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**How to Recycle Ourselves through Art:
Rubbish Inspirations in Contemporary Art**

Abstract: This article will focus on the work of two contemporary artists; of Vik Muniz and Jeff Wall, to discuss the change of material and inspiration in contemporary art and the effects of this change. Both of those two artists take rubbish, human waste, masses of debris which have been thought to be the end-products, useless residue of human actions and civilization, and then they transform those so-called dead materials into original artistic products. In a way, they use those dead materials for an artistic *rebirth*. Through Muniz's re-makings of famous art works through junk materials, or by way of Wall's completely new interpretations of the already existing and useless trash provide both literary and symbolic *recycle* for the contemporary society.

Keywords: Vik Muniz, Jeff Wall, trash, recycle, new materialism, contemporary art;

"Things are what we encounter, ideas are what we project."
Leo Stein¹

As the material conditions in which human beings live and with which they interact change in time, the sensations and inspirations which give birth to art also shift focus and intention in the same parallel. In other words, art, artist and the atmosphere in which artistic experiments take place continuously reconstruct one another. With the change of artistic material and inspirational atmosphere, art can be reconceptualised.

Trash, garbage, rubbish, junk, and waste are one of those new inspirations in contemporary art. Those are very similar concepts that will be referred to in this article – sometimes interchangeably. In *the American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* the word *junk* is defined as discarded material, such as glass, rags, paper, or metal, some of which may be reused in some form. In its informal use, junk refers to either materials that are worn-out or fit to be discarded, such as broken furniture and other junk in the attic, or cheap or shoddy materials. French

¹ Leo Stein, *The A-B-C- of Aesthetics*, New York, Boni and Liveright, 1927, 44.

sociologist Thierry Bardini, who is renowned for his theoretical studies on junk, however, underlines junk's potential of being recycled, used for new purposes, and thus brought back into life once again. In this respect, Bardini's definition of junk will suit better, for the purpose of this article. Thierry Bardini defines junk as "all kinds of stuff that grows in stacks and patiently waits for a renewed use."² Bardini states that junk is "useless or waiting under the falling dust for an improbable novel use for it to be put to."³ In this respect, junk is "one step before garbage (...) junk is garbage ready to happen, trash in the making."⁴ Bardini sees junk as "the signature of our time, a reminder of what consumer capitalism does both to the earth and its inhabitants."⁵ Contemplating on the connotations of junk materials in our lives, at some Bardini comes to romanticizing junk saying that: "(...) junk lies in the marginal living spaces of the house, garages, attics, and cellars. You forget about it, and it somehow grows anarchically. Junk rusts, fades, decays. (...) Junk used to be something else, though. It used to be useful, to serve a purpose, or it was meant eventually to serve a purpose. It materializes the memories of consumption that we grew up idolizing. (...) Junk is personal, in the eye (and hands) of the beholder; somebody's junk is somebody else's treasure (...) Junk must be collected, stored before it is recycled, combined in whole or parts."⁶

So, the recycling process of junk materials, and the efforts to find new ways of bringing the so-called leftovers of culture back into cultural life, in a way, end up recycling ourselves. That is to say, from a material ontological perspective, since the waste and junk materials are the end-products of civilized life, human beings can metaphorically be reduced to junk. In other words, you are what you produce and what you consume. In this respect, those pieces of junk are the traces of our very existence on earth. It can be argued that out of those mountains of junk, life can re-emerge. In other words, it is possible to make sense of the junk materials. Through bizarre material intra-actions, new combinations can be produced. At this point, art provides a tool to face the leftovers of a long-lived civilization, stretch the ecological imagination and welcome the unwanted materials of human beings back into the culture.⁷

As American theorist of literature and visual arts Patricia Yaeger,⁸ who is known for her studies on material culture with focus on trash, emphasizes, it is possible to find ways in which "the old opposition between nature and culture has been displaced in postmodern art by a preoccupation of *trash*." Once used and lost their practical value for human beings, waste materials are immediately "marginalized, repressed and tossed away" into nature creating huge landfills. As a result, human beings are destined to be born into "a detritus-dominated nature." At this point, the interaction between nature and culture starts to take a new turn, a new materialist turn in which the old dualities need to be revisited and in which the changes in the physical environment as well as the material processes become interdependent with the cultural processes – including artistic productions.⁹

In this context, this article will focus on the representative works of two contemporary artists; of Vik Muniz and Jeff Wall, to discuss the change of material and inspiration in contemporary art and the effects of this change. Both of those two artists and their representative work take rubbish,

² Thierry Bardini, *Junkware*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2011, 7.

