

EL ANATSUI



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EL ANATSUI

ART AND LIFE

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PREFACE

This is not a work of research or theory. It is both more analytical and more personal than that, having grown out of my contact with El Anatsui as I directed *Fold Crumple Crush* and *Anatsui at Work*, documentary films shot on three continents over more than three years. I realized that during the filming, which began with Anatsui's installations at the 2007 Venice Biennale, and the years of friendship that followed, I had witnessed the evolution that lofted him to recognition today as an artist of lasting importance. The swift and ongoing development of his work fascinated me.

Anatsui's current evolution has been little discussed though recent changes have been profound. His main messages, which for two decades focused on Africa's history and contemporary condition, expanded to a concern with the earth and all humanity, while the cloth phase of his metal hangings ended and they grew into suspended sculptures resembling nothing else.

The liquor bottle-top medium is the most evident feature of Anatsui's work and it has dominated discussions—the craft-like recycling of manufactured detritus, the historical triangular trade that linked slavery with the importation of alcohol to Africa, and the significance of the brand names printed on the screw tops. But other important aspects were overlooked—the many shapes Anatsui had devised, the working of the Nsukka studio, and the formal implications of bottle tops as an artistic medium. While making the film, I was teaching African art in the Department of Art History and Archaeology at Columbia University and lecturing on Anatsui in my courses. I wanted to reflect upon his practice, which I had known for nearly twenty years, and to analyze Anatsui's work with the tools of art history. My own art-historical practice led me to focus, not only on the artist and his concepts, but also on close examination of individual artworks. I built a chronology of more than 150 bottle-top hangings, a virtual catalogue raisonné of these works and a mine of information on their development. Although even specialized publications have discussed them mainly collectively, they form an evolving corpus with obvious stages and series punctuated by significant masterworks.

To write on an artist who is still in the full fever of creative invention is to tell a story that ends in suspense: the work I am discussing is preface and preparation for things invisible—for objects yet unknown. While I was writing this book, Anatsui created *Garden Wall* and *Broken Bridge*, two departures in wholly new directions. I can chronicle his earlier bodies of work—the trays, the broken pots, the wood-panel series, the metal sheets—as chapters in a history that leads to the invention of the glorious bottle-top hangings. But when my main story runs into the present, it breaks off abruptly, ending not with a conclusion but with anticipation.

While filming, we recorded interviews and exchanges between Anatsui and numerous individuals. His conceptual and analytical approach to his own work, combined with

his articulateness in interviews published in the past, has resulted in a body of substantive commentary that traces the development of his concepts of art since the 1980s. I have consequently focused closely on the theories of Anatsui himself, and of the Nigerian art world in which he works—an intellectual zone known mainly to specialists. As a friend, I have also been alive to some biographical aspects of his work, and sometimes sought to discover connections between his art and his life. This line of inquiry seemed to interest him, leading to his own speculations on the subject, which I have included here. Multiplicity of meanings is to be expected not only because it is human but because it is consistent with Anatsui's view of art as something not fixed, either in form or in the way it is explained. This book hopes to constitute a kind of archaeology of Anatsui's ideas, adding the latest layer to a rich accumulation of past interpretations of his art.

Most of the original interview material and location photography in this book was collected by my independent film production company, Prince Street Pictures, for *Fold Crumple Crush*, and *Anatsui at Work*, co-produced with Isaac Guba Kpelle and edited by Harry Kafka. In addition to Kpelle and Kafka's fruitful interview questions, I am grateful to many people whose taped interviews and exchanges with El Anatsui also produced valuable quotes and information for this book: Chika Asadu, Professor S.O. Onyegegbu, Professor Ola Oloidi, Ifeanyi Ozioko, Kenneth Prewitt, Enid Schildkrout, Rob Storr, Onyishi Uchechukwu, Ugwu Marcellinus Uchenna, Mattijs Visser, Joan Wainwright, and Alexi Worth. For facilitating my work in Venice, I am grateful to Giulia Paoletti; the Fondazione La Biennale di Venezia, Marco Duse; Museo Fortuny, Jean-Hubert Martin, Axel Vervoordt, and Mattijs Visser; at Skowhegan I am grateful to Linda Earle for permissions and hospitality. For support in Nsukka I wish to thank the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Chinedu O. Nebo, Vice-Chancellor, for permissions and hospitality at the University Guest House, and Sylvester Ugwuanyi, Security. Onyishi Uchechukwu, Anatsui's studio manager, was unfailingly informative and helpful.

