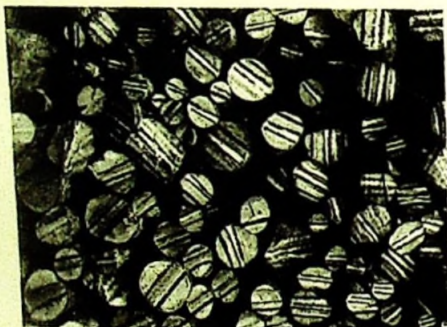


Foreword



Under the mossy green shade of Plas Caerdeon woods, beside the leaf-strewn path, were stacked several hundred lengths of cut timber. An ordinary sight normally, but now the bands of bright colour painted on each of the sawn ends stopped one in one's tracks. Pale blue, white, dark blue, black, red, yellow, green, black. The patterns spoke, but not in a way that could be translated into words, or at least not words that could explain the power of this piece in a quiet wood in north Wales.¹

'Art grows out of each particular situation and I believe that artists are better off working with whatever their environment throws up.' These words, spoken in early 2003 by that work's maker, El Anatsui, might explain, if not its power, then at least its origin. Some months later I walked with El Anatsui in the forest not far from Nsukka, Nigeria, to a fallen tree, led there by a villager from nearby Agbamere who scouts out such materials for him. With a leaf he marked the hollow trunk into rough sections for later sawing. We went on to another village, where he procured several disused wooden mortars previously used for pounding yams and cassava. Previously we had visited a vast wholesale market where he had sought a bulk supply of the tops of tins of evaporated milk, thousands of which he had already used in his piece *Peak Project* (1999).

'Working with whatever the environment throws up' does of course mean the actual physical materials that the artist finds to hand. This exhibition, *Gawu*², includes several 'cloths' made from the tops of bottles of spirits, the piece referred to above made from milk-tin tops, a large 'wall' made from pierced metal sheets, and a piece made from old printing plates. All were gathered by the artist in and around Nsukka, where he lives and works. As well as their basic physical characteristics, however, these materials carry also the cultural, social and historical imprint of the society which uses, reuses and finally discards them, for example in the names of the dozens of brands of liquor made in local distilleries, not to mention in the use (i.e. consumption) of the drinks themselves and the re-use of the bottles. After the evaporated milk – manufactured in Nigeria under licence from a Dutch company – is used, the opened tins are used to make a boiled pudding consumed at roadside night stops; only the tops are thrown away. The roughly-pierced metal sheets are used in every home to grate cassava into *gari*, a staple for meals in most households, while the printing plates are used to print the ubiquitous obituary notices posted on walls, fences and doors to inform all around of a death in the neighbourhood or village and give details of the funeral arrangements.

EL ANATSUI
GAWU, 2003
Oriel Welsh Gallery
Llandudno.

To those materials and their many associations El Anatsui adds further layers of meaning, fed by his deep awareness of the culture and history of the African continent, an awareness evolved over years of restless intellectual and artistic enquiry. It is expressed through a remarkable practice whose conceptual framework draws equally from the aesthetic traditions of his native Ghana and adopted Nigeria, and the concerns of contemporary western art. The liquor bottle tops, for example, are woven into vast cloths that reflect current sensibilities and artistic vocabularies, while at the same time referring to the great and continuing west African tradition of weaving *kente* cloth, within which in turn is embodied a complex system of references to the history, philosophy and moral values in African culture.

Over the years Anatsui's materials have ranged from wood to clay to paint to metal, and his techniques from moulding to carving to chainsawing. As evidenced in the work in this exhibition, much of it made specially or else shown here for the very first time, he continues to innovate, throw up ideas and produce work with the energy and enthusiasm of one just embarking on an artistic career. Yet his great influence over two or three generations of contemporary artists in Nigeria is obvious from even the shortest visit to that country, and indeed he is acknowledged as one of the foremost contemporary artists of his generation in Africa as a whole. Some four years after my first encounter with his art in woodland near Barmouth, therefore, I am pleased and proud that Oriel Mostyn should have the privilege of presenting this exhibition of El Anatsui's work.

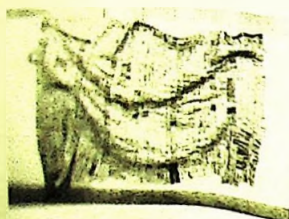
Martin Barlow
Director, Oriel Mostyn Gallery,
November 2003

¹ El Anatsui was participating in the Cyfuniad International Artists Workshop, which took place at Plas Caerdeon, near Barmouth, Ceredigion, in August 1999. He was one of twenty-two artists present over the two weeks of the workshop, half of whom were from the United Kingdom and half from overseas. At the time he described the painted stripes as inspired by similar marks seen in the forest in Nigeria to identify which felled trees belonged to whom. Atta Kwami participated in the second Cyfuniad Workshop in 2001.

