



ELANATSUI



TSIATSIA - searching for connection, (detail) 2013.

Aluminium (bottle-tops, printing plates, roofing sheets) and copper wire, 15.6 x 25 m.

Photo: Jonathan Greet



Only connect... (E. M. Forster)



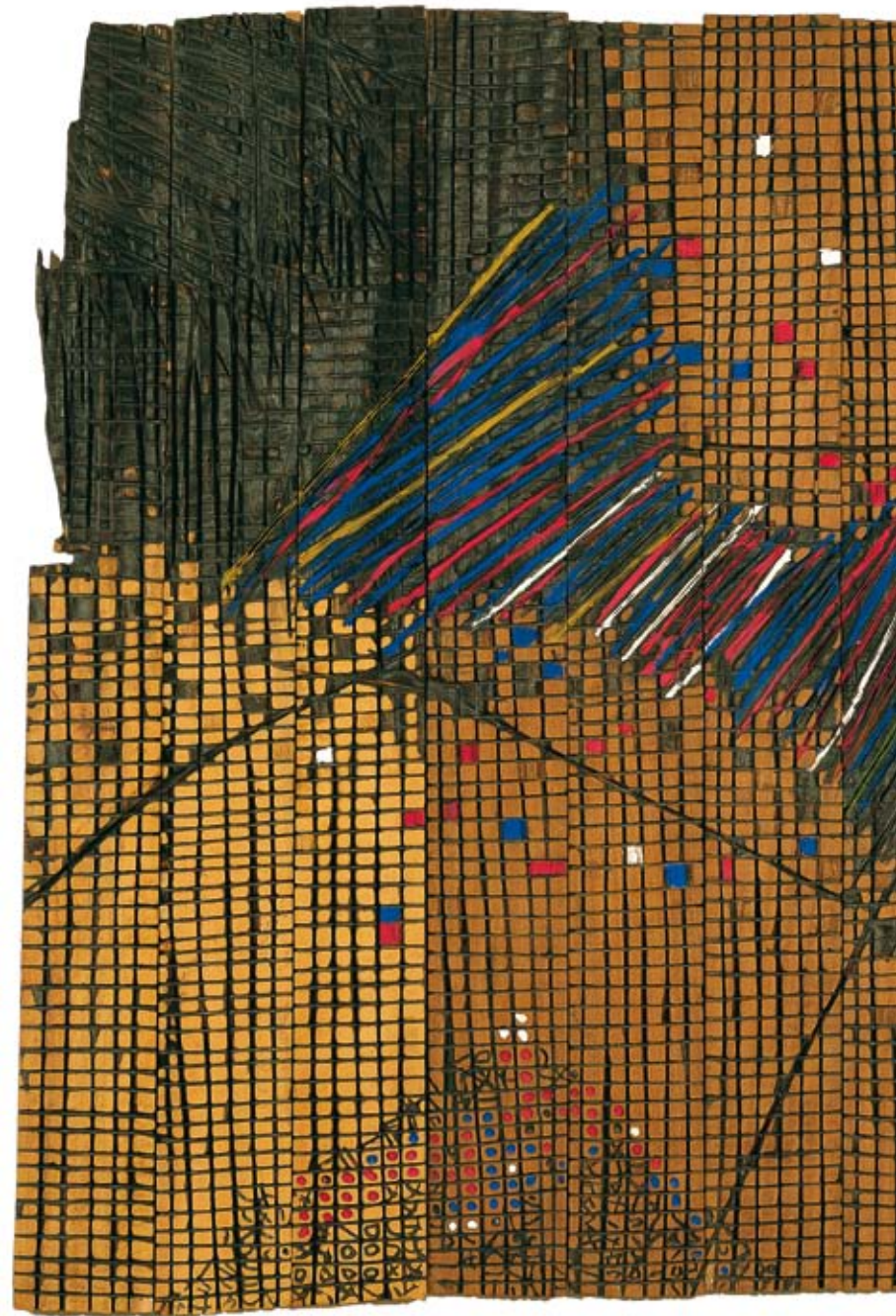
EL ANATSUI in front of TSIATSIA - *searching for connection*, 2013.
Aluminium (bottle-tops, printing plates, roofing sheets) and copper wire,
15.6 x 25 m. on the facade of the Royal Academy of Arts.
Photo: Jonathan Greet

ARCHITECT OF EVANESCENT ILLUSIONS...

smaller to larger...

Although the claim has often been made before, *TSIATSIA – searching for connection* (2013) is the largest hanging aluminium bottle-top sculpture that El Anatsui has ever created. The same was, of necessity, true of *Woman's Cloth* (2002), the original work of art that began this remarkable series, measuring around ninety square feet in size. It was likewise true of *Man's Cloth* (2002), the second in the series, nearly a quarter as large again. From that initial point onwards the works have continued to grow in size as much as they have in value. This most recent addition to the lineage of aluminium and copper wire sculptures, comprising eight panels, each of 500 square feet in size and all connected together, was custom-built to ornament the imposing façade of Burlington House during the 245th Summer Exhibition at the Royal Academy (2013). El Anatsui's hanging sculptures are modular by design. Many individual 'blocks' were connected together to create that original cloth. Beyond a certain scale, individual 'cloths' could be 'stitched' together to form larger assemblies, and so on up to the 'panel' scale, a size permitting ease of transport. Multiple panels when connected together create sumptuous singularities, such as *TSIATSIA – searching for connection*, of over 4000 square feet. The process is simple. The upper limits of the scale, to date, remain unknown.

