

## Acclaimed Brazilian artist Vik Muniz to host screening here and make massive artwork in Squamish

by [Janet Smith](#) on Jul 18, 2014 at 4:20 pm



Brazilian-born artist Vik Muniz is probably best known here for the Academy Award–nominated documentary *Waste Land*, in which he worked with garbage pickers at Rio de Janeiro's sprawling landfill to create giant, mosaiclike portraits out of trash. It was both a devastating look at the poverty-stricken people who live at the dump, and a revelation of the transformative power of art.

Now the international art star with a passionate social conscience is set to come to B.C. to create another of his massive, mosaiclike pieces. The Vancouver Biennale will bring him and his team to B.C. from Monday (July 21) to August 8 to work on a gigantic portrait of a Squamish resident made from the area's natural materials.

Muniz will actually appear in town here, in person, on Wednesday (July 23) at the Rio Theatre (1660 East Broadway) for a double screening of the mesmerizing *Waste Land* with the Canadian premiere of his *This Is Not a Ball*. The latter follows the artist as he plans out a pair of art installations using 20,000 meticulously arranged soccer balls, travelling around his country and the world to research the sport's history and its biggest fans. It opens the program at 6:30 p.m.; *Waste Land* screens at 8 p.m; and Muniz heads up a Q&A at 9:30 p.m. (He hosts a similar event, with a screening of *Waste Land*, at Squamish's Totem Hall on Monday [July 21].)

When the Straight catches up to the affable, in-demand artist, he is still in Rio de Janeiro (he splits time between there and New York City), which is just getting over the World Cup.

"It's a little quieter; there's a lot of tourists still here. things are slowly getting back to normal, which is good, but it was a fun experience to have all the foreigners here," he says. "The World Cup was contrary to what most people expected. People expected Brazil to win and the whole thing to be a disaster. But it was the opposite."

Muniz, who caught the first and last games but missed much of the FIFA frenzy due to installing a

major new piece in Arles, France, says he's not a footie fanatic, but it's also something he can't escape—and, ever the social observer, he sees it as a fascinating connecting force. “For Brazil it's almost an element of national identity,” he explains. “Being Brazilian it's almost impossible to neglect. You have your team and everyone rallies for that. But also what fascinates me is soccer as a human activity: it can only be rivalled by great religion. Over the whole world, a billion people watched the World Cup this time. A billion people: a good fraction of the entire race was connected and looking at one thing. That gave me a lot of food for thought.”

That food for thought shows in *This Is Not a Ball*, which started as a project to install two matching fundraising works crafted out of 10,000 soccer balls each at a Rio de Janeiro favela and Mexico City's mega Azteca Stadium, but grew into Muniz travelling around the world with the cameras and profiling the people who love the beautiful game.

“It was a fun project. If there's any drama in it, it was me trying to find an image [to make with the soccer balls]. I found that running after the ball through nine countries: a lot of what I do in my work is the spirit of immersion. Normally I try to find out as much as I can about the subject.”

That was certainly the case with 2010's *Waste Land*, where he formed close relationships and built trust with some of the 1,700 garbage pickers—some of Brazil's most marginalized people, who built a community sorting through trash. He says he maintains contact with a few of them, but events around Jardim Gramacho have made it difficult to return to the community there. The landfill was closed in 2012 (in part as cleanup for World Cup hosting) and is being transformed into a vast facility for harnessing greenhouse gases generated by the rotting garbage, which will in turn be used to fuel to heat homes and run cars. Lump sums have gone to the pickers, known as catadores, but Muniz has tried to advocate for matching funds from the city to set up a major recycling depot on part of the site.

“The soil there is so contaminated there's no way they could clean up the place,” he says. “It's near the port, and would be perfect. But it's a cultural thing: most of the people who live at Gramacho don't make longtime plans.... They decided to just share the money among them. Each one of them got \$5,000 and it didn't last. They bought cars, TVs, booze, drugs, and the money is all gone there.” Now garbage is burned at the site, he says, and there are great clouds of noxious smoke. “That adds to the problems. And now that the landfill is gone, crime is rampant.”

Whereas Muniz worked with garbage to create the artworks that have outlasted Rio's infamous mountain of trash, he will use much different materials for a similar, massive project in Squamish. Working with First Nations and community members, he plans to use natural materials from the surrounding area.

"The most interesting thing about these projects is the social element to them," says Muniz, who moved to New York City from Sao Paulo in the early 1980s to pursue art, and became well known for blending unexpected materials and photography. His *Sugar Children*, portraits of Caribbean kids who worked on sugar plantations made out of the sweet substance and then rephotographed, was featured at the Museum of Modern Art in the mid-1990s. He's also used everything from ketchup to wool to chocolate sauce to execute his artworks, which now sit in the permanent collections of every gallery from the Tate to the Whitney.

"When you start making art, you want to control everything, to show what you're capable of but also discover what you're capable of by doing it yourself," he explains. Now, as he matures, he says, he enjoys involving others in the making of his art, and handing over the responsibility. "I keep thinking of how to extend the idea of participation to a type of art experience that came before the idea of spectacle was devised, where a person performs for a large number of people. Before, people would just perform together and a lot of what happened in culture was by sharing. I keep thinking maybe there are a few ways to engage the public beyond ideas of being just observers.

"Gramacho was the first time I could prove that it could affect the experience of anyone—of people who had no experience of art-making and no connection at all."

From there he's worked with everyone from children and teens in Brazilian cities to communities in France. Here, like elsewhere, he's not sure what the end product will look like. "I've been doing a lot of research about what should that image represent to the people involved to empower and emphasize the spirit of collaboration," says Muniz, who is bringing some of his long-time team members to work on the project. In other words, he may be just as surprised at what emerges from his work here as the visitors to the Biennale will be seeing it.