³ Ibid. 9.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Cit. cit. Pippa Marland, "Remaindering the Material Ecology of Junk and Composting", *Green Letters: Studies in Ecocriticism*, 2014, Vol. 18, No. 1, 2.

⁶ Thierry Bardini, op. cit. 9.

⁷ Cf. Pippa Marland, op. cit. 2.

⁸ Patricia Yaeger, "Editors Column: The Death of Nature and the Apotheosis of Trash; or Rubbish Ecology", *PMLA*, 2008, Vol. 123, No. 2, 321–338.

⁹ Cf. ibid. 322.

human waste, masses of junk and debris which have been thought to be the end-products, useless residue of human actions and civilization, and then they use those so-called dead materials for totally new purposes; to create brand new, original artistic products. In a way, they use those dead materials for an artistic rebirth. By this way, humanity is also reborn out of its waste, metaphorically speaking out of its ashes. Through Muniz's re-makings of conventional art works through junk materials, or by way of Wall's completely new interpretations brought on the already existing and useless trash provide both literary and symbolic *recycle* for the contemporary society.

Well-known postmodern theorists Deleuze and Guattari¹⁰ consider the human and nonhuman territories as one and the same essential reality. So, for a new focus on integral ways of thinking, not only discourse and matter, but also human and nonhuman together, we owe to Postmodernism. The role of postmodernism in the discourse of material ecocriticism and its new materialist approach regards language and reality, nature and culture, discursive practices and the material worlds as complexly intertwined, and it proposes a new worldview in which nature is fundamentally reanimated based on the recognition of the vitality of things in all natural-cultural processes. According to new materialist ecocritics Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann,¹¹ this new perception provides a base for the development of new materialism and material ecocriticism.

As Coole and Frost argue, matter is "agentic" and capable of producing its own meanings. Every material configuration, from bodies to their contexts of living is *telling* and therefore can be the object of a critical analysis aims at discovering its stories, its material and discursive interplays, its place in a "choreography of becoming".¹² Rather than focusing on the matter's – trash's or junk's in our case – non-human agentic capacities, which can be observed, described or represented in the narrative texts, and their concrete, observable interactions with the human organisms as active entities modifying the systems through which they physically interact, the selected works of art to be discussed in this article will be illustrating the matter's – trash's and junk materials' in our case – narrative power of creating configurations of meanings and by this way interacting with human beings. In that case, matter/trash/junk itself will be interpreted as a *text*.

From a new materialist perspective, not only human material discursive constructions but also nonhuman things; such as, water, soil, stone, metals, minerals, bacteria, toxins, food, electricity, atoms, etc. can be treated as texts, therefore, as possible producers of meaning. In this respect, even vast assemblages of trash, garbage, and junk which are composed of useless cultural objects are "vibrant" in Jane Bennett's words,¹³ that is to say; they have "trajectories, propensities or tendencies of their own" and they have agentic capacities to intervene into our material bodies. With their capacity to produce methane gas, with their capacity to leak into the soil water, air and even into porous human bodies and with the billions of microscopic organisms living in them, those garbage hills are alive. On the other hand, if they are put into a different context by human agents, or re-organized those piles of trash, stacks of junk material have also the narrative capacity of immediately turning into nonhuman systems of signs which can produce alternative meanings.

Canadian photographer Jeff Wall's depictions of everyday life successfully convey such alternative meanings. The staged photographs of Wall aim to deconstruct the mental constructions of the viewer and the original images by replacing them with objects of waste, or junk. By this way, Wall directs the viewer to think that the picture will offer a narrative meaning. Wall's *The*

¹⁰ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1983, 4–5.

¹¹ Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann, "Material Ecocriticism: Materiality, Agency and Models of Narrativity", *Ecozon@*, 2012, Vol. 3, No. 1, 79.

¹² Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, "Introducing the New Materialisms", in: D. Coole and S. Frost (eds.), *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2010, 10.

¹³ Cf. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2010.

