

EXHIBITION

ANAT SUSI

New Worlds

MOUNT HOLYOKE
COLLEGE
MUSEUM OF ART



PERSPECTIVES

JOSHUA H. ROTH

Creating New Worlds

Conventional maps are meant to represent the relative positions of various objects, natural or man-made, within a delimited space. When we view a map, we read the correspondences between the map and its spatial referents. The viewer of El Anatsui's *New Worlds* exhibition at the Mount Holyoke College Art Museum, which includes the sculpture *New World Map*, performs a different operation. As viewers, we do not attempt to find topographical correspondences to known continents or worlds in the massive wall hangings. But neither do the works push us to an internal space of imagination. Through a series of paradoxical oppositions, these works invite us to view the world anew, and perhaps recognize our part in its creation.

The first opposition that we see is that between the opulence of the sculptures, and the everyday recycled materials from which they are made. The works *Blema* and *They Finally Broke the Pot of Wisdom* shimmer with gold and silver, but upon closer examination, it becomes clear that they, like all of the works in this exhibition, are made from liquor bottle caps stitched together by copper wire. Several of the other works with a more subdued color palette nevertheless give the appearance of brocade with glimmers of gold and silver. In demonstrating how such opulence can be fashioned from the discarded byproducts of a consumer society, Anatsui shows us that value ultimately resides in our creative ability to perceive and shape the world in new ways.

Another paradox exists between the delicate cloth-like refinement of the works and their metallic hardness. The colors, patterns, and folds of Anatsui's hangings bring to mind the kimono, and yet the hard metallic bottle caps also recall Japanese armor made of similarly diminutive rectangular plates stitched together with leather and silk—rigid, yet flexible, strong yet delicate. Anatsui's kimono-armor breaks down our taken-for-granted oppositions and stimulates us to imagine a world of new combinations.

Approximately ten faculty joined the curators and Museum staff in hanging



JAMES HAROLD

El Anatsui: New Worlds as New Forms of Art

The first time we see El Anatsui's bottle-top hangings, we are not only immediately struck by their scale, beauty, and richness: we are also unsettled. What exactly is it that we are looking at? Is it a painting, a textile, a sculpture, or something else? We want to be able to classify, to compare, and to know how to experience these works. Anatsui seems to have created not just a series of new and exciting works of art, but new forms of art. (In fact, looking at his career as a whole, we might say he has done this more than once.)

Anatsui's bottle-top hangings comprise thousands of metal bottle caps, bent and shaped into 15 or so different configurations, which are "sewn" together with wire. The result is a large sheet that can be draped and hung like a textile. Anatsui's first works of this type were titled *Man's Cloth* (2001) (Figure 19) and *Woman's Cloth* (2001) (Figure 20). The titles and the methods of display suggest that the "right" way to think of the wall hangings is as textiles. Looking at bottle-top hangings as textiles, our attention is drawn to the way in which the work drapes and folds as it hangs and to the patterns that weave them together. Early critics focused on this and also sought to explore connections between Anatsui's work and traditional Ghanaian weaving. In this way of seeing the works, it is primarily the material itself—metal bottle tops and wire rather than silk or cotton—that appears novel and of artistic interest.

However, Anatsui has made it clear that he does not want his works to be seen

They Finally Broke the Pot of Wisdom. We were like children allowed to remove a toy from its package and invited to play with it for the first time. We were taken by the impulsive joy of manipulating and making our own an object of art, something that we are normally told not to touch. Put a fold here! Bunch the material there! Loop a curve inward! No, direct it up and out! It was a process of trial and error, assertions and compromises. The process revealed how new worlds can be created out of old, and how the temporary fixity of one hanging emerges out of a transformative movement made possible by the work of imagination and experimentation.

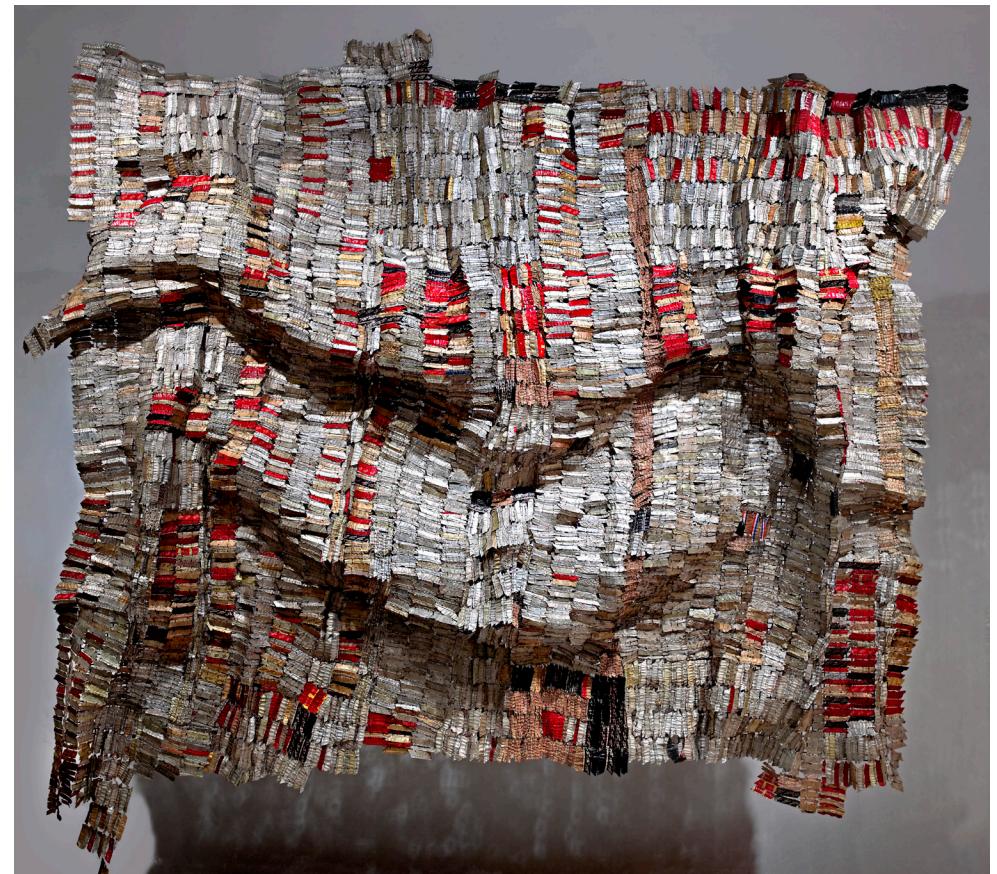
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A Professor of Anthropology, Roth specializes in migration and ethnic minorities, risk and governance, automobility, consumption and exchange. He has worked primarily in Japan and Brazil.