² "'Ga' contains allusions to many things including metal, and 'Wu' references a fashioned cloak. The word encapsulates the medium, process and the format of the works, and I think it is appropriate for a show in which I am for the first time featuring works all in metal, sewn into exclusive sheets." (Email received for the artist, 25 September 2003).

• An Interview with El Anatsui¹

Gerard Houghton



Man's Cloth, 2002

Gerard Houghton: We've just been to the Sainsbury African Galleries at the British Museum to see your newly installed piece, *Man's Cloth* (2002). Could you tell me something about how it and its sister piece, *Woman's Cloth* (2002), were made?

El Anatsui: Well, the whole process started when I discovered piles of empty drinks bottles that had been thrown away. I thought that something could be done with them, so I did some study of them. Finally the idea came that these tops are very soft that it's easy to rip them apart and flatten them out. After stretching them I felt that the best thing would be to put them together in series to make a sheet, to play down their petty individuality by welding them into a massive block. That's how it started. Now, the process is a very laborious one. First of all you are ripping and stretching and making holes in the ripped pieces, and then carefully sewing them together in sections, and after some time you bring them together, study them before beginning to piece them together. There are a lot of decisions to make – its like working with digital media – you have a section which you don't find OK, you can easily lasso it and pick from another place to replace it. There is this scope to shift things around, to re-align relationships.

GH: So, rather than following any overall plan, the work was created organically as you went along?

EA: The only plan was that you were going to join all these pieces together. Probably you want to put as many elements of the same colour together for some time before breaking the developing pattern. Those are the local decisions one had to make, but the global one of how the piece would eventually look was something that grew – as you say – organically.

GH: So then you'd step back, take a look and think about it – maybe take it apart, move a piece around and insert it in a better position?

EA: Yes. You undo and redo, take a piece out – there are several elements that are at play. The stretched-out sheets are a length and a breadth and you discover that there are different effects when the sheets travel lengthwise or breadthwise or are mixed. So it's not only colour, but the flow of lines also. Basically, all those elements are alive and have their inflective properties which one can engage – or ignore at one's peril.

GH: And how big might one of these elements that you're talking about actually be?

EA: Sections can vary – It could be a very long section, which might be about three or four inches wide and as long as you like – It could be three to four metres in length! You can always still cut it up again into smaller pieces as needed, but that's what you would work with for starters.

GH: To make something the size of these two 'cloths' over what must have been a long period obviously required quite a team of people to help you?

EA: It's a terribly laborious process. In a day you are talking about maybe half a square foot. Apart from my full-time studio staff, I have assistance from some of my students and largely from young men within the vicinity of my studio, especially when they are on holidays. They are friends of the studio and since 1999 have on many occasions done long hours with me. On a particularly full day, we could be up to fourteen pairs of hands spread out in the studio.

GH: So each person would work on his or her own piece, or would several people work on a single piece together?

EA: No, each person would work on a separate segment and then afterwards would come my major intervention of putting these together.

GH: So you had a whole group of people working together to create a single piece of material – it's an interesting model of communal creation.

EA: It is a universal approach. I think the form lends itself to this kind of strategy. Working on such a large scale alone can quickly become very boring. Also variety, which is needed at this scale, could come from the style and the feel of each individual hand: on occasion, for instance, when we had to fold and twist the flattened tops before sewing, there were many effects and styles of folding/twisting from each individual, resulting in a variety of textures.

GH: One of the things that interests me about these pieces is that the material seems to have the same essential qualities as any piece of cloth, the way it hangs and can be draped like woven textiles. Yet at the same time you know, intellectually, that it's made of metal, something rigid and unyielding, and that there's a sensual opposition set up between what the eye sees and what the mind knows.

EA: Yes, this idea of getting a fabric out of metal, it's interesting to me in the sense that the idea of hardness/rigidity is subverted by having the medium treated that way. Well, and this idea of using drink tops, too. Back home we would characterise someone who is given to the pleasures of drinking and eating as someone who is 'building in the stomach', so that kind of idea is somehow behind it as well – the whole piece is talking about 'consumption', or could be seen as referencing it at least. Not consumption as something that is peculiar, in the sense that we are talking about the various landscapes that consumption can create in Nigeria, Ghana, etc. You can have huge piles of detritus from consumption, because you don't have the technology to recycle and also because of weather. A lot of things which are made in Europe and America and are sent over, arrive in certain kinds of packaging, for example fresh milk comes in tins. We have our own milk too, of course, but in addition there are huge imports of milk from outside, which is accessed by way of tins. Being that you don't have the means to recycle there develop huge piles of milk tins, drink tops and all these things all over the place. So it's an examination of consumption and the various landmarks it can generate in various parts of the world.



Peak Milk

Crumbling Wall

GH: Talking of milk tins reminds me of your earlier work where you joined the tops of milk tins together in a way similar to these bottle-top pieces. Were the larger milk tin tops less fluid, less like a woven fabric?