The Ewe and English title, *TSIATSIA – searching for connection*, employs the verb 'tsia' meaning 'to connect.' 'Tsiatsia' - a noun form of that verb - adds a further layer of complexity, implying an ongoing process of looking to make connections, of laying down pathways – in spatial or neurological terms - that develop habitual patterns of access the more frequently they're used. This root idea of 'pathways' was simultaneously



EARTH-MOON CONNEXIONS, 1995. Tropical hard woods and tempera, 90 x 84.4 x 2.5 cm.
Collection of the National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., USA
Purchased with funds provided by the Smithsonian Acquisition Program, 96-17-1 Photo: Franko Khoury



REMNANT OF GRANDMA'S CLOTH (detail), 1995.

Wood relief, akparata, oke-oyo & tempera, 80 x 92 x 2.5 cm.

Collection of Mark McCain and Caro MacDonald / Eye and I. Photo: Andy Keate

present during the many months of gestation required to bring this piece into existence. It is appropriate that in a work comprising more than a quarter of a million bottle-tops, each connected, minimally, to four of its neighbours, all painstakingly 'stitched' by many hands into a unified whole, the idea of connectivity should be foregrounded at this the most basic level of structure.

At the integrative level of design, the work of art suggests two contrasting bodies separated by a sinuous, intervening, silvery space, across which division coloured elements almost connect, to suggest evolving pathways of communication. Seen from orbit it might represent a strategic map of naval manoeuvres: at the nanolevel of spatial resolution, we could imagine an electron microscopic image of chemical messengers moving across the synaptic pathway within the living cell. Of further interest in this formal sense are several earlier wooden wall-hanging sculptures by El Anatsui where similar sorts of patterns and ideas were explored. One such, *Earth-Moon Connexions* (1993), shows two forms of different sizes representing the Earth and its companion Moon, separated by intervening space, across which colourful strands (gravitational forces?) appear to connect, fixing the opposing bodies in a defined relationship.

Most frequently, however, El Anatsui wants his often poetic titles simply to indicate an overall direction without insisting on too literal an interpretation in any formal or figurative sense. Once any fears of failing to understand 'the meaning of the work' have been calmed, the viewers are free to observe it for themselves, developing whatever individual trains of thought are prompted by the piece. At these scales, such imposing structures, that move and change with the shifting lights of day and the varieties of weather are meant to be experienced at least as much as they are supposed to be understood. We can be captivated, held spellbound or bedazzled by this gleaming fabric under conditions of full sunlight; or calmed, perhaps strangely stirred, by the chance interventions of overhanging clouds, a squall of rain or gust of wind. Experientially, in this place and at that moment in time, this too becomes part of the meaning of the work. We connect to the shimmering form of a myriad meanings overwhelming us with experiences sensed in the continuous present.

earlier to later...

The connection between El Anatsui and the October Gallery began over 20 years ago with a felicitous moment of pure serendipity. Because of its broad remit to exhibit the work of cutting edge contemporary artists from around the planet, Elisabeth Lalouschek, the gallery's Artistic Director, was shown a documentary film about contemporary art in Africa produced by Smithsonian World, USA.

“Suddenly, I saw an artist’s chainsaw tearing powerfully through tropical hardwoods. The sound of the chainsaw was deafening; the wood was black from burning; and I knew that I was witnessing the creation of an artistic masterpiece. This artist had to be found, and I immediately set about searching for works by El Anatsui. Then, one day, Sandor Péri, a Hungarian architect telephoned me. He had several works, ranging from an early wooden plaque, through wooden wall reliefs to a free-standing sculpture. Péri had been one of the architects who had planned the new University of Nigeria at Nsukka. He built the Physical Sciences block, in 1982, for which he’d commissioned two public sculptures by El Anatsui, who had started teaching at the university some years earlier.”¹

With this significant lead established, the collaborative links grew stronger and El Anatsui’s work was first shown at October Gallery, in November 1993, in a group exhibition. This was followed, in 1995, by his first solo exhibition in the U.K., *El Anatsui: Reliefs and Sculptures*, comprising eighteen wooden wall-hanging sculptures surrounding a large central tree-trunk, ruthlessly carved with a chainsaw, its compromised outer surfaces still richly ornamented by the persisting traces of African symbols and scripts (*Erosion*, 1992). Debris lay strewn around the standing tree-trunk’s base.

Though born and educated in Ghana, where he studied Art at the University in Kumasi, El Anatsui has lived and worked in Nigeria since 1975. There, as Professor of Sculpture at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka until his retirement in 2011, he exerted a powerful influence on successive generations of younger artists. Many of his students have themselves gone on to become leading artists, art historians and critical theorists in their own right. Over the intervening decades he has maintained an increasingly active schedule of engagements around the world, becoming one of the most influential and exciting contemporary artists on the international stage. During this time, he has explored an unusually wide range of media: from concrete, ceramics, tropical hardwoods, driftwood and discarded wooden mortars in the latter decades of the 20th century, to found and re-purposed metals, including roofing materials, cassava graters, milk-tin lids, printing plates and aluminium bottle-tops in his more recent installations. Indeed, the decades on either side of the millennial divide could be characterised as two distinct periods. The first is a period of explorations in wood (incisively sawn and gouged; elaborately scorched and painted), many of the source materials for which, as in the house-posts and mortar series, were discarded objects recovered from the local environment. The second period is distinguished by a flourishing range of installations using found objects made of more



ADINSIBULI STOOD TALL, 1995.
Iroko and tempera, 239 x 40 x 37 cm. Private Collection, UK.
Photo: Andy Keate





Opposite page: BALKAN (detail), 2012.
Aluminium and copper wire, 260 x 320 cm.

Above: BALKAN, 2012.
Photos: Jonathan Greet



October Gallery exhibitions
including *LADY IN FRENZY*,
CHIEF IN ZINGLIWU
ADINSIBULI STOOD TALL, and
AFRICA - INTERNAL RHYTHMS II,
Photos: Andy Keate

durable metal components, wired together in innovative ways to create ever-larger sculptures. It is this later work that has fired the imagination of the international art world as a whole.