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not so remarkable. One may be inclined to compare Anatsui's works to those of other large-scale sculptors, particularly those who use discarded or recycled materials, such as Xu Bing.

So what we see in Anatsui's works depends crucially on us: that is, on the category we place it in (textile or sculpture). This is a point made memorably by the philosopher Kendall Walton.² Walton noted that when we mentally place a work in a category, we thereby determine what features of that work seem standard (it is standard for textiles to be pliable: that is, to be capable of folding in different configurations when they hang; sculptures are standardly three dimensional), which ones vary from work to work (the particular colors of each textile and sculpture vary), and which ones are contra-standard and therefore seem strange (textiles are not

¹ Quoted in Susan Mullin Vogel, *El Anatsui: Art and Life* (New York: Prestel, 2012), 120.

² Kendall Walton, "Categories of Art," *Philosophical Review*, July 1970.

normally made of metal; sculptures normally have a fixed three-dimensional configuration). What's more, the categories that we put artworks in affect our experience and understanding of those works. To see the bottle-top hangings as continuous with the kente cloth tradition is to have an experience that is very different than one might have if one sees

the works as “between painting and sculpture.”

The question then appears to be: What is the correct category—are the bottle-top hangings “really” textiles, or are they sculptures, or are they members of a new art form altogether? If we take the artist’s own views as authoritative, the answer to this question seems clear. Anatsui has said that his work should not be seen as textiles. However, once we look more closely, matters are not so simple.

Anatsui has repeatedly affirmed the importance of the “nonfixed form.” By this, he means first that the works themselves can and should be changed each time they are displayed, by folding and shaping them into any number of configurations: the curators of each exhibition, in his view, are artists themselves, creating new works by



using his hangings as “raw materials” in creating a new three-dimensional shape. But he also means that the audience plays a role in determining the work: “As an artist, I don’t want to be a dictator: I want to be somebody who suggests things, and then people can do whatever they want with them. The idea of freedom, you know.”³ Anatsui entrusts his works to us, and asks us to do with them what we will.

In light of this, it’s worth noting that Anatsui’s primary objection to classifying his works as textiles seems to be that to do so is limiting: when the hangings are thought of as textiles, we are fixing a nonfixed form, banning the sculptural and painterly aspects of the works from our minds. In an interview, Anatsui said: “If you immediately associate it with kente, then you take a lot of things away. For instance, the implications of the medium that I use... would be lost.”⁴ But, of course, to classify the wall hangings as sculpture is limiting too. All categorizations limit in one way or another, though categorizing Anatsui’s works as kente may be particularly dangerous because of the way it treats

³ Quoted in Vogel, *El Anatsui*, 109.

⁴ Bronwyn Law-Vrijenhoek and Kate McCrickard, *El Anatsui* 2006 (New York: David Krut Publishing, 2006).

him as an African artist tied to traditional African art forms, rather than as a contemporary international figure.

There is another way, however. We do not need to choose any one category for these wall hangings, or, at least, we do not need to fix the hangings in any one particular category: to do so “ends everything.” Our experience of the bottle-top hangings can involve subtle but powerful perceptual shifts, like a Gestalt shift, where a set of features emerge as salient, and then recede as another set leaps to the surface. One of the revelatory aspects of the experience of Anatsui’s work is the freedom to see it first as a textile, then shift to seeing it as sculpture, than as painting, and then freely back again as we choose. With each conceptual shift, new readings of the work are offered to us. Therefore, the answer to the question of in which category the wall hangings belong is not fixed: it belongs in all of them, or perhaps none.

As I survey the marvelous installation of Anatsui’s works here at the Mount Holyoke College Art Museum, I find myself benefiting from a kind of restlessness: moving

⁵ I am grateful to Sherri Irvin for her helpful comments and suggestions on an earlier draft of this essay, including a reference to some remarks by El Anatsui that I had not seen.

around the space in order to see different aspects of the works, in different lights, from different angles, and also moving the pieces around in my mind, focusing on different aspects and categories to which they might belong. Each perspective enriches the experience: none should be taken as the final word.⁵

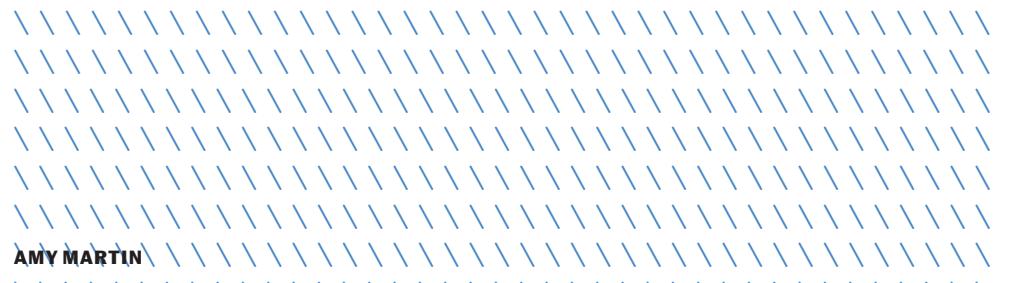
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A Professor of Philosophy, Harold specializes in the philosophy of the arts, with a particular focus in ethical issues in art and theories of value. Harold’s interests include moral aspects of imaginative engagement with artworks as well as related issues in ethics and ancient Chinese and Greek philosophy.

