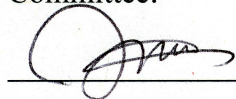


TROMPE L'OEIL AND VIK MUNIZ'S VERSO SERIES: THE BACK OF THE
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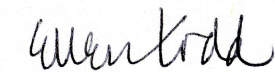
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Greta Kuriger Suiter
A Thesis
Submitted to the
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George Mason University
in Partial Fulfillment of
The Requirements for the Degree
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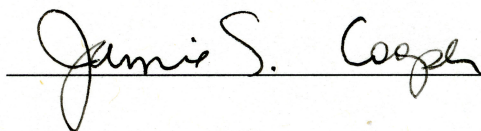
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Spring Semester 2014
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Fairfax, VA

Trompe l'Oeil and Vik Muniz's Verso Series: The Back of the Canvas as an Original
Copy

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Art
at George Mason University

by

Greta Kuriger Suiter
Master of Library and Information Science
University of Washington, 2010

Director: Angela Ho, Professor
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DEDICATION

This is dedicated to my husband Tad and my parents Bill and Sigrid.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my thesis committee for all the support and good advice when it came to my writing and my family for all the personal support. I would also like to thank my classmates, especially Kristen and Masha, without whom graduate school would not have been as much fun.

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ABSTRACT

TROMPE L'OEIL AND VIK MUNIZ'S VERSO SERIES: THE BACK OF THE CANVAS AS AN ORIGINAL COPY

Greta Kuriger Suiter, M.A.

George Mason University, 2014

Thesis Director: Dr. Angela Ho

In much of his work Vik Muniz recreates well known images in sculptural form using unexpected materials such as diamonds, sugar, and garbage. He then photographs the pieces and presents the photograph as his final work. Over the course of six years, from 2002 to 2008, Muniz created *Verso*, a sculpture series that reverses his usual artistic process. With *Verso*, Muniz recreated the backs of iconic works of art instead of the widely circulated images found on the front. He took the project a step further by not just photographing the back of a work of art but by hiring artisans to meticulously recreate the backs in three dimensions. This thesis argues that the sculptural imitation of a photograph complicates and updates the tradition of trompe l'oeil. This theme is explored through an investigation of the history of the back of the canvas in trompe l'oeil painting and its relationship to contemporary art as evidenced in the *Verso* series.

INTRODUCTION

Vik Muniz's (b. 1961) art is often described as making the ordinary extraordinary. With many of his series, he does just that, transforming wire, dust, chocolate syrup, sugar, torn pages of magazines, recycled materials, Carnival detritus, or Pantone swatches, into familiar works of art. The series *Verso* does the opposite of that. It turns a canonical work of art into everyday materials, calling attention to art as object, and bringing to the fore the underappreciated tradition in trompe l'oeil of depicting the back of the canvas. In this thesis there are two main themes I will be exploring in detail: depictions of the back of the canvas as an original work of art as found in the history of trompe l'oeil, and determining how this tradition is relevant today both broadly in relation to photography and sculpture, and specifically within Muniz's oeuvre.

In the accompanying publication to the exhibition *Vik Muniz: Reflex* from 2005, Muniz wrote: "the use of trompe l'oeil appears and disappears mysteriously through history, tending to show up during shifts in media technology, when it becomes an almost ethical necessity for the hand to re-assert its role and ability."¹ By studying the times when trompe l'oeil has appeared in history we can better understand why Muniz considers the genre to be of importance today. In this thesis I will be looking at distinct examples of trompe l'oeil and the back of the canvas from art history and will compare

¹Vik Muniz, *Reflex: A Vik Muniz Primer* (New York City: Aperture, 2005), 113.

them to how trompe l'oeil functions today, using *Verso* as a jumping off and landing point.

To better understand what trompe l'oeil is, it is helpful to be familiar with the goals and some of the basic rules of trompe l'oeil. Works of trompe l'oeil seek to deceive viewers into thinking they are looking at actual objects rather than a painted depiction of a group of objects. One of the most important aspects of trompe l'oeil paintings is that the artists' hand, or brushstroke, should not be visible. When it comes to subject matter, inanimate everyday objects work best and should be arranged in a believable way. For example, pieces of ephemera, such as letters, tickets, and scraps of paper tacked to a board create a believable composition. Objects should be represented at life size and should be depicted in a shallow field of depth. It is also important that the entire object is depicted. If it is cut off at an edge of the canvas it loses its believability.²

This thesis is divided into two main sections: "Trompe l'oeil and the back of the canvas" and "Verso." "Trompe l'oeil and the back of the canvas" follows the development of trompe l'oeil from antiquity to today, focusing on times when the back of the canvas appeared. This section has four subsections including, "Origins of trompe l'oeil to Gijsbrechts' *Back of the Canvas*," "Trompe l'oeil in America," "Trompe l'oeil and the 20th century," and "The resurgence of trompe l'oeil today." Each subsection looks at trompe l'oeil or the back of the canvas theme and the society in which it emerged during a particular time period. The first subsection looks at the origins of trompe l'oeil and how it came to flourish during the late Renaissance. Discussion then continues with a

² Jean Baudrillard, "The Trompe L'Oeil," in *Calligram: Essays in New Art History from France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 53–62.

jump to America in the late 1800s where we find an audience looking at high art and mass entertainments in a similar way. This conflation of high and low culture is telling in regards to how audiences were encountering objects of deception. The next subsection looks at trompe l'oeil moving into the sculptural sphere with Marcel Duchamp's readymades paving the way for inclusion of objects in art. Finally, the last subsection looks at the resurgence that trompe l'oeil has undergone in the past few years.

The second main section looks at *Verso* in detail with regards to process of creation, the use of photography and sculpture in contemporary art, humor in contemporary art, Muniz's choice of famous works of art as subject matter, and a brief look at some of Muniz's other series. Muniz created *Verso* over the course of six years, from 2002 to 2008. *Verso* is a sculpture series which plays with visual literacy and people's perception in a different way than his other work. With *Verso*, Muniz photographed the backs of iconic works of art, such as Pablo Picasso's *Woman Ironing* and Grant Wood's *American Gothic*, and used them as his inspiration. Instead of creating a photograph of a sculptural work, Muniz starts with a photograph and produces a sculptural work as his final project. With this series Muniz takes his play with visual literacy and iconic subject matter a step further by not only photographing the backs of works, but by hiring artisans to meticulously recreate these backs in three dimensions (fig. 1).

Verso as exhibited at Sikkema Jenkins & Co. in September to October of 2008 consists of nine sculptures based on famous paintings. Three are based on paintings at the Guggenheim, including Pierre-Auguste Renoir, *Woman with Parrot* (1871); Pablo

Picasso, *Woman Ironing* (1904); Fernand Léger, *The Smokers* (1911-1912). Three more are inspired by works at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA): Vincent van Gogh, *Starry Night* (1889); Pablo Picasso, *Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J.)* (1907); and Henri Matisse, *The Red Studio* (1911). The remaining three represent paintings at the Art Institute of Chicago: Georges Seurat, *A Sunday Afternoon on the Grande Jatte* (1884-1886), Grant Wood, *American Gothic* (1930); and Edward Hopper, *Nighthawks* (1942). The exhibition also included fourteen backs of photographs from the New York Times photography morgue with the title *Times Verso*. These images are interesting comparisons to the paintings in terms of size, reproducibility, and legibility. Like many of Muniz's series he has continued to add new additions to *Verso* over time when the opportunity arises. In Muniz's hometown of São Paulo, Brazil, for example, an exhibition at the gallery Fortes Vilaça included versos based on artwork by artists connected to São Paulo. Well known Brazilian works such as *Abaporu* by Tarsila do Amaral (fig. 2) and *Samba* by Emiliano Di Cavalcanti served as inspiration. For the purposes of this thesis I will be mainly referring to the original nine works and will include a comparison to *Times Verso* in the Verso section.

All nine sculptures in *Verso* have titles that allude to their original counterparts but exclude the original artist, such as *Verso (Starry Night)*, and *Verso (Nighthawks)*. In reproducing the backs Muniz has removed the original artists and the recto image but still alludes to both, allowing the viewer to conjure the image in their minds eye while examining the exhibition labels, markings by the artist, and the nicks and scratches

apparent on the wooden frames. Through *Verso* we are allowed entrance into the behind-the-scenes world of the museum and the private sphere of the artist's studio.

As a photographer, Muniz creates photographs using an unexpected range of materials and multiple working methods. Using photography in a documentary way is common in contemporary art. Muniz states in *Reflex*, "I sometimes feel that I am not really a photographer because I just use photography to document everything else I really like to do."³ In contemporary art understanding the process of creating a work is key to fully appreciating and understanding the art. The subject matter represented in *Verso* calls attention to many issues related to the artistic process including originality, authorship, and collaboration.

Beginning in the 1970s, the artist Duane Hanson started creating incredibly convincing lifelike sculpture of everyday people. Today artists like Ron Mueck, Gavin Turk, Jamie Salmon, and others, create trompe l'oeil sculptures and play with expectations of scale and materials. Muniz contributes to this trend, and breaks away from it, in two ways. The first is in his choice of subject matter in that he chooses to represent an art historical object, and the second is his choice of scale in that it is a life-size reproduction. In this thesis I will argue that by representing the back of a canvas, and by using canonical subject matter, Muniz is calling attention to the object-ness of a framed artwork; an object that often gets left behind as the image gets reproduced and circulated.

³ Vik Muniz, *Reflex: A Vik Muniz Primer* (New York City: Aperture, 2005), 74.

John Ruskin identified the unnerving quality of trompe l'oeil when he stated that such representations caused viewers to focus on “the materiality of the constructed object” rather than “the truth of representation.”⁴ Ruskin was disturbed by the power of trompe l'oeil to make viewers question their ability to perceive and recognize truths. Fortunately, during certain times in the history of art, including today, the public loves to be manipulated and challenged through visual puns and tricks.

Today we are increasingly reliant on digital reproductions and experiencing works of art primarily through the World Wide Web. Exploring Muniz's creative process and placing *Verso* within the context of his oeuvre will provide background for understanding the work. It is fascinating to look at how Muniz challenges his audiences' perception of familiar images by recreating them in innovative ways. As Lisa Turvey wrote in her review of *Verso* for *ArtForum*, “At what point does an image become so familiar and disseminated that it itself is expendable?”⁵

Digital photography has changed how we perceive images. It is cheaper, quicker, and easier to share visual information digitally. There is an increased demand for more information, including information about information. The *Verso* series fits into this trend by providing access to a rarely seen side of a famous work of art. It also denies this trend by creating a sculpture that is best experienced in real life, and is problematic when experienced through photographic reproductions. A comparison to Philippe Gronon's

⁴ Sybille Ebert-Schifferer, *Deceptions and Illusions: Five Centuries of Trompe l'Oeil Painting*. (Washington DC: National Gallery of Art, 2002) 18.

⁵ Lisa Turvey, “Vik Muniz,” *Artforum International*, December 2008.

series of *Verso* photographs will provide a look at what the verso of a famous work of art can tell us when it is only photographed.

The relationship between the copy Muniz has created and the original is important to consider now because in today's society we are bombarded with visual representations that distort traditional ideas of authorship and access. As new technological advances become commonplace it makes sense that art would engage with such issues. If we think of art history as a continuum, it is clear to see that *Verso* exists as an example of art from our time the same as Gijsbrechts's work exists as an exemplary work of the 1600s. Since *Verso* and *Back of a Canvas* are relatively similar, but made hundreds of years apart, how can both accurately represent the time period they are from? This thesis hopes to begin to answer that question by looking at times in the past when trompe l'oeil has emerged and comparing it to current practices of contemporary art as exemplified in Muniz's *Verso* series.