The decorated wooden strip sculptures of the '80s and '90s, which for many years represented his signature style, made way in the later '90s for standing figure sculptures refashioned from old mortars. Originally made from hollowed-out tree-trunks, these large mortars had been used in extracting palm-nut oil. For El Anatsui, part of the fascination of such discarded objects could be found in the charged histories inscribed in these wooden vessels by their many decades of useful service to the community. Together with old house-posts, which had formerly supported dwellings, these timeworn artefacts were deftly transformed into archetypes and ancestral spirits, who represented older classical traditions, as in such assemblages as *The Well-informed Ancestors* or the willowy, haunting figure of Adinsibuli, a multilingual woman, portrayed in *Adinsibuli Stood Tall* (1995).

From the late '90s onwards metal begins first to decorate, (See *Adinsibuli Stood Tall*) then to replace wood as the foremost medium of choice. Composite figures were conjured out of old oil drums and corrugated iron sheeting, perhaps ornamented with scraps of cloth, and wrapped around wooden frames (*Lady in Frenzy* and *Chief in*

Zingliwu). Other more experimental figures were made by fastening rusting iron cassava graters together with wire (*King Xortame and his Favourite Consort*, 1998). A much larger installation, *Ancient Wall*, 1999, exhibited on the Champs Elysées in Paris, in 1999, was constructed of the same materials wired together in sheets before being draped and fastened over a large free-standing frame, extending these grater experiments into the third dimension and at much larger scales. *Ancient Wall* is noteworthy not simply for successfully negotiating a complex scaling-up process, but also because it signals El Anatsui's first foray into the domain of large-scale public art, to which he would later return. The simple technique of wiring together discarded metal items, be they cassava graters, milk-tin lids, printers plates or liquor bottle-tops defines an ongoing experimental phase between '98 and the first years of the new century. El Anatsui has given several accounts over the years of the sequence in which significant breakthroughs occurred:

"I think working with the sheet – joining things into sheets – started with the (cassava) graters – then moved into the bottle-tops then into the milk-tins ... working in sheets, I find ... gives a lot of versatility to my works."²

So too with of the gradual genesis of this emergent working process:

“The whole process started with my having discovered empty drink bottle-tops in the wilderness. I thought that something could be done with them, so, for some time I just studied 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 all 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 into larger blocks so as to study them before beginning to piece them together at a larger scale.”³

However, in terms of displaying the results of these various trials, the critically significant date occurred with the arrival of the first two completed ‘bottle-top pieces’ for the solo show, *El Anatsui: New Works*, at October Gallery in London, in 2002. Although work on *Woman’s Cloth*, had started several years earlier, it progressed only slowly because the fundamental procedures used had still to be defined – and refined – by trial and error, as the work itself increased in size. Only once the individual techniques used to flatten, cut, fold, pierce and

connect hundreds of aluminium bottle-top bits together with copper wire began to stabilise and be transmitted to others, could sufficient ‘blocks’ be built to feed the insatiable process that forms these magnificent metallic fabrics of intricate design.

“The first of these pieces that I started with was Woman’s Cloth – which I think I started in 1998 – and this developed gradually until last year, [2002] when I finished it about the same time as Man’s Cloth. So Woman’s Cloth was going on for some time alone – before Man’s Cloth joined it, because by that time we had developed a feeling for the whole process, and it became easier to move along faster. In fact, I started these two pieces even before the milk-tin project which actually came later.”⁴

The subjects addressed by El Anatsui’s work are wide-ranging and have expanded to embrace new interests over time. The central themes of his earlier work took the broad spectrum of indigenous African cultures as an extended canvas, and were concerned with the erosion of those inherited traditions by intrusive external forces, and the fortuitous manner of their continued survival into the present. His deftly-organised and sophisticated wooden sculptures represented an entirely original synthesis of the diverse histories of classical African art interspersed with more modern influences selected from amongst the prevailing paradigms of contemporary western practices.



Left: MAN'S CLOTH, 2002.

Aluminium and copper wire, 297 x 374 cm.

Right: WOMAN'S CLOTH, 2002.

Aluminium and copper wire, 287 x 292 cm.

Collection of the British Museum





SKYLINES?, 2008.
Aluminium and copper wire, 300 x 825 cm.
Photo: Jonathan Greet

One *leitmotif* that continually resurfaced over the years was the idea of 'consumption' and as his principal practice concentrated on the re-integration of found objects into new works of art, this aspect can, with hindsight, be understood to contribute a sustained ground-note to the oeuvre taken as a whole.

"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 (palm-oil) mortars, that's food again, and the milk-tin lids, bottle-tops and the (cassava) graters too. ... so statements about consumption come into play almost from the beginning... But when I'm referencing consumption I'm talking also of the various landscapes that consumption creates in Nigeria, Ghana and so on. You can have huge piles of detritus from consumption... Being that [we] don't have the means to recycle properly, there develop huge piles of useless empty milk tins, drink tops and other such things all over the place.... So I return them to use – by giving them a different function – 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 ever did as a stopper [on a bottle]." ⁵

Even though he had been exploring the single common process of wiring together different metal pieces: large cassava graters, discarded printing plates, useless milk-tin lids and eventually aluminium bottle-tops recovered from the leftover piles of Nigerian alcohol bottles, something unpredictable occurred as his focus turned to these bits and pieces of recovered aluminium. Although it's easier to produce sizeable sheets by using large components like cassava graters, the small, seemingly fragile pieces of aluminium, demand dexterity, concentration and large amounts of time to connect them together into sheets of any appreciable size. The variety of patterns that could be obtained by more easy manipulation of the soft aluminium materials, and the imprinted industrial colours gave to the resultant 'blocks' a different delicacy of detail to the larger, rougher, rusted metal forms. The long hours required to produce even small expanses of this delicate chain-mail tracery was visibly evident, lending an extra sense of value to the more pliable sheets so produced. The larger such sheets grew, the further these cascading effects multiplied, and the more surprising the experience





Opposite page: NUKAE? (detail), 2006.
Aluminium and copper wire, 280 x 400 cm.
Collection of Doreen and Gilbert Bassin.