When I mentioned to Jack Shainman that I wanted to write a book on Anatsui, he immediately put me in touch with Christopher Lyon of Prestel Publishing who greeted the proposal with enthusiasm. I was happy to return to the care and high standards of the publisher who had presented so many of my previous books. This book was written in an unusually brief period of time, narrowing the circle of supporters and collaborators, and making the contributions of each even more precious and essential than usual. I am deeply grateful to Ryan Newbanks at Prestel for personally providing much more than routine editorial support; for enlisting the incomparable David Frankel to edit and vastly improve my manuscript; for immediately seeing the superior sensitivity and originality of Bob Stern's design; and for Nerissa Dominguez Vales's painfully exacting standards for the illustrations. The cover photography by Jerry L. Thompson was organized and illustrations were located and



supplied by Jack Shainman Gallery's knowledgeable and ever-helpful Elisabeth Sann; assistance with illustrations was also generously provided by October Gallery's Alana Pryce and Bonham's Catherine Harrington-Gioulekas. I am warmly grateful for an extended interview with Jack Shainman who shared his enthusiasm and his special knowledge of Anatsui's art with me. A long, revelatory interview with Elisabeth Lalouschek and her associate at October Gallery Gerard Houghton was central to my understanding of the first appearance of the metal sheets. They—especially Gerard—kindly reviewed and commented on drafts of the manuscript, as did Elisabeth Harney, Perkins Foss, and Yukiya Kawaguchi, for which I am most grateful; Sylvester Okwunodu Ogbechie was especially generous with his time,

knowledge of the Department of Fine and Applied Arts Nsukka, and his scholarship as he read and commented on the entire manuscript. These colleagues have all kindly helped improve this book and I extend my warm thanks to them all, though its flaws remain my own.

Finally, I am profoundly grateful to El Anatsui for his uncommon openness with me, for his friendship, and for the privilege of his trust.

Sagamore, May 28, 2012

*For Karen, and
In memory of Denny*

2. **Garden Wall**, 2011.

Aluminum bottle tops and copper wire; wall element: 205 × 209 in. (520.7 × 530.9 cm), floor element: 209 × 295 in. (530.9 × 749.3 cm).



REACHING VENICE FROM NSUKKA



I don't think my success is a sudden thing.¹

A LATE-IN-LIFE INNOVATION

It is unclear . . . just what it was that precipitated Anatsui's core confounding of our categories: the breakthrough into the hanging pieces. Terry Smith²

This observation of Terry Smith's probes the entirety of Anatsui's art and life. After making art for more than thirty years, the artist began to create a series of works that vaulted him to the highest ranks of global acclaim in the space of just five years. His hanging metal sheets are now regarded in the international art world as among the most conceptually complex objects being made today.³ How did a sixty-year-old artist living in an obscure town in Nigeria invent an art form capable of challenging classifications of "painting," "sculpture," and "abstraction" that are cornerstones of the discipline of art history? This book attempts to answer that question.

The feat that interests me here is less the unprecedented success of an African artist at the highest levels of world art—impressive though that is—than a late-in-life innovation producing an art of enormous conceptual and material complexity. How any artist makes the jump from one mode of expression to a more eloquent one is always a mystery, and Anatsui's swift, unexpected leap to international visibility from Nsukka, Nigeria, made his case seem more sudden and mysterious. His wood sculptures and other works, though prominent in the African art world for decades, had not received wide exposure beyond the continent, striking a chord only with Africanists and just a few contemporary-art critics.⁴ The art world at large awoke to Anatsui only beginning around 2004, when it began to discover the brilliant mode of expression embodied in the metal hangings, which he appeared to have developed overnight. Equally surprising was his sudden stepping into a spotlight on the world stage seemingly out of nowhere.

In reality, neither was at all sudden or unprepared for. Both were actually steps in a gradual evolution, still ongoing, that was available to anybody who knew to look. The wellsprings of creativity can never be truly known, but I will follow the through-line of Anatsui's art in his life and ideas, including the detours along the way to the present. To understand the conceptual brilliance of his work, and particularly that of the late-arriving metal sheets, a key factor to absorb, I believe, is his decades-long development of a complex practice and philosophy of art that contained both their working process and their conceptual foundation. When mainstream critics abroad became open to his work in the mid-2000s, he was fully equipped to engage them in an intellectually sophisticated dialogue that furthered both their acceptance

and his own growth. The global acclaim he now receives I see as enabled by two advances: critics and curators in major international art establishments—museums, biennials, journals—changed their expectations of art from outside the Western tradition, freeing Anatsui and other artists to make any kind of art they pleased; and the international art establishment offered a warmer welcome to artists living and working far from the mainstream.