TROMPE L'OEIL AND THE BACK OF THE CANVAS

In Vik Muniz's *Verso* series we find the opposite of a painted depiction of a three-dimensional object. Instead a flat image, a documentary photograph, provides the subject matter for a three-dimensional trompe l'oeil. As such, Muniz extends the tradition of trompe l'oeil to incorporate contemporary modes of production, including a focus on process which entails multiple media and the work of artisans, as well as using famous works of art as subject matter. In the publication *Reflex*, Muniz wrote that trompe l'oeil appears and disappears throughout history, especially during times of technological shifts.⁶ Trompe l'oeil is a genre that asserts the hand of the artist by hiding it. With trompe l'oeil we experience a heightened awareness and interest in how works of art are created. By exploring the history of trompe l'oeil from the Greeks to the twentieth century, I will highlight those times throughout history in which trompe l'oeil and especially the back of the canvas appear. By tracing the evolution of a particular genre of art and exploring briefly the society in which it arises, I demonstrate how Muniz participates in this tradition. We find in *Verso*, a series of works of art that are uniquely of our times but also look back to a long tradition found in art history.

⁶ Vik Muniz, *Reflex: A Vik Muniz Primer* (New York City: Aperture, 2005), 113.

The term trompe l'oeil first came to describe works of art around the year 1800.⁷ It literally means “eye-deceiver” and up until the 1800s it was an unnecessary distinction. In the exhibition catalogue to *Deceptions and Illusions: Five Centuries of Trompe l'Oeil Painting*, Sybille Ebert-Schifferer points out that all European art from the Renaissance until the mid-1800s strove for accurate imitation of the world and thus it was anachronistic to consider eye-fooling images as a separate genre. What technique did not separate, subject matter did. For the most part the subject matter of trompe l'oeil included everyday objects depicted life size and in a shallow space. In the hierarchy of subject matter, still-life and trompe l'oeil were at the bottom. The emphasis of the painting was on the skill that artists employed to conceal their hand. The paintings should look like objects not paint. Ebert-Schifferer states that “It was precisely the way trompe l'oeil caused a painter to disappear behind his work that resulted in this genre's being so despised within the hierarchical schemes established by the academies.”⁸ Even though this was the case, trompe l'oeil was always a popular genre of painting with customers, patrons, and artists alike.

Origins of trompe l'oeil to Gijsbrecht's *Back of a Canvas*

Even though the term trompe l'oeil was not used as a noun until the year 1800, the history of trompe l'oeil begins with the Greeks and the often-quoted story of Zeuxis and Parrhasius. The two artists had a contest to see who could make the most lifelike painting. Zeuxis depicted grapes. After revealing his painting a bird flew into it trying to

⁷ Sybille Ebert-Schifferer, *Deceptions and Illusions: Five Centuries of Trompe L'Oeil Painting* (Washington D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 2002), 17.

⁸ Ibid.

snatch one of the grapes with no luck. Zuexis then asked Parrhasius to draw the curtain away from his image, but amazingly his painting was the curtain. In this example from art history we find the origins not just of a hyper realistic tradition of applying pigments to a surface, but also the idea that *who* you trick determines the value of a work of art. By deceiving a fellow artist instead of a bird, Parrhasius wins the competition.

Not all of the Greeks thought that representations of reality were a good thing. Plato and Aristotle disagreed on this matter. Plato thought the imitation of reality in paint was simply a way to obscure the truth. This idea is also found in the Middle Ages. “In the wake of medieval Christian thought, when everything the human eye could see was deemed a hollow semblance, illusionism was likewise denigrated as mere ‘deceit’.”⁹

The shift to fully appreciating and valuing realism in art emerged in the thirteenth century with a new empirical approach when one-point perspective, light and shadow, colors, and imitation all became necessary for artists to employ. The earliest example of the back of the canvas theme could possibly date back to the late 1400s. This painting is by an artist from the Ferrarese School and it is titled “The Virgin and Child with Angels” (fig. 3). M. L. d’Orange-Mastai puts this to be the first occurrence of the back of the canvas theme.

The strangest feature of all is that the picture appears as if painted not on the front but on the reverse of a stretched canvas. And at some time - the artist wishes us to believe - it had been hidden from view by a cloth covering drawn taut and attached to the border by a narrow band nailed at close intervals. Now at last, the covering has been torn away, leaving only the jagged fragments we see around it. It is truly startling to meet at so early a date the theme of the reversed canvas and the shreds of paper, which, to present knowledge, did not surface again until the 17th c.”¹⁰

⁹ Ibid, 21.

¹⁰ M.L. d’Orange Mastai, *Illusion in Art: Trompe l’Oeil: A History of Pictorial Illusionism*. (New York, New York: Abaris Books, 1975), 65.

Another explanation for the torn shards of parchment around the image is found in the catalogue to the exhibition *Deceptions and Illusions: Five Centuries of Trompe l'Oeil Painting*. In this text both Sybille Ebert-Schifferer and David Alan Brown¹¹ propose that the parchment was covering the *front* of the canvas instead of the back. Ebert-Schifferer postulates that the painting is depicting the remains of the picture's packing materials and compares it to John Haberle's *Torn in Transit* (fig. 4) from the early 1890s which depicts an image partially revealed beneath a torn package complete with mailing labels.¹² This comparison focuses on the logistics of moving artwork from one place to another. The artists concerns of properly packing, storing, and delivering a painting is given more weight than possibly ever before. Regardless of whether the painting is in fact depicting a hidden image on the back of a canvas, or a revealed image on the front of a canvas, it is clear that the painting is calling attention to its artifice. Paintings of religious figures are just that - paintings.

The slow emergence of trompe l'oeil continued until it reached a zenith in the Golden Age of Dutch art in the seventeenth century. This was influenced by developments that started in the sixteenth century when the Low Countries saw a growth of interest in scientific observation and discovery as well as the emergence of a new economic system. The development of capitalism saw a change from the reliance on agricultural production to a new interdependence on strangers for buying and selling goods. As more mediated sales were conducted in the market, there was a fear that

¹¹ Brown agrees with this assessment and describes how the painting "is unique in panel paintings of the period, but is commonly found in contemporary manuscript illuminations" thus hypothesizing that the painter may have been primarily a miniaturist, p. 294.

¹² Ebert-Schifferer, *Deceptions and Illusions: Five Centuries of Trompe L'Oeil Painting*, 32.

merchants would use dubious techniques to sell their wares. In this atmosphere of fear of deception, artists experimented with illusions found in images. Consumers were wary of being cheated in the marketplace, but art lovers highly regarded painted deceptions precisely because the images claimed to be something they were not. In the first chapter of *Painting & the Market in Early Modern Antwerp*, Elizabeth Honig summarizes the relationship between painting and the marketplace as: “The triumph of deception and trickery through eloquent representation on the stage of the marketplace is, after all, the triumph of painting.”¹³ Even though Honig is referring to the cultural climate in Antwerp, the characteristics that she discusses were also observed in the Dutch Republic in the seventeenth century.

The logical conclusion of picture making that calls attention to itself as an object would be further explored and flawlessly executed by the Dutch master Cornelius Norbertus Gijsbrechts in the late sixteen hundreds. His *Back of a Canvas* (fig. 5) from 1670 displays not only his technical skills at hiding the hand of the artist, but it also shows off his artistic genius. As painter to the king of Denmark, Gijsbrechts’ paintings resided in royal company. His *Back of a Canvas*, and *Painted Easel* (fig. 6) were both included in the king’s Perspective Chamber, a section of the royal Kunstkammer, along with optical devices, perspective boxes, specimens from nature, and various examples of man-made tools created to explore and document the known world. This amalgam of

¹³ Elizabeth Alice Honig, *Painting & the Market in Early Modern Antwerp* (New Haven [Conn.]: Yale University Press, 1998), 2.

objects indicates that society in the time of Gijsbrechts was interested in the intersection of science and art and how people perceive reality.

Gijsbrechts created many of these reversed canvas paintings and exhibited them together with fruit still lifes. His *Back of a Canvas* from 1670 clearly displays his technical skills and by placing it on the ground, the artist draws viewers in, gently suggesting that they should turn the piece around and see the front. Upon doing so, the viewers would find only the real back of the canvas. In his review of the exhibition *Painted Illusions: The Art of Cornelius Gijsbrechts* held at the National Gallery of Art in London in 2000, Richard Dormant fantasizes about what the King's response would have been to Gijsbrechts' *Back of a Canvas*.

Gijsbrechts must have enjoyed playing tricks on his royal masters. I would bet £5 that the king did not know what his court painter was up to when his Royal Highness came across the "back" of a framed painting leaning against the wall in Gijsbrechts's studio. Seen from the reverse it was nothing much to look at: a few crooked nails holding the stretcher in the frame, ragged edges of canvas, paint smears, knots of grainy wood, and an old inventory label attached to the back of the canvas with a plug of sealing wax. You can picture the scene as the king ordered his lackeys to turn the painting round so that he could see its front, and his whoop of delight when he discovered that he had been looking at the "front" all along.¹⁴

There are many similarities between Muniz's work and Gijsbrechts'. With *Cut-Out Trompe l'Oeil Easel with Fruit Piece*, 1670-72, Gijsbrechts creates an installation that consists of what looks like multiple pieces working together to create the effect of being in the artist's studio. In fact, the display which includes an easel, a painted still life of fruit, and cut out painted canvases that resembled brushes, a palette, and other artists' tools are all created from a single piece of wood. The entire ensemble consists of one flat

¹⁴ Richard Dormant, "Look at It like This... Now like That," *The Telegraph*, February 2, 2000, sec. Culture, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/4719740/Look-at-it-like-this...-now-like-that.html>.

work of art but gives the illusion of being multiple three-dimensional objects. Overall when looking at the work it is difficult to know if some parts are real and what is painted.

In the installation of *Verso* at Sikkema Jenkins Co., the works include the canvas turned to the wall with its “back” exposed to the viewer and two wooden blocks covered with cloth that support the canvases. Unlike Gijsbrechts’ works, all of Muniz’s canvases are three dimensional mixed medium objects and if turned around they would reveal a blank canvas. Muniz presents the deceptive work with actual wooden supports, providing a context which heightens the illusion and begs viewers to question, what is real and what is art.

Ebert-Schifferer describes Gijsbrechts’ *Back of the Canvas* as “a work that constitutes one of the highest achievements in the genre in terms of mimetic ability and synthetic ‘invention.’”¹⁵ The invention was that Gijsbrechts was calling direct attention to the object-ness of the painting. By painting the canvas itself Gijsbrechts presents a negative image. At first we struggle to see the image and then we realize that it is a representation of itself, breaking ground for a non-subject to become a viable subject.

Playing with the relationship between representations and reality is something that is explored more by artists throughout the 1900s and something that would be shattered by Marcel Duchamp with the introduction of the readymade. According to Ebert-Schifferer “Gijsbrechts’ *Back of a Canvas* differs from a readymade solely – although certainly decisively – in being a *painted* reverse.” If Muniz’s *Versos* were of a canvas bought from an art supply store his too would be ready-mades, and would not be very

¹⁵ Sybille Ebert-Schifferer, *Deceptions and Illusions: Five Centuries of Trompe l’Oeil Painting*. (Washington DC: National Gallery of Art, 2002) 62.

interesting. Instead they engage viewers because they are depictions of the backs of famous works of art, not something that could be bought.