IRIS, 2012.
Aluminium and copper wire, 300 x 310 cm.
Photos: Jonathan Greet



of the resultant products became. In gestalt theoretical terms, as defined by Koffka, the whole metallic structure is quite other than the sum of its individual parts. By a transformative magical process that built minute elements into large-scale expanses, a rich new material, with unexpected synergetic properties, had been found. Realising how this material breakthrough could accelerate all kinds of corresponding conceptual advances, El Anatsui, began, from 2002, to explore the novel opportunities afforded by this ingenious medium. Whilst this material advance was in effect no more than the product of a skilful handicraft revolution, the manner in which El Anatsui organised and combined these new metallic pieces into imaginative pieces of awe-inspiring art, was what changed the game entirely. The pieces demonstrated all those same concentrated powers of ingenuity – what the artist Aubrey Williams called ‘the mark of the hand’ – that were already evident in El Anatsui’s wooden explorations to date. Terry Smith writing for *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, in 2011, accurately defined this insightful discovery when he wrote:

“El Anatsui has accomplished one of the very few genuine breakthroughs in contemporary art anywhere in the world today.”⁶

Smith goes on to talk about “Anatsui’s core confounding of our categories” which again is correct. The problem rests wholly, however, with the outmoded western categories being invoked, and having ridden roughshod over categories to which he had never subscribed, El Anatsui would continue to confound them further by pushing forward again and again.

In 2002, Elisabeth Lalouschek could sense El Anatsui's excitement on first describing, by telephone, the new works he was dispatching to October Gallery in London. Inside the shipment, wrapped and folded like sheets, were two fairly lightweight metallic objects, which when unfolded and rolled out on the floor proved to be the first two metal 'cloths' – *Woman's Cloth* and *Man's Cloth*. The excitement was as palpable as it was infectious. El Anatsui explained that to distinguish the woman's from the man's cloth the former should be hung in a crumpled manner and the other in a flatter way. Left alone to hang these works herself, Lalouschek positioned them side by side, asymmetrically, before introducing deep horizontal folds to increase the dramatic tension and help distinguish the one from the other. On the artist's return, he made adjustments to the larger cloth, before pronouncing himself satisfied. This original style of hanging the two fabrics, where deeply creased folds add abstract pockets of shade and high-light to the underlying design, became the *de facto* standard as a display stratagem - although significant alternatives would later also be explored.

On seeing the invitation to the Private View of *El Anatsui: New Works* which featured an earlier photograph of *Woman's Cloth*, the curator of the African Galleries at the British Museum had straightaway asked that it be put on reserve – so immediately attractive was the piece - even in reproduction. Yet, on seeing both cloths hanging together 'in the flesh'- the second larger than the chosen one - there was some initial hesitation as to which of the two might be more appropriate to the African Galleries' space. After a brief discussion it was decided to acquire the 'historic cloths' as a dyadic pair, along with *Kente Rhapsody* (2001) a wooden wall-hanging created around the same time. *Man's Cloth* has been on permanent display in the British Museum's African Galleries since 2003, re-hung over a metal frame to preserve the shape of that original hanging, and represents the first in line of the liquor bottle-top works of art to be placed on permanent display by a major museum. *Woman's Cloth* hung, for some years, in the office of the British Museum's Director, before being included in *Treasures of the World's Cultures*, a touring exhibition of 250 exceptional objects selected to tell the history of human civilisation from the dawn of time to the present.

Opposite page: THE BIG ART PROJECT (Channel 4), 2008.

Steel and aluminium newspaper printing plates. Photo: Jonathan Greet

CRUMBLING WALL, 2003. Cassava graters and copper wire, 400 x 550 x 70 cm.

Collection of David and Audrey Mirvish, Toronto, Canada. Photo: El Anatsui

EL ANATSUI during the installation of THE BIG ART PROJECT, 2008. Photo: Jonathan Greet







IN THE WORLD BUT DON'T KNOW THE WORLD, 2009.
Aluminium and copper wire, 560 x 1000 cm.
Photo: Jonathan Greet



Installation of IN THE WORLD BUT DON'T KNOW THE WORLD, at ART13, Olympia, London. March 2013.
Aluminium and copper wire, 560 x 1000 cm. Photos: Jonathan Greet

Info

Welcome





DER DEUTSCHEN KUNST 1822

Given this wholly positive reception, the next decade witnessed an extraordinary growth in the production of ever more inventive and creative solutions to the many formal challenges posed by the materials themselves, and many more of the metal wall-hanging pieces were created in Nsukka. As word spread, international media interest grew and other museums and collectors followed the British Museum's lead, and the clamour for more of these spectacular Gobelin tapestry-like pieces increased apace. The Nsukka studio increased in size as more assistants were taken on to feed the demand for more artworks, coming particularly from the American museum world. The most authoritative treatment to date, cataloguing a majority of the one hundred and fifty plus metal wall-sculptures created since *Woman's Cloth* (2002) is to be found in Susan Vogel's *El Anatsui: Art and Life* (2012) which provides the outline for a catalogue raisonnée of the bottle-top pieces and an inspired taxonomic survey of the basic linking patterns by which the elements are stitched together and the blocks created.

inner to outer ...