*Destroyed Room*¹⁴ can be discussed as an example of this marginal artistic method. Being the remaking of Eugene Delacroix's *Death of Sardanapalou*¹⁵ (1827), which depicts the Assyrian monarch on his deathbed, commanding the destruction of his possessions and slaughter of his concubines in a last act of defiance against invading armies, and thus is usually interpreted as a painted depiction of aggression and violence, Jeff Wall's *The Destroyed Room* is a staged scene of destruction in the bedroom of a young woman whose personal possessions have been hurled across floor of the room, only one black stiletto-heeled shoe remain standing. An old and torn mattress is placed in the room representing and replacing the luxurious bed of the Assyrian monarch in the original picture. The drawers are open and what appears to be women's underwear is partly visible. Various objects – women's clothing, jewellery and sunglasses – are piled in disarray on the floor. "The discarded objects are the debris of commodities that promise personal beauty."¹⁶ All the objects on the floor of the room are women's clothing and accessories; pairs of shoes, boots, several pairs of sunglasses (one broken), combs, straw baskets and many pieces of plastic jewelry, in addition to a piles of clothing.

In other words, the personal possessions thrown across the room are not only images of aggression and anger, but also the embodiments of commodity fetishism and symbols of a culture of waste. Thus, the objects in Wall's transparent photographs like *The Destroyed Room* are the images of contemporary urban life. Wall argues that you can make beautiful pictures out of common things and he continues in "The Whole Truth: Jan Tumlir Talks with Jeff Wall about *the Flooded Grave*" as follows: "The everyday, or the commonplace, is the most basic and the richest artistic category. Although it seems familiar, it is always surprising and new. (...) So everyday is a space in which meanings accumulate, but it's the pictorial realization that carries the meanings into the realm of pleasurable."¹⁷

In addition to his use of junk materials in his artistic work, the special method that Jeff Wall uses in his photographic remakings contributes a lot to production of alternative meanings. Wall's photographs are neither photographs shot in traditional ways nor conventional images on a screen; to be more precise, they are "cibacrome transparencies lit from within by fluorescent light." In an interview, Wall himself says that "one of the reasons (of his use of this special method of enlightenment) is that the painting or ordinary photograph lit with the same light that falls in the room and onto the spectator himself. But the luminescent image is fascinating because it is lit with another atmosphere. So, two atmospheres intersect to make the image. One of them, the hidden one, is more powerful than the other." Thus, Wall's luminescent images have an immediate visual impact, and the images which they present have a disturbing, unsettling effect.¹⁸

Although Wall's *The Destroyed Room* is a staged set constructed afterwards for the deconstructive purpose of the artist, the dominant colour in the photograph and the light creeping through the openings for the door and window, the angles of the objects is true to the original painting. Adams argues that the illusion created by the artist implicitly drives the spectator first to recognize its resemblance to Delacroix's painting slowly, and then to solve the puzzle of the meaning of its remaking.¹⁹ Despite the recognizable resemblances to the original painting, Adams underlines an interesting and remarkable change in the photograph; the figurine in the original painting is the room's absent occupant. The possibly victimized concubine in bed in Delacroix's

¹⁴ See Figure 2.

¹⁵ See Figure 1.

¹⁶ Virginia Adams, *Illusion and Disillusionment in the Works of Jeff Wall and Gerhard Richter: Picturing (Post)Modern Life*, PhD Dissertation, University of Maryland, USA, 2007, 134.

¹⁷ Cit. cit. Michael Fried, "Jeff Wall, Wittgenstein, and the Everyday", *Critical Inquiry*, 2007, 33, 506.

¹⁸ Ibid. 525–527.

¹⁹ Cf. Virginia Adams, op. cit. 134.

painting has been removed from Wall's photograph.²⁰ Interestingly and deliberately the human figures in the original painting were replaced by nonhuman objects in Wall's remaking. Unlike most of Wall's images that followed in the 1980s, *The Destroyed Room* lacks an apparent human actor. The only figure present in the room is the plastic statuette that holds out its skirt to display its body to the viewer.²¹ Perhaps Wall wants that the agent of the destruction in the room is to be imagined by the observer.