Trompe l'oeil in America

If we jump ahead now to America in the mid to late 1800s we will find similar examples of the canvas verso as well as a similar society to that in the Netherlands. As Ebert-Schifferer points out trompe l'oeil flourished in seventeenth century Holland and nineteenth century America, both bourgeois economies with small capitalist markets.¹⁶ In America during the nineteenth century shifts in technology and society range from industrialization to westward expansion to urbanization. Here we find another example of a time in history experiencing shifts in media technology, affecting how people communicate and create art. In *Framing America* by Frances K. Pohl we find an explanation for the rise in popularity of trompe l'oeil and still life, that art was becoming more democratic:

While the academician might place still life at the lower end of the hierarchy of genres (with history painting still assuming a prominent place at the top), and might also dismiss trompe l'oeil illusionism as lacking in that crucial element of great art – imagination – the department store shopper and middle-class traveler followed his or her own tastes. And these tastes were increasingly being guided by the same men who marketed other objects with persistence in their stores and saloons. The art market was, indeed, becoming more 'democratic,' much to the chagrin of artists like Whistler and Dewing.¹⁷

In America the conceit of the nineteenth century con-man hinged on the public's willingness to engage. Similar to the situation in the Netherlands, an atmosphere of deception permeated the world of fine art where deception become a thing of delight. In James W. Cook's *The Arts of Deception: Playing with Fraud in the Age of Barnum*, Cook

¹⁶ Ebert-Schifferer, *Deceptions and Illusions: Five Centuries of Trompe L'Oeil Painting*, 95.

¹⁷ Frances K. Pohl, *Framing America: A Social History of American Art* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2012), 295.

explores the use of trompe l'oeil by the artist William M. Harnett (fig. 7) in comparison to an object on display in P. T. Barnums Museum. Cook finds that viewers would read the paintings and exhibits such as the Feejee Mermaid, a half monkey half fish critter, in similar ways.

One viewer claimed that Harnett's hunting horn was painted, while another insisted that the wooden background was real. One viewer claimed to see a seam separating the body and tail of Barnum's Mermaid, while another insisted that the fusion was fully natural. For both Barnum and Harnett, the ultimate goal was to produce a highly unstable, perpetually contested brand of verisimilitude.¹⁸

In this example Cook is bringing together a mix of high and low culture that may not have been experienced by viewers at the same moment, but tellingly they are perceived and dissected in similar ways. Reactions to the painting and the mermaid include both skepticism and a desire to believe what they are seeing. By representing something familiar - the hunting horn with Harnett, and the notion of a mermaid with Cook - viewers can imagine the thing being real, they want the image to be real but at the same time they have doubts.

It wasn't just the general public that was fooled. At the 1888 St. Louis Exposition the artist George W. Platt exhibited his painting *Vanishing Glories*. An example of trompe l'oeil that depicted a buffalo skull from which accoutrements of the Western cowboy hung, including a lariat, pistols, a Winchester, and a sombrero. The public debated for days whether parts of the painting were real or not, especially the wood grain background. But it was a cause of excitement for the public to see famous people also be puzzled by the work. Cook recounts the story in detail in his chapter "Queer Illusions"

¹⁸ James W. Cook, *The Arts of Deception: Playing with Fraud in the Age of Barnum* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2001), 225.

and states that Patrick Gilmore a well-known orchestra conductor and a mystery Lady in Black were both considered celebrities at the time in the local paper. “And when, by sheer coincidence, Gilmore and the Lady in Black appeared before Platt’s painting together one night, it was almost more excitement than the crowd could bear.”¹⁹

In trompe l’oeil, as much as it deceives viewers, there is always a clue indicating to the viewer that the object before them is a representation of a thing and not the thing itself. The goal isn’t to actually become the object the painting seeks to represent, it is only to temporarily fool the viewer and thus provide enjoyment for the viewer when they realize the deception. At the very end of her essay “Seductive Reflexivity: Ruskin’s Dreaded Trompe L’oeil,” Caroline Levine points out that “...there would be little pleasure in trompe l’oeil if we never paid attention to the fact that it was a trick.”²⁰

For one to enjoy a work of trompe l’oeil it is necessary that people recognize that they are being deceived. Regardless of how convincing the painting may be, for the viewer to appreciate the skill of the artist the viewer needs to acknowledge that they are looking at a painting. According to Levine, “Trompe l’oeil actually demands that we attend to the artifice of art.”²¹ When we contemplate the falsehood of the work of art we find ourselves split between the illusion and the art itself. “Self-reflexive art is not a *self-divided object*, but an *object that divides the subject*, by offering us two mutually exclusive moments of experience – one of perceiving art as a reference to the real, the

¹⁹ James W. Cook, *The Arts of Deception: Playing with Fraud in the Age of Barnum*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2001) 244.

²⁰ Caroline Levine, “Seductive Reflexivity: Ruskin’s Dreaded Trompe L’oeil,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 56, no. 4 (Autumn 1998): 374.

²¹ Levine, 366.

other of perceiving it as an artificial object, a skillful fabrication.”²² Viewers are torn between these two ideas and it becomes challenging to focus on both the thing being depicted and the fact that the depiction is so lifelike at once. Muniz uses this to his advantage in much of his work. Forcing viewers to contemplate the materials used as well as the image itself. In *Verso* we find this as well. The question of *how* is just as important as the question of *what*.

Trompe l’oeil and the 20th century

This engagement with verisimilitude through representations of reality led artists in the early 1900s, such as Pablo Picasso and Marcel Duchamp, to incorporate actual objects into their work instead of depicting the objects using paint or sculptural means. Whereas Picasso experimented with including objects into his still-lives, Duchamp took the object by itself as the work of art. Readymades differ pronouncedly from trompe l’oeil paintings in that they are not deceptive - they are mass produced real objects representing themselves. The first readymade by Duchamp was *Bottle Rack* (fig. 8) in 1914. The interest in these objects disappears as time goes on until the late 1950s when demand for them starts to rise. But due to a lack of originals the curator Ulf Linde and the art dealer Arturo Schwarz begin making handmade versions of the readymades. Helen Molesworth describes this event in the catalogue to the *Part Object Part Sculpture* exhibition held at the Wexner Center for the Arts at Ohio State University in 2005-2006.

In 1960 Linde made copies of *Bicycle Wheel* and *Fresh Widow* for a gallery exhibition of Duchamp’s work in Stockholm. It appears that, at first, Duchamp was unaware of these

²² Levine, 372.

copies. At Linde's beckoning, Duchamp traveled to Stockholm in 1961, where he was presented with Linde's copies, both of which he graciously signed 'copie conforme.'²³

In 1964 Schwarz produced more copies. All of the lost readymades were recreated in editions of groups of ten with one edition going to Duchamp and another to Schwarz. The production of these readymades were overseen by Duchamp and accuracy was strived for. Schwarz hired engineers to create blueprints of the readymades based on photographs of the objects. *Fountain* was the only readymade not made by a craftsman. Instead a mold was made by a ceramicist and produced by an Italian plumbing manufacturer. The other objects were made by craftsmen – a glassblower for *Paris Air*, a welder for the *Bottle Rack*, and a carpenter for the *Hat Rack*. This is an interesting comparison to *Verso* because we tend to think of the readymades as mass-produced objects, when in fact most of Duchamp's readymades that we see in museums today are from these handmade reproductions from the early 1960s.²⁴ There is a huge sense of irony in this story; that something so original as calling found objects art, could eventually only be recreated through the handmade work of skilled craftsman. In reflection we are reminded that technology from the twentieth century is rapidly changing. In Duchamp's readymades we find the creation of a new series of handmade sculptures based on lost famous works of art, through the use of photographs and blueprints of the originals, because of this it provides a fascinating comparison to Muniz's *Verso* series. It is possible to faithfully and convincingly recreate objects based on photographs alone.

²³ Helen Anne Molesworth, *Part Object Part Sculpture* (Columbus, Ohio: Wexner Center for the Arts, The Ohio State University, 2005), 182–185.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 185–188.

Another trend that developed in the 1950's and 60's was that of visual puns rather than imitation. While these examples are not strict examples of trompe l'oeil, they do participate in the tradition of depicting the back of the canvas. Artists such as Jasper Johns and Roy Lichtenstein used humor and everyday objects to draw in audiences. Speaking of the New Realists in 1966, art critic Harold Rosenberg states: "In short, while the work of art today is not illusory in the sense of being a representation, it is of a nature to give rise to new forms of mystification through drawing the spectator into an invented realm not unlike that of his everyday life."²⁵

In the work *Canvas* (fig. 9), Jasper Johns painted a canvas in bluish grey tones and then placed a second smaller canvas on top of the first so that it's back was facing the viewer. Johns uses the idea from the trompe l'oeil tradition of showing the viewer the back of a canvas, but he makes no attempt to make you think that he painted it. Art historian Roann Barris explains, "instead of using illusionism or trompe l'oeil to make something seem real when it isn't, he uses something real to question the possibility of reality in painting."²⁶

Lichtenstein looks at the tradition of depicting the back of the canvas in a different way (fig. 10). Instead of using objects from the real world Lichtenstein follows art historical examples of back of the canvas subject matter, but he does so in a non-illusionistic way. Muniz notes, "For the pop artist, the task was to test manual skill

²⁵ Harold Rosenberg, *The Anxious Object: Art Today and Its Audience* (New York: Collier Books, 1966), 62.

²⁶ Roann Barris. Jasper Johns: Reorienting the Self.
<http://www.radford.edu/rbarris/art428/art427/JasperJohns.html>

against a visual environment mainly produced by machines.”²⁷ Lichtenstein, by using his recognized flat comic book style, with Benday dots, is calling attention to himself as the artist and mechanical processes with subject matter taking a secondary role.

Both Johns and Lichtenstein rely on clever ways of subverting what an audience would expect from a painting. Even if the audience was familiar with trompe l’oeil, these new takes seem unfamiliar and new, causing the viewer to take a second look. “The transformation of things by displacing them into art and of art by embedding it in a setting of actuality is the specifically twentieth-century form of illusionism.”²⁸

The resurgence of trompe l’oeil today

Similar to Dutch society in the 1670s, and America in the 1890s and 1960s, today we are navigating a new visual world. With the widespread acceptance and proliferation of digital media we are experiencing a shift in technology. This includes how we create, view, and interact with images. As images are removed from any physical bearing, they exist without context or connection to the tangible world. With its focus on artistic skill, trompe l’oeil has appeared at these times in history to reassert the skill of the artist. The examples covered in this section demonstrate how trompe l’oeil emerged in societies during times of changing technology.

Today we find examples of trompe l’oeil in a range of media and of a range of subjects. Most notably contemporary subjects include drawings and paintings that have the appearance of being a photograph, or more traditionally, a nostalgic object. The most

²⁷ Muniz, *Reflex: A Vik Muniz Primer*, 85.

²⁸ Rosenberg, 61.

famous artist creating paintings that look like photographs is Gerhard Richter. Artists working in a more traditional vein include Kyle Surges who creates paintings of nostalgic items such as yo-yos and a marshmallow roasting stick, and Sharon Moody who specializes in painted depictions of comic books. Other artists such as Molly Springfield and David Shapiro focus on the drawing of documents, either Xeroxed documents or everyday transactional documents such as receipts, both are playing with how documents function in today's society. A growing trend of artists working with sculptural trompe l'oeil is also found in contemporary art. Ai Weiwei is one such artist using unexpected materials to create everyday objects. His *Sunflower Seeds* created out of porcelain and his marble objects such as a chair and construction helmet are a few such examples.