The exponential rise in positive media attention reached a peak, in 2007, when two glimmering wall sculptures, *Dusasa I* and *Dusasa II*, were deliberately hung as twin focal points in the international exhibition curated by Robert Storr as part of the Venice Biennale. These impressive works were installed opposite each other in the Arsenale in a darkly lit cavernous space between large stone pillars. Despite the uncertain lighting, they still dazzled all who saw them there. At the same time, in another part of Venice, another work, *Fresh and Fading Memories* (2007) magically transformed the outer façade of the ancient Palazzo Fortuny. Taken together these three works, and the different effects each created marked a pivotal moment of transition, as the wall-hangings proved their inherent adaptability by effortlessly switching between decorating the inner walls of gallery spaces to adorning the exterior walls of



FRESH AND FADING
MEMORIES, 2007.
Palazzo Fortuny, Venice, 2007.
Aluminium and copper wire,
900 x 600 cm.
Photo: Chili Hawes



Opposite page and left:
OZONE LAYER and
YAM MOUND
installed at the Alte
Nationalgalerie, Berlin, 2010.
Aluminium and copper wire.
Photos: Jens Ziehe





TSIATSIA - searching for connection (details), 2013.

Aluminium (bottle-tops, printing plates, roofing sheets) and copper wire, 15.6 x 25 m.

Photos: Jonathan Greet

the gallery buildings themselves. From this point onwards, new possibilities emerged, as ever-larger sculptures moved from inner to outer spaces, gradually at first, but over the next several years to increasing effect. From these new external vantage points the mosaic wall-hangings could interact directly with the architectural features of the place – no easy feat in Venice - for not to mention the wider ambient environmental parameters. In transitioning from interior to exterior wall-hangings, the modular sculptures negotiated a change of scale, without requiring any significant change of process, and once outside, in the public space, an entirely new order of interactive strategies and commentaries became instantly available. The two-dimensional sculptures had become elements in the architecture. Between Venice, in 2007, and today, ever more adventurous placements on prestigious sites in major cities around the world have seen these protean sculptures growing in size and sophistication as well as developing in the integrative vision of their eloquent interventions in the architectural space.

2008 saw El Anatsui covering the 'Big 4' sculpture, the iconic logo of Channel 4 TV in central London, with used offset printing plates. In a very public setting, this temporary installation reinterpreted this London landmark, overlooked by bustling media offices active at all hours of the day and night. The recycled printing plates, seeming to cling to the statue before being blown away by gusts of wind, suggested the ephemerality of vast quantities of rapidly changing information processed by the press and media 24 hours a day, and our increasing inability to digest it all.

In The World But Don't Know The World (2009) is a major piece, measuring over 18 by 32 feet in size, that premiered in the 3rd Moscow Biennale. Comprising five separate elements of varying sizes, which combine to create a colossal unified wall sculpture of some six hundred square feet, this immense work has since been shown at numerous venues around the world. Whilst never yet hung as an 'exterior' piece *per se*, it operates

at the boundary of what can easily be hung inside a gallery. When shown at Art Fairs in Dubai and London, it has always climbed beyond the constraining walls of space needing to be hung in a category of its own – hanging like an archetypal presence above the exhibition space and outside the normal context of the other works of art presented. This *tour de force* bottle-top work was the main talking point at Art Dubai, in 2010, and again most recently when hanging high above the bustle and press of Art13, London's first 'global' Art fair. During Art Dubai, the Palestinian artist, Laila Shawa, asked to talk about her own work by the local media, had this to say:

"I've been in Dubai for the last few days – wandering around the Art Fair viewing the many artworks on display. I've just ground to a halt. The more I look, the more I question the validity of the 'process' that produces the things we artists are making. I include my own work here, as well as all the other works I'm seeing... However, one work alone answers all my questions – that immense work by El Anatsui. Here, my own work hangs next to the work of an artist who is taking what has been rejected by other people, and who makes of it a thing of beauty – not just mundane beauty – but something sublimely beautiful – that draws gasps of amazement from everyone who sees it. He has taken everyday bottle-tops – the kind of thing we all break open every day – and transformed them – somehow – to give a sense of opulent abundance, a hint of the last word in luxuriousness."⁷

Selected as one of five international artists of African descent to take part in the *Who Knows Tomorrow* project in Berlin (2010), El Anatsui contributed one bottle-top work, *Ozone Layer*, and *Yam Mounds* made from milk-tin lids as part of a site-specific installation adorning the Grecian columns of Germany's Old National Gallery. Hung beneath the neo-classical pediment still bearing a golden inscription proudly proclaiming 'To German Art, 1871' these works' provenance added subtle layers of commentary to the ongoing debate about western versus non-western art and the critical role of public art in today's multi-cultural society.



BROKEN BRIDGE I, 2012. Installation view of Musée Galliera, Paris Triennial 2012.
Photo: Erik Lasalle. Courtesy Shainman Gallery, New York.



In 2012, as part of the Paris Triennial, *Broken Bridge I*, another magnificent exterior work designed to embellish the Musée Galliera, was fitted onto a scaffolding frame precisely covering the stone façade. As though revisiting the *Ancient Wall* sculpture last exhibited in Paris twelve years previously, the main elements deployed were rusted cassava graters, now overlain, for the first time, with a new reflective plastic material, made from mylar sheeting. This work caused a quiet sensation, and not simply because it so ambitiously re-fashioned the arched Renaissance-style frontage of the French Museum of Fashion. *Broken Bridge I* picked up and re-transmitted ambient lighting effects from morning to night: reflecting the leisurely passage of clouds across clear blue skies; replicating the shimmering lights of the awakening city at night; and delicately insinuating itself into the everyday lives of the local citizens. Dismantled as the Triennial ended, it was transported to New York, expanded and re-installed on the exterior wall of a humdrum building above the High Line elevated parkway in west Manhattan. Here, El Anatsui reconfigured the colossal sculpture into a new format, renaming it *Broken Bridge II*, the better to adapt to the very different urban surroundings. The reflections of Haussmann's Parisian Boulevards were replaced by the mirrored images of brown-stone buildings and the early-modern skyscrapers of Manhattan. At the time of the *Tilted Arc* controversy, Richard Serra argued, in court, that to remove a site-specific sculpture from its

BROKEN BRIDGE II, 2012. Commissioned by High Line Art, presented by Friends of the High Line. Photo by Austin Kennedy. Courtesy of the artist, Jack Shainman Gallery, and Friends of the High Line.



