

Seeing Waste and Ourselves Differently

by Ralph C. Martin

“It’s not bad to be poor.

It’s bad to be rich and

at the height of fame,

with morals, that are a dirty shame.”

Valter dos Santos, Vice-President of Association of Pickers, Jardim Gramacho, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

Waste Land, directed by Lucy Walker, is now available on DVD. Viewing it is a rich experience and I highly recommend it.

Jardim Gramacho, the largest landfill in the world and situated in Rio de Janeiro, is featured in *Waste Land*. Every day 3,000 garbage pickers are paid to pick, sort and assemble 200 tonnes by hand, so that it can be recycled. “It’s bit a like the stock market” explained one picker, “and we retrieve re-usable trash that is most in demand and adjust the price according to supply.”

Some are ashamed of having to resort to such degrading labour, yet others approach it with pride and recognize that about 50% of Rio de Janeiro’s waste is being diverted from landfill and subsequent polluting effects. Even those who understand the dignity of earning a living in this way, recognize that a system to divert such waste at source would be more efficient. In a world of wealthy people too lazy to sort their trash, it is the poor who rescue them from the consequences of their negligence.

It took an artist, Vik Muniz, to transform some of the trash to reveal its beauty. He helped the pickers to arrange the selected trash to present images of their own faces in compelling art. “When you lean in close you only see the materials but when you step back you see the image,” he pointed out to the pickers. In the end, art patrons loved the results and paid handsomely for it.

Recently, I met a businessman who jumped into dumpsters at his glass company’s site to get a close look at what was thrown away. In 2007, they sent 967 tonnes of waste to the landfill and by 2009 it was down to 253 tonnes. It paid to observe.

David Gordon, the Manager of the City of Guelph Organic Waste Processing and Compost Production Facility, kindly gave a tour and answered a garbage truck load of questions for a small group of us last month. I was struck by how thorough the designers were to prevent problems of smell and seepage. It is also a challenge to sort and manage so much organic material when citizens have tossed cigarette lighters, bottles and other non-organic things into the compostable mix.

The lyrics of an old song are ‘Throw it away, where’s away? There’s no such place as away.’ The penny dropped for the songwriter between the first and second line. The stuff we don’t use is still with us. By not buying what we don’t need there’s less to dispose. By using what we have as many times as possible there’s also less to buy and less to dispose. If we can no longer use something, then the trick is to recycle it.

There is a yuck factor with organic material that many want out of their sight as soon as possible. We miss so much by not valuing compostable leftovers and scraps. Compost provides nutrients and can build soil organic matter, if properly sorted, handled and delivered to farm soils.

Local organizations, and people, can and do make a difference. By being proactive about finding other uses for materials already used and sorting it before it goes to the landfill, we avoid the requirement to have pickers sort through all the trash.

It pays to be aware of the materials that we no longer need and where they are going. With just a bit of attention and extra activity we can also gain some dignity by shifting the reality of waste. Materials that are properly recycled are no longer waste, but rather resources, on the way to serving a new purpose.

There is a temptation to consider ourselves to be more civilized as we rise above the tasks of avoiding, sorting and re-processing used items. Perhaps a manifestation of decency is to live mindfully with what we no longer require and to be deliberate about husbanding it for future uses. When those materials become art, we can even see ourselves with new insight.

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