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AMY MARTIN

Revealing the Violence of Empire

Sitting in a dark classroom, the students in my “Victorian Visual Culture” seminar stare at the photograph projected on the screen (Figure 21). Our eyes first see the rocky landscape near Lucknow in India. As we take in the composition of this photographic image taken in 1858, we follow the small path that winds up the hill toward some type of fortifying wall at the top. It is a pleasing image—the terrain, the walking path, and the edifice bathed in bright, stark sunlight—a pleasurable mix of the natural and the human which invites our eyes to make their way slowly up the step-like formations of rock to the top and then to the open sky. Even knowing the circumstances in which Felice Beato took the photograph, it takes us a while to work our way back



When you first approach El Anatsui's *Alter Ego* from across the room, it appears to be more reminiscent of a topographical map than any other work in the *El Anatsui: New Worlds* exhibition. With prominent mountain ranges and gentle valley floors, the piece draws you in to explore its details in the same way you might find yourself lost in a Google Earth session. *Alter Ego* presents you with the same satellite view, and, like Google Earth, it is not just natural forms that are represented. White liquor bottle caps imprinted with the word "pilot" form the shape of an airplane flying over the mountains; three lines of dark green bottle caps traverse the middle of the piece, recalling highways, railroads, or some other human incursion of the landscape. Upon closer inspection, you can see that the majority of caps in the central part of the piece are imprinted with blue and yellow stripes; it's only when viewed from a comfortable distance that you notice the effect of shimmering green they create. The random pattern in which the stripes are connected further heightens the naturalistic sense of the aerial view.

Now your eyes move from the central greenery of *Alter Ego*, drawn by the contrasting pattern of black bottle caps on the top and bottom of the sculpture. Arranged in rigid rows that seem to lie underneath the landscape (pockets of black are visible throughout the green section), these caps form a stratified foundation I associate with the mineral and fossil fuel resources we extract from the earth. Many of the black caps carry the words "black gold" which—as we may remember from *The Beverly Hillbillies*—is another name for oil. The ordered pattern calls forth the imprint of value that humans place on particular parts of the landscape. It is also most noteworthy that these liquor bottle caps themselves are made from the minerals that we mine from the land—the resources that we dig up and manipulate to create the fabricated products with which we surround ourselves. Here, they create an artwork that simultaneously reconnects us to the land while also revealing how we divide the landscape's components both

physically and mentally.

Although some viewers talk of Anatsui's "recycling" of materials, it is really more effective and accurate to speak of his "reuse" of the bottle caps. Recycling implies a process that returns materials to their base, moldable form, but here, Anatsui has employed the original manufactured product such that while the shape has changed, the original identity as a liquor cap remains recognizable. This "reuse" is important for the impact of the artwork. How might humans represent the value of the landscape we live in? One answer is before our eyes: packaging for liquor that is sold and shipped throughout Africa, with questionable economic and social impacts. In this way, I would argue that Anatsui's reuse of caps in sculpture has imbued the metals with new purpose—one more timeless and significant, and which draws attention to the insufficient quality of their short, uncelebrated tenure as bottle-stoppers for alcohol.

The title of this wall piece at first puzzled me, but as I worked through the juxtaposition of the two very different representations in *Alter Ego*—the naturalistic blue/green/yellow versus the ordered, straight lines of black—the genius of the name revealed itself. We humans are surrounded by a shrinking world of Nature that we draw upon for resources to create our "civilized" habitat. Is our Alter Ego the green world that we must dig through to retrieve the resources we use to define our true selves? Or is it the other way around—we are natural beings, but our Alter Ego is our constructed identity, which is defined by the things we manufacture, such as liquor bottle caps. Which identity is primary in our minds? *Alter Ego* serves as a touchstone of reflection on this important dialectic.

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The Leslie and Sarah Miller Director of the Miller Worley Center for the Environment and an Associate Professor of Environmental Studies, Farnham's scholarly interests focus on environmental values and how humans have perceived their place in the natural world throughout history.

SARA LONDON

El Anatsui's Redemptive Art

El Anatsui's lavish bottle-cap assemblages both defy and deeply satisfy a 21st-century preoccupation with the recycled object. Like the best of art, they throw aspects of our humanness back at us in a figurative act of mirror making. We virtually preen in their light. They blanket walls with multifaceted refractors—bending, distorting, and deflecting our natures, histories, and lands—all the while casting out and back



those core human motivators, memory and desire.

The dazzling, grand-scale quilts of silver and gold, yellow, red, blue and black patchwork—Star Ponche, Sailor Dark Rum, Newlife Gold—are quick intoxicants for the eye. (Up close, the thousands of linked and flattened metal “tags” and rings reflect the labor of myriad hands.) But beneath the finished, tantalizing surfaces, beneath the swags, seas, and upheavals of texture and color, lies a more complex magnetism. Meaning in these works is thickened through their inherently metaphorical threads.

Metaphor (from the Greek “to transfer”) is what we naturally employ to decipher and express what we see. It’s about the pairing of images—of making what we see more concrete and less abstract by calling it something else. Anatsui’s abstract imagery sparks quick fires of analogy in our minds. We thrive in the fertility of these juxtapositions, and in the fresh illuminations they fuel.

After all, “what’s lovelier / than the shapeshifting / transparency of like or as,” writes the poet Mark Doty. When we view un-nameables, the “something” begins “forming itself into figures / then refiguring.”¹ What we see when we gaze upon Anatsui’s surfaces are shapes suggestive of land masses, rivers, tributaries, oceans, and world migrations. The strangely reflective skins summon textiles and tapestries, skies, the cosmos, cascades of gold, or the grosgrain of ribbons. We see teeming crowds, gleaming anarchies, or cellular microcosms. There’s a shattered pot, or the bloody drippings of an eerily ravishing aftermath, or, there, all ashimmer with colorful blinking stars, we find the terrible beauty of apocalyptic night. The artist encourages associations by using titles such as *New World Map*, *Blema* (meaning “ancient” in Ghana’s Ewe language), *Alter Ego*, *Harbinger*, or *They Finally Broke the Pot of Wisdom*. He has spoken of an impulse to “indigenize his ethos,” and the shivering illuminations of African culture and history also inform our interpretations.

