

desire and ice
TRAVEL WINTER 2010
Tallberg, Sweden



Peripheral Vision

For artists in Rio, inspiration is found on the city's fringes. John Bowe goes to the edge.

One recent, drizzly Sunday, I met the artist Vik Muniz at his Ipanema home to drive from Zona Sul, the beachy, bathing-suited Rio of Copacabana lore, to the less renowned poorer part of the city in the north. As we whizzed up Avenida Brasil through an area called Mare, Muniz indicated a cluster of *favelas* arrayed around a public pool called Piscinão de Ramos and quipped, "You have to think of Rio as St. Tropez — surrounded by Mogadishu."

Muniz, who splits his time between New York and Rio, sited his studio in a grim northern barrio called Parada de Lucas, in order to be next to the city's largest junkyard. The proximity allows Muniz, who creates work from found objects, to prowl the premises with abandon. His studio recently appeared in "Waste Land," a documentary that charted his collaboration with a group of poor *catadores*, or garbage recyclers, from nearby Jardim Gramacho, Rio's biggest landfill. After drawing classically styled portraits of *catadores*, Muniz recruited them to help recreate the original drawings with enormous collages composed of painstakingly arranged buckets, nuts, bolts, old refrigeration units, tractor pieces, chunks of plastic and so on, spread out all over the studio floor. Shot from

high above, the junk collages became a series of photographs in 2008 that traveled around the country and drew half a million visitors. The photographs were sold at auction and collected by museums around the world. The garbage pickers got to watch their bodies become art, then junk, then art, then money.

Outside the studio, we chatted with a guard who goes by the name Paulo. Paulo works for both Muniz and the junkyard owner, and lives in a *favela* on a steep cliff directly above us. Muniz had recently asked him to find a kid from there to come shoot a .38 pistol at a metal box in the studio, for an art project. What Paulo discovered, however, was that no one in the drug gangs uses .38's anymore — they're too small. They prefer adult-size weapons like AK-47's and M-16's. If that weren't unsettling enough, Paulo and Muniz both informed me that, at this very moment, we were being observed in the scopes of young snipers bearing such heavy arms. After all, the *favelas* — and their valuable drug trade — remain under constant threat of invasion by the military police and rival drug factions.

It's this constant and perversely high level of contrast that defines Rio. Rich versus poor, mountain versus beach, the spray of an AK-47 versus the coo of Caetano Veloso; rampant social injustice versus stunning natural

beauty. In short, it's a great place to be a gainfully employed artist.

Brazil, as is well known, has been on an economic tear, and Rio, fueled by newfound wealth and pride, in preparation for the 2016 Olympics (and the 2014 World Cup), has gone on a spending spree. Work is under way on Santiago Calatrava's Museum of Tomorrow, a sleek cantilevered structure that should go a long way toward transforming the downtown waterfront area. Other flashy projects include the Museum of Image and Sound, the Art Museum of Rio and a new home for the Symphony Orchestra called City of Music.

If São Paulo has long functioned as the brains of Brazil, Rio currently serves as something like the pelvis. The money and power are in São Paulo, as are virtually every important dealer and gallery. For Paulistas, or citizens of São Paulo, "culture" means wealthy, educated people collecting art, seeing films, attending performances. For Cariocas, or citizens of Rio, the word conjures people mingling at the beach, dancing and downing a few caipirinhas. Add to this the fact that despite the dangers of Rio, São Paulo is far larger, more dangerous still, and it becomes easier to see why most of Brazil's

Concrete jungle From left: the view from Aprazível in Santa Teresa; the artist Adriana Varejão in her studio.

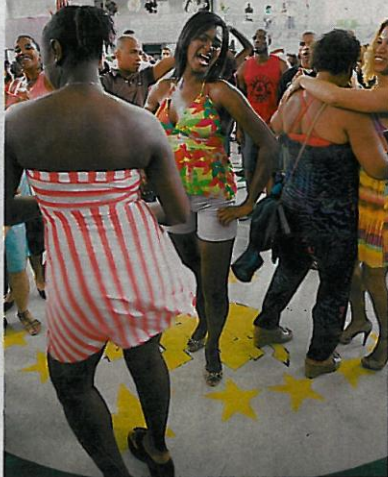
creative types gravitate to Rio. As Muniz says, "It's not a city for art; it's a city for artists."

"I like the everyday behavior of people here," said Bernardo Pinheiro, a young photographer and video artist who was born in Belo Horizonte and lived in São Paulo for 10 years before moving to Copacabana. "People are easier. Happier." For artists from São Paulo, he said, "everything is about strategy. They're obsessed with form. We're more intuitive. We joke here that they learn everything at school and we learn everything in the street."

In fact, says the artist Mari Stockler, it's the street life, the very "outsiderness" of Rio, that distinguishes her from artists working New York or Berlin. Rio's sunny climate brings its population outdoors and beyond proscriptive social and interactive patterns that separate most cities' populations by class, race and function. From street art to folk music, ideas are able to flow here in a way they don't elsewhere. "There is a gigantic culture that comes from the periphery, the poorer areas around the city," Stockler said, "which then informs the traditions of the central part of the city. There's a conversation between the two." For her series of portraits "Meninas do Brasil," Stockler photographed girls in the city's malls, dance halls and beaches. The images of bodies are not celebrating so much as meditating upon the pleasure of being and seeing.

