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One Man's Trash:

The Story of Garbage Artists in South America

What is art? According to the Cambridge Dictionary, art is *the making of objects, images, music, etc. that are beautiful or that express feelings*. But do the items the art is made from need to be beautiful? Artist Vik Muniz and his *Catadores*, as well as the children of the *Recycled Orchestra of Cateura*, would argue that they do not. These resilient individuals have stretched the boundaries of modern art, turning to a new medium to express themselves: garbage. Their stories have inspired others all over the world, and ought to be shared as symbols of resilience and extraordinary creativity.

The artist Vik Muniz was born in São Paulo, Brazil, but moved to the US to pursue his artistic career. He became popular for unique art styles, and decided to use his influence to shed light on one of the poorest places in Brazil: the Jardim Gramacho trash dump. Before its recent closure, this landfill received around 8,000 tons of trash a day, and it was teeming with desperate trash-pickers, or *Catadores*, who relied on it for their survival. Their only source of income relied on sifting through the endless piles of rubbish in the hopes of finding material and metals to trade for money. Day after day these persistent workers came back in the hopes of providing

their children with a brighter future, often without hope of escaping the system themselves. That is, until Vik Muniz decided to do something about it.

Muniz met with the local *Catadores*, and they began brainstorming ways to escape the cycle of poverty down at the landfill. Given his artistic experience, Muniz started a project to create pieces of art out of something the *Catadores* knew well- the very garbage in which they worked. Muniz and the *Catadores* labored tirelessly for 3 years to create large scale portraits of the *Catadores* out of the landfill trash, using items such as nets, toilets, cans, tires, batteries and other pieces of trash. They would take a picture at the landfill, and then recreate it on a larger scale on the ground. These portraits were then photographed and scaled down, and they were sold at a major art auction. In total, the proceeds of the auction totaled over \$250,000, and that money was returned to the *Catadores* and their organization at the landfill. The workers at Jardim Gramacho never chose to be in poverty, and many were born into a broken system. But with years of tireless work, determination, and the help of an artist with a dream, these resilient *Catadores* achieved more than they could have ever imagined.

In a similar fashion to Muniz, artist Favio Chavez created unique art out of trash- but in this time, art for the ears. The Cateura landfill is a garbage dump near Asunción, Paraguay, and the children there live tough lives marked by violence, disease, and poverty. When Favio Chavez, an Argentinian musician working in the area, saw the children, he began to offer classes at the local music school. They at first worked with a just a few donated instruments, and they did not have nearly enough instruments to match the demand of the local kids. Working together with a local carpenter nicknamed “Cola”, they began to create functioning instruments out of the very garbage from the landfill. Instruments like violins and flutes were made of cans, bottle caps, old coins, water pipes, and assorted “junk” from the landfill. With a fresh supply of instruments,

the children worked tirelessly with Chavez, performing nearby at competitions and festivals. This orchestra soon drew worldwide attention, and the students were flown all over the world to perform for bands and even several Popes. I had the pleasure of going to a performance by the orchestra on tour in North Carolina, and I was not disappointed. The sight of all the young men and women, many younger than I am, all playing beautiful music with their recycled instruments, was truly inspiring. Chavez once said, “The world sends us garbage, we send back music.” While the children of Cateura never could have imagined touring all over the world to perform, they took the opportunity when it presented itself and didn’t let their surroundings affect them, and their determination paid off.

Stories like the ones of the *Catadores* and the children of Cateura are incredible examples of resilience. Not only are they talented artists and musicians, but they had to overcome so many obstacles, societal stereotypes, and broken systems to get where they are now. In this case, both of these stories originated in landfills, some of the most dirty and disgusting places on the planet. And yet, through the perseverance of the artists, they both resulted in beautiful masterpieces that display the glory of their cultures and of the world.

Images:



Vik Muniz at the Jardim
Gramacho landfill



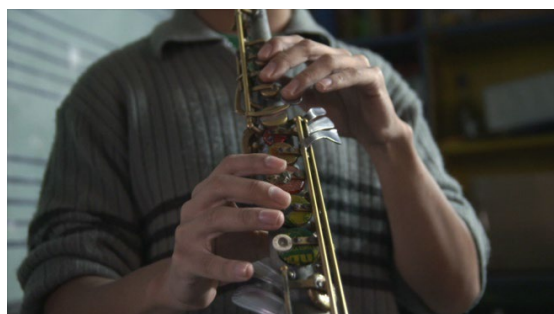
Catador posing for portrait, portrait later being constructed out of garbage



Musicians of the *Recycled Orchestra of Cateura*



Instruments made out of garbage from the Cateura landfill



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