Wall's replacement of human subjects in the original painting with the nonhuman objects in his photographic remaking can be considered as a new step in the contemporary art. In Deleuze and Guattari's words, We make no distinction between man and nature: the human essence of nature and the natural essence of man become one within nature in the form of production of industry, just as they do within the life of man as species (...) "man and nature are not like two opposite terms confronting one another (...) rather, they are one and the same essential reality, the producer-product."²²

Another innovative method of recycling waste or junk materials into art forms has been introduced and developed by the Brazilian artist Vik Muniz. His work is definitely out of canonical art forms since he uses junk materials which have been traditionally expelled from conventional aesthetic forms of expression. In his huge remakings of famous paintings out of junk materials, in a way Vik Muniz puts into practice what Deleuze and Guattari's theoretically emphasizes in their abovementioned conception of man and nature composed of the same essential reality, and becoming" the producer-product." To exemplify, Vik Muniz's huge remaking of Caravaggio's well-known painting *Narcissus* is reproduced out of trash, recyclable waste objects –rusty metal bottle taps, empty gas cylinders, flat tyres, broken plastic objects, etc. The effect is dazzling, especially in Narcissus example. In Caravaggio's version,²³ Narcissus, literally surrounded by nature composed of real soil and water, stares into a dark pool and sees his own reflection. In Muniz's photographic remaking of *Narcissus*,²⁴ on the other hand, Narcissus "looks into and made out of a junk world puffed with poisonous particles."²⁵ In that second version, Narcissus is not situated in natural environment, as in the sense of the original version, "he is his environment" as Yaeger puts most accurately. Muniz imagines Narcissus staring into a pool of trash. Yaeger describes his physical appearance as follows "the texture of his skin and hair is mechanical; he is in love neither with himself nor with nature, but with the dregs of consumer narcissism; he sees a reflected subjectivity made out of used stuff."²⁶ As Narcissus is looking at his reflection in the water, he actually both looks into and is made out of his environment. Muniz's *Narcissus* has been turned into a representation of a "toxic body", which is a term coined by Stacy Alaimo. Alaimo defines the concept of *toxic bodies* "as particularly vivid example of trans-corporeal space",²⁷ suggesting potentially harmful substances (i.e., toxic chemicals in water, air, and soil) and their effects in the human body as a consequence of a possible interaction between man and his/her toxic environment.

Muniz gives the first clues of his new approach to art from a new materialist perspective in the 2010 documentary of his last project "Pictures of Garbage" entitled *Waste Land*.²⁸ The Oscar-nomi-

²⁰ Cf. *ibid.*

²¹ Cf. *ibid.* 136.

²² Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *op. cit.* 4–5.

²³ See Figure 3.

²⁴ See Figure 4.

²⁵ Patricia Yaeger, *op. cit.* 323.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2010, 22.

²⁸ *Waste Land*, Dir. Lucy Walker, Almega Projects & O2 Filmes, DVD, 2010.

nated Brazilian-American film *Waste Land* (2010) documents Muniz's work with pickers from the Jardim Gramacho landfill outside Rio de Janeiro, which is the largest garbage landfill in the world. Muniz's analogy of the people in the museums looking at paintings can actually be very explanatory of the new materialist approach in his art and of the essence of his unusual method of working with junk. He states in the documentary that people in the museums, as they are looking at the paintings, they lean in and everything vanishes and becomes paint. They just see the material of the painting. Only when they move away from the painting, they see the image. When they get closer to the painting, the only thing they see is the material from which the painting was created. Muniz claims that it is when one thing turns to another is the most beautiful moment and that applies to everything in life. In his project called "Pictures of Garbage" it is possible to see such a transformation clearly. Muniz orchestrates the transformation of garbage into astonishing works of art. The hands on deck are actually the real people, the garbage collectors, – "pickers," to be more precise – who go through huge mountains of trash to pick out the recyclable materials in a large landfill near a favela (suburb) called Jardim Gramacho, in Rio. They first become models for the photographic remaking of famous paintings chosen by Muniz, and then literally put every piece of trash onto the right place on the reflections of them on a large ground. Finally, those assemblages of trash were being photographed to be printed out in large sizes and be sold in international auctions to create funds for those low-paid people working under terrible physical conditions (See Figures 3, 4, 5, and 6). Muniz declares his aim in this project being to *recycle* the garbage pickers' lives through the same materials they have worked with, interacted with for the most part of their lifespan. Through this project, the recyclable garbage/junk composed of plastic bottles, metal scraps, polyester, x-rays, broken pieces of toy and record, old shoes, even dust, etc. have been used not only for the remaking of famous paintings but also for remaking the lives of those suburbians. In other words, trash composed of various materials metaphorically and literally revived the famous paintings and ordinary lives. In this respect, trash as the collective noun for most of the non-human actors in everyday human life are seen no longer passive but an active contributors. Through the works of Vik Muniz in this project the lowest possible materials of culture were transformed into high cultural products of art. In Vik Muniz's words, "I just had the material and I had to go after the image" (*Waste Land* 2010). So, he presents the examples of transformation of the material into the artistic image. Muniz states that "Sugar Children" project is the first time he addressed "the idea of material as something that exists in the world with its own importance" (*Waste Land* 2010). This brings us back to the new materialist ecocritical perspective underlining humans' entanglement with matter and requires in ecocritic Heather I. Sullivan's words, "a conscious and concrete embrace";²⁹ with junk and re-evaluate those various forms of decomposition and junk as possible ways of expression of life itself.