The low-next-to-high, garbage-to-art aspect of these cacophonous and inebriate collages suggests yet another significant metaphorical realm. Time itself becomes interestingly argued. The past and present are fused in a dramatic “immediacy of...testimony,” to use a John Berger phrase. It’s an epic human road the artist has blazed here, and we observe it in one, lingering, scintillant now: We gaze upon history, moving from land to sea and sea to land; from thirst to the alchemy of metal. We’re off to the market, greedy for consumption and blithe in our making of material waste. Our search for meaning sends us scavenging. We inhabit the artist’s heart as we hoist the hammer, flatten and cut the metal, and curl copper wire into infinite conductors of connection. From the womb of the studio to the highest halls of art, Anatsui brings us, figuratively speaking (again and again), from hunger to degradation to transformation.

While critics struggle to classify Anatsui’s precise genre, it seems accurate to conclude that, whether sculptures, conceptual constructions, or piecemeal “paintings,” these hangings are heavenly human redemption centers. The pun may seem facile, but an object (or person) redeemed makes for a continuum of legitimacy, and this is perhaps the most profound metaphor at play in these intricate assemblages. Art does, after all, serve not just to mill, mime, and mirror our narrative, but also to save us from ourselves.

The hard labor of exhibiting these permutations of redemption becomes in itself a unique kind of redemptive process. Curators are given unusual license. From the unboxing and unrolling or unfolding of the works, to the final configuration of the pieces, the artist invites others to renew his vision; no two showings look entirely alike. Hefted up walls and over flooring, the

forms shush and clink as new wrinkles or planes are considered amidst the deliberating voices. Each mounting results in imposed change, as if variable weather has wafted through the exotic fields of harvested throwaways.

In his epic poem *Garbage*,² A.R. Ammons writes of the gathering “consummations” in the heaps of what humans discard, “where the last translations // cast away their immutable bits and scraps, / flits of steel, shivers of bottle and tumbler, // here is the gateway to beginning, here the portal / of renewing change.” Anatsui’s art of refuse extends Ammons’s image of “a permanent twang of light, a dwelling / music remaining.” And it refreshes our notion of sustainability. Our story, our “little gleam of time,”³ always arcs toward renewal. But humanity must also arc toward a magnificence of vision, conveyed globally by artists such as Anatsui, to reawaken that voice in our very blood that calls out for more.

² A. R. Ammons, *Garbage* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1993), sections 3 and 4.

³ “One life, a little gleam of Time between two Eternities; no second chance to us forevermore!”, Thomas Carlyle, “The Hero as Man of Letters,” *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (1840), retrieved from <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1091/1091-h/1091-h.htm>

A Visiting Assistant Professor of English, London specializes in creative writing as well as 20th- and 21st-century American literature. She is the author of *The Tyranny of Milk*, a poetry collection.



SHAUN TRUJILLO

Data Collection

The sculptures of El Anatsui emanate an uncanny and magnificent aura when first viewed. Beyond that initial impression there is a singular point at which the viewer’s eye turns critical and catches the actual composite material that underlies the work’s complexity. Like a manifestation of punk pointillism, there is an almost physical jolt the viewer experiences when they “zoom in” and realize Anatsui composes his dreamscapes almost entirely of bottle caps.

I happened across Anatsui’s work, fresh out of my library and information science program, in the summer of 2012 while browsing the galleries of the North Carolina Museum of Art in Raleigh. I was immediately transfixed by a kind of sculpture completely unique and new to me and felt an instantaneous affinity to the work. There are parallels I read in Anatsui’s sculpture to found art, personal geographies and psychic mapping, 8-bit and pixel art, upcycle and freeuse culture, network theory and data visualization. Above all there is something in reviving obsolescent and disused objects that always appeals to me. There is a recognition in Anatsui’s work of the pervasiveness

¹ Mark Doty, “Difference,” *My Alexandria* (Champaign-Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991).



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DOROTHY MOSBY

Reflection on the African Diaspora, Anancy Stories, and They Finally Broke the Pot of Wisdom

Looking at *They Finally Broke the Pot of Wisdom* on the gallery wall, like many viewers I am instantly drawn to the large, abstract shape in the center of the work—the presumed “pot of wisdom” with its metallic shades of black, gold, yellow, silver, brown, and red. Flowing out of this broken pot are small abstract shapes that remind me of the bits and pieces of *adinkra* symbols I used to intuitively doodle as a child. Writing about El Anatsui for *The Boston Globe*, Cate McQuaid observes that in his art, “rescued trash comes to life, tells a story.” About *Pot of Wisdom*, she writes, “The center . . . is black, threaded with red and yellow—a dark center, veined with light. Made of the empty circles of bottleneck rings tied together with copper wire, it reads like netting, drooping and creasing, dense but porous. The shape that the net takes might be a map of Africa; it might be a human heart. Perhaps it’s the pot of wisdom, broken and beginning to leak.”¹ I believe the piece reflects all of these elements that McQuaid observes. The large form in the center may represent the heart that spills forth the qualities of love and humanity. However, my work as a scholar embedded in the histories and cultures of Latin America and the Caribbean prompts me to look at the work as a creative expression of the African Diaspora.