While Stockler's interpretation of the city leads her toward bodies and people, her husband, the artist Carlito Carvalhosa, interprets the same data in a more abstract manner. Life in Rio, according to Carvalhosa, was in part characterized by a constant, willfully ignored disconnect. High, low, rich, poor, up, down, he said, "people don't talk about problems here. They don't confront issues like class or race head-on, the way they might elsewhere." Carvalhosa had a meeting the day I visited him with an American artist, inventor and photographer named Clifford Ross. The pair were exploring a way to project Ross's animated images of a Colorado mountainside onto some kind of surface that Carvalhosa might devise for a public spectacle, perhaps in conjunction with the Olympics. As Ross and Carvalhosa worked away, a fusillade of fireworks exploded from a nearby *favela*, signaling drug customers that a new shipment had arrived.

"I KNOW IT'S A CLICHÉ," ADRIANA Varejão said, "but I feel that focusing on Rio really does lead me to the universal." Varejão, who was born in Rio, is one of Brazil's leading contemporary artists, whose work is in the collections of the Tate Modern and the



Everybody dance now The Cariocas get their groove on at the weekend parties in the city's *favelas*.

Guggenheim. Her house and adjacent studio sit in a neighborhood called Horto, between the 346-acre Jardim Botânico and the Floresta da Tijuca, which, with some 12 square miles, is the largest urban forest in the world.

Rio's extremes, she said, had led her to a very theatrical sensibility. Not only does the city range from paradise to hell, from the *favela* to the beach, she said, but the transition from one to the other is so quick as to seem instantaneous. She describes the resulting work as necessarily baroque — "Because baroque is totally about extremes. It's this contrapunto of extremes."

Varejão's output over the years has spanned from painting, sculpture and installation to photography. Her recent series of five-foot-wide painted plates feature soothing, but indeed baroque, mermaids, water deities and ripe, ripe fruit. The pieces owe much to the 19th-century work of the Portuguese political cartoonist-turned-ceramist Rafael Bardalo Pinheiro, but Varejão insists that as layered and political as her work may be, it remains beyond erudition. Looking out her large studio windows, opening onto the mountains, I feel like I get it. To live in Rio is to live with beauty every day of the year.

ON MY FINAL NIGHT, I FOUND MYSELF at Rio's fanciest restaurant, eating dinner with Vik Muniz, Clifford Ross and Carlito Carvalhosa. As we dined, Ross explained the difference between Rio and New York. In the latter, one set up proper meetings and followed a schedule, and yet everything took forever. In Rio, no one takes meetings but he was getting a tremendous reception for his ideas. He recognized that to come to Rio is to surrender control — gladly.

Rio remains a deeply, deeply disturbing place. Three million of the city's 14 million live

in *favelas*, beyond government control, under the medieval-style governance of drug lords. In 2008, there were some 5,000 murders. And yet, as Muniz said brightly, compared with the past, "It's fun to be here now!"

The city of Rio is by far the most attractive physical place to be in a country on the rise. The country's gross domestic product is growing about 5 percent a year, the incomes of the poorest are being raised, and even the *favelas* are being pacified. In preparation for the Olympics, the military police are slowly asserting control over them, one by one. To talk about the art world in a place so socially skewed is a little like pretending you're fine while bleeding from your head. But the fact remained: As Muniz had said, it's fun to be here.

"We don't have such a fixed sense of our own history as you guys do," Carvalhosa said. Brazil's contradictions and disconnects — at least for those who could afford them — were themselves perhaps the very root of the culture. Artists could have a good time here for a while. Would Brazil's radically polarized income distribution ever get smoothed out? Who can answer such a question?

"It's a country of soft boundaries," Carvalhosa said. "You never want to say yes. You never want to say no." He paused, and added, "But in this space, there is a kind of freedom." ■

ESSENTIALS • RIO

HOTELS Copacabana Palace. Elegant and charming and on the beach. Avenida Atlântica, 1702; 011-55-21-2548-7070; doubles from about \$585. **Hotel Fasano** Philippe Starck's beachfront masterpiece. Avenida Vieira Souto, 80; 011-55-21-2322-4000; doubles from \$640. **Hotel Santa Teresa** Cozy rooms and a bustling bar. Rua Almirante Alexandrino, 660; 011-55-21-3380-0200; doubles from \$450.

RESTAURANTS AND BARS Aprazível Excellent food with awesome views. Rua Aprazível, 62; 011-55-21-2508-9174; \$35 to \$50. **Bar do Mineiro** Great for feijoada and caipirinhas. Rua Paschoal Carlos Magno, 99; 011-55-21-2221-9227; \$5 to \$15. **Nova Capela** Popular late-night spot. Avenida Mem de Sá, 96; 011-55-21-2252-6228; \$2 to \$14. **Roberta Sudbrack** The most sophisticated restaurant in Rio. Rua Lineu de Paula Machado, 916; 011-55-21-3874-0139; \$63 to \$132.

GALLERIES AND MUSEUMS Casa de Cultura Laura Alvim Shows blue-chip artists like Vik Muniz. Avenida Vieira Souto, 176; 011-55-21-2332-2016. **Galeria Artur Vidalgo** Emerging and established talent. Housed in a shopping mall. Rua Siqueira Campos, 143, second floor; 011-55-21-2549-6278. **Galeria Sílvia Cintra** An ambitious and cutting-edge program. Rua das Acácias, 104; 011-55-21-2521-0426. **A Gentil Carioca** Owned by the artists Laura Lima, Ernesto Neto and Marcio Botner. Rua Gonçalves Ledo, 17 sobrado; 011-55-21-2222-1651. **Museu de Arte Moderna** Latin American and international art. Avenida Infante Dom Henrique, 85; 011-55-21-2240-4944.