EA: What I do with them is to create sheets about two-and-a-half feet wide and about four feet long, and with these sheets I can then configure so many things – so they are in fact shifting compositions at any one time. The format that I find very effective with them is piling them into heaps – or peaks, since the commonest brand is Peak Milk! They mutate effectively because we don't tie them too tightly, there is always the freedom for each piece to adjust itself. So as you lift them and place them down they keep adjusting until a form firms up.

GH: So the milk tins too have basically the same focus – the problems of consumption and waste, and your own – not recycling so much as – transforming of this waste material into something of value.

EA: I think the right word is transforming – you talk about recycling when you are returning something to its former function. So, yes, these are transformed into something else, or given a new life, a new function.

GH: I know that this idea has always been dear to you as expressing a uniquely African characteristic – that things should never be discarded. A pot for example might be broken, but the pieces wouldn't be just thrown away but would rather be given a different function – used as a digging tool – or added as decoration to a wall, perhaps. Ultimately the high point in this process of transformation is when they become pieces of art in their own right. Somehow the whole history of the various transitions that they've undergone is retained and made visible in the art-work.

EA: Yes, they become loaded – 'charged' is maybe the right word – with a lot of meaning, and talking about all the various stages that they've gone through or the various uses that they've been put to – this is all written upon them.

GH: Although you're working in somewhat different materials, there's a definite continuity to your recent phases of work using discarded milk-tops, 'grater pieces' such as *Crumbling Wall* (2000)² and now bottle-tops, that seems to be exploring both a common set of ideas and a set of common techniques.

EA: Yes, the same idea, and the thing, incidentally, is that all the objects that I've used have something to do with either food or drink. Starting with the trays earlier on, these have to do with the display of food. And then the mortars, that's food again and the milk tops and then the *garl* graters too. All of them have to do with food, so statements and quotations about consumption come in there almost from the beginning. I don't know where they lead to eventually.



Crumbling Wall, 2000

GH: You're using things that people have thrown away even though they do come belighted with their own 'histories'. In a sense your work as an artist is to pick up these rejected objects and – in the way that you refashion them – restore them to circulation again, perhaps creating new stories for them. There's a recovery of something that was on the point of extinction.

EA: You return them to use but it's not the same function. It's a different function. As you said earlier, a higher function – maybe even the ultimate function. Each bottle top returning as an object of contemplation has the capacity to reveal to us a more profound understanding of life than it did as a stopper.

GH: It's just like those Benin leopards we saw today in the British Museum. They had little brass roundels set into their ivory 'skins', which had been recovered from spent cartridges left behind by European soldiers. The local people had done exactly what you're doing, collecting them, cutting off the round ends and using them to decorate their traditional art-objects. It's 19th Century work, but the beautifully arranged brass caps become an integral part of the aura of invincible power displayed by the animals. It evidences a huge respect just for the material itself.

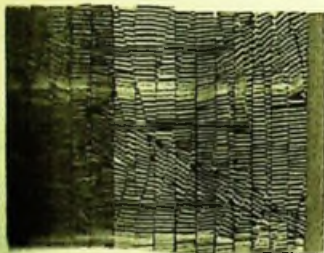
EA: Yes, art grows out of each particular situation and I believe that artists are better off working with whatever their environment throws up. I think that's what has been happening in Africa for a long time, in fact not only in Africa but the whole world, except that maybe in the west they might have developed these 'professional' materials. But, I don't think that working with such prescribed materials would be very interesting to me – industrially produced colours for painting. I believe that colour is inherent in everything, and it's possible to get colour from around you, and that you're better off picking something which relates to your circumstances and your environment than going to buy a ready-made colour. It's like someone, a stranger is trying to tell you what to do, rather than you deciding what to do with what circumstances have made available around you.

GH: Talking of colour, can we return for a moment to the *kente* cloths that you were saying *Man's Cloth* remembers? I've always associated *kente* cloth with the Asante people, but when you talk of *kente* you seem to suggest a broader use of the term.

EA: The two basic types of *kente* are associated with the Asante and the Ewe.

GH: And are the two types very different from each other?

EA: Well, my father wove Ewe *kente* – as a hobby, though, it wasn't his profession per se – and my brothers also wove. The differences have become muted, have almost disappeared; because of influences and other factors, weavers now use all kinds of threads, synthetics included. But the Asante *kente* typically comes in shiny silken threads and the Ewe *kente* employs cotton, so one is glossy and the other is matt. That's the basic difference. A typical Ewe *kente* one is able to distinguish because of its muted harmonies mostly of secondary hues, whereas the signature Asante one is associated with sharp contrasts from a largely primary palette.