The very title of El Anatsui’s sculpture, *They Finally Broke the Pot of Wisdom*, immediately connects spectators to the story often called “Anancy and the Pot of Wisdom.” This story has its roots in the oral traditions of the Akan people of Ghana and

¹ Cate McQuaid, “In El Anatsui’s Art, Rescued Trash Comes to Life, Tells a Story,” *Boston Globe*, March 17, 2014, accessed June 23, 2014, from <http://www.bostonglobe.com/arts/theater-art/2014/03/16/anatsui-art-rescued-trash-comes-life-tells-story/FSNeGaVdmxBaI1BivoekI/story.html>.



or “play fool fe catch wise,” in the words of Jamaican folklorist Louise Bennett.³

A reinterpretation of the formidable crash of Anancy’s clay pot and the dispersal of wisdom in the world encourages me to reflect on how the violent scattering of millions of enslaved Africans and West African cultural wisdom transformed the languages, cultures, and peoples of the Americas. The African cultural survivals and continuities in the New World, such as the Anancy stories and the people who produced them, were once viewed as discarded cast-offs, inauthentic retentions, refuse, and objects void of cultural value or social validity. I cannot help but to connect this history to the discarded

³ Louise Bennett, “Me and Annancy,” in *Jamaican Song and Story: Annancy Stories, Digging Sings, Ring Tunes, and Dancing Tunes*, ed. and comp. Walter Jekyll (New York: Dover, 1966), ix-xi.

objects that form the recent works of El Anatsui like *They Finally Broke the Pot of Wisdom*. The bottle caps, aluminum cans, pull-tabs, and copper wire—products that are reminders of uneven colonial exchange and discarded quotidian objects—are gathered together and refashioned into something new, an object of beauty and admiration.

An Associate Professor of Spanish, Latino/a, Latin American Studies, Mosby specializes in literatures and cultures of peoples of African descent in Latin America and the Caribbean. She is the author of *Quince Duncan: Writing Afro-Costa Rican and Afro-Caribbean Identity* (University of Alabama Press, 2014) and *Place, Language, and Identity in Afro-Costa Rican Literature* (University of Missouri Press, 2003).

MARTHA HOOPES

Shifting Patterns

As an ecologist, I am used to working with data and numbers and trying to identify patterns and relationships. As a spatial ecologist, I think about how things move and how dynamics change when a new element enters a community, a population, or an interaction. As an invasion ecologist, I study organisms that humans have moved around the globe and that cause disruptions to native communities in their new environment. Most of the time I am trying to figure out what makes these new arrivals succeed and what traits or luck of circumstance drives their impacts. I set up experiments and collect data that allow me to disentangle the effects of the novel species from other factors. But ecology is a context-dependent science. There really are no big truths or absolutes, or very few. In general, the answer to almost every question is, “It depends.”

I like to remember that I am more than just an ecologist—that I can still tap into my own liberal arts background and appreciate visual art, poetry, or perhaps conversation in another language. It is rare, though, to look at art and find that my ecological

training opens up new vistas of insight and areas of connection. Encountering El Anatsui's sculptures gave me that rare pleasure. I got an immediate thrill from each piece, but I also found myself wanting to stare, to drink them in, to look for patterns, to analyze them as I might my own data.

Just like the communities that I study, each Anatsui piece reveals different patterns at different distances. If we look at the interaction between just two caps, we see them linked, holding each other up, tugging away from each other, perhaps contrasting in color and shape. If we step back, though, we see groups of different colors and shapes, bending toward and away from one another. Back even further, and the colors start to blend; hollow sections look solid; thin sections look heavy. One more step, and we see patterns again, like the contrasting dimensions of a landscape that we might see from an airplane. But none of them are smooth or perfectly symmetrical. There is no single unbroken pattern. These pieces are like my research. There is no single hypothesis, no single factor that can explain or unlock the pattern. And there is no such thing as true equilibrium or a true constant. Each pattern is broken by a new relationship, a new start. Each smooth field gives way, sometimes gradually, sometimes very fast, to a new region. If we step in closer, we may see that the change, which at first seemed sudden to us, was actually foreshadowed in subtle shifts and blends of color; that the green was actually shades of yellow and blue; and that one color slowly died out, like an outcompeted plant or a rare species in decline long before we detect a



FIGURE 25
Faculty and Museum staff work together to install El Anatsui's *They Finally Broke the Pot of Wisdom* as the culmination of a faculty seminar focused on the exhibition.

cious sometimes just because they are unique and other times because they perform a particular function in a stunningly efficient fashion. Invasive species increase so fast and sometimes so unexpectedly that they crowd out other species, change communities, and alter ecosystem processes. Probably I should speak publicly and write more about how and why to control invasive species. Despite my conservation origins, though, I cannot help but be fascinated by these new arrivals. I do not like the losses

they cause, but think of all we can learn from examining these brand new communities, from looking at what happens when we release something new into the world, and it spreads and creates new associations, new patterns!

On a day when I had one free hour, I came to help hang *They Finally Broke the Pot of Wisdom*. I stayed for five hours. I saw a pot, just starting to break with the world moving toward it. With new folds, I saw a cradle, catching something falling. More shifts brought ripples of effect spreading outward and a tiny corner of stillness. One time, when the gallery was full, the piece seemed to hold isolated clusters created by ripples forward and backward; each cluster seemed to resist communication or repel the other clusters. I can still squint and see the pot I saw that first day, but it is no longer ever the strongest shape in the composition. Instead each time I look, I see new patterns, new connections. Scientists often approach data with preconceived theories, hypotheses, and predictions. Sometimes we see what we expect to see. When we approach data and see new things, though, that is when we discover new ideas and new worlds. El Anatsui refers to his works as his data, and that makes my heart beat faster each time I look for new patterns in his pieces.

An Associate Professor of Biological Sciences, Hoopes specializes in the role of landscapes and species interactions in conservation biology.

Harbinger, 2012

Found aluminum and copper wire

133 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 157 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches

Private Collection, New York

Details on pages: 102, 106, 109, 110–11



DISCOVERIES



TATIANA GINSBERG

Reclaimed: Experiments in Printmaking and Installation

If El Anatsui were to make prints, how would he work?¹ With this question in mind, I asked my “Printmaking I” students to investigate his working methods and to translate them into print. They created sculptural pieces from found and printed materials, culminating in an installation in the student gallery. Along the way, they explored the possibilities of ink on paper and what a print is and might be.