In sculpture, paint, and drawings, trompe l'oeil has a way of making us doubt our sense of truth and makes us question reality. Muniz is aware of the history of trompe l'oeil as well as contemporary uses and harnesses this tradition to create something new. His *Verso* works do not exist as images as much as they exist as handmade objects, thus Muniz is using trompe l'oeil to reassert the role of the artist and call into question the digital proliferation of the image.

VERSO

“Each medium affords you a different experience. The physical manifestation of it is how meaning is constructed. You have to choose the medium, to exploit its properties...”

- Kiki Smith²⁹

Painting, sculpture, and photography all exist as different modes of artistic expression but artists today frequently mix media to create new forms of art. Muniz has found a way to mix the three dominant media of painting, sculpture, and photography in *Verso*. By using a painting as inspiration, and the photograph as the basis of a sculptural piece he combines the three to create a new mode of trompe l’oeil. In this section I will be investigating the roles and meanings that painting, photography, and sculpture embody in Muniz’s work and trompe l’oeil. To do this I will look at the relationship between sculpture and photography as seen in Muniz’s work and other contemporary artists. By placing *Verso* in the context of Muniz’s oeuvre I will argue that this series builds upon his previous work while at the same time engaging with media and subject matter in a new way.

In much of Muniz’s work the viewer’s attention is divided between subject and material. Muniz doesn’t try to hide the materials he works with, instead he calls attention to them. This exemplifies the modernist aesthetic which according to Caroline Levine “is

²⁹ Judith Olch Richards, *Inside the Studio: Two Decades of Talks with Artists in New York* (New York: Independent Curators International (ICI), 2004, 235.

typically generated by the use of new materials, or by the unfamiliar use of conventional ones.”³⁰ In addition to the materials used to create the work of art, viewers must also contemplate the subject. With *Verso* the subject includes both the actual back of the work of art that is Muniz’s subject, but also the history of depicting the back of the canvas. The following subsections will address both how Muniz works with unique materials and his chosen subject matter of images from pop culture and art history.

Art as process

Rosemary Hawker points out “After Modernism, hybridity of means appears as the juggling act most necessary to the ascendancy of the contemporary artist, the pursuit of singularity or purity of medium has been seen as mistaken or even antiquated.”³¹

Muniz is no stranger to working in multiple mediums and through works such as *Verso*, he must also work with a studio of hired artisans.

In the printing industry in the sixteenth century we find the emergence of a distinction between the author of an idea and the technicians who carry out the work to make the idea into a reality.³² Today we see a similar working relationship between the artist who conceives an idea or design and the artisan, craftsman, or technician who will actually create the work of art.

³⁰ Caroline Levine, “Seductive Reflexivity: Ruskin’s Dreaded Trompe L’oeil.” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 56.4 (1998): 373.

³¹ Rosemary Hawker, “Idiom Post-medium: Richter Painting Photography,” *Oxford Art Journal*, (32(2): 263-280, 2009) 266.

³² Neil de Marchi and Hans van Miegroet, “Pricing Invention: ‘Originals,’ ‘Copies,’ and Their Relative Value in Seventeenth Century Netherlandish Art Markets,” in *Economics of the Arts* (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 1996), 49.

For many artists today working with a team of craftsmen is the norm. In many instances the art market, if not the mainstream museum goer, has embraced the fact that artists are taking on the role of a director who has an original idea and then hires skilled workers to create the actual work. This type of art production is used by popular artists like Damien Hirst, Jeff Koons, Takashi Murakami, Dale Chihuly, and Maurizio Cattelan among many others. It is a factory system that allows these artists to produce pieces of art quickly, in limited series that can be sold in galleries for expensive prices. Jeff Koons has a studio in New York that employs eighty-two people. “He seldom contributes to painting or casting, but controls each step of his technicians’ work.”³³ Koons and artists like him are the like the modern day equivalent of Rubens, working with a large staff and producing as much art as the market can bear.

Taking this method of art production to the extreme was Andy Warhol with his Factory in the mid twentieth century. So much art was produced there by so many people that today it can be almost impossible to authenticate a Warhol. The Andy Warhol Authentication Board has had issues in the past with authenticating work and then reversing their opinion, or even saying that pictures received directly from Warhol are not authentic. Don Thompson describes the dilemma faced by collectors and dealers in his book *The \$12 Million Stuffed Shark: The Curious Economics of Contemporary Art*,

The question is not whether a work is fake or original, nor whether his hand ever touched the work. It is the ‘presence of the artist,’ whether Warhol at least saw the work and approved it on its way to his dealer. Scholars disagree on even that criterion; they make

³³Don Thompson. *The \$12 Million Stuffed Shark: The Curious Economics of Contemporary Art*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) 83.

the point that it was exactly the practice of blurring authorship and using mass production that produced his place in art history.³⁴

In *Reflex*, seven people are included as being a part of Muniz's studio. This is a far cry from the eighty-two that Koons employs. Working with a smaller studio means that Muniz is more hands on in the creation of his art, and that it is created with the artist present. With *Verso* Muniz had to include specially trained artisans who could successfully copy the backs of priceless works of art. Muniz points out that, "Copying the backs of old paintings sounds awfully simple until you start figuring out how to do it right. The complexity of the process made it look like a movie with a great number of experts, each doing a specific but fundamental job."³⁵ For *Verso* Muniz had to coordinate with a team of craftsmen, his studio, and work with staff at the institutions to acquire access to the originals. Barry Friar of Baobab Frames was one of the technicians to work on the *Verso* series. In a video titled "This is Verso Part 1 (of 2)" found on the YouTube channel VikMunizStudio, Friar explains that the photographs Muniz took had become a point of reference for the museums regarding the works of art.³⁶ By studying, photographing, and recreating the backs Muniz was adding to the knowledge the museums had about their works of art.

In "This is Verso Part 2 (of 2)" viewers get a glimpse of the work on a piece from *Times Verso*. Artist Rebecca Graves, the founder and Creative Director at RGraves & Co. - Decorative Painting and Murals, is seen using stamps, mixing ink, as well as aging and placing tape strategically to create a copy of the original back of a photograph. Graves is

³⁴ Thompson, 76.

³⁵ Muniz, *Verso*, 18-19.

³⁶ VikMunizStudio, "This is Verso Part 1 (of 2)", <http://youtu.be/sThr7kyozgc>.

an artist who has created many murals and decorative paintings for customers that include faux bois mantels and walls in homes.³⁷ As an artist who excels at the trompe l'oeil practice of faux bois she understands and contributes to the influence trompe l'oeil has over *Verso*.

Photography and sculpture

In her essay “Nine Years, A Million Conceptual Miles,” Charlotte Cotton emphasizes the act of combining sculpture and photography in contemporary art. “The relationship between photography and sculpture has perhaps been the most imposing signature of contemporary photography of the twenty-first century so far.”³⁸ There are a number of artists today who create works in three dimensions and then take photographs of them. They consider the photographs to be the final works. Gregory Crewdson uses live models on film like stage sets to create color photographs that have the appearance of being a film still. Thomas Demand creates three-dimensional life size paper models based on photographs from the press which he then photographs as his final work. In contrast to Muniz, Demand’s photographs are usually devoid of human presence. In *Barn* from 1997 (fig. 11) for example we see the barn walls from Hans Namuth’s photographs of Jackson Pollock, but the floor is clean and there is no sign of Pollock.

Other artists who play with the boundaries of sculpture, photography, and art history in similar ways to Muniz include the artists Paulette Tavormina and Sharon Core. Both artists create still-lives and then photograph them in a way to make viewers unsure if

³⁷ Rebecca Graves & Co., <http://rgravesandcompany.com/decorative-painting/> (accessed December 1, 2012).

³⁸ Charlotte Cotton, “Nine Years, A Million Conceptual Miles,” *Aperture*, Spring 2013, 35.

they are looking at paintings or photographs. Sharon Core's series *Thiebauds* (fig. 12) and *Early American* find the artist recreating subjects from Wayne Thiebaud's and Raphaelle Peale's paintings and then photographing it. She works from reproductions of the paintings, bakes or sources the elements needed to create the still life found in the paintings, and then photographs her created still life scene. These photographs are utterly convincing deceptions making viewers ask "Is it a photograph or a painting?"

In opposition to today's emphasis on the documentary in photography, in the 1980s one finds examples of a mix of sculptural elements and photographs intended to make photography less documentary and more expressionistic. Examples include among others the work of Robert Mapplethorpe, Doug and Mike Starn, Annette Lemieux, Sarah Charlesworth, Cindy Sherman, and Barbara Kruger. *New York Times* critic Andy Grundberg saw this trend as an attempt to make photography more artistic and less documentary.

Ultimately, then, the trend toward making photographs into something other than flat pieces of paper is not so much evidence of a postmodern backlash as it is an expression of dissatisfaction with the limitations of the conventional means of photographic display – its two-dimensionality. In part this dissatisfaction stems from a need to compete for attention with paintings and sculpture, and in part it comes from an urge to trespass beyond the strictures of the medium's veristic, documentary traditions.³⁹

Muniz, as an artist who began his career in New York in the 1980s, was aware of notions of how sculpture and photography were allowed to mix and was influenced by how the previous artists mentioned were combining media. There were and still are many artists who work with sculpture and photography in this way, but Muniz differs in that he

³⁹Andy Grundberg, "Photograph as Art Object" NYT May 2, 1987 in *Crisis of the Real: Writings on Photography, 1974-1989*, New York: Aperture Foundation, Inc. (1990) 148.

embraced the documentary effect of photography and incorporated it into a signature style. Instead of combining sculpture with photography to make photographs more expressionistic, in most of Muniz's work he exploits the documentary nature of photography to flatten his sculptural works and call attention to the fact that he is using photography in this way.

Humor and art, *Relics* to *Verso*

Some of Muniz's earliest work consists of sculptures. These works established Muniz as an artist with a sense of humor and are intrinsically entwined with how he began his career as a photographer. Muniz's first show, *Relics*, was exhibited in New York in 1987. At this point Muniz considered himself a sculptor and the show played with absurd examples of historical objects. For example, a skull with a round nose was titled *Clown Skull* (fig. 13), and a large bowl type structure with a coffee filter and coffee grounds placed inside of it was titled *Pre Colombian Coffee Maker*. In addition to the series *Relics*, Muniz has done only a couple of other series that are purely sculpture based, including *Relicário* and *Verso*. *Relicário* (Reliquary) is a series by Muniz created in 2010 that consists entirely of sculptures that are similar in theme to the *Relics* series. Objects include an Egyptian mummy lying within a see-through Tupperware container with a blue lid featuring characteristics of a sarcophagus, a soccer ball with a concave depression in it titled *Deflated Ball*, and a set of butterflies laid out as if displayed in a natural history museum, *Graphic Entomology* (fig 14). In both series there is a humorous play with what modern relics might be – a piece of toast with a burnt portrait of Christ or Che Guevara in its center for example. In contrast *Verso* lacks the same type of humor.

Although it adheres to a gimmick of disingenuousness it lacks the outright visual gag of Muniz's other sculptures.

