation' is literal and not offered as 'an approximation of other experiences of oppression' (Tuck and Yang 2012: 3). Their matter-of-fact introduction and subsequent approach to the subject of decolonisation challenges pervading themes in contemporary scholarship where the term functions not as a direct reference to the ongoing and urgent need to withdraw the persisting colonial presence from Indigenous life, space and culture and to patriate independence, but as a 'swappable term' (Tuck and Yang 2012: 3), 'a synonym' (Tuck and Yang 2012: 3) and as a 'metonym for social justice' (Tuck and Yang 2012: 21). Instead, throughout their article, Tuck and Yang discuss the importance of concrete actions relating to decolonisation, especially in the context of education.

This article adopts a similar approach when considering what is here called 'engaged art'. Such art typically seeks to fight for certain communities, creating a space – whether this be visual, textual or otherwise – for these communities to be heard. This space

is generally created in the public and/or academic spheres – which it would be more constructive not to perceive as a dichotomy, but rather as interrelated spaces – however, as we will show, in some cases a slippage occurs in the creation of this space and the engaged art runs the risk of speaking on behalf of these communities rather than letting them speak in this new space. Similarly, commercial and/or academic approaches to these pieces have the potential to erase or fetishise these communities. These are the two layers which need to be decolonised in Tuck and Yang's terms to ensure that engaged art, and its analysis, are not co-opted and do not obfuscate the reality of the communities it wishes to make heard and for whom it fights. For this reason, here the term 'engaged art' is preferred to other currently widespread terms such as 'visual activism' or 'artivism' (Demos 2015; Nossel 2016). Though both case studies investigated here offer a space in which marginalised groups are re-centred in visual and written discourse, hoping to invite the wider public and institutions to acknowledge these communities' respective situations and prompt change, the distance between the artists and the communities they depict runs the risk of objectifying the latter. Unlike artivism, where the artist and artwork usually comprise part of a larger group united through the act of political activism, engaged art, through its adoption of social issues as its narrative, threatens to supplant the voices of the communities it wishes to capture. Harnessing their privilege, the artists allow an essential and valuable refocusing on marginalised communities via the decision to centre their work on these subjects. However, this same privilege often locates their perspective as representative of the voices they intend to share. This privilege, a form of colonial gaze, also extends to academic approaches to and cultural reception of these works.

The aim of this article is to offer a study of engaged art via two exemplary photoseries, one from Brazil and one from Mexico, to demonstrate the potential and limits of this type of work. Both works are considered engaged art since they foster greater attention from their own countries' public and institutions, as well as those of other nations, to overlooked and ostensibly disposable communities. The first, Vik Muniz's photoseries *Pictures of Garbage* (2008, Brazil) addresses the impact of landfills on the catadores (pickers of recyclable materials) and through collaboration with them, represents a type of engaged art which is co-produced. The second, Alejandro Cartagena's photoseries *Carpoolers* (2011–2012, Mexico) captures the commute of day labourers, and though it highlights the effects of poor infrastructure, the photographer's distanced approach (non-consensual photographing subjects from an overpass) embodies the notions of separation and privilege that can characterise and attenuate this form of art. As well as considering how the photoseries are produced and to what degree the communities captured participate in this production, this article also considers the reception of engaged art. Discussions of both case studies focus on decolonising these responses, which comprise scholarly criticism in the case of Muniz's work and public response in relation to Cartagena's series.

In order to achieve this, this article also engages with waste and toxicity, not merely as metaphors and imagery, but as tangible consequences of our current economic system, considering how both are a daily reality for the marginalised, ostracised and pauperised communities globally. In order to de-objectify these groups and re-centre them as subject, this article challenges how waste matter(s) and how the conceptualisation of 'wasted lives' need re-articulating. This is achieved by reconsidering, first, the relationship between the artists and their subjects and, second, between academia, audience and these engaged artists as well as their subjects.

Vik Muniz's Photoseries: *Pictures of Garbage* (2008, Brazil)

Brazilian artist and photographer Vik Muniz was born in São Paulo in 1961 and achieved global fame in the 1990s after moving to the United States. He is known for his post-modern art and use of foodstuffs, mundane objects and rubbish in his work (Santos and Fux 2011: 132). In 2006 he exhibited a series entitled Pieces of Junk (Imagens de Sucata), co-produced with students of his art studio in Rio de Janeiro. Under Muniz's directive, the art studio, Centro Espacial Vik Muniz, works with youth from nearby favelas (Schmidt 2017: 21). Over a month and a half, each picture was put together by assembling garbage to outline and thus recreate 'canonical' paintings (Rena Bransten Gallery 2006; Sanfelice 2011).