We began the semester by reading two chapters from Susan Vogel’s book *El Anatsui: Art and Life*, attending Chika Okeke-Agulu’s lecture and the opening of the Museum’s exhibition, and by collecting materials. From the sculpture studio, we salvaged an assortment of wood offcuts and project scraps with obvious history and tactile surfaces. And from the recycling bins and various private stashes, we collected papers that would accept ink, such as discarded flyers, envelopes, and wrappers. All of these materials had previous lives—none were purchased, only repurposed.

The challenge, then, was to give these materials new life and form through print. Discussing ideas brought up by Vogel’s book and Okeke-Agulu’s lecture, we considered the evolution of Anatsui’s process and his ideas. Our conversation centered on how the rusted graters and bottle caps begin as waste and are transformed without erasing their history, how Anatsui and his assistants have developed a vocabulary of forms, and how the installation process (often without the artist’s presence) reinvents each piece again.

After demonstrating some basic printing techniques, I encouraged the students to experiment. Rather than trying to make “art,” they began by discovering which materials would print and how patterns, shapes, and textures could be developed. Anatsui makes

¹ While Anatsui is primarily known as a sculptor, he worked in both printmaking and drawing early in his career. These early works on paper do not exhibit his mature style or use the strategies that he has developed for the bottle cap projects. However, after his 2012 residency at the Brodsky Center for Innovative Editions at Rutgers, where he worked with a master papermaker, perhaps we can expect to see more works on/in paper from him again soon.

Blema, 2006

Found aluminum and copper wire

146 x 217 inches

Private Collection

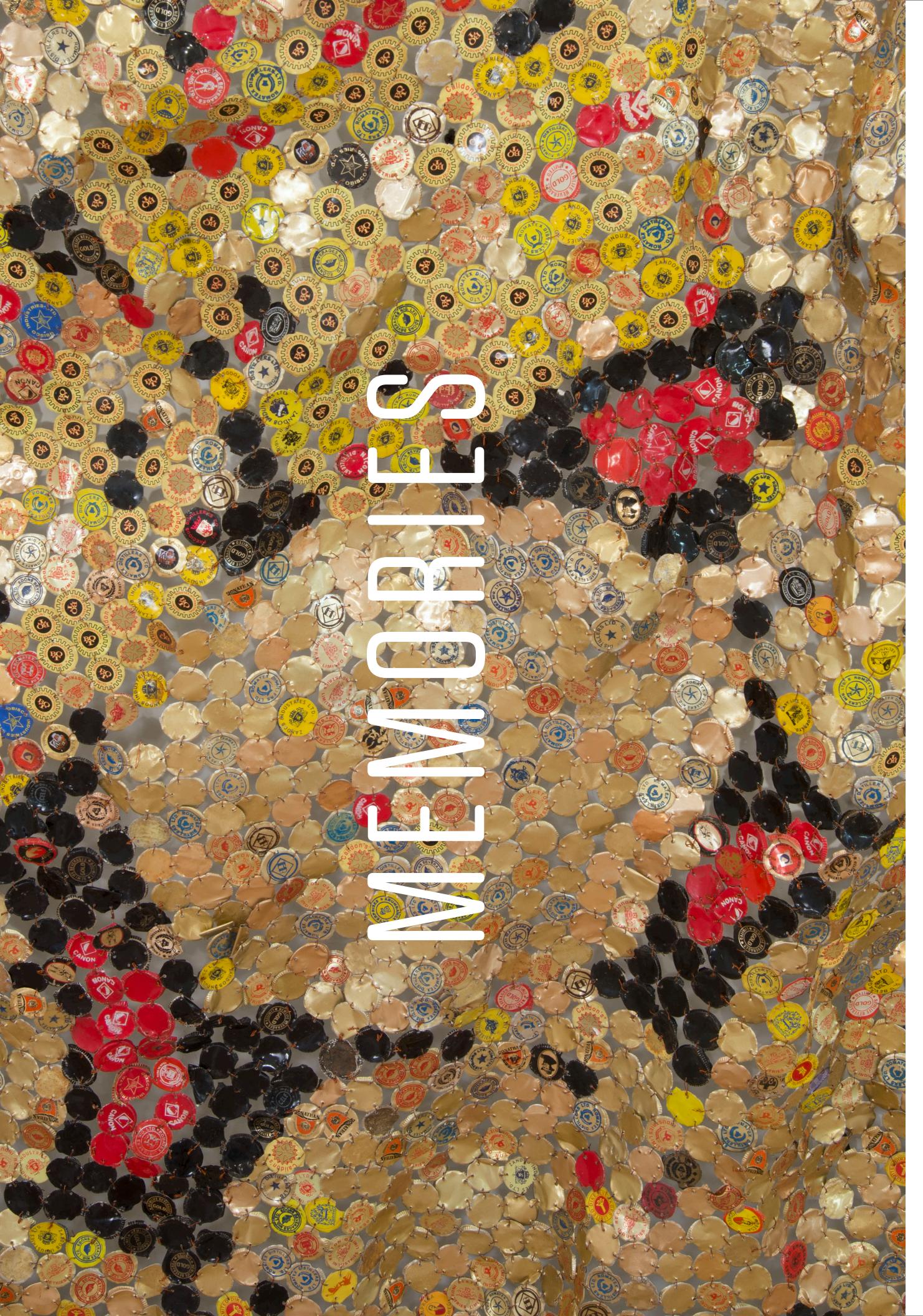
Courtesy of Jack Shainman

Gallery, New York

Details on pages: 116, 120–121, 126,

130–131





JIM COLEMAN

El Anatsui in Motion: Body, Space, Memory

El Anatsui's magnificent, shimmering "canvases" struck an immediate visceral chord in me the first time I saw them. Their undulating metallic folds roiling and cresting down the walls—helter-skelter waves in a vertical ocean—were so physically palpable that they charged the space with invisible currents. The idea of a movement response, a dialogue through dance, action, and gesture, was quickly born.