To conclude, no matter how we try to discard it, junk is actually part of our lives, and an important means of economical survival for some people. Placing their artistic work's focus on junk materials and garbage, both Vik Muniz and Jeff Wall underline the interaction between human and nonhuman elements. Muniz remakes canonical artworks which put both the garbage and the garbage pickers literally into his art. By this way, those rejected and marginalized – both junk materials and people from lower social classes – by the society could be recycled and accepted back into the social and cultural life. Similarly, Wall replaces human actors and nonhuman actors in the original art work and in his contemporary remakings showing the usability of junk material for aesthetic purposes and the interaction of human and nonhuman elements in everyday life. What Muniz and Wall achieve through their work on junk material is to turn "the decompositions of culture" into "cultures of decomposition,"³⁰ to put the so-called useless junk and garbage back into life through both literary and symbolic recycling.

²⁹ Heather I. Sullivan, "Dirt Theory and Material Ecocriticism", *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, 2012, Vol. 19, No. 3, 517.

³⁰ Pippa Marland, op. cit. 7.



Figure 1
Eugène Delacroix, *The Death of Sardanapalus*, 1827.
Oil on canvas, 392x496 cm. © Louvre, Paris, France/Giraudon/The Bridgeman Art
Library



Figure 2
Jeff Wall, *The Destroyed Room*, 1978. Transparency in lightbox, 1590 x 2340 mm
National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Purchased 1988, © The artist



Figure 3
Caravaggio, *Narcissus*, 1597-1599?
Oil on canvas, 110x92 cm.
Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica, Rome.



Figure 4
Vik Muniz, *Narcissus*, 2005
Chromogenic color print, 226.2 x 182.6 cm
© 2014 Vik Muniz / Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY



Figure 5
Death of Marat (after David) by Vik Muniz –
Junk Series, 2005



Figure 6
Vik Muniz – *Sisyphus* (after Tiziano) Junk Series, 2005

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Ilustracije:

- Figure 1 – Eugène Delacroix, *The Death of Sardanapalus*, 1827, oil on canvas, 392x496 cm. © Louvre, Paris, France/Giraudon/The Bridgeman Art Library.
- Figure 2 – Jeff Wall, *The Destroyed Room*, 1978, transparency in lightbox, 1590 x 2340 mm National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Purchased 1988, © The artist.
- Figure 3 – Caravaggio, *Narcissus*, 1597–1599?, oil on canvas, 110x92 cm. Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica, Rome.
- Figure 4 – Vik Muniz, *Narcissus*, 2005, chromogenic color print, 226.2 x 182.6 cm © 2014 Vik Muniz / Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.
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Kako se reciklirati kroz umetnost: otpad inspiracije u savremenoj umetnosti

Sažetak: Ovaj tekst će se fokusirati na rad dva savremena umetnika, Vika Muniza i Džefa Vola, kako bi prodiskutovao promenu materijala i inspiracije vezane za konceptualnu umetnost, kao i efekte ove promene. Oba ova umetnika uzimaju smeće, ekskreme, gomile otpada koji se smatra samim krajnjim, beskorisnim ostatkom ljudskih aktivnosti i civilizacije i transformišu te, takozvane, mrtve materijale u originalne umetničke proizvode. Na neki način, oni koriste mrtve materijale i *ponovo ih rađaju* u umetnosti. Kroz Munizove ponovne izrade poznatih umetničkih dela od otpadnog materijala, ili putem Volove kompletne reinterpretacije već postojećeg i beskorisnog smeća dolazi se kako do doslovnog, tako i do simboličkog *recikliranja* namenjenog savremenom društvu.

Ključne reči: Vik Muniz, Džef Vol, otpad, recikliranje, novi materijalizam, savremena umetnost;