Unpacking and inspection of TSIATSIA - *searching for connection*, 2013,
Work for Royal Academy of Arts at MDM Props, Cranleigh, UK. Photo: Jonathan Greet

designated place is to destroy it as a work of art. El Anatsui's 'nomadic aesthetic' approach suggests that, on the contrary, to re-site works capable of multiple arrangements and overflowing with free-form possibilities, creates as many new works of art as there are suitable locations in which to re-situate them - and people passing by to enjoy them. These works are not to be 'seen' so much as to be 'experienced.' The citizens of Paris and of New York re-experience their own particular worlds through the reflective medium of these remarkably plastic and endlessly adaptable works of art. It is interesting to compare the earlier interior work *Skylines ?* (2008) with the more recent exterior installation stratagems used in *Broken Bridge I and II*. Indeed, several wooden strip hangings from the '90s - e.g. *People's Window* and *1004 Flats* - also demonstrate

Anatsui's longstanding interest in the figurative representation of urban architectural elements. But these ambient external works go far beyond simple figuration in the chameleon-like manner in which they integrate with the surrounding skylines themselves: transforming the view, participating in the daily dialogues of the place and connecting with the fluctuating urban landscape.

In front of any one of these giant, shimmering curtains of light - running the gamut of colours and exhibiting a bewildering array of patterning strategies - we are quite simply entranced. *TSIATSIA - searching for connection* installed at the Royal Academy of Arts integrates with all the architectural features of an Palladian inner courtyard and displays a wealth of variable effects at different distances. Seen from afar, these gleaming fabrics are sumptuous cloths of gold; rich, opulent creations of sparkling splendour. As we move closer, the eye is attracted by the smaller-scale patterns, and the variety of techniques by which the elements are arranged and stitched together. Dissimilar parts jockey for precedence as our attention is drawn still closer, forcing upon us a choice between seeing the part and losing sight of the whole. Finally, right in front of our noses, the secret is revealed. We've been enthralled by pre-fabricated bottle-tops, the glittering colours no more than specious brand names from the trade: '*Stern Distilleries*,' '*Squadron*,' '*Newlife Beverages*,' '*Perfect Dry Gin*' and '*Liquor Headmaster!*'

If, when confronted by the poverty of the materials used, we feel disappointed, then we are too close, and need only to step backwards away from the work. First, a return to the level of patterns, a tumult of pixelated shapes; further back to where the whole fabric hangs in a quivering halo of light; until - *Eureka!* - the illusion of the cloth of gold is restored completely. By careful adjustment of our distance from the artwork - it is possible to enter into a liminal zone, balancing the fabulous wealth of luxurious sculptural forms against the brazen stridency of hard-sell, industrial branding. Held carefully balanced at that tipping-point between the two -



the recycled refuse transforms into an object of sublime beauty, without losing all the traces of its true origins. We ourselves hang in the presence of the marvellous.

To return the final word to the artist himself:

“Ten years after first developing this medium, I now realise that it’s something endless. Like a painter who spends his entire career using one medium - oil paints, water colours or whatever. I feel I could spend the rest of my career using just bottle-tops, because there’s an open-endedness - a sense of freedom - present in this medium. The amazing thing about working with these metallic ‘fabrics’ is that the poverty of the materials used in no way precludes the telling of rich and wonderful stories.”⁸

We should celebrate El Anatsui's amazing performance as he sows these visions amongst us: this artist of sublime sensations, this architect of evanescent illusions - there is a master in our midst.

Gerard Houghton, October Gallery, May, 2013



¹ Elisabeth Lalouschek, in *El Anatsui: A Sculpted History of Africa*, Saffron Books, 1998.
Translated from the German by E. Lalouschek

² Transcript of interview between El Anatsui and Gerard Houghton, March, 2003.

³ Gerard Houghton, "An Interview with El Anatsui" p. 21 printed in catalogue for *El Anatsui : Gawu*, Oriol Mostyn Gallery, 2003.

⁴ March interview, op cit.

⁵ Gerard Houghton, *Gawu* catalogue, op cit, p.22.

⁶ Terry Smith review of "When I last Wrote to You about Africa," *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, No 28, (Spring) 2011.

⁷ Laila Shawa, "Opinion Piece," *Canvas (Art Dubai Edition)*, 19th March, 2010.

⁸ Gerard Houghton, "The Epitome of Freedom" in *The World Belongs to You*, Milan: Electa, 2011.

Opposite page: TSIATSIA - searching for connection (detail), 2013.
Aluminium (bottle-tops, printing plates, roofing sheets) and copper wire, 15.6 x 25 m.

Unpacking and inspection of TSIATSIA - searching for connection, 2013,
Work for Royal Academy of Arts at MDM Props, Cranleigh, UK. Photo: Jonathan Greet



Installation of TSIATSIA - searching for connection, 2013.
Aluminium (bottle-tops, printing plates, roofing sheets) and copper wire,
15.6 x 25 m. Work for Royal Academy of Arts.
Photo: Jonathan Greet



EL ANATSUI

Born in 1944, Ghana

Lives and works between Ghana and Nigeria

education

1969

Postgraduate Diploma, Art Education, University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, Ghana

1965 - 1969

BA (Art) College of Art, University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, Ghana

solo exhibitions

2012 - 2014

Gravity and Grace: Monumental Works by El Anatsui, Akron Art Museum, Akron, Ohio; Brooklyn Museum, New York; Des Moines Art Center, Iowa; Bass Museum of Art, Miami, USA

2012 - 2013

Broken Bridge II, the High Line, New York, USA

2012

Pot of Wisdom, Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, USA
Stitch in Time, Axel Verwoordt Gallery, Antwerp, Belgium