Muniz's process centres on two core issues addressed through this and later series': he is interested in making 'populist art' and avoids 'taking things for granted' in the art world. In the first instance, he produces artworks anybody can access, using his platform to create art engaged with social issues. In the second, Muniz is concerned with form. By using different forms, he hopes to guide the viewer's gaze to unusual elements. For example, by using molasses rather than pen to draw someone's portrait, Muniz aims to destabilise the viewer's focus on the drawing's likeness and instead draw attention to the materials of production. This destabilising encourages the viewer to consider the function of an artwork instead of simply its subject matter (Rena Bransten Gallery 2006). In this context, the use of rubbish in particular plays a crucial role in both his 2006 series and the subsequent one of 2008 examined here. This section focuses on Muniz's use of form and content in the later series *Pictures of Garbage* (Imagens de Lixo, 2008, Brazil), and academic responses to this engaged art. Indeed, by contrasting the series' framing in Lucy Walker's documentary *Waste Land* (2011) alongside academic responses to both series and documentary, this section aims to propose a decolonised approach to Muniz's work, one that considers the impact of the artist and questions the academic discourse that requires from the artist more than he can do.

Re-Centering the Periphery: The Landfill of Jardim Gramacho

Muniz decided to expand the 2006 series significantly by visiting Jardim Gramacho in Rio – one of the largest landfills in the world located, before its closure in June 2012, at the periphery of the city – resulting in his 2008 photoseries Pieces of Garbage. In its early stages, the project was intended as an investigation of the landfill by Muniz. He wished to understand the work being done there and see whether art could engage with a space that had a crucial socio-ecological role in the capital. However, after spending time there and interacting with the catadores, the nature of his project changed. Instead, the photo-series focuses on seven catadores – Sebastião Carlos Dos Santos (Tião), Jose Carlos Da Silva Bala Lopes (Zumbi), Suelem Pereira Dias, Isis Rodrigues Garros, Leide Laurentina Da Silva (Irma), Valter Dos Santos and Magna de França Santos –, and as with the 2006 photoseries, it was developed through co-production (Sanfelice 2011). Muniz photographed each of the catadores as they posed in imitation of a famous artwork, either in the landfill or in his studio, and with their help recreated these images at a larger scale with recyclable materials from the Jardim Gramacho (Kantaris 2016: 54–55). The catadores were employed and remunerated for their work. Likewise, a percentage of the profits generated from the sale of the artworks was donated to the catadores and the Associação dos Catadores do Aterro Metropolitano de Jardim Gramacho (ACAMJG, Association of Recycling Pickers of Jardim Gramacho) (Möller 2013:

43). This association is led by catador Tião dos Santos to improve the lives of the catadores as well as their working conditions and permit the association to expand its recycling work in Rio. As the sole association providing such a service to the city at the time, its expansion was crucial.

The work undertaken by Muniz and the catadores was visually documented by British filmmaker Lucy Walker in her film *Waste Land* (2011). Walker's documentary provides an interesting contrast to the academic scholarship produced in response to Muniz's project. While the former depicts Pieces of Garbage and the process of its creation in an idyllic way (Kendall 2012: 53), the latter has been more critical of both Muniz's and the documentary's underlying ethos. Academic reception of the photoseries focused on what was considered to be a problematic erasure of issues of race and colonisation as well as the dynamic of commodification of marginalised groups, their life-stories and their work on the global art market: 'Muniz and catadores assemble waste materials into artworks, which eventually get sold at a prestigious London-based auction house. Garbage is thus transformed into a commodity and circulates in the global art market' (Linder and Meissner 2016: 3). Scholarly comment centres on the tension between visibility and complicity. Indeed, though scholars recognise that the photoseries and the documentary provide crucial visibility to the landfill, the ACAMJG and the catadores and their living and working conditions, their critique focuses on the fact that the sale of the artworks resituates them as participants in the capitalist system that produced this waste and these conditions (Schmidt 2017: 15).

Hence, this article emphasises that the material impact of the project is often forgotten amid discussions surrounding the series' relation to the global marketplace as well as the reinscription of art and the catadores into the capitalist system. As Megan Jones, one among few scholars, acknowledges:

> My own sense is that critiques of the documentary omit its capacity to make visible the work of the [ACAMJG], led by Tião dos Santos. While Muniz provides fleeting observations about what the waste in the landfill discloses about class prejudices in Brazil, it is the organisational impetus of Tião and others that promises to offer structural support to the catadores after the cameras have departed. When Jardim Gramacho closed in 2012, the ACAMJG ensured that recyclers received a lump sum of US$7,500 each, and that they would be provided with work at new recycling centres in Rio. (Jones 2017: 1005)

Indeed, though a certain critical approach might have been forgone in framing the landfill and the catadores and the articulation of the series, Muniz is able to provide tangible financial support for a group of workers who continue to be forgotten and marginalised and whose work is crucial in the context of our current climate crisis given their picking of recyclable materials. Hence, what is crucial in the decolonisation of academic approaches to engaged art that are considered here is to shift the focus onto the visibility and financial support generated by the art and artist and evaluate their tangible impact for the arts' subjects, rather than expect the artist to necessarily provide a critical social commentary through their work, though these aims are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Indeed, this article considers the latter as a more effective type of engaged art given that it literally engages with the communities it depicts through collaboration.