Safi Harriot, a graduate student in the Five College Dance Department, had recently completed a new solo that seemed a perfect vehicle for this project. I sent her images of the exhibition and space and asked if she was interested in collaborating; she was. Together, working in the exhibition space, moving, and experimenting, we began to collect images and movement ideas, identifying opportunities for specific spatial, kinetic, and personal encounters with El Anatsui's sculptures. We also collaborated in developing a sound score, an acoustic collage and counterpoint to the action, with sound bits from traditional Nigerian song, colonial-era beer ads, copper mining promotions, industrial machinery, village marketplace banter, political speeches at independence rallies, and other more elemental sounds—wind, rain, ocean waves—all assembled against a backdrop of a deep, distant, pulsing drone.

As we searched for unifying themes, Safi was especially struck by issues of space and time and the need for an open, meditative tone. Reflecting on the experience, she writes, "It was important for me to give a lot of space around my own associations and to manage my own identity in relation to the exhibition. Rather than character/narrative/exegesis, I wanted to offer more of a meditation that is open and can acknowledge and make space for complex connections without having to nail them down in one particular/linear sequence. That approach also creates/ed for me an expansive experience/sensation of time, and it put me in relationship to the scale of Anatsui's work—the details within each piece as well as their sheer size, the geographic

scale, how much and how far they travel, and the scale of historical/current events that produce (among other things) so many discarded liquor bottle caps!"

From the very beginning, the idea of a living, breathing, movement response to these works seemed in the spirit of Anatsui's own desire for the sculptures to continue to grow, evolve, and exist in living, responsive dialogue with different exhibition spaces and sensibilities. Our efforts culminated in a live performance—an intimate, physically charged, dancing encounter between Safi, the works of art, and the space, with the audience looking on, stationed around the periphery of the room, close to the action.

From the responses that followed the performance, it was clear that new ways of seeing, feeling, and understanding these pieces were opened, especially through their kinetic and personal resonances. This reminded me that while conventional responses to art typically proceed from viewing to intellectual understanding, alternative responses, through other media—music, poetry, dance—offer their own illuminations, which, because less driven by the urge to conclusively explain, help to further animate and keep alive the images of the work.

A Professor of Dance and Chair of the Five College Dance Department, Coleman is co-artistic director of the Freedman/ Coleman Dance Company, which has toured nationally and internationally. He has received two Choreography Fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and teaches modern technique, repertory, dance composition, and music and choreography.

LAURET EDITH SAVOY

Coda

Surrounded by El Anatsui's suspended sculptures, I can see ghosts.

I'd brought my seminar "Landscape & Narrative" twice to the exhibition. The students' project: to imagine their experiences of places as cartographic encounters.



FIGURE 35
Graduate student in the Five College Dance Department Safi Harriot performs a movement response to the *El Anatsui: New Worlds* exhibition.

Each asked, how have I moved across this Earth, the "land" writ large, in my life and in the life of my family? How have I lived—that is, how have I touched the Earth, impacted it, used or consumed its resources? How have I been touched by Earth? El Anatsui's metal sculptures were to be food for the imagination.

Mapmaking fulfills a most ancient and deep-seated human desire: to understand the world around us and our place in it. To find our way. Maps are often considered universal forms of communication, easily understood and appreciated regardless of culture or language. They are anything but. We'd explored in class how colonial maps served a project of invention that sought to transform terra incognita into a known world, defining sovereignty and self. As European mapmakers illuminated what to them was darkness, they also defined and bounded who they were. The course of empire entailed possessing territory on the ground and laying claim to territory of the mind and memory, to the future and the past. Other lives, other visions were obscured or excluded in the process of claiming, then trading, the world.

I've returned often to stand in this room where suspension holds the breath. Appearances deceive. Nothing here is fixed or static.

The word *gli* in Ewe, Anatsui's native language, can mean wall, story, or disrupt—the differences depending on how the word is pronounced, on the point of view or intention. "Walls are meant to block views," Anatsui has said, but "walls reveal more things than they hide."¹ In the quiet of the exhibition hall, I change position. What I see on these walls changes, too.

Shimmering mosaics of *New World Map*, *Alter Ego*, and *Blema*—indeed all of them—become, in my mind's eye, fragments of another time.

Not metal liquor tabs but wooden staves of barrels—"hogsheads" once packed tight with dried, pressed tobacco. Hogsheads stacked with blocks of sugar, brimming with the juices of cane, with rum. Not bottle caps but dark amber, brown, black-green shards of bottles once shaped like onions, mallets, cylinders.

They were the currency of older Atlantic crossings, colonial commodities along with some of my ancestors. I am a child of that trade.

My skin, eyes, and hair recall the blood of three continents as paths of ancestors—free and enslaved Africans, colonists from Europe, and peoples indigenous to this land—converge in me. As an Earth historian I've tracked the continent's past from rocks and fossils, the relics of deep time, but my own familial past lies fragmented and eroded. Residues of silence and displacement across generations mark me.

With broken pieces hinged and flexed by copper wire, Anatsui articulates a multidimensional past in present by stitching elements together, by giving them form and expression. For him the bottle tops' provenance "imbues or charges them with his-

¹ El Anatsui, quote from his statement about the installation of *Gli* in the Brooklyn Museum exhibition "Gravity and Grace: Monumental Works by El Anatsui." Accessed http://www.brooklyn-museum.org/exhibitions/el-anatsui/gli_detail.php.

² El Anatsui, quoted in Susan Mullin Vogel, *El Anatsui: Art and Life* (New York: Prestel, 2013), 104.

³ El Anatsui, quote from the video, "Interview with El Anatsui, 2011." Accessed <http://www.clarkart.edu/exhibitions/anatsui/content/video-interview.cfm>.