2011

El Anatsui, Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts, USA

2010 - 2012

El Anatsui: When I Last Wrote To You About Africa (organised by the Museum for African Art, New York), Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, Canada; Davis Museum, Wellesley College, Wellesley, Massachusetts; Blanton Museum of Art, University of Texas, Austin; North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh, North Carolina; Denver Art Museum, Colorado; University of Michigan Museum of Art, Ann Arbor, Michigan; USA

2010 - 2011

A Fateful Journey, National Museum of Ethnology, Osaka; The Museum of Modern Art, Hayama; Tsuruoka Art Forum, Tsuruoka Art; The Museum of Modern Art, Saitama, Japan

2010

Gli, Rice University Art Gallery, Houston, Texas, USA
El Anatsui, Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, USA

2009

El Anatsui, Belger Arts Center, Kansas City, Missouri, USA
Process and Project, BRIC Rotunda Gallery, Brooklyn, New York, USA

2008

Earth Growing Roots, San Diego State University Art Gallery, San Diego, USA
Zebra Crossing, Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, USA

2006

Asi, David Krut Projects, New York, USA, in collaboration with October Gallery, London, UK
Nyekor, Spazio Rossana Orlandi, Milan, Italy, in collaboration with October Gallery, London, UK

2005

Danudo: Recent Sculptures of El Anatsui, Skoto Gallery in collaboration with Contemporary African Art Gallery, New York, USA

2003 - 2008

El Anatsui: Gawu, Oriol Mostyn Gallery, Llandudno, Wales, UK; Model Arts & Niland Gallery, Sligo, Ireland; Gallery Oldham, Oldham; October Gallery, London; Djanogly Art Gallery, University of Nottingham, UK; Samuel P. Harn Museum of Art, Gainesville, Florida; Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, Hanover; New Hampshire; Fowler Museum, University of California, Los Angeles; University of Arizona Museum of Art, Tucson; The National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., USA

2002

New Works, October Gallery, London, UK

1998

A Sculpted History of Africa, October Gallery, London, UK

1997

Hakpa, French Cultural Centre, Lagos, Nigeria

1995

El Anatsui: Sculptures and Reliefs, October Gallery, London, UK

1991

Old and New: An Exhibition of Sculpture in Assorted Wood, National Museum, Lagos, Nigeria

1987

Venovize: Ceramic Sculpture by El Anatsui, Faculty of Art and Design Gallery, Cornwall College, Redruth, UK
Pieces of Wood: An Exhibition of Mural Sculpture, The Franco-German Auditorium, Lagos, Nigeria

1982

Sculptures, Photographs, Drawings, Goethe-Institut, Lagos, Nigeria

1980

Wood Carvings, Cummington Community of Arts, Cummington, Massachusetts, USA

1979

Broken Pots: Sculpture by El Anatsui, British Council, Enugu, Nigeria; Institute of African Studies, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nigeria

1976

Wooden Wall Plaques, Asele Art Gallery, Nsukka, Nigeria

selected group exhibitions

2013

245th Summer Exhibition, installation on the façade of the Royal Academy of Arts, London, UK
ArtZuid 2013, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
Masters of the Transvanguard, October Gallery, London, UK

2012

El Gran Sur, Ist Montevideo Biennial, Montevideo, Uruguay
All Our Relations, I8th Biennale of Sydney, Sydney, Australia
Intense Proximity, Paris Triennial 2012, Palais de Tokyo/ Musée Galliera, Paris, France
We Face Forward, Manchester Art Gallery, Manchester, UK
Dialogues, Setagaya Art Museum, Tokyo, Japan

2011 - 2012

Architectural Environments for Tomorrow: New Spatial Practices in Architecture and Art, Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo, Tokyo University of the Arts, Tokyo, Japan

2011

The World Belongs to You, Palazzo Grassi, Venice, Italy
ARS II, Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma, Helsinki, Finland
The Splendour of Truth, The Beauty of Charity, The Vatican, Rome, Italy

2010

Who Knows Tomorrow, Alte Nationalgalerie, Berlin, Germany

2009

Against Exclusion, 3rd Moscow Biennale, Moscow, Russia
Intramoenia Extra Art, Castelli di Puglia, Barletta Castle, Barletta, Italy
Chance Encounters: Seven Contemporary African Artists, Sakshi Gallery, Mumbai, India

2008

Second Lives: Remixing the Ordinary, Museum for Arts and Design, New York, USA

Angaza Afrika: African Art Now, October Gallery, London, UK
Sonsbeek 2008: Grandeur, Sonsbeek Park, Arnhem, The Netherlands

2007

Artempo – Where Art Becomes Time, Palazzo Fortuny, Venice, Italy
Think with the Senses, Feel with the Mind: Art in the Present Tense, Arsenale, 52nd Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy
Still Life: Art, Ecology, and the Politics of Change, 8th Sharjah Biennial, UAE

2006

Altered, Stitched and Gathered, MoMA PS I, New York, USA
DAK'ART 2006, 7th Biennale of African Art, Dakar, Senegal

2005

In the Making: Materials and Process, Michael Stevenson Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa
Out There, Sainsbury Centre for the Visual Arts, Norwich, UK

2004 - 2007

Afrika Remix, Museum Kunstpalast, Düsseldorf, Germany; Hayward Gallery, London, UK; Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, France; Mori Art Museum, Tokyo, Japan; Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Sweden; Johannesburg Art Gallery, Johannesburg, South Africa

2004

A Grain of Dust, A Drop of Water, 5th Gwangju Biennale, South Korea
Intelligence Now! October Gallery, London, UK

2003

Africa Informs, October Gallery, London, UK
Transfer(t)s, Palais de Beaux Arts, Brussels, Belgium

2002

The Independent, Liverpool Biennial of Contemporary Art, Liverpool, UK

2001–2002

The Happy Face of Globalization, 1st Albissola Ceramics Biennale, Albissola, Italy; Musée Ariana, Geneva, Switzerland