Reconsiderations on Engaged Art: Decolonising Academic Reception

In particular, considering issues of visibility, Schmidt argues that 'one is often drawn to contemplate the 'identities' of the garbage-objects more than the catadores, repeating the dynamic between the fetish commodity and the forgotten labor behind it' (Schmidt 2017:15). However, it is important to remember that value itself is not intrinsic to these 'garbage-objects', rather value is bestowed upon any object (and also person) through subjective and socially constructed agreements, which are regulated through cultural and economic considerations. As Michael Thompson argues, '[f]or the social order to be maintained there has to be some measure of agreement as to what is of value. People in different cultures may value different things, and they may value the same things differently, but all cultures insist upon some distinction between the valued and the valueless' (Thompson 1979: 2). These photographs propose to re-evaluate not only the catadores and their lives' worth but also the worth of recyclable materials, challenging what is understood as 'garbage' and pointing to the social and environmental importance of their work in sorting such material that can be reused. Moreover, the conflation that Schmidt indicates between the catadores and the garbage is not prominent when focusing on the different layers of transformation that catadores' images undergo. Indeed, they are photographed while posing like specific famous paintings. The distance that is firstly established between them as individuals and the so-called artistic canon they invoke is magnified as the photograph is projected on to the floor of Muniz's studio, and a duplicate of it is produced by recreating the image on the floor with the recyclable materials from Jardim Gramacho. This new version is photographed once again and then printed to be sold and exhibited or even showcased in private spaces, creating a further distance between the original photograph and the final product, all co-produced by the catadores, Muniz and his team.

The changes in scale and material undergone by the different stages of the photographs as well as the continued replication of it emphasise the different layers of socialisation and valuing through which the catadores and the objects attached to them go. The individuals are not erased or supplanted by rubbish, but instead they loom large in the image both as reimagined subjects and as co-producers of the artwork itself. By choosing to capture the catadores in this multi-media layered approach, the artist avoids a simplistic fetishising of poverty and consequently re-focuses the audience's gaze on the trash produced through overconsumption. As such, the focus rests on the implications of societal consumption as linked to the work of the catadores. Here, of particular interest is the photograph of Jose Carlos Da Silva Bala Lopes (Zumbi) who poses in a way that suggests that he is scattering seeds from a bag. The original photograph was taken in the landfill, subverting the idea that it is a space of decay and waste and emphasising the importance of the catadores' work. Indeed, the recycling of materials alleviates the pollution generated by the waste and the catadores can be seen as closer to the land they are attempting to help, especially when bearing in mind Valter Dos Santos' repeated comment '99 is not a 100', which is featured in Walker's documentary. Dos Santos makes clear the importance of the catadores by explaining that by picking even just one object and recycling it and thus even if only 99 items of refuse are left out of 100, that act already makes a difference. Hence, Zumbi's pose as Vincent Van Gogh's *The Sower* (1889) displaces the toxic space of the landfill to that of a scenic European pastoral one. This movement can be read as containing two crucial meanings: first, it can be seen as commenting on Zumbi's role as preserving and caring for the land by recycling garbage that would otherwise only pollute the space in which it is dumped. Second, through a postcolonial lens, this reads as a critique of the Dutch,

and more generally European, colonial and imperial wealth that facilitated the creation of the original painting. Through these endeavours primary materials were extracted in their colonies to profit the different countries which at the time were slowly becoming European nation-states, leaving many former colonies today depleted agriculturally and under-developed economically and infrastructurally. These uneven developments are the reason behind the existence of a landfill such as Jardim Gramacho. Essentially, the literal toxicity of the garbage in the landfill comes to embody these uneven dynamics in the Brazilian former colony.

Moreover, the decolonisation discussed by this article focuses on the contention in scholarly investigations surrounding this photoseries, which focuses on the crucial and positive result of visibility and attention created by the artwork and the documentary and their pitfalls and limits. In particular, Schmidt notes that '[c]ertainly we can credit Muniz with the best of intentions, and the catadores do seem to benefit from their involvement in the project. But one is left wondering whether the artworks express or repress this colonial history' (Schmidt 2017: 25), and while the photoseries and the documentary may not explicitly consider the colonial, neo-imperial and racial dynamics at the heart of the multi-scalar uneven developments on which Brazil, Rio and Jardim Gramacho are constructed and continue to function, the engagement with the 'Western canon' of the photographs and the documentary permit such a questioning. This engagement is clear given that the individual photos in the series bear the title of the paintings they 'rewrite'. Thus, while Pieces of Garbage can be seen as a successful piece of engaged art because of the refocusing of the gaze discussed above that the series provokes, it also displaces white European subjects from canonical paintings and replaces them with the catadores, thereby challenging the status of the canon and not only the colonial discourse inscribed within it but also the colonial violence and pillaging which generated western Europe's wealth and the context in which the 'canonical' paintings were created in the first place. This is also the case if one considers the documentary's title, as Jones notes:

> The frame through which this occurs in both the film and the artworks suggests an echoing and reworking of the Euro-American canon; Walker evokes the London of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* in ways that both de-particularise its alienated landscapes (saturated with a specifically Eurocentric mytho-poetic tradition) and reframe its resonances. If Eliot's poem describes the social and psychological inhospitality of European city life in the early 20th century, in the film, 'waste' bleeds more explicitly into 'land' – a landscape that is waste – and into the interiorities of the film's subjects. (Jones 2017: 1004)

Eliot's poem is a highly intertextual work that engages, echoes and rewrites a number of canonical texts (see also Biswas 2002). As such, it is also highly inaccessible and requires an encyclopaedic understanding of European literary history dating back to the sixteenth century. As John Haffenden notes, it is a 'piece of elitist eclecticism appealing principally to those who appear to have access, like Eliot, to a swathe of European literary history' (Haffenden 2001: 381). By juxtaposing the use of intertextuality in Eliot's poem and Muniz's photoseries – a comparison evoked in the documentary's title, in particular for an anglophone audience engaging with the documentary in an academic context – one may identify how the latter's use of allusion appeals to a certain group's elitism (auction houses, galleries and academics), to serve another group's material needs (the catadores) by substantially providing them important financial support.