Combining art history and humor has worked well for Muniz. Highlighting humor through art is also popular with other contemporary artists. Artworks featured in the 1999 exhibition *Abracadabra* held at the Tate Gallery in London were described as including aspects of the humor and anarchy of Dada and Fluxus, the scale and glamour of Pop, and the obsessive accumulations of Outsider Art. It was noted in the introduction by Catherine Kinley that Andy Warhol was a major influence on the artists since it was he “who has revealed the incidental within the general and made the superficial enthralling.”⁴⁰

A second essay in the catalogue by Catherine Grenier describes a noticeable trend in contemporary art that includes humor as a main component. She states that throughout Europe and the West there is a new spirit “whose spontaneous dynamic favours immediacy, light-heartedness, humour, frivolity, inventiveness and proliferation.”⁴¹ Muniz understands this playful dynamic and is not afraid to create deceptions to engage his audience. In *Reflex* he states: “Humor and visual gimmicks operate at the most basic level of art appreciation. They create physical and perceptual responses that hold the viewer in front of the work a bit longer than usual. Once you achieve this tenacity, you can afford to be deep and erudite.”

⁴⁰ Catherine Grenier and Catherine Kinley, eds., *Abracadabra: International Contemporary Art* (London: Tate Gallery Publishing, 1999), 10.

⁴¹ Ibid, 19.

Relics was successful enough that the gallery hired a photographer to photograph the works. Muniz writes about the experience of witnessing the photographer taking pictures of his work in *Reflex*.

He set up the view camera and with the help of an assistant lit the works to perfection with long, halogen lamps. I was so flattered by the amount of gear that was carted for the sole purpose of documenting my work that I started seeing documentation as the ultimate goal of the art object, its passport to posterity and fame, a kind of apotheosis.⁴²

This experience influenced Muniz's style of photography, and it became how he worked from then on. This was an important realization for Muniz. He found a way to continue to assemble images by working with physical materials, as well as master the technical aspects of photography. By combining these media he had stumbled upon a reliable process that would allow him a limitless number of variations.

Muniz considers himself to be a very straightforward and documentary photographer. In *Reflex* he wrote,

I'm a traditional photographer: I don't rely much on effects, or toning, or ways to make an image look interesting. I'm a very boring photographer. I just take pictures of things the way they are. But these two things together [taking photographs of sculpture in a straightforward manner] give a contemporary character to what I do.⁴³

Muniz of course is making multiple decisions every time he takes a photograph. There is much skill and technique involved in creating "straightforward" photographs of objects, especially objects that contain an image when viewed a certain way. In his technical manual "How to Photograph Works of Art," Sheldon Collins points out that "with three-dimensional works of art, the serious photographer will have the opportunity to go beyond simply making 'clear shots,' and may experiment with creating superior images

⁴² Muniz, *Reflex: A Vik Muniz Primer*, 19.

⁴³ Richards, *Inside the Studio: Two Decades of Talks with Artists in New York*, 233.

that both serve utilitarian functions *and* move a viewer with a profound sense of the art's immediacy.⁴⁴

Muniz convinces the viewer that all he is doing is taking a straightforward photograph, but he painstakingly created the sculpture to reveal a new image that is most convincing when photographed from a certain angle. Speaking of photographing the *Pictures of Junk* series Muniz said,

I can already foresee a number of things that can go wrong...instability, movement, or wind. When we worked with an 8x10 camera on a tower in Brazil to shoot these junk pieces, we have to figure out when the streetlights close, so the buses won't hit the potholes and we can have a steady 10-second shot. These are all things that we have to deal with that aren't written in any book.⁴⁵

Although we are more aware of the manipulations that happen with photographs, we still as a society tend to trust them as documentary evidence.⁴⁶ Barbara E. Savedoff in her essay "Transforming Images: Photographs of Representations," looks at how photography and painting diverge. Where photographs are perceived as having a documentary aura, painting is often thought of as more of a creative and thus personally expressive view of reality. It is interesting to note that Savedoff specifically looks at photographs of representations – paintings, billboards, signs, photographs, sculptures, and mannequins – to make her argument. "In a photograph, pictures are *reproduced* in their two dimensionality, whereas objects are *reduced* to two dimensionality. In this way the

⁴⁴ Sheldon Collins, *How to Photograph Works of Art: A Practical Guide for Photographers, Artists, Private Collectors, Gallery Owners, Antique Dealers, and Anyone Interested in Photographing Art* (New York: Amphoto / Watson-Guptill Publications, 1992), 10.

⁴⁵ Jason Landry, *Instant Connections: Essays and Interviews on Photography* (Boston, Massachusetts: Doolittle Press, 2013), 112.

⁴⁶ Charlotte Cotton sees the shift of more documentary photographers in contemporary art as a result of the lack of opportunities to earn a living for traditional editorial photographers. She also states that photography is inserting itself into contemporary art in increasingly unexpected ways. At the end of her article "Nine Years, A Million Conceptual Miles" she states, "for the first time in my professional life, I am seeing independent photography that doesn't operate in a conventional art-photography way..." Cotton, 39.

object and its picture are put on the same footing – they cannot be distinguished by the type of space they occupy.”⁴⁷

Muniz plays with this sensation in much of his work as he creates pictures out of different materials. This reduces the materials or objects to a two dimensional appearance and allows the picture to emerge. Take for example *Passione (Soap Opera Project)* (fig. 15), a special project hosted at Spectaculu, a school of art and technology in Rio de Janeiro. Muniz worked on the project with a group of students who completed a two month internship. In the image on the left we can see the objects piled up with the picture being formed in the negative spaces. The final picture on the right, photographed from above, gives the initial impression of a flat image, but upon closer inspection the individual objects reveal themselves and our eyes shift between the constructed picture and the materials themselves. Thus the two images of *Passione* illustrate how important the straightforward documentary style is to Muniz’s photographs. Muniz writes about photographing art works: “No matter how great an object or sculpture is, there is always an ideal angle at which the object can be perceived, and this angle always has something to do with the way the object was imagined in the first place.”⁴⁸ Muniz is referring to how he originally envisioned the work of art, and the angle of the work that needs to be captured to correspond to his original idea. If the sculptural work is not photographed at a certain angle the illusion of a constructed picture within it is lost.

⁴⁷ Barbara E. Savedoff, “Transforming Images: Photographs of Representations,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 50, no. 2 (Spring 1992): 94.

⁴⁸ Muniz, *Reflex: A Vik Muniz Primer*, 21.

This is also central to trompe l’oeil art. Masters of trompe l’oeil have to use the exact perspective that results in the illusion of objects floating on top of a flat surface. Through the layering of textures, emphasis on shadows, and highlighting materials and textures a painted trompe l’oeil is able to convince the viewer that what they are seeing are real objects. This brings us to an interesting intersection. A trompe l’oeil is more convincing in a painting than in a photograph. In the book *Trompe l’Oeil Painting: The Illusions of Reality*, Miriam Milman explains that a photograph is limited by its single viewpoint and that “unlike oil painting, is incapable of rendering the texture of objects in ways that transcend its own substance.”⁴⁹ Milman was writing in the early 1980s, since then improvements in cameras and printing techniques have enabled photographers to convincingly capture shadows and textures of objects making it a viable option for Muniz’s series that rely on the viewer’s acknowledgment of material. But a photograph will still flatten an image. This may be why Muniz found it necessary to recreate the *Verso* series in three-dimensions.

Another major difference between *Verso* and the rest of Muniz’s work is its emphasis on non-figurative subject matter. Savedoff writes that we as viewers tend to anthropomorphize objects in photographs. The effect is heightened if the object depicts human features, especially if the features are expressive.⁵⁰ In *Passione* the negative space is outlined and shaded to create human subjects. Our focus is thus at first drawn to the

⁴⁹ Miriam Milman, *Trompe l’Oeil Painting: The Illusions of Reality* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 1982), 68.

⁵⁰ Savedoff, “Transforming Images: Photographs of Representations,” 94.

human elements; after acknowledging this initial reaction viewers can investigate the objects and see them for what they are.

Subject matters

Muniz uses figurative subject matter in many of his more popular series. Photographs from *Sugar Children*, *Pictures of Garbage* and *Pictures of Junk*, as well as *Pictures of Diamonds* and *Pictures of Chocolate* among others, feature portraits as the main subject matter, often linking the portraits with the materials in some way. In *Pictures of Diamonds* for example portraits of movie stars such as Elizabeth Tayler and Marilyn Monroe are depicted in diamonds.

It is also telling that Muniz will often test a new series by completing a self-portrait first. In *Reflex* he states: “Whenever I run into a new technique before I decide on the right subject, I test out that technique by doing a self-portrait.”⁵¹ For Muniz the self-portrait is a neutral subject matter in that it is convenient⁵² and “isolated from the entire realm of subjectivity, allowing the artist a great amount of focused technical judgment, unencumbered by context.”⁵³ The self-portrait allows him to see how a figurative depiction will look for a new series. *Verso* includes no figurative subject matter in the object itself, but because of the mental image that it conjures it can be argued that it has a figurative element. If we are looking at *Verso (Nighthawks)* (fig. 16) we might

⁵¹ Muniz, *Reflex: A Vik Muniz Primer*, 142.

⁵² Muniz: “The subject is readily available. [...] It’s interesting to see versions of yourself through different materials. There isn’t anything philosophical about it, when you come to think of it. It’s just a convenience.” Jason Landry, *Instant Connections: Essays and Interviews on Photography* (Boston, Massachusetts: Doolittle Press, 2013), 110.

⁵³ Muniz, *Reflex: A Vik Muniz Primer*, 142.

involuntarily think of the famous image of two customers sitting in a well-lit diner at night.

In both *Reflex* and the *Verso* catalogue, Muniz emphasizes the importance of finding famous works of art that are familiar to a broad audience to make *Verso* successful. When asked about his selection process for *Verso* he states, “The paintings selected me. They’ve been around. I am the one passing by. I wanted iconic, historical works. Works that could be imagined by simply hearing someone whisper their titles. Works that, even if you could only look at their backs, you would already be seeing them in your head.”⁵⁴ In *Reflex* he goes into further detail about the selection process and how the project began at the Guggenheim, followed by MoMA and then The Art Institute of Chicago.

A few years ago, I happened to mention to curator Lisa Dennison of the Guggenheim Museum that I’d always been curious to see the backs of famous paintings. She told me that, as the museum would soon be de-installing part of the collection, I could come and look at them – even take pictures, provided of course that no harm would be done to the works. A few weeks later, I brought my large camera to the Guggenheim and shot the backs of some of my favorite paintings in the collection, focusing on the ones I thought a large number of people would be able to identify without having to read the label. [...] Not long after my shoot at the Guggenheim, the Museum of Modern Art let me photograph the backs of Picasso’s *Les Femmes d’Alger*, Van Gogh’s *Starry Night*, and Matisse’s *Red Studio*. Currently I am planning a trip to the Art Institute of Chicago to shoot the back of the Seurat’s *Sunday on La Grande Jatte*, Van Gogh’s *Bedroom*, and maybe Hopper’s *Nighthawks*. The list is growing. My plan is to enlarge them to the original size of the paintings and exhibit them that way.⁵⁵

By choosing these specific works of art Muniz is relying on the viewer to complete the work by imagining the recto as they are looking at the verso. Muniz often has the viewer in mind when creating his series. How viewers react to his work is very

⁵⁴ Vik Muniz, *Verso* (New York: Charta, 2009), 18.

⁵⁵ Muniz, *Reflex: A Vik Muniz Primer*, 112.

important to him, both in terms of playing with the science of perception and also the viewer's involuntary reflexes.

