

Original Paper

ELAnatsui, Visual Arts and Intersection with Knowledge

P. Nelson Graves, Ph.D¹*

¹ Department of Fine and Applied Arts, Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Rumuolumeni, Port Harcourt

* P. Nelson Graves, Ph.D, Department of Fine and Applied Arts, Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Rumuolumeni, Port Harcourt

Received: April 16, 2020

Accepted: May 15, 2020

Online Published: May 20, 2020

doi:10.22158/wjeh.v2n3p71

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/wjeh.v2n3p71>

Abstract

“Natural synthesis” compartmentalized the black art world. This essay unravels how with folkloric glee EL Anatsui, in a “selective critiquing and re-evaluation of self” dared to “wriggle out” of that quagmire. Thusly, reactivating the dynamic terrain that lives and is animated from within the soul of artists, he forged a new path of creativity. With reappraisals of the intellectual dynamics that forged the artistic substance of the post 1960s; empirical analysis and the engagement of storytelling mechanisms, this essay unreels that artistry. Anatsui, in spite of his academisation and art practice, threads a detour to cloth making craft traditions, particularly the Kente weave and its autography; for inspiration. Hence, the “vital and enabling” intellectual paradigm “resumptions, disappearances, and repetitions” makes possible an intersection with arcane knowledge, while the “uniting representation” of the synthesis in the appropriation of Memory and Interview grounds the contexts within which each artwork is experienced. EL’s “non-fixed forms” make visible the temerity of new shapes and forms forged directly from the wellsprings and fecundity of African roots as exemplars of the art of the new dawn (Ben Shahn, 1965:53). A deconstruction of EL’s artworks reveals the groundings of his discourses on assemblages of “Forgotten Biography” and the engagement of “mythopoeia imagination” (Marina Paolo Banchetti-Robino, 2011) in the recalibration of personal expression in language and imageries that inflect spiritual ties to ancestry and the reality of memory. This is sufficient basis for the historical narration of the intersection of visual arts and knowledge.

Keywords

visual arts, intersection, knowledge, compartmentalisation, mythopoeic imagination, forms and shapes, iconography

The 1960s witnessed the flowering of the “*natural synthesis*” modernist ideology and universalistic paradigm in a plethora of varied paintings, sculptures, even performance and installation arts. Europe seemingly succeeded in the “compartmentalisation” of the black art world with that invariant label. However, the artist, EL Anatsui (Ghana-Nigeria) in a “*selective critiquing and re-evaluation of self*”, to use Wole Soyinka’s words (1976) dared to “wriggle out” of the quagmire. EL’s artworks aptly described as “*non-fixed forms*” (EL Anatsui, 2015) in concert with that spirit, simulates the lyrical poetics of patterns and colour with graphic marks and symbols, the most distinctive characteristics of *Akan Kente* fabrics. EL grounds his discourses on assemblages of “*Forgotten Biography*” and the engagement of “*mythopoeic imagination*” (Marina Paolo Banchetti-Robino, 2011) in the recalibration of personal expressions in language and imageries that inflect spiritual ties to ancestry and the reality of memory. Alagoa’s picturesque admonishment *Anyia Diali Bu Anyia Ekee, The keen observer’s talent resides in the capacity to patiently observe and read* (Alagoa, 1979) frames the discourse of this essay. However, the proverb *Nku Di naMbanaegheluMbanni, A people’s wood is their source of cooking fire;* made famous by Pat Oyelola (2003) *encrypts* the wonder and fascination of the “*miraculousness of the commonplace*” (Arthur, 1963) that the artworks enact. Hence, with words, metaphors and folklore; legends and tradition in re-imaginings, the artist in engaging these simple tenets of language as *aide de memoires* shocked the world with artistic spectacles inspired by history, culture and myth. This reveals the role of the artist as poet in society who yields an insight into the reality of imagination in picture making.

This essay engages: (I) a provisional gleaning of the groundings of the artistic substance that informed EL’s art; (II) an empirical analysis of two artworks of this master to unravel the platforms of picture making he employed, and (III) a deconstruction of these works to unfold the reality of the engagement of “mythopoeic imagination” in the critical enfoldment of “*stolen voices*” in the dislodging of the cognomen, “*natural synthesis*”. The emergent stylistic features of the new art debunks the western takes, however pliant their frames. Indeed, reflecting Jean-Hubert Martins’ view (1989) that the burden is on the new creator to play the role of a *social agent* who works against his own contexts in order to foist other options; and to narrate differently the link between the artist and his own society. Hence, playing the role of “*central node of the confrontation*” (Bruce, 1989), the artist imaginatively reconstructs his identity, culture and history. This points to a new generation of artists, aptly described as “*trans-vanguard*” by Gerard Houghton (1998). Affirming a true vanguard of artists that force a disengagement from the limiting concourse of their particular cultures, such giants with paws firm on the ground but a nose in the air bestraddle the cultures to operate a futuristic system of signs that register the urgencies of the cosmopolitan world. Transcending all cultural specificities, but assuming global visionaries, the artists direct their message to a global world. Lodestars of the new avant-garde, the new breeds thrust upon new forms of visual expressions on the