Kente Rhapsody, 2001



Man's Cloth and Woman's Cloth, both 2002

GH: These are very elemental things to be working with. I suppose that like the idea of food that you were talking about earlier this idea of woven cloth goes very deep in the material culture of the African continent. I'm thinking of the way in which your wooden relief pieces like *Remnants Of Grandma's Cloth* (1995) or *Kente Rhapsody* (2001) are not only representations of textiles done in wood but again contain something of the transmitted history of a culture or people.

EA: I think that cloth has been maybe an unconscious influence. I have discovered only much later, looking back over what I've done over a particular period, that cloth has been a recurrent theme or leitmotif, and it featured in so many dimensions. It could even be the strategy of strip weaving that became reflected in (my pieces composed of) the strips of wood, or the colour schemes of cloth, or the fact that cloth is more related to so many things. You know you can memorialise a lot of things in cloth instead of having a statue in bronze or marble, in fact, these days cloth is loaded with so much meaning that it is rare to go to a cloth market, for instance, and find a cloth which does not have a name. And the name is not something which has come out of the blue, it's something tied to that place or a person or an event that, when it is mentioned, you know what is being referred to – it's something in the environment.

GH: You just made me think about *adinkra* motifs, which are often found printed on Ghanaian cloth. So, if you wear a cloth with a particular motif and name, you're actually making some sort of statement, using it to reflect a particular idea, expressing a thought-form.

EA: Yes...my explorations of traditional – or what I call classical – African art started with *adinkra* symbols and that's from cloth as well, so you can see how cloth has run through my work as a vehicle through which I have tried to grapple with ideas – as well as serve as metaphors.

GH: When we first exhibited *Man's Cloth* side by side with *Woman's Cloth* at the October Gallery in London, I was aware of people being transfixed and fascinated by them. They found them startlingly beautiful and original objects.

EA: I think that that's one of the things about the variety of conditions that are created in different parts of the world – when I come to the West I encounter some works of art which not only excite me, but also enable me to understand better things in my own environment when I go back. Cultures still have to have their differences. If the audience in London has an affinity for these works it's possible the same forces – which none of us can precisely name or explain – are at play.

Gerard Houghton
October Gallery, London
March 2003

¹ Gerard Houghton interviewed El Anatsui at October Gallery, London, in March 2003, following the purchase by the British Museum of *Man's Cloth*, *Woman's Cloth* (both 2002) and *Kente Rhapsody* (2001). The works had previously been on display at October Gallery in the exhibition *El Anatsui: New Works* (to October – 9 November 2002). This is an edited version of a longer interview, with corrections and revisions to the transcript made by both El Anatsui and Gerard Houghton.

² Previously shown in a different configuration as *Ancient Wall*.

Wonder Masquerade:
Transfiguration and Embodiment
in the Art of El Anatsui
Sylvester Okwunodu Ogbechie

In April 1990 at the annual exhibition of the AKA Circle of Exhibiting Artists in Enugu, Nigeria, an audience gathered for what had by this time become a ritual of radical practice in contemporary Nigerian art: El Anatsui's annual exhibition of innovative sculpture. Each year, large audiences gathered at the AKA exhibition to see El Anatsui's new artworks. Each year, they went home delighted and talked about his work until the next year when he presented artworks of even greater complexity. Anatsui's relentless innovations in sculpture were by then a staple of the Nigerian art scene.¹ His students at the University of Nigeria (whose principal artists and aesthetic ideology are collectively identified as "the Nsukka School") were used to Anatsui's incendiary genius. El Anatsui, a Ghanaian, brought elements of Ewe sculptural traditions into the Igbo-oriented artistic practice of Nsukka School sculpture and in the process established a completely identifiable sub-style of art practice in this environment. His chain-saw sculpture technique has been much appropriated in contemporary Nigerian art. His general principles of sculpture composition and installation art have found their way into the artworks of several Nsukka artists, so much so that one can speak of an Anatsui sub-style of the Nsukka School.

At the AKA 1990 exhibition venue in Enugu, expectations were high and onlookers opined among themselves as to what they could expect from this group of excellent artists but especially from El Anatsui. As one of Anatsui's students and an art historian whose research at that time focused on the AKA Circle of Exhibiting Artists, I had been granted access to the exhibition venue before the exhibition was officially opened. In the final hour of preparation for the exhibition, all the artworks were properly installed and ready for viewing except for Anatsui's entries. I wondered aloud whether the artist was going to participate in this particular event since his sculptures usually required a certain degree of assembly before they were ready for viewing. What would he show this year? How would he get it ready in time for the opening?