In all of his work Muniz plays with media in different ways, and he is very conscious of the effects different media will instill in a viewer. There are the different types of media he uses to create his images – flat paper pieces for the *Pictures of Magazines* or the *Pictures of Colors* series, but also viscous materials such as chocolate, ink, and caviar. With so many different textures and colors, printing techniques contribute to how viewers receive and react to the works. The *Pictures of Chocolate* for instance have a shininess to them that is unforgiving. Muniz explains this phenomenon in an interview with Hans-Michael Herzog in the book *La Mirada – Looking at Photography in Latin America Today*. “With *Sigmund* and the first *Pictures of Chocolate* I used another medium, Cibachrome, which is very repellent. The way it reflects, you feel compelled to get away from it rather than being attracted to it, and as you back away from it you get to see what the image really is.”⁵⁶ With *Pictures of Chocolate* the closer you get the more your reflection becomes all you can see. With a dark background and a glossy surface, imperfections such as dust, fingerprints, or a loose hair, are magnified and the viewer becomes acutely aware of them. There are few details to inspect. It is the overall image that has the best, most pleasing impact. Using the photograph *Action Photo (after Hans Namuth)* (fig. 17) as an example, one can clearly see the overall image in a reproduction. The painter Jackson Pollock is working in an enclosed space moving his brush over an already well covered canvas that is on the ground. Viewers are also aware

⁵⁶ Hans-Michael Herzog, *La Mirada - Looking at Photography in Latin America Today* (Zurich: Daros Latin America AG, 2002), 80.

of the material that was used to create it. The chocolate looks wet and three-dimensional. These images do just as well, if not better, viewed as a reproduction in a printed or digital format than they do in person.

To consider the circulation of images online is an interesting facet to the discussion of new media. Artists today, similar to fifty years ago, use photography to capture, create, appropriate, promote, disseminate, collect, transform, and sell art. It is our culture's primary mode of sharing visual information. What has changed dramatically from fifty years ago is how quick and easy it is to do all of those things in a digital environment. It is still unclear how the digital world is affecting our perception of photographs. According to Charlotte Cotton, digital imagery has changed some of the basics of how we view images. Two of her observations are the shift in our attitude towards authorship, and the divide between "high-versus-low art categorizations that are used in the cultural sector."⁵⁷ Even though these changes have emerged as all-encompassing it is not clear what effect they have on how people think about images. Cotton states that these changes were not anticipated by the art world. Referring to her research for her book *The Photograph as Contemporary Art*, nine years ago, she states that "the schools of and growing market for contemporary art photography seemed content with digital photography mimicking its analog predecessors' conventions and not particularly interested in deciphering what might be uniquely digital characteristics, in either its aesthetics or its channels of dissemination."⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Cotton, "Nine Years, A Million Conceptual Miles," 36.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 35.

Muniz on the other hand is acutely aware of the impact of the digital world. In interviews he has likened the effect digital technology has on photography to the effect photography had on painting. “We’re creating a catharsis in terms of defining what an image is at this point. It’s like the ghost of painting came back to haunt photography in the form of digital media. Photography made painting lose its need to relate to a world factually. Digital media now does the same thing to photography.”⁵⁹ In another interview Muniz reiterates the idea of the ghost of painting, this time again emphasizing that with the introduction of digital photography it will be more evident that photography is a constructed medium. “Now that photography is a digital medium, the ghost of painting is coming to haunt it: photography no longer retains a sense of truth. I think that’s great, because it frees photography from factuality, the same way photography freed painting from factuality in the mid-nineteenth century.”⁶⁰ Basically, “If altered or computer mixed photographs were to become the norm, our ways of reading photographs could change significantly.”⁶¹ With digital manipulation it can be impossible to tell if an image has been altered or not. Because of this all digital images can be seen as a lie. Even though photographic tricks have fooled viewers for over a century now, it is only with the adoption of digital photography that we are beginning to expect our photographs to be altered in some way. Even more so than traditional photography, how are digital images constructed and how have they been manipulated are essential questions to ask when viewing digital photography.

⁵⁹ Herzog, *La Mirada - Looking at Photography in Latin America Today*, 84.

⁶⁰ Richards, *Inside the Studio: Two Decades of Talks with Artists in New York*, 232.

⁶¹ Savedoff, “Transforming Images: Photographs of Representations,” 105.

Muniz plays with this belief in the veracity of the photograph. Even with digital media challenging how we interpret photography we still believe photographs more than other types of images. According to David Levi Strauss photographs have taken on “the aura of believability” and Muniz “both trades on and subverts that aura.”⁶² In much of Muniz’s work he is not trying to deceive viewers but rather make them aware of how much they trust photographs. “I create gimmicks that prove just how much we want to believe in images.”⁶³ In most of Muniz’s work the gimmick is the material with which he creates the sculptural part of the work. With *Verso*, the gimmick is reversed. Instead of a photograph that exudes an “aura of believability” viewers are confronted with a three-dimensional object. Muniz is playing with expectations based on media. Whereas a photograph will be taken as a depiction of reality, a piece of sculpture is debatable. A sculpture could be real, as in Duchamp’s readymades, or it could be a constructed object. Compared to photography, sculpture is more similar to a painted trompe l’oeil. By being displayed as a sculptural object, Muniz is letting his viewers determine what is real and what isn’t. In a photograph the backs of the canvas would only be read as indexical.

With *Verso* Muniz came dangerously close to creating an exact copy of the original. In the *Verso* catalogue Muniz emphasizes the attention to detail that went into the creation pieces. “When I first saw my version of *Starry Night* completed, the level of faithfulness to the original was so photo-realistic that I thought it was too sick. I had to deal with an object capable of really fooling someone.”⁶⁴ In an interview with the gallery

⁶² David Levi Strauss, “La Mirada, and the Evidence of Things Not Seen,” in *La Mirada – Looking at Photography in Latin America Today* (Zurich: Daros Latin America AG, 2002), 168.

⁶³ Ibid., 81.

⁶⁴ Muniz, *Verso*, 19.

owner Jason Landry, Muniz explains that the works are photorealistic and they were completed in “increments of four square inches. Every single hair on the back of it is like the original. [...] If I make an object that is photographically correct then I am making something that is quite new. I am making a three-dimensional trompe l’oeil.”⁶⁵ When we are viewing a sculpture made from a photograph is it the same as viewing the photograph only in three dimensions? What differences are there really between the photograph and the sculpture?

Trick of the eye

With *Verso*, Muniz is acting as the con-man more than usual. When asked about the *Verso* exhibition at Sikkema Jenkins & Co. Muniz said, “I thought the show was really cool. People would come and they would get so confused. Some people would walk in and think the show wasn’t installed yet. I gave instructions to the gallery, ‘Don’t tell them.’”⁶⁶ This Barnum-like secrecy is certainly not what Muniz is usually known for but the roots of it can be found in his past.

Speaking about growing up in São Paulo, Brazil, Muniz said,

I still celebrate the fact that I have a very uncanny ability to deal with metaphors and internalized information. I have it from growing up in a country plagued by military dictatorship. There was censorship and the media was controlled. The media environment was very obnoxious, none of the messages that circulated through the media were true, and everything that you said or announced artistically could be used physically against you.⁶⁷

Brazilian artists had to be innovative to find ways of expressing their creativity within a boundary of rules which made it difficult to express political opinions and

⁶⁵ Landry, *Instant Connections: Essays and Interviews on Photography*, 113.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Herzog, Hans-Michael. *La Mirada – Looking at Photography in Latin America Today*. Zurich: Daros Latin America Collection, (2002) 84.

artistic experimentation. This encouraged artists to use visual and verbal codes to communicate. By working within the rules of trompe l'oeil, Muniz showcases his creative talents in presenting *Verso* as series that explores the boundaries of a genre.

Muniz was introduced to the world of cheap Chinese labor and forgeries while working at a gallery in New York City. In *Reflex* he explains the operation as “an assembly line for cheaply produced decorative art to be sold at furniture stores. They would acquire bulk ‘Impressionist style’ canvases painted by Chinese craftsmen, embellish them with a baroque faux-wood frame, and validate the contraption with an invented biography of the ‘European master’ who was supposed to have painted it.” In this instance it is clear that a certain familiar look is important to buyers, even if they have suspicions that what they are buying is not real. Buyers who want to believe may feel that it looks real enough to suffice. Muniz’s future subject choices may have been highly influenced by this experience of witnessing first-hand the high demand for art that is familiar to and popular with a broad audience.

Another influence of Muniz’s chosen subject matter is found in his reaction to Robert Mapplethorpe’s photographs, which he saw in New York in the 1980s. In 2005 Muniz curated an exhibition of Mapplethorpe’s photographs. In the publication *Mapplethorpe X7*, Muniz reflected on how he and Mapplethorpe differed as photographers. Muniz emphasized the difference in subject matter between himself and Mapplethorpe when it came to “shocking” or “controversial” images, but also how brave he thought Mapplethorpe was for photographing “pretty” subjects as well.

In my own work, I try to avoid as much as possible dealing with shocking images. Because I think you raise too many psychological defenses. The perception of those

images are very ineffective, in a way. I prefer to use familiarity to my advantage.” In comparison to Mapplethorpe’s work: “I think if you have an example like the flowers, or even the statues... I remember having conversations about this then at Robert Miller Gallery, people saying, ‘Oh, that’s a sellout, that’s for people to buy,’ duh-de-duh. I said, ‘Well, why do you think people buy those things...really?’ ‘Oh, because they’re pretty.’ I said, ‘What bothers you so much about being pretty?’” “I am not afraid of commercial art. I am not afraid of making beautiful things. For me, seeing somebody do that is quite inspiring, to say, ‘Ok, let’s look at this thing now, and let’s look at it objectively and also fearlessly. Let’s take a picture of a flower.”⁶⁸

Much of Muniz’s work can be called “pretty,” but more than this, an overarching theme is his use of art for subject matter. Muniz is always coming back to famous works of art in his series. He does not, however, consider himself an appropriation artist. When asked about his choice of subject matter that stems from art history, he replied: “I always copy things, but I’m not an appropriation artist. When you are copying, you add something of yourself that is sincere, and also you actually update that picture somewhat – as long as you do it with respect and sincerity.”⁶⁹

With *Verso* Muniz is updating these famous works of art by focusing on their backs and de-mythologizing them as “masterpieces.” What clues does Muniz give his audience that the canvases are not real? It is through the subject matter. If we read the title of the work and examine the labels and markings on the works themselves we are confronted with two possibilities: either this is a show of famous paintings that hasn’t been hung yet, or these are not the versos of the paintings that they claim to be. But who would copy the back of a painting?

In trompe l’oeil and art in general we find that art imitates but it does not produce an exact copy of a thing. In the essay “Still-life Paintings from the Netherlands”, Brusati explains that “Contrary to what is sometimes assumed, the aim of these paintings [trompe

⁶⁸ Richard Flood, *MX7* (New York: teNeues, 2011), 51–53.

⁶⁹ Herzog, *La Mirada - Looking at Photography in Latin America Today*, 83.

l'oeil] is not to efface all evidence of their fabrication, but rather to render the painter's artistry visible by calling attention to its consummate artifice, and thus confronting the beholder directly with the deceptive workings of the painter's art."⁷⁰ One has to call attention to the deceit in some way. With an early work by Muniz titled *I Am What I Read* (fig. 18) the artist placed a large photograph of books on a shelf within a frame that is supported by two wooden legs, giving the impression of a bookshelf. The photograph is convincing but the two wooden legs and shallow frame inform the viewer that the books cannot be picked off the shelf and read. With *Verso*, Muniz found himself struggling with this because the backs are so lifelike. Viewers may be momentarily fooled to think that they are looking at the back of a work of art, but they may not believe that they are looking at the back of *Starry Night*. Once they realize the trick they start to acknowledge the famous image as an object that has functioned in a working environment – first the studio of the artist, and then the museum world.