The material complexity of the metal sheets—which are made of used aluminum bottle tops—is a continuation of Anatsui's work in a conceptual mode rarely found among fine artists in Africa but widely practiced by artists in Europe and the United States. From the time he graduated from university, in 1969, Anatsui located his work in the margins between media (painting, graphics, sculpture, ceramics), and across categories that Western art history divides: art and craft, heritage and invention. The metal sheets continue the practices that produced his earlier wooden trays and wall panels; these are works in media of his own invention that do not fit the usual taxonomies.

The assumption that the artist's conception of the artwork constitutes the principal creative act has also been implicit in Anatsui's practice since the late 1970s. The idea of the artist's hand has long been under question in his work; the bottle-top hangings, manifestly handmade, conceptually complicate this by displaying the traces of many hands, but none is the artist's—one of the many contradictions built into these works. Around 1980 (with the close of the "Broken Pots" series), Anatsui's practice would become increasingly anomalous in Nigeria in terms of facture, yet consonant with that of a great many artists elsewhere. When the time came in the 2000s, his work fit easily alongside the work of international artists, though he had arrived at his process and theory by an independent route.

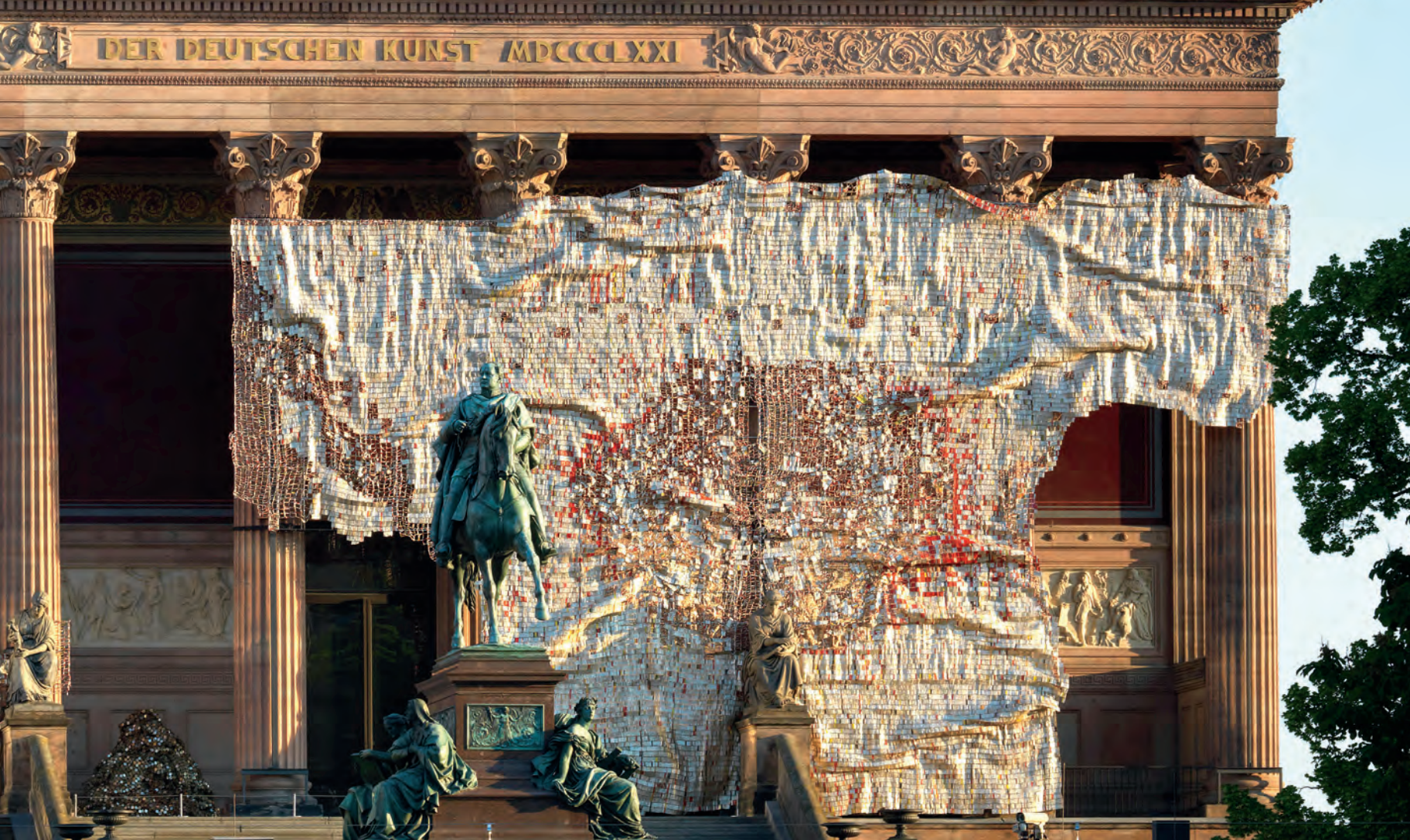
The metal sheets embody a conceptual framework that Anatsui had spent two decades refining. A conception of art as contingent, as the embodiment of pure potential, has been central to his practice for twenty years or more. He began to formulate his principle of the "nonfixed form" (central to the metal sheets) back in the late 1980s, when he started to compose wall hangings on unattached boards that he encouraged others to rearrange. These works mocked the role of the artist as a heroic individual, and the idea of the artwork as unique, but their conceptual complexity has gone entirely unremarked. Ola Olodi, then a colleague of Anatsui's in the Fine and Applied Arts Department at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, wrote in a catalogue of 1991, "His works, to him, are not creatively conclusive, rather they are just a stage on [an] experimental adventure."⁵