Anatsui came into the exhibition hall a few minutes before the opening of the exhibition carrying a round wooden base with a long iron rod rising directly from its centre and a fairly hefty bag slung over his shoulders. From the rattle of wood in the bag, I guessed it contained his sculpture but could not fathom what kind of sculpture it was exactly. Anatsui set the wooden base and its iron rod down in a corner of the room and set the bag down next to it. He then opened the bag, reached in and lifted out a slice of wood about twelve inches in diameter with a hole drilled in the centre. He slipped the iron rod through this hole and dropped the piece of wood onto the wooden base. This process he repeated and I watched, astounded, as the pieces of wood resolved themselves into a sculpture about five and a half feet in height. Anatsui placed a final cap piece of wood on the sculpture and ran his hand down its side in a fluid motion. The sculpture bobbed slightly and settled into a sensuous repose: a phallic object with a sharp curved line running down its side where the artist's hand swept down earlier. He turned away from the sculpture, placed a tag on the wall next to it and took the now empty bag back to his car. Anatsui's title for this sculpture was *Wonder Masquerade*.



Wonder Masquerade, 1990

A few minutes after the exhibition was formally declared open, the buzz from the mostly Igbo crowd gathered around Anatsui's sculpture quickly grew into a roar. Igbo definitions of artistic practice (*Ikwa Nka*) imply a process of embodiment in which the creative persona operates as a conduit channelling prodigious and usually unpredictable amounts of energy from the realm of the supernatural into the realm of the living. In this context, the artist is not only a master of physical forms (defined as the concrete manifestation of abstract paradigms through objects realized in wood, metal and other media); he is also a master of conceptual form and a ritual expert attuned to invisible forces that guide his interaction with the realms of the supernatural. Thus Igbo peoples call an artist *Omenka* and recognize him/her as one who mediates the above interchange of ideals. Adepts are called *DiNka* or literally masters of "form" and the artworks thus produced are invested with meanings extending beyond their physical nature and immediate functions. In terms of masquerade performances, the idea of 'spectacle' (*ihe nkiri*) and 'sublimity' (*ihe di egwu*: that which evokes awe) signifies an aesthetic of transcendence, an understanding of material form as a liminal stage in the evocation of supernatural forces. Among Igbo peoples, when an individual achieves beyond normal expectations, he is declared to be a spirit (*mmonwu*). In the unanimous opinion of the AKA 90 exhibition crowd consisting of Nigerian artists, art critics and the lay public, *Wonder Masquerade* proved that El Anatsui had metaphorically become a *Spirit*.

I dwell on the above event at length because most contemporary evaluation of Anatsui's art fails to take into consideration the immense spirituality that underlies his evocation of history and memory. His art is also increasingly subjected to exegesis that fails to recognize the deep impact of his local environment on Anatsui's creativity and the reception his work elicits in the local Nsukka community among which he lives.¹

El Anatsui has long been a subject of intense critical evaluation in Nigerian art history.² In this sense, the international critical acclaim he receives today extends an existing scheme of things. His students and colleagues at the University of Nigeria already recognized him as a master sculptor, as did Nigerian art and cultural critics who watched his reconfiguration of forms and images with endless fascination since he presented his first Nigerian exhibition in Nsukka in 1975. Anatsui has also become the subject of international critical attention since his appearance at the 1990 Venice Biennale and he is currently being reinterpreted for an international audience mostly unfamiliar with his Nigerian/Ghanaian context of practice. This audience needs to be made aware that Anatsui's art operates within existing local concepts of art and ritual structured by an awareness of wider international developments in sculpture and installation art.



■ Anatsui's studio, 2003

Anatsui's art emerges from a deep appreciation of local colour and also from careful attention to indigenous materials and methods of art making. In his Nsukka studio where he works with chainsaws and chisels, found wood and fire, planks and pigments, durable metal and discarded mortars, Anatsui has gradually become a spectacle (in the Igbo connotation of *Ihe Nkiri*). In the mythical universe of the local Nsukka people, he represents a type of personage they are familiar with, an individual who engages in 'powerful' activities; an idea of power derived from indigenous notions of efficacy. This notion is reinforced by the cavernous space of Anatsui's studio, a converted warehouse where he works with a chainsaw and fire, and by the large numbers of strangers of all nationalities who pass through his studio every year. In fact, the local Nsukka community regards the artist himself as a mythical figure and perhaps one with metaphysical powers. This perception derives from his use of heavy machinery (associated with iron and hence the occult powers of blacksmiths), the stream of foreign visitors to his studio, and his penchant for sculpture installations that echo the ritual processes of indigenous masquerade societies like *Omabe* or *Odo*, both prevalent in the Nsukka environment.

Anatsui's Immersion in and identification with the quotidian experiences of the Nsukka people makes him a 'son of the soil'.³ In twenty-five years, it has transformed him from a foreigner into an *Omenka* (artist) whose activities elicit a fierce pride among Nsukka indigenes. He has become in essence, 'an Nsukka artist'. However, since Anatsui travels frequently to different countries to participate in exhibitions and artist residencies, his art also has an international character. His insistence on culture-specific inscription in his art is thus a conscious, intellectual choice and an active strategy of engagement within which the artist positions himself in relation to local and international discourses of contemporary art practice.