The ideal audience for this work is one with some education in the arts; a viewer who would be able to dissect the associations and use context clues to understand what she is looking at. The fact that this series was originally exhibited for barely two months in the fall of 2008 at Sikkema Jenkins & Co. gallery in New York, shows that it wasn't meant for a large general public, but rather an educated viewer with an interest in contemporary art.⁷¹ The back of the canvas is a sight reserved for art world insiders. It is not something that most museum goers are expecting to encounter. As scholar John

⁷⁰ Brusati. *Still-life paintings from the Netherlands: 1550-1720*. Zwolle: Waanders, (1999) 61.

⁷¹ The Exposure Project, "Vik Muniz's *Verso*", September 5, 2008, <http://theexposureproject.blogspot.com/2008/09/vik-munizs-verso.html>.

Berger notes: “Museums function like homes of the nobility to which the public at certain hours are admitted as visitors. The class nature of the ‘nobility’ may vary, but as soon as a work is placed in a museum it acquires the *mystery* of a way of life which excludes the mass.”⁷² By turning the canvas around, Muniz is shedding light on this mystery of the life of a famous work of art, and he is exhibiting it to a focused well-informed audience.

Muniz is not the only artist interested in photographing famous works of art. The artists Philippe Gronon and Simon Menner have both created verso series. When asked why he didn’t just stop at a photograph of the back of the works of art Muniz explained, the documentary lens of the camera provides all the evidence of the original object that artisans need to construct an exact copy without viewing the object themselves. The contemporary French photographer Philippe Gronon took photographs of the backs of famous works of art and exhibited them in a show titled *Verso* which opened in Paris on the same day as Muniz’s show *Verso* in New York. These photographs of the backs of art from the Musee d’Orsay include works by John Constable, Courbet, Francis Picabia, Picasso, Modigliani, Tom Wesselman and Roy Lichtenstein. The most recent photograph in the series is from 2013 and is of Lichtenstein’s *Stretcher Frame with Crossbars III* (fig. 19), a verso that includes a taped photograph of a back of a canvas on it. Another photographer, Simon Menner has started a similar series working with paintings from the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin. On his website Menner states that it is too difficult to

⁷² John Berger, *Understanding a Photograph* (New York City: Aperture, 2013), 24.

obtain access to famous works of art to continue the series, but if the possibility arises, he would like to pursue it.⁷³

Although Gronon states that his work is more about access to museum collections and the history of the work itself, all artists using the backs of works of art as a subject cannot help but include these themes. The back of the canvas tells the history of the painting as an object. Looking at famous works of art as material objects removes the romantic notions about art that many people to art viewing - especially of rare, or canonical works. Menner, Gronon, and Muniz are all calling attention to the world in which the painting exists. The back exists in the pragmatic, business, institutional side of the art world, whereas the front exists as an image separated from its physical makeup through reproductions that can be found online, in art history textbooks, or as decoration in homes and offices.

This subject of the canvas verso conforms to the specifications of trompe l'oeil as described by the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard:

There is no nature in trompe l'oeil, no countryside or sky, no vanishing point or natural light. Nor is there any face, psychology, or historicity. Here all is artifact; the vertical field constitutes objects isolated from their referential context as pure signs. There are objects that have already endured: time here has already been, space has already taken place.⁷⁴

This emphasis on “objects that have already endured” is something that is explained again in relation to trompe l'oeil of the late 1880s in America. Even though the burgeoning marketplace made it possible for artists to survive on painting still lifes and trompe l'oeil, it was not advised that the artists actually paint new commodities. As

⁷³ Simon Menner, *The Backsides of Some Famous Paintings*, accessed April 24, 2014, <http://simonmenner.com/pages/Paintings.htm>.

⁷⁴ Jean Baudrillard, “The Trompe-l’Oeil,” in Norman Bryson ed., *Calligram: Essays in New Art History from France*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) 55.

quoted in James A. Cook's book *The Arts of Deception*, artist William Harnett explained in the *New York News* that "To find a subject that paints well is not an easy task. As a rule, new things do not paint well. ...I want my models to have the mellowing effect of age" (3). In *Framing America* Pohl uses scholar David Lubin and writes, "'Old and worn objects provided appealing subject matter, but just so long as the portrayal of them, the painting itself, had the look of an object good as new.'" Muniz writes about trompe l'oeil appearing during shifts in media technology and this falls in line with the requirement of trompe l'oeil to depict something old but in a new way.

Many trompe l'oeil works feature letters, ephemera, and everyday objects as their main subject. In regards to *Verso* the exhibition labels and markings on the back of the canvas are similar objects. The notes, stamps, and exhibition labels found on the works that inspired *Verso* are recreated by artisans using wood, metal brackets, paint, and paper that is aged and treated to look much older than it is. From these scraps of paper we can learn about the exhibitions, locations, travels, and history of the original works of art that Muniz has copied.

In her book *My Love Affair with Modern Art*, critic and Art Institute of Chicago employee Katherine Kuh reminisces on the exhibit *Seurat: Paintings and Drawings* that was on view at the Art Institute from January to March of 1958, and then traveled to the Museum of Modern Art to be exhibited from March to May of the same year. In mid-April a fire broke out at the Museum of Modern Art harming multiple paintings and putting employees at the Art Institute into a panic.

The most agonizing experience I ever suffered over works in peril began on April 15, 1958, when we received an emergency call from New York with the horrifying news that

the Museum of Modern Art was on fire. *A Sunday on La Grand Jatte*, by Georges Seurat, often considered the Art Institute's supreme masterpiece, was on exhibition there, along with one of our canvases by Juan Gris. [...] Because of the ever present threat of vandalism at the Art Institute, we were forced to encase many paintings in glass, which, of course, made large ones inordinately heavy. Surrounded by its glass and special housing, the *Grand Jatte* weighed about five hundred pounds. Sitting in my office and waiting for word from New York, I didn't know whether to worry about this problem or to be relieved that at least the painting was somewhat protected from smoke.⁷⁵

The painting was saved and brought unharmed to the Whitney Museum of American Art then located next door on West 54th Street. Kuh wished the painting to be returned to Chicago but it was finally decided that it would stay through the time of the exhibition as a vote of confidence for MoMA. What kinds of evidence from this ordeal can be found on *Verso (A Sunday on La Grand Jatte)* (fig. 20)? Looking at the back we can envision it firmly affixed to the wall and surrounded by glass for protection. Even in reproductions the canvas looks large and heavy. Perhaps some of the discolorations on the wooden frame or on the canvas back are the results of being moved from a smoke filled room. The clearest markings on the back is the Art Institute of Chicago's accession number "1926.224" telling the viewer that the painting was the two hundred and twenty-fourth accession in the year 1926; over thirty years before the fire at MoMA. *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte* rarely travels and the trip to MoMA was to be its last exhibition outside of Chicago.⁷⁶ Compared to some of the other works in *Verso* the back of *Verso (A Sunday on La Grand Jatte)* seems mysteriously devoid of labels. By looking at the exhibition history on the Art Institute of Chicago website it's clear why.

⁷⁵ Katharine Kuh, *My Love Affair with Modern Art* (New York: Arcade Publishing, Inc., 2006), 31–32.

⁷⁶ Exhibition history, Art Institute of Chicago website - http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/artwork/27992?search_no=1&index=0

The labels and handwritten notes seen on the back of the canvas carry meaning in a working environment, but when the back of the canvas is photographed and removed from the actual object, the labels and notes are separated from their use and they become documentary evidence that is accurate up until the photograph was taken. It is a moment in time, a moment in the life of this painting, at a certain age with a certain past. *Verso (A Sunday on La Grand Jatte)* tells us what the verso of the canvas looked like in 2008, but it may change in the future if it moves or is exhibited elsewhere.

The importance of the back of the canvas for documentary purposes and a general comparison to the works in *Verso* can be found on a back of a canvas that has become so integral to the work of art that it has been marked by the artist “Frame is part of drawing.” Robert Rauschenberg completed the work *Erased de Kooning Drawing* in 1953 although it wasn’t publicly exhibited until 1963.⁷⁷ The work consists of an actual drawing by de Kooning that has been erased by Rauschenberg. The front of the paper is blank with light traces of the drawing that used to exist. The verso of this work is covered in labels that provide evidence of its inclusion in over thirty-three exhibitions in six different countries from 1966 to 1990. Rauschenberg added the words “DO NOT REMOVE DRAWING FROM FRAME FRAME IS PART OF DRAWING,” after the work underwent conservation treatment in 1988.⁷⁸ By doing this Rauschenberg points to the labels as evidence of interest and use for a work of art that only needs to be explained to be understood, since there is almost nothing to see.

⁷⁷ <http://galleryoflostart.com/>

⁷⁸ Roberts, Sarah. “Erased de Kooning Drawing,” *Rauschenberg Research Project*, July 2013. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. http://www.sfmoma.org/explore/collection/artwork/25846/essay/erased_de_kooning_drawing

The emphasis on the back of the canvas as evidence of use is even more pronounced in *Times Verso*. This subseries differs immensely in size and historical meaning from *Verso*. Unlike the paintings each original photograph exists as one in an edition of many. But this was the one used for reproductions that were published in the New York Times in a pre-digital world. Because there is no need today for a physical print in order to publish an image, the verso series of photographs documents the photographs with all of the labels and markings they will ever receive due to use. The original paintings on the other hand are still alive in this sense, and will be “used” in more exhibitions in the future, thus changing how they look as time goes on. Muniz is very aware of the shift in photographic production and consumption. In the *Verso* exhibition catalogue he states: “We are living in the end of paper media, and there could not be a more appropriate time to think about its meaning and the role it has played so far in our culture.”

The painting must fool viewers into thinking it is not a painting. Thus skilled artists and in Muniz’s case artisans who are capable of leaving no trace of their own hand are essential to achieving success in deception - but there must always be a clue to the viewer that what they are looking at is not actually what it purports to be. In the straightforward documentary photography as used to create Gronon’s *Verso*, and Muniz’s first step in *Verso*, there is no tell - no separation of machine and artist. Muniz’s *Verso* reasserts the importance of traditional skills and the artist’s mimetic ability. Again we see the connection to Muniz’s quote that *trompe l’oeil* appears throughout history when the

skill of the artist is called upon to reassert itself during times of change in media technology.

CONCLUSION

“The whole idea of originality to me is very unappealing because if you think about it enough, it’s more interesting to think that you’re just part of a continuum of the way in which we look at the world, how we choose to see the world and how that changes with time and technology.” – Vik Muniz⁷⁹

In conclusion, if we think of art history as a continuum it seems that *Verso* exists in our time as much as Gijsbrechts exists in his, Harnett and P.T. Barnum in theirs, and Rauschenburg, Johns, and Lichtenstein did in theirs. For the same subject / object work of art (the back of the canvas) to exist as an original, successful piece of art it has to be of its time. The theme of the back of the canvas began with Gijsbrechts and how he successfully fooled the king into picking up the canvas and turning it around only to find the true back of the canvas. For Gijsbrechts and later artists such as Harnett, the fact that they were painting a mundane part of their world was enough of a subject to be shocking. We find Johns and Lichtenstein updating the tradition by calling attention to the materials and style they use to depict the back of a canvas. Today it is Muniz updating the tradition by creating a sculptural piece that not only imitates the back of a canvas, but the back of a masterpiece from the western canon. The importance of the image and its ability to travel through space and time effortlessly thanks to digital means is put to the test with *Verso*.