Here are webs of crossings, over an ocean, across borders of culture, "race," and time. In each sheet's constituent fragments I see the rending of generations torn from homeland, lifeway, language, and autonomy. But violence creates as it destroys relationships. In these arrangements of problematic beauty lies something more than survival, more

The contingent nature of musical form, as dictated by the impact of improvisation and the role of a participating audience, is clearly echoed in the works of curators who create new versions of Anatsui's work. Anatsui's famed experimental skills are strongly evocative of the improvisations of the Yoruba master drummer, who, responding to the contingencies of a performance situation, creates melo-rhythmic patterns that are guided by the dynamic nature of the event. The multiple modes of interpretation that greet the performance of the master drummer (through dance, song, chant, and quiet meditation) are similar to the varied ways in which Anatsui's works may be engaged. In both types of creative expression (music and art), the process of composition continues well beyond the work of the original composer or artist into the public domain of the audience, where the form or meaning of a work is transformed or reinterpreted through individual reflection and group participation.

LIFE, DEATH, AND LIMINITY

There is a sense in which Anatsui's art is both transcendental and liminal. His own reflections on his *Broken Pot Series* (Figure 15) corroborate the relevance of these qualities. He conceives of the series as "a metaphor for life," capturing different stages of life, with each stage functioning as a transition to the next.⁶ Anatsui explains that when a pot is broken, "that's not the end of its useful life. When you make sacrifices you do it with a broken pot. It's like a pot which has lost its life and it is transformed into the spiritual realm."⁷ The themes of transformation and renewal provide the context for seeing death not as closure but as marking the transition to a new form of life. Anatsui's works are figurative exemplars of how physical life connects with the spirit world, with death functioning only as a dramatic cadence—a pivotal event—linking the two modes of existence. This core Africanist epistemology reminds me of a similar belief in my native Yoruba culture. The Yoruba concept of the "living dead" prescribes that a departed soul is not dead, but merely transformed into another plane of existence. As Babatunde Lawal has observed, "Death is (among the Yoruba) not the end of life. It is merely a dematerialization of the vital breath or soul, and hence a transformation from earthly to spiritual existence."⁸

The close relationship between the living and the dead as illustrated in the Yoruba notion of the "living dead" recalls the type of fluidity of terrains and spaces captured in Victor Turner's notion of liminality.⁹ Although Turner employed this concept within the context of rituals to describe the significance of transitional stages, it is adaptable to the permeable boundaries that define the relationships between multiple planes of existence in African belief systems: life and death; humans and animals; heaven and earth, and so on. Anatsui's *Broken Pot Series* mirrors the transmutable quality of life. Furthermore, in their capabilities to elicit an almost infinite variety of meanings, Anatsui's works are defined by a form of semiotic fluidity that parallels the diverse meanings

⁶ Vogel, *El Anatsui*, 33.

⁷ Quoted *ibid.*

⁸ Babatunde Lawal, "The Living Dead: Art and Immortality Among the Yoruba of Nigeria," *Africa* 47, no. 1 (1977): 50–60. (The Yoruba, numbering over 30 million people, represent one of the three largest ethnic groups in Nigeria.)

⁹ W. Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974).

we humans make of life itself. The process of engaging art is therefore ultimately reflective of how we engage life. Anatsui's works helped me to connect art with social experience and measure the significance of artistic contemplation in terms of how it facilitates the performance of individual social and cultural knowledge.

LIONS OF NSUKKA, THE RED SOIL OF ANAMBRA

I must begin this section of my reflection by referring to Anatsui's *Between Onitsha and Asaba* (Figure 37), a work that relies on the use of wood, carved with a chainsaw, and aluminum. I am not sure of what motivated Anatsui to create it. My reflection is based on how it speaks



FIGURE 37
El Anatsui, *Between Onitsha and Asaba*, 1984, wood and aluminum, 39¾ × 49¼ inches (approximate). Collection of David Zemanek, Wurzburg, Germany. © El Anatsui.

to me, thus I am able to demonstrate a key theme of my essay: that art speaks to us individually regardless of the intent of the artist. My reflection on this piece of art is based on how it speaks to my experience as an undergraduate student at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, in Anambra State. As a student, I traveled regularly some 400 kilometers from Ado-Ekiti in western Nigeria to Nsukka in eastern Nigeria, the location of the university.¹⁰ Relying on Anatsui's title, I assume that this work is a representation of the River Niger Bridge linking Asaba in midwestern Nigeria and Onitsha in eastern Nigeria.¹¹ The critical importance of this bridge as the main gateway between eastern and western Nigeria was demonstrated during the Nigerian civil war when it was destroyed and repaired many times, functioning as a means of measuring the situation at the war front by civilians on both sides of the divide.¹² The two boundary towns, Asaba and Onitsha, were key stops on my journey from home to college. I had to cross the bridge to get to Nsukka. Although the two towns are within ten kilometers of each other, my movement from Asaba to Nsukka was usually marked by significant drama and transformation for a number of reasons. Asaba, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, was a sleepy town, quiet and provincial. Onitsha on the other hand was big, loud, and tedious, with paralyzing traffic as found in many big cities in Nigeria. On many occasions, I encountered a chaotic traffic jam on the bridge and had to disembark from the bus bringing me from home to cross the bridge on foot before boarding another vehicle from Onitsha to Nsukka. The status of the River Niger Bridge is captured in Anatsui's *Between Onitsha and Asaba* through meandering incisions created on chainsaw wood panels. On opposite ends of the

¹⁰ Located in the northern part of western Nigeria, Ado-Ekiti is the capital of Ekiti State.

¹¹ Asaba is now a much bigger city because of its status as the capital of Delta State in mid-western Nigeria.

¹² The Nigerian civil war, now often referred to as the Biafra War, pitted the Igbo people against the rest of the country. It lasted from 1967 to 1970.

¹³ Vogel, *El Anatsui*, 38.