Anatsui's sculptures and installations transit between ritual and performance, aesthetics and social commentary, and his art is best perceived in terms of the transfiguration and embodiment he effects in wood and recently, in metal. The malleable nature of Anatsui's sculptures means that any of his installations embodies both sculptural forms and performance art. His themes focus on African history (especially its colonial past) in relation to the vagaries of quotidian existence in the present. His images are full of political commentaries subsumed within dense aphorisms, symbolic forms and pointed social commentary. Anatsui also uses Africa's political and cultural experiences as the core of his creative endeavour. His materials and methods, and the proliferation of indigenous African symbols and ideographs in his art, reinforce a figuring of Anatsui's production as text. With this sometimes esoteric text, he scripts a visual narrative of Africa's history.



Woman's Cloth, 2002



Crumbling Wall, 2000 (detail)

Anatsui uses the architectonic logic of west African strip-woven cloth as the frame (and ground) on which he inscribes images and motifs from such diverse backgrounds as Akan Adinkra, Igbo Uli, and Ejagham Nsibidi syllabaries. Transformed into different media like clay, wood and metal, this underlying textile orientation is a structural grid for Anatsui's creative endeavour. Over the years, he has built up a sophisticated vocabulary that is endlessly adaptable and frequently yields new combinations and interpretations of the artist's principal themes. This is evident in a cursory glance at the exhibition catalogues that chronicle the formalistic and conceptual experiments of Anatsui's professional career. They include the wooden wall plaques series modelled on the wooden trays of market women from Winneba, Ghana, and the *Broken Pots* series – his monumental dirge for the destruction and decay evident in modern African polities. They also include the exuberant *Pieces of Wood* series, and the metal constructs of his recent masterpieces like *Man's Cloth* and *Woman's Cloth* with their overt references to the forms and traditions of African textiles.

In all the above formalistic developments, Anatsui utilized available local resources as his materials for making art. He has a prodigious knowledge of wood and he takes colour, texture and sometimes the fragrance of specific woods into consideration before using them for his sculptures. At one time or another, he has used for sculpture discarded wooden mortars, rusty metal graters used for sifting cassava (a local staple from which *gari* is made); discarded cans and bottles, rusted sheets of zinc roofing material and found wood for his sculptures. Some of these materials are extensively reworked, others, like metal sheets, are used raw to reflect the ability of natural forces to transform even the hardest substances.

In his most recent works, like the *Cloth* pieces mentioned above, Anatsui has turned a recycling project into spectacular art, constructing monumental textile-inspired ensembles from coloured metal liquor bottle tops (all from local brands of liquor) flattened and meticulously sewn together. These works take their form from traditional strip-woven cloth techniques and they recall the exquisite *kente* royal cloths found among Akan peoples. Anatsui's experimental process is also tied into a local economy of recycling: all over west Africa, people use empty milk cans as containers for steaming food and other sundry uses. However, no African artist has quite used bottle top covers or strips of metal in the manner that Anatsui does or transformed them into the kind of significant forms he achieves.



Young Woman's Cloth, 2003 (detail)

There are many allusions present in Anatsui's metal evocation of prominent African textiles traditions given the important role that metals (iron, gold, silver etc.) and blacksmiths played in traditional African societies. African peoples ascribe occult powers to blacksmiths on account of their mastery of the elemental force of fire and the changes they exert on metal during the process of smelting iron out of stone. Iron is also a major force in industrial technological processes and the herald of industrial modernity. Anatsui's metal constructs (evident in artworks like *Earth Cloth* and *Adinkra Sasa* (both 2003)) embody ideas about the resilience of African traditions in the face of change but they also embrace change as a fundamental aspect of life. Their intricate visual structures comment on the power of elemental forces and, with an ironic twist, on the elegance of power.

It is obvious that El Anatsui is now in a very important stage of his career where all the divergent impulses of his creativity merge to produce artworks invested with formal excellence, conceptual significance and outstanding visual impact. However, unlike many of his contemporaries, Anatsui has decided to remain in Nsukka and continue to contribute to the development of sculpture at the University of Nigeria where he has been teaching since relocating from Ghana in 1975.

This decision is significant because it reinforces his attempt to secure a favourable opinion of contemporary African art in an international art world that largely disregards African artists who live and work in Africa. Anatsui's art consistently speaks to the reality of African existence, unfolding the dense scrolls of history as a critique of neo-colonialism, utilizing pieces of wood and broken pots to construct a communal invocation of the ideal, and using cloth as a metaphor for indigenous notions of dignity and memory. As the AKA 1990 exhibition crowd averred, he is *Omenka*, a master artist. He is *Mmonwu*, a Great Spirit and like any masquerade, his performance demands that his audiences move quickly and constantly in order to perceive all facets of his creativity. His best is truly yet to come.