2001

El Tiempo de Africa, Centro Atlantico Arte Moderno, Las Palmas, Canary Islands; Consejería de Cultura de Comunidad, Madrid, Spain
News from the Front, October Gallery, London, UK

1999

Les Champs de la Sculpture, Champs Elysées, Paris, France

1998

7 Triennale der Kleinenplastik, Stuttgart, Germany
9th Osaka Sculpture Triennale, Osaka, Japan

1997

The Poetics of Line: Seven Artists of the Nsukka Group, The National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C., USA

1996

Container '96: Art Across Oceans, Langelinie, Copenhagen, Denmark

1995 - 1996

An Inside Story - African Art of our Time, Setagaya Art Museum, Tokyo; Tokushima Modern Art Museum, Tokushima; Himeji City Museum of Arts, Himeji; Koriyama City Museum of Art, Koriyama; MIMOCA - Marugame Inokuma-Genichiro Museum of Contemporary Art, Marugame; Museum of Fine Arts, Gifu, Japan

1995

AKA '95, Bona Gallery, Enugu; Didi Museum, Lagos, Nigeria
Contemporary African Art, World Intellectual Property Organisation Headquarters, Geneva, Switzerland
Seven Stories about Modern Art in Africa, Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, UK; Malmö Konsthall, Malmö, Sweden
Configura 2, Erfurt, Germany
Africus, 1st Johannesburg Biennale, Johannesburg, South Africa
Uli Art– Master Works, Skoto Gallery, NY, USA

1994

Arte/ Sociedad/ Reflexion, 5th Havana Biennale, Havana, Cuba

1992

Arte Amazonas, Modern Art Museum, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; traveled as: *Klima Global* to Staatliche Kunsthalle, Berlin; Ludwig Forum, Aachen, Germany

1991

El Desafí de Colonization, 4th Havana Biennale, Cuba
South of the World, Galleria d'Arte Contemporanea, Marsala, Italy

1990

Five Contemporary African Artists, 44th Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy

1988

Walls and Gates - El Anatsui & Liz Willis, Avant-Garde Gallery, Kaduna, Nigeria
Thoughts and Processes - El Anatsui & Ndubisi Onah, The Italian Cultural Institute, Lagos, Nigeria

1987

AKA '87, The Presidential Hotel, Enugu; National Gallery of Crafts and Design, Lagos, Nigeria

1986

AKA '86– *Inaugural Exhibition of the AKA Circle of Artists*, the French Centre, Enugu and Goethe-Institut, Lagos, Nigeria

1981

Drawing on the World, Billingham Art Gallery, Billingham; Middlesborough Art Gallery, Middlesborough and the House of Commons Gallery, London, UK

1979

Christian Arts in Nigeria, Holy Trinity Cathedral Hall, Onitsha, Nigeria

1975

Fabric Wall Hangings, Burnt Wooden Wall Plaques, The Institute of African Studies, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nigeria

1974

Tekarts Expo 5, National Arts Centre, Accra; Specialist Training College, Winneba, Ghana

1969 - 1970

Ghana National Collection, National Arts Centre, Accra, Ghana; Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., USA

public collections

African Studies Gallery, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nigeria
Akron Art Museum, Akron, Ohio, USA
Asele Institute, Nimo, Nigeria
Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Seattle, Washington, USA
The Blanton Museum, University of Texas, Austin, Texas, USA
The British Museum, London, UK
The Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, New York, USA
The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington D.C., USA
Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, France
Clarks International Art Collection, Somerset, UK
ConocoPhillips, Houston, Texas, USA
De Young Museum, San Francisco, USA
Denver Art Museum, Colorado, USA
Diamond Bank of Nigeria, Victoria Island, Lagos, Nigeria
Eden Project, Cornwall, UK
Embassy of Ghana, Copenhagen, Denmark
Fowler Museum, University of California, Los Angeles, USA
French Cultural Centre, Lagos, Nigeria
Guggenheim Abu Dhabi, Abu Dhabi, UAE
The Hammermill Collection, Hellebaek, Helsingør; Denmark
Hood Museum of Art, Hanover, New Hampshire, USA
Indianapolis Museum of Art, Indianapolis, Indiana, USA
International Peoples' College, Helsingør; Denmark
Iwalewa-Haus, University of Bayreuth, Bayreuth, Germany
Jordan National Gallery of Arts, Amman, Jordan
Los Angeles County Museum of Art, California, USA
Missoni, Milan, Italy
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY, USA
Musée Ariana, Geneva, Switzerland
Museum of Art, University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa, USA
Museum Kunstpalast, Düsseldorf, Germany
The Museum of Modern Art, New York, USA
The National Gallery of Art, Lagos, Nigeria
The National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institute, Washington D.C., USA
The Nelson-Atkins Museum, Kansas City, Missouri, USA
The Newark Museum, New Jersey, USA
Novartis Campus, Basel, Switzerland
North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh, North Carolina, USA
Osaka Foundation of Culture, Osaka, Japan
Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, Canada
Rubell Family Collection, Miami, Florida, USA
Saint Louis Art Museum, St. Louis, Missouri, USA
Samuel P. Harn Museum of Art, Gainesville, Florida, USA
Setagaya Art Museum, Tokyo, Japan
UNAIDS, Geneva, Switzerland
The World Bank Art Collection, Washington D.C., USA





TSIATSIA - searching for connection (detail), 2013.
Aluminium (bottle-tops, printing plates, roofing sheets) and copper wire, 15.6 x 25 m.
Photo: Jonathan Greet



TSIATSIA - *searching for connection*, 2013.

Aluminium (bottle-tops, printing plates, roofing sheets) and copper wire,
15.6 x 25 m. on the facade of the Royal Academy of Arts.

Photo: Jonathan Greet



ROYAL ACADEMY OF ARTS.



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