Hence, in line with Tuck and Yang's article and understanding of decolonisation, the work done by Muniz, whether intentionally or not, is one of action and impact that effectively plays within the set capitalistic and neo-colonial system to redistribute wealth to a marginalised group. For this reason, critiques of the photoseries that consider the erasure of colonial and racial dynamics, though they raise important points, forget to consider the real and tangible impact of this project. Moreover, contrary to the fact that, as Schmidt argues, 'racial difference is muted in Muniz's formal decision to depict the Afro-Brazilian catadores using a neutral off-white or tan background' (Schmidt 2017: 25), in the photographs racial features remain visible and this is reinforced by the documentary that obliterates any doubts concerning this issue. Indeed, when watching Waste Land one cannot help but notice the lack of white people in Jardim Gramacho, clearly indicating the structural and systemic racism deeply rooted within Brazilian society. Nonetheless, one can identify the history of slavery that has structurally created contemporary Brazil and continues to influence it in this photoseries. This is done by drawing attention to the fact that the catadores are predominantly Afro-Brazilian and then redirecting the gaze to the waste surrounding them, a waste with which both wealthy white Brazilian and Euro-American audiences can identify given that this is literally their rubbish. One can consider both the history of colonisation and capitalist overconsumption as responsible for the condition of the catadores and see how both stem from the same capitalist impulse of primitive accumulation that promoted the commerce of peoples through slavery and colonisation and continues to be present in our neoliberal system.

The reconstruction of these images through garbage materials redirects the viewers' gaze to the materials themselves. The toxic build-up of neglected and unwanted sundry material is the root of the issue addressed in *Pictures of Garbage*, as the title of the series indicates. There would be no catadores and no picking and sorting of recyclable materials if it were not for garbage and an overfilled landfill in the first place. If one considers the documentary film's framing of the series, one can notice that this type of redirection and refocusing is partially undone. Indeed, a specific narrative of the Jardim Gramacho, this project and the people involved in it is curated, one that sometimes becomes blurred with the artwork itself. According to Kendall, 'while it is an intensely moving film, *Waste Land* does very little to redraw relations between human and non-human life, or to implicate us ethically in what is shown. Rather, the film foregrounds the cathartic, redemptive capacities of art to transform feel-bad poverty and human suffering into an uplifting, feel-good message, while absolving us of responsibility for what we see' (Kendall 2012: 53). Hence, it is important to disentangle scholarly criticism regarding Muniz's photoseries from Walker's documentary in analysing the role of the former as a piece of engaged art. While both afford visibility to and open a space for catadores to tell their stories, the documentary's fetishisation of poverty lessens the powerful message and action of the photoseries. Indeed, the latter is co-produced, meaning that the catadores representation has been created with their participation.

In conclusion, while Muniz's project work may not generate 'radical social critique' (Jones 2017; 1005), this was never the intention and exceeds the limits of even the most successful forms of engaged art. Instead, this article agrees with Frank Möller when he notes:

> After all, some catadores have been helped (although Muniz suspects that actually they have helped him more than he managed to help them). The visibility of one of the most marginalised groups of people in Rio de Janeiro has increased. For a limited period of time, the catadores have entered the

> world of fine art, which, according to Muniz, normally is 'a very exclusive, a very restrictive place' (6'00'), and they have entered this world not as objects of someone else's work but as coartists, as coagents of their own image. (Möller 2013: 44)

The photoseries engages with socio-ecological and economic and political issues that are deeply entangled within the marketplace of the artworld. The power of Muniz's photoseries and project is to use this same system against itself and essentially redistribute wealth to support the catadores as well as the ACAMJG in its recycling work. By financially helping the association and its work to expand, this funding also permits further work towards more sustainable garbage processing in Rio given that this endeavour was successful, and the association expanded and continues to play a crucial role in the city (Huval 2012). While Muniz's photoseries begins in the literally toxic space of a landfill, the next photoseries examined here – Cartagena's *Carpoolers* – considers the consequences of neoliberal policy and the toxic discourse that can emerge in the process of creating engaged art in these contexts. Moving on from scholarly responses, the next section investigates approaches to decolonise public reception specifically.

Alejandro Cartagena's Photoseries: *Carpoolers* (2011–2012, Mexico)

Cartagena started *Carpoolers* (2011–2012) in the summer of 2011 as part of a commission from a research institute to capture citizens' use of the streets in the Mexican state of Monterrey. In the context of rapid urbanisation alongside the rising disparity between rich and poor, Cartagena uses his camera to document the typical commute of the local working-class labourers from the far-removed growing suburbs of Monterrey down the motorway to one of Latin America's wealthiest city-municipalities, San Pedro Garza García. In its study of this journey and this motorway (Mexico's Federal Highway 85), the photoseries provides countless aerial view images that are primarily of passing pick-up trucks, the beds of which are occupied by workmen, tools, and materials.