Dr Sylvester Okwunodu Ogbechie
University of California Santa Barbara,
October 2003

¹ This is evident in the divergent perception of Anatsui's work within the Nsukka discourse of his practice and in the international arena. For a discussion of this dichotomy, see Sylvester Ogbechie "Issues of Locale." *African Arts* Volume 32 No. 4 (Winter) 1999: 91 - 92

² Nsukka School artists and critics were unique in modern African art for the reflexivity (documentation and exegesis) they brought to bear on their own practice. In 1997, Simon Ottenberg utilized this vast archive to produce an exhibition catalogue evaluating the aesthetics and ideology of the Nsukka III revivalist movement. See Simon Ottenberg, *New Traditions from Nigeria: Seven Artists of the Nsukka Group*. Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997. See especially his section on El Anatsui.

³ The Nigerian expression 'son of soil' refers to autochthonous indigenes of specific ethnic groups, towns or villages. My analysis above recognizes Anatsui's two ethnicity while making a claim for the importance of his Nigerian identity. He is primarily recognized as a Nigerian artist.

Nsukka – A Place to Hide:

Towards a Conversation with El Anatsui

Atta Kwami

A Place to Hide

I first met El Anatsui in Nigeria in the early 1980s when I was working and teaching in the then Cross River State, and when a shared view within African academic circles was that sculpture could be almost anything. We have caught up with each other briefly since: in London, in 1995, in Ghana in 1998 and, most recently, in Nigeria in 2003, when I travelled there to see him. El met me at Enugu airport and drove me to Nsukka, telling me about the browns, greens, greys and blacks of the landscape across the seasons, and about the breweries and bottling companies in the area. We saw abandoned burnt-out vehicles or crashed ones, standing as monuments to junk.

Ensnared in a suburban studio home in London during the summer of 2001, I had been feverishly preparing for a show in Europe. One night, around midnight, the phone rang: it was El calling to say hello and that he was in London for a few days, in transit from Barcelona. I ask how he has my telephone number, as I am in hiding to get work done. El says, 'In fact, London is one such place where you need somewhere to hide'.



El Anatsui's Flat, June 2003

At Nsukka, El has two cars: an old Peugeot 505 saloon which is driven at night (just in case armed robbers want it!), and a newish Toyota Carina that is used in the daytime. Later that evening there is talk of originality and Fela Kuti's music. El's flat, the flat where he has lived for the past 28 years on the Nsukka campus of the University of Nigeria, teaching and making art, is modest in size. Good paintings hang on the walls, a high stack of catalogues from a prolific career serve as a pedestal to miniature metal boxes from Ghana. Early works and a few student sculpture adorn the living room space as well as his own customised furniture in wood, bearing marks of gouged-out termite routes. After supper, I am taken to my hotel.

From Breaking Up to Settling Down

From the 1980s, a number of works by El parodied as well as highlighted concerns with the despondency, social degradation and the political doldrums into which several west African economies, under military regimes, had plunged themselves. *Soja Go, Soja Come* (a drawing), and *We De Patch Am* (a ceramic sculpture) are two examples. Nonetheless, such works were not totally pessimistic. El is Ewe-speaking like myself and he often uses titles in Ewe¹. Aspects of regeneration or rebirth may be perceived from the *Broken Pots* series, *Gbeze*, (1979), (translation from Ewe: medicine pot), which addresses resilience and renewal in ways that transform 'decay, break-up and dilapidation as pre-requisites for growth'.²

The wall plaques of the 1990s have become more and more painterly through combinations of pyro-engraving and paint.³ *At first whatever was available was used; my vocabulary of processes is larger now, so I have some choice.* The planning side is imperative throughout the entire process of constructing a work but 'a few are improvised'. El's work references all kinds of fabric, not only African. Taken *Ancient Cloth Series VIII* (1993), or *Oga in Agbada* and *Green Stone Wash* (2002), for instance. When I try to find out why he is working on cloth themes he answers, 'probably the genetic factor'.



El Anatsui, 1993

For its elastic metaphors on fragility and Africa's eroding cultures there could not be a more imaginative leitmotif, but its fragility may be feigned. The physical requirements of his 'robe', in and out of the studio, involve El in yet another dramatic dimension. Some years ago he had a blow-torch accident in his studio. In a hospital bed with serious burns, a friend visited and demanded to acquire the shirt he had been wearing on the fateful day: *The friend (actually the one from whom I bought my studio) was certainly expressing a gallows humour; nevertheless, this is a reflection of the human practice whereby provenance confers value on things.* The way El works is meditative, teaching him patience. Since El has worked with power tools, he finds that piecing together the rectangular or circular bits of metal with fine wire has a way of slowing him down. *I think as a process it contrasts with the one with the tools in that it slows me down to a pace where spontaneity yields ground to more deliberation.*