⁷⁹ Klein, Michèle Gerber. “A Profile of Vik Muniz,” *The Brooklyn Rail*, June 3, 2013.
<http://www.mutualart.com/OpenExternalArticle/A-Profile-of-VIK-MUNIZ/15B9AC3FDAF4F1A3>
Accessed February 15, 2014.

In the gallery we are confronted by a handmade object that needs to be seen in person to be fully appreciated and comprehended.

Muniz has stated that “A copy of a copy is always an original thing.” This is certainly true with Muniz’s *Verso* series, which consists of works that exist in small editions. Each almost identical to each other and the works they are based on, but still original in idea, process of creation, and final form. Today, with photography still seen as a documentary tool, the Internet as a way of mass dissemination, and contemporary arts acceptance of multi-media, we find Muniz’s *Verso* series conforming to current art practices while at the same time referring to a long history of the back of the canvas.

FIGURES

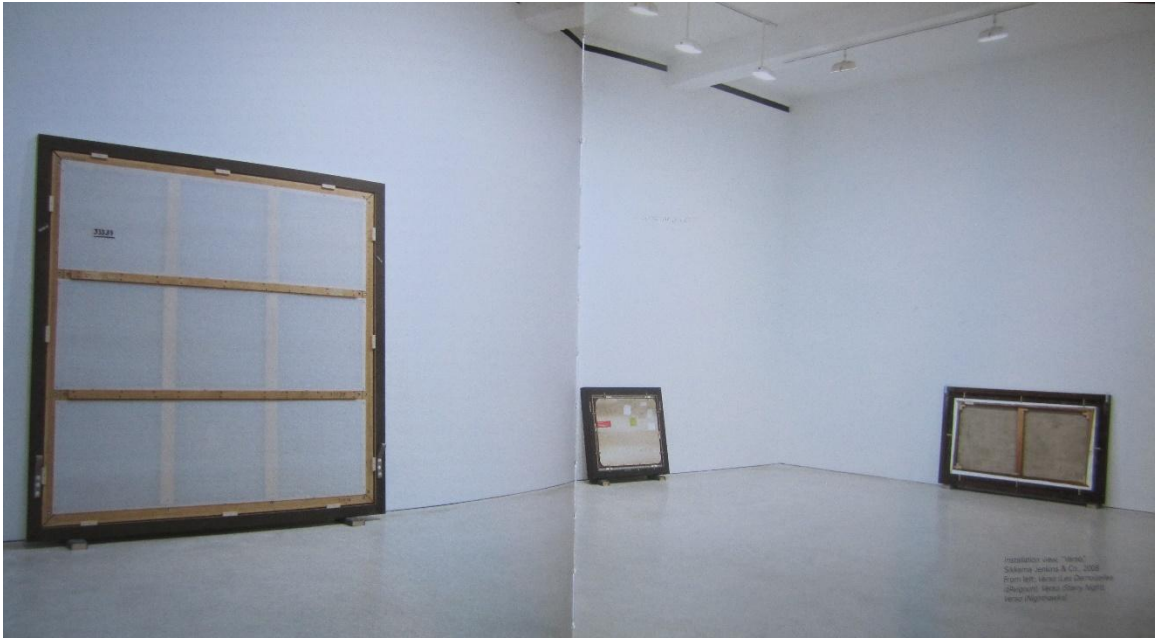


Figure 1. Installation view of *Verso* at Sikkema Jenkins & Co., 2008
Image of installation view from Vik Muniz, *Verso*. Milan; New York: Charta, (2009) 24-25. From left: *Verso* (*Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*), *Verso* (*Starry Night*), *Verso* (*Nighthawks*).



Figure 2. Vik Muniz, *Abapuru, after Tarsila do Amaral*, 2010
© 2014 Vik Muniz. <http://vikmuniz.net/gallery/verso-fortes-vilaca-gallery>.



Figure 3. Ferrarese School, *The Virgin and Child with Angels*, circa 1480
National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh, Scotland.

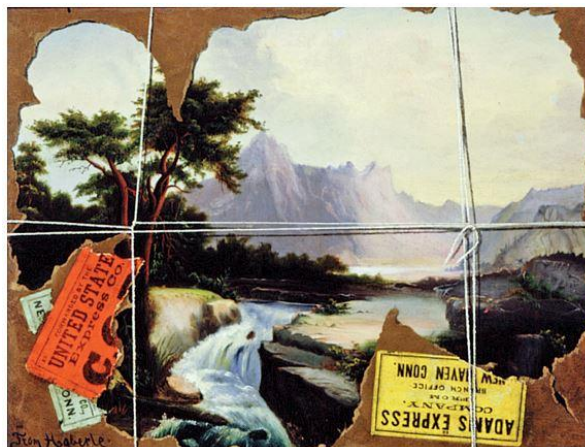


Figure 4. John Haberle, *Torn in Transit*, 1890-1895
Brandywine River Museum, Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania.



Figure 5. Cornelius Norbertus Gijsbrechts, *Back of a Canvas*, 1668-1672
Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen, Denmark.



Figure 6. Cornelius Norbertus Gijsbrechts, *Easel Painting*, 1670
Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen, Denmark.



Figure 7. William M. Harnett, *After the Hunt*, 1883
Columbus Museum of Art, Columbus, Ohio.



Figure 8. Marcel Duchamp, *Bottle Rack*, 1961 (replica of 1914 original)
Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.



Figure 9. Jasper Johns, *Canvas*, 1956
Collection of the artist.

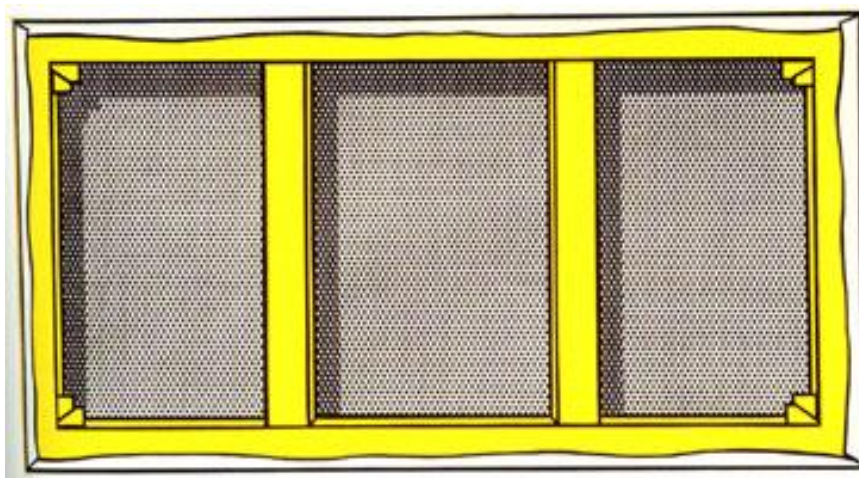


Figure 10. Roy Lichtenstein, *Stretcher Frame with Vertical Bars*, 1968
Sotheby's November 2013 Contemporary Evening catalogue.
<http://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2013/nov-2013-contemporary-evening-n09037/lot.37.html>.



Figure 11. Thomas Demand, *Barn*, 1997
Reproduced in Fried, Michael *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*. New Haven; London: Yale University Press, (2008) 263.



Figure 12. Sharon Core, *Candy Counter* 1969, 2005
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.



Figure 13. Vik Muniz, *Clown Skull*, 1989-1990
 © 2014 Vik Muniz, <http://vikmuniz.net/gallery/relics>.



Figure 14. Vik Muniz, *Graphic Entomology*, 2010
 © 2014 Vik Muniz, <http://vikmuniz.net/gallery/relicario>.



Figure 15. Vik Muniz, *Passione*, 2010
 Photograph: Divulgação/TV Globo.



Figure 16. Vik Muniz, *Verso (Nighthawks)*, 2008
 Image from Phillips auction house,
<http://www.phillips.com/detail/VIK-MUNIZ/NY010411/275>.

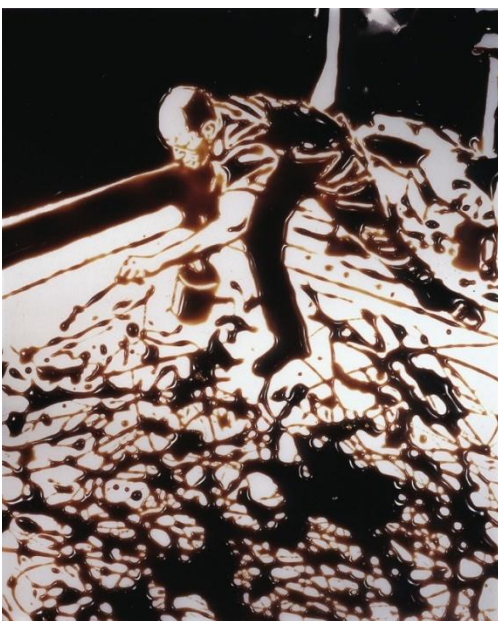


Figure 17. Vik Muniz, *Action Photo (after Hans Namuth)*, 1997
 © Vik Muniz and the Estate of Hans Namuth/VAGA, NY.



Figure 18. Vik Muniz, *I Am What I Read*, 1989
 Phillips auction house, <http://www.phillips.com/detail/VIK-MUNIZ/NY000112/244>.

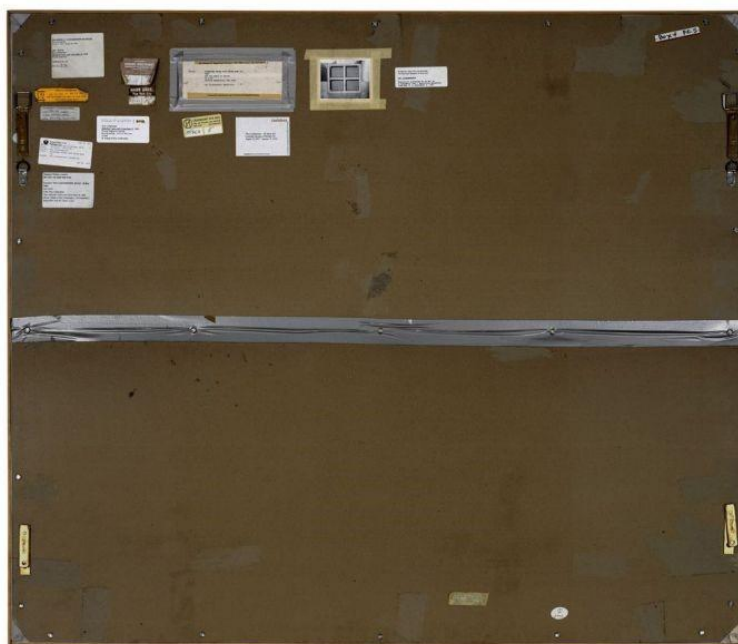


Figure 19. Philippe Gronon, Verso no25, Stretcher Frame with Cross Bars III, par Roy Lichtenstein, Collection Particuliere, New York, 2013.



Figure 20. Vik Muniz, *Verso (A Sunday on La Grand Jatte)*, 2008
 © 2014 Vik Muniz, <http://vikmuniz.net/gallery/versopainting>.

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