The detrimental impact of the capitalist system is not something palpable in these images at first glance. The pictures are populated by resources, by workers who contribute to a labour economy, and thus laden with positive connotations in the context of capitalist ideology. Nonetheless, the exploitative and dehumanising side of this system is discernible not only within the images but also through their creation, exhibition and reception.

Creating Engaged Art: The Colonial Gaze

Starting with the creation process, it is beneficial to consider the print copy of the series and how it can elucidate our limited understanding of the images. In its hardcover first edition, self-published in 2014 by the photographer, the images of *Carpoolers* are accompanied by an explanatory essay written by Jessica S. McDonald, chief curator of photography at the Harry Ransom Center in Austin, Texas. In this text, McDonald writes 'Cartagena's book *Carpoolers* asks us to consider the political and economic structures that move energy, labor, and wealth throughout Mexico'. The textual framing by McDonald encourages the viewer to think beyond the direct contents of each image and instead to the infrastructure and ideology that have brought the subjects under the

scrutiny of Cartagena's lens. Put simply, how did these subjects arrive here, from where are they coming, where are they going and for what purpose? *Carpoolers* is part of a body of photographic work produced by Cartagena that is concerned with urban space, and environmental and socio-political issues, including *A Guide to Infrastructure and Corruption* (2017), which focuses on public spaces and occupants affected by construction investment, and his earlier series *Suburbia Mexicana* (2010), a five-part project which scrutinises the social and ecological consequences of rapid suburban development in Monterrey. Seen in the context of his other work, *Carpoolers* is imbued with a deeper significance that cannot immediately be perceived in isolation. In this sense, it also charts the journey from Suburbia Mexicana, where the state-sanctioned and profit-driven private development of suburbs has led to poorly designed towns devoid of public transportation, proper roadways and communal public spaces, to the ongoing consequences of this reality seen in Infrastructure and Corruption.

In *Carpoolers* the subjects of the images, who are mainly day labourers, must travel to work by this means in part due to a lack of infrastructure to support the journey any other way. There is no public transport available to them and so the question of private transport coupled with petrol prices is answered with the shared travel in the truck bed. In interviews, Cartagena acknowledges that this is a precarious form of travel that it is both 'completely unsafe' and 'illegal', but nonetheless it is also 'the most efficient way to travel' (Silverman 2015).

While Cartagena's series does home in on the social issue of precarious working conditions and the growing rich/poor divide in Mexico, it maintains a light-hearted atmosphere. There is a mischievous nature to the photos, which are captured from the bridge above the motorway and offer unhindered views of the trucks' cargo while nourishing the audience's voyeuristic desires. Through the unwitting participation of the photographic subjects, the intersection between public and private space is bridged, a term rendered a pun when considering Cartagena's vantage point of a bridge over the motorway. The beds of these trucks become living spaces where subjects read, sleep, chat, huddle and coexist with the materials of production that accompany their journey.

These recumbent journeys are a regular occurrence for some workers in Mexico. Cartagena knows little about the often sprawled occupants populating these images beyond what can be ascertained through careful inspection (Silverman 2015). Instead, as McDonald's text (2014) explains, '[t]o get a sense of their perspective as this project neared completion, Cartagena climbed into the bed of a pickup truck with his camera one Sunday morning'. This weekend excursion forms the basis of Cartagena's subjective understanding and exemplifies the privileged outlooks he brings to the experience.

The presumption to be able to see from the perspective of the labourers simply by lying in a truck and inverting the angle of his camera speaks directly to the colonial gaze. It is Cartagena's aim to provide another side to the visual narrative, that of the workers, but in doing so he places himself in the role of voyager, thus supplanting the perspective of those he wishes to portray. In the print edition of the series, this shortcoming is exacerbated through design. The subjective photos (where Cartagena occupies the trucks and points his lens to the sky) are introduced near the end of book, signifying the stage at which they were captured; in their bound presentation, the truck-occupant-perspective photographs are coupled with the more repetitive images of the trucks from on high (where Cartagena shoots the trucks from the bridge), suggesting, through visual juxtaposition, that these subjective photos are indeed those of the labourers. Thus, the layout implies a capacity to speak (see) for the workers in the trucks. The resulting hollowness of this approach is captured aptly in one double-page spread where the blurred picture

of an underpass sits to the right of another image of an obviously empty green truck bed.

The whimsy with which Cartagena chooses freely to take on the risk of riding illegally and without being properly secured by a seat belt for the purpose of his photo project is at odds with that undertaken by the workers through obligation and a lack of other options. The privileged nature of this activity is further demonstrated by the subsequent images it produces: blurred underpasses, blue skies with the odd commercial or road sign present. According to McDonald's interpretation the power lines that appear in these images 'serve as significant emblems' as the photoseries 'makes visible one more space between major points on the urban power grid'. While the photoseries is effective in its capacity to generate viewer interest in these microcosmic examples of working conditions and how these relate to larger issues in the realms of infrastructure and neoliberal policy, the attempt to see as the worker sees is emblematic of the potential colonisation that often lingers between artist and subject in the practice of engaged art.