Anatsui stresses that the acclaim he received when he exhibited in the Venice Biennale of 2007 was not sudden but had been building for decades: "My exhibition history started from this campus [in Nsukka], and from there went to Enugu and Lagos," followed by exhibitions in increasingly far-flung and visible parts of the international art scene (illus. 6).⁶ His first significant solo exhibition outside Africa,

previous spread:

3. **Earth's Skin (Wrinkle of the Earth)**, 2007.

Aluminum bottle tops and copper wire, approx. 177 × 394 in. (449.6 × 1,000.8 cm). This piece is a close companion to **Dusasa I** (illus. 75), created at the same time for the Venice Biennale. For its presentation at the Sharjah Biennale in 2007, Anatsui described the hanging as concerned with several themes, "permeation, binding, yoking, opulence, and bleakness: the textures, patterns, and complexions of the globe, resulting from age-long human actions and interactions."



in London in 1995, coincided with an awakening interest in non-Western artists in the international art world—an interest that today has finally turned into a warm welcome.⁷ Anatsui's current work, expressing global themes instead of African ones, might have been coolly received a decade earlier, but the metal hangings appeared in London just as international curators began to accept the premise that African artists might legitimately make art that did not look typically "African."

LIVING IN AFRICA

If there were people coming to the continent [of Africa], they would have bumped into one and helped one come and show [in exhibitions in Europe and the United States].⁸

Anatsui is the first and only black African artist to achieve global recognition at the highest levels while living and working continuously in Africa. This "largely African life" is exceptional, since "many modern African lives," as Kwame Anthony Appiah notes, particularly those of men and women who become internationally successful, include "long periods outside Africa."⁹ In his whole life, Anatsui has never spent a long period away from his home base. He has felt no need to study or work outside Africa, though he has had many formative residencies of a few months' duration abroad. He developed his conceptual framework in Nsukka, a supportive

intellectual and artistic community for him—he calls it "a little village," a place that even today is barely on Nigeria's electricity grid and certainly not on the international art-world radar (illus. 8). Virtually all the other African artists who have gained visibility on the world scene, beginning with the very earliest, have studied, lived, and worked (most of them for decades) in Europe or the United States, or are of European ancestry.¹⁰ But Anatsui's long, solitary intellectual journey took place in Africa, and it was there that he arrived at his present level of sophisticated complexity and his fluency in an international art discourse.

The Ghanaian artist Atta Kwami recounts the story of a day spent visiting Anatsui as a comical metaphor for creativity in Nsukka:

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.¹¹

Kwami titles his essay "Nsukka—A Place to Hide," but there are other powerful incentives to remain. In London in 1995, Anatsui explained,

Art is something that is environment based. . . . If what you derive your nurture from is not much in the new environment,

4. Installation view of **Ozone Layer and Yam Mound** at the Alte Nationalgalerie, Berlin, 2010.