The floor of El Anatsui's studio

Next morning I am picked up by El in the old car since the Toyota has a puncture, a hint at the unpredictability of life. Past the main gates to the campus the old car breaks down; it needs water. El parks in the middle of the road, joking about the possibility of this action only in somewhere like Nigeria; he likens the freedom to park unmolested to the ideal atmosphere for creative activity, or better still – the fertile medium in which the germ of creativity grows. Luckily, a friend passing by offers to fetch us water. Meanwhile El finds a standby plastic bottle of water and with the poise of a Zen master, begins to refill the over-heated radiator. In the midst of this event, which I am watching with passers-by, I ask him how he became interested in art. He says, shrugging, 'It must've been a natural inclination'. I recall steam and small bubbles jetting from the hot spout and El saying it's 'just like a volcano'. El's late brother and father were both weavers of Ghanaian *kente*.⁴ El's father wove and presented a kente to him when he was of age and gained admission to university in Kumasi. We quickly head for the studio in town since I am heading back to Lagos before noon.

Outside the building are remains of old solitary mortars, lined against a hedge. *During my search for media, when my car is sighted in the village, word spreads round fast and several people wait along the route to take me in to see their disused mortars, house-posts, etc.*

Looking round the studio floor – here and there are portions of flattened screw tops and liquor bottle-tops in all apotropaic shades and colours: silver, aluminium, pewter or gold. These are the raw materials of the cloths, examples of which – *Man's Cloth* and *Woman's Cloth* (both 2002) – were recently acquired by the British Museum, the former being on display in the Sainsbury Galleries there.



Adinkra cloths

In the Market

El considers: *The scope of meaning associated with cloth is so wide I have not heard it more aptly and succinctly put than by Sonya Clark, an impressive fibre artist at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, USA. Clark averred that cloth is to the African what monuments are to Westerners. Indeed their capacity and application to commemorate events, issues, persons and objectives outside of themselves are so immense and fluid it even rubs off on other practices.*



1 | Anatsui with studio assistants

He lists an array of names of local alcoholic beverages, whose caps he utilises for his 'Cloth' series, that abound in synecdoche: *I find trade names memorialising quite recent events – the wars in the sub-region (Ecomog), the last elections in Nigeria (Ebe-ano) or just names expressing sheer macho (Liquor Headmaster).*⁶ All of these, akin to kente names like *Takpekpe le Anloga (Conference at Anloga), Achimota and so on, are names which have been with him since childhood.* Nevertheless, a sculptor like El acts as a custodian of past and living traditions of Africa, without consciously trying to do so. His 'sculpted histories', that draw heavily on Africa's heritage, now provide a text of African modernity, along with images of innovation, experimentation and originality⁷. I've discovered that El's work looks just as good in reproduction as it does in the flesh. Photographic images of such works as *Imbroglia*, (1979), *Chambers of Memory*, (1977), *Tapper*, (1995), *Erosion*, (1992) and the recent 'robes' (*Woman's Cloth*, (2002), *Man's Cloth*, (2002), and so on), are a few examples (some he has personally taken). Such images in print, capture superbly the genesis of their making.

While I'm about to leave, El is still at it, arranging work from another series – the belted circular milk-tin tops⁸ – into heaps of differing sizes. He continues to arrange them, concentrating, knowingly or unknowingly, in the manner cloth is often set up for display in west African markets. These small mountains, or cones, settle, finally, into unpredictable shapes that recall volcanoes adjusting their shape each time they throw up hot lava, but not like the gentle rounded hillocks amongst which Nsukka seems to hide.

Atta Kwami
College of Art, KNUST, Kumasi
August 2003

¹ Ewe is the language and the name of a group of peoples in parts of Togo, Benin and the Volta Region of Ghana. Its use for the diverse group first derives from German missionaries who, in the 19th century, were writing down the language.

² See also Fosu, Kojo. 1986 (reprinted 1993): *20th Century Art of Africa*, Zaria: Gaskiya Corporation and Kumasi: College of Art, The Design Press for Artists Alliance.

³ See Anatsui, El. 1991. *Old & New - an exhibition of Sculptures in Assorted Woods*, catalogue, Lagos: National Museum, March 23 April 6 1991.

⁴ Kente is strip-woven cloth that is sewn into larger pieces. It is worn as a textile identity in Ghana and by people of African birth in the Diaspora. [See *Glossary* - Ed.]

⁵ [Apotropaic: supposedly having the power to avert an evil influence (The Oxford Compact English Dictionary) - Ed.]

⁶ [Synecdoche: a figure of speech in which part is made to represent the whole or vice versa (The Oxford Compact English Dictionary) - Ed.]

⁷ See Platon, John, et al., 1998. *El Anatsui: A Sculpted History in Africa*, London: Saffron Books, in conjunction with the October Gallery, London. Saffron Books is an imprint of Eastern Art Publishing.