Disseminating Engaged Art: The Colonial Gaze Continued

Another element that highlights a continued need for decolonisation present in this work and in other forms of engaged art is the relationship between the artwork and the audience. The photographing of the project lasted a year but its impact reached far beyond initial expectations. In 2012 the photoseries was included at the Sony World Photography Awards. Unlike much of the internationally recognised photography from and about Mexico during this period, Cartagena's images are largely playful, an atypical characteristic that provokes further curiosity. Cartagena was at first surprised by the interest in the series, foreseeing the work being lumped with other depictions of a homogeneous Latin America (Rosenberg 2013); however, his unobstructed aerial approach to these detailed scenes encourages careful scrutiny on the part of the viewer.

As McDonald's essay (2014) acknowledges, 'Cartagena's framing of these bodies, piled into open truck beds, is laden with dark, unsettling associations'. One such association, for example, comprises the opening sequence for Amat Escalante's internationally lauded film *Heli* (2013), where the tight framing of battered shoeless feet next to a bound and bloodied head with a boot resting on it are captured in the back of a pick-up truck travelling to an as yet unknown destination. Similar imagery is used in Luis Estrada's satirical film *El infierno* (2010) in a montage demonstrating protagonist Beny's descent into organised crime, where gun in hand Beny pushes a man into the back of his pick-up and proceeds to beat him with the hilt as his companion gets in to drive. Both films' narratives concern the effect of Mexico's ongoing drug war and the rise of cartel violence and, as such, both include imagery of unwilling passengers either dead or suffering in the backs of these trucks. Thus, it is arguably unsurprising that a common viewer reaction to the photographs is the assumption that the passengers are 'crossing the border illegally or there are dead bodies in the trucks' (Rosenberg 2013). The ready inclination of the viewer to conceive of the subjects of these images as either criminals or victims speaks to the toxic discourse surrounding the image of Mexico and its citizens. It testifies to a willingness for largely white Western audiences to interpret images of Mexicans and Latinx people first as migrants and drug traffickers. It also draws attention to the more typical imagery that is permitted to be distributed and championed at international film festivals and photographic exhibitions by their organisers.

Heli, for example, was nominated for the Palme d'Or and won Best Director at the Cannes Film Festival in 2013, while Fernando Brito's photoseries *Tus pasos se perdieron*

con el paisaje (2011) won second place in the category Current Affairs at the Sony World Photography Awards the very same year as Cartagena's *Carpoolers* was recognised at the same awards festival (World Photo Organisation, 2012). Brito's series photographs lifeless bodies that are primarily abandoned by their killers in the rural landscape of Sinaloa. The images produced in tandem with Brito's own photojournalist work capture the human toll of increasing drug-related violence in the region of Sinaloa. The tenor of Brito's images, which often aesthetically frame the corpses at the site of their abandonment, is quite clearly a world apart from the tone conveyed in *Carpoolers*. Nevertheless, one article in the *New York Times* attempts to push the narrative further, introducing the photoseries and its location in Monterrey in relation to the US/Mexican border. The article begins, 'A bridge is situated on a highway that goes from the Mexican city of Nuevo Laredo – across the United States border in Laredo, Tex. – due south to Monterrey' (McCann 2012). The reference to the border could be read innocently as a means of explaining the location in more detail to a US audience if it were not for another allusion later in the interview. This time in relation to *Suburbia Mexicana* and the uniform houses it pictures McCann (2012) writes, the 'stillness in those images belies the terrible violence that wracks Mexico's northern cities'. The writer actively asserts his narrative of 'violent Mexico' on the works even when an image shows only 'new suburban constructions in the Monterrey region, lined in innumerable rows', to use McCann's words. The mislabelling of its subjects seems yet more incredulous when considering the title of the photoseries. *Carpoolers* are passengers with a purpose, grouping together in a shared journey typically for work, but also sometimes education or leisure activities. The aim of carpooling is to save resources such as fuel and reduce environmental impact.

An article from independent fashion and culture magazine *Dazed* elides *Carpoolers* with another photoseries from Cartagena that focuses on Mexicans born legally in the United States, entitled *Americanos* (2013–2014). It should be noted that while the *Dazed* article gives the title as *Born in the USA*, while Cartagena's website now lists the series under the title *Americanos*. Using the strapline 'Cartagena's carpoolers expose the "invisible" human cargo between the US–Mexican border' (Jun, 2013), the article's text poorly differentiates the two photoseries, which are visually and thematically starkly opposed. While *Carpoolers* provides aerial views of trucks on the motorway, *Americanos* consists mainly of portraits of its varied eponymous subjects. Presumably describing *Carpoolers* Jun writes:

> we are given a god's eye-view of the 'invisible' traffic often illegally shuttled over the US–Mexican border. And yet, chances are, this 'cargo' will be responsible for providing a majority of indispensable services 'on the other side,' such as construction work, pool and garden maintenance, as well as minding other people's children. (Jun, 2013)

The self-conscious language deployed here, and denoted using speech marks, to describe the passengers of these trucks further obfuscates the stories of the photographic subjects. They are not being transported over the border, illegally or otherwise. Even in relation to Americanos, the legal legitimacy of the subjects' US citizenship forms the very basis of the photoseries, yet this is still called into question in the magazine article. Here the colonial gaze is exposed in the reception of and commentary on the engaged art.

Despite audience prejudices, the subjects of *Carpoolers* are workers. The misinterpretation of labourers as anything other than that is particularly potent when seen in the context of discard studies via the analytical optic of waste. In keeping with what Zygmunt Bauman (2004) refers to as 'wasted lives', here waste is used to describe those

members of the population who are considered surplus and thus disposable – these include migrants and the wageless. While Bauman's framing has been criticised for its rudimentary and tropic framing of the unemployed as on par with material rubbish (Denning 2010: 96; Yates 2011: 1687; Niblett 2019: 5) the association between not contributing to capitalist society in the form of labour and the disposability of human life creates an interesting tension. Here workers, based on their location and their ethnicity, are initially perceived as waste.

The example takes on further significance when examining the images more closely. In many pictures the workers contort their bodies to fit the space in and around their tools. In other images, it is often tricky to count the number of people in the beds accurately as the high angle flattens the subjects and obscures facial features, meaning that buckets and backpacks frequently resemble baseballs caps or hard hats and thus material objects can be easily mistaken for individual people. Both of these characteristics pertain to one image of a truck with 'maple' written on the hood. The back of the truck is replete with tools: a large black container fully occupies the top third of the bed; a likely four-metre ladder dissects the frame vertically from the centre bottom of the bed over the carriage and hovering over the lettering on the hood; to its left are three buckets filled with sundry tools and a toolbox; and, finally, to its right more containers, a loose denim jacket, and a pair of bent denim-clad legs which emerge from atop a cardboard box wedged against an old tyre at the very bottom right corner of the truck's bed. No face, not even a head, is visible and so the legs, through their contracted state that fill out the jeans tightly, are the only identifiable feature of human life in the vehicle's back carriage.

While most images of the trucks include people, there are some where beds are filled only with materials, such as one silver/white pick-up, which is shown three times always without occupants in the back but on all occasions with a large piece of torn yellow foam. In one frame the foam accompanies an empty cardboard box and bits of rubbish, while in the adjacent frame it lies beside a backpack and a piece of piping. In the final frame the foam is alone save for the rubbish which remains from the first image. The images, through their necessarily repetitive framing and exhibition, begin to blur and with them, the labourers too start to sink away all too easily into the sea of objects or, worse still, disappear entirely. *Carpoolers* perfectly captures the value of these workers in a capitalist society: they are on par with the hardware and raw materials that accompany their journeys, they are seen as replaceable and, though made visible through Cartagena's photoseries, they can just as quickly disappear again as the viewer loses interest or the materials begin to take over. As McDonald and Cartagena (2014) aptly states, 'a photograph on the left of one spread reveals three men traveling together in the bed of a white truck; two of these men reappear in the photograph on the right, yet a ladder now occupies the third man's place'.

The photoseries recalls other visual depictions of labour and Mexico's working class, principally construction workers, who participate in the building of a modernity that is not intended to benefit them. This topic is particularly prevalent in documentary filmmaking such as Juan Carlos *Rulfo's En el hoyo* (2007), which follows the lives of construction workers building Mexico City's *pereferico*, as well as Natalia Almada's *El velador* (2012), where labourers work tirelessly to expand the ornate mausoleums of a notorious Sinaloan cemetery. Seen alongside these documentary texts, *Carpoolers* asks audiences to reflect on the immense amount of labour required to sustain neoliberal models of production and the human lives that rapid urbanisation demands as part of this process.

Conclusion

Each of the photoseries examined in this article demonstrates the ongoing need to decolonise both the process of narrative creation and the scholarship/viewership that responds to engaged art. Muniz and Cartagena alike make important contributions to the depiction of communities disenfranchised by neoliberal policy. Their works share stories of often-overlooked subjects and in doing so foster greater institutional attention to the conditions of precarity that permeate their lives. While neither text takes an active role in facilitating policy change or generating widespread sustained dissent regarding these environments, the harnessing of their privilege to bring attention to these stories makes a valuable contribution in different contexts and ensures that these communities are materialised in the public eye rather than continuing to be erased and forgotten. These two examples point to the varying outcomes of engaged art. In the case of *Carpoolers*, the photographer extends his privilege to speak for the subjects of his images whereas in *Pictures of Garbage*, Muniz works in collaboration with the catadores. As such, they are both subjects and creators, assisting in the articulation of their own reality instead of running the risk of becoming objects of a piece of art. Nonetheless, in both cases, it is the academic scholarship alongside media reception and broader viewership that reinforces a certain colonial dynamic continuing a toxic (literally and metaphorically) neoliberal relation. These examples point to the ongoing need to decolonise the hierarchical nature of cultural criticism, including academic responses, such as this article.

References

Bauman, Z. (2004) *Wasted Lives*. Polity: Cambridge.

Biswas, A. K. R. (2002) 'Intertextuality in the Waste Land' in M. K. Ray. *Studies in Literature in English*, Vol. **11**, Atlantic: New Delhi, 85–101.

Demos, T. J. (2015) 'Between Rebel Creativity and Reification: For and Against Visual Activism'. *Journal of Visual Culture* **15**(1): 85–102.

Denning, M. (2010) 'Wageless Life'. *New Left Review* **66** (Nov./Dec.): 79–97.

Haffenden, J. (2001) 'T. S. Eliot: The Waste Land' in N. Roberts (ed.) *A Companion to Twentieth-Century Poetry*. Blackwell Publishing: Melbourne and Berlin, 381–391.

Huval, R. (2012) Whatever Happened to … The Garbage Pickers from Waste Land? [WWW document]. URL https://www.pbs.org/independentlens/blog/whatever-happened-catadores-waste-land/ [accessed 20 February 2021].

Jones, M. (2017) 'Junk Aesthetics from South Africa, Brazil and India: Re-Evaluating the Object'. *Journal of Southern African Studies* **43**(5): 997–1010.

Jun, C. (2013) Alejandro Cartagena: Born in the USA. [WWW document]. URL https://www.dazeddigital.com/photography/article/16966/1/alejandro-cartagena-born-in-the-usa [accessed 16 June 2020].

Kantaris, G. (2016) 'Waste Not, Want Not: Garbage and the Philosopher of the Dump (Waste Land and Estamira)' in C. Linder and M. Meissner (eds.) *Global Garbage: Urban Imaginaries of Waste, Excess, and Abandonment*. Routledge: London and New York, 52–67.

Kendall, T. (2012) 'Cinematic Affect and the Ethics of Waste'. *New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film* **10**(1): 45–61.

Linder, C. and Meissner, M. (2016) 'Globalization, Garbage, and the Urban Environment' in C. Linder and M. Meissner (eds.) *Global Garbage: Urban Imaginaries of Waste, Excess, and Abandonment*. Routledge: London and New York, 1–13.

McCann, M. (2012) Piling in a Flatbed to Get By in the Suburbs. [WWW document]. URL https://lens.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/06/27/car-poolers/ [accessed 16 June 2020].

McDonald, J. and Cartagena, A. (2014) *Carpoolers*. Self-published/Fonca–Conaculta: Mexico.
Möller, F. (2013) 'Photo-Activism in the Digital Age: Visions from Rio de Janeiro' in N. S. Love and M. Mattern (eds.) *Doing Democacy: Activist Art and Cultural Politics*. Suny Press: New York, 29–51.
Muniz, V. (2008) Pictures of Garbage. [WWW document]. URL http://vikmuniz.net/gallery/garbage [accessed 20 February 2021].
Niblett, M. (2019) '"Time's Carcase": Waste, Labour, and Finance Capital in the Atlantic World-Ecology'. *Atlantic Studies* **16**(1): 72–89.
Nossel, S. (2016) 'Introduction: On "Artivism," or Art's Utility in Activism'. *Social Research* **83**(1): 103–105.
Rena Bransten Gallery (2006) Pictures of Junk Series: An Interview with VIK MUNIZ. [WWW document]. URL https://vimeo.com/21780105 [accessed 20 February 2021].
Rosenberg, D. (2013) Spying on Mexico's Carpoolers. [WWW document]. URL https://slate.com/culture/2013/02/alejandro-cartagena-car-poolers-examines-the-intersection-between-the-personal-and-the-collective-photos.html [accessed 16 June 2020].
Sanfelice, S. (2011) *Diálogos contemporâneos entre arte e fotografia: Um percurso pelas obras de Vik Muniz*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Universidade Estadual de Campinas, Campinas.
Santos, D. and Fux, J. (2011) 'Estamira e Lixo Extraordinário: A arte na terra desolada'. *Ipotesi: Revista de Estudos Literários* **15**(2): 125–137.
Silverman, R. (2015) Mexican Carpoolers: A Photographer's View of Truck Bed Commuters. [WWW document]. URL https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2015/01/11/375922456/mexican-carpoolers-a-photographers-view-of-truck-bed-commuters?t=1591277458694" [accessed 16 June 2020].
Schmidt, C. (2017) 'Vik Muniz's *Pictures of Garbage* and the Aesthetics of Poverty'. *ART-Margins* **6**(3): 8–27.
Thompson, M. (1979) *Rubbish Theory: The Creation and Destruction of Value*. Oxford University Press: Oxford.
Tuck, E. and Yang, K. W. (2012) 'Decolonization is not a Metaphor'. *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education and Society* **1**(1): 1–40.
World Photo Organisation. (2012) Sony World Photography Awards 2012: Shortlist announced. Sony, https://presscentre.sony.eu/pressreleases/sony-world-photography-awards-2012-shortlist-announced-1024407. [accessed 13 May 2021].
Yates, M. (2011) 'The Human-As-Waste, the Labor Theory of Value and Disposability in Contemporary Capitalism'. *Antipode* **43**(5): 1679–1695.

Films

Heli, 2013. Film. Directed by Amat Escalante. Mexico: NDMantarraya
El infierno, 2010. Film. Directed by Luis Estrada. Mexico: Bandidos Films.
Waste Land, 2011. Film. Directed by Lucy Walker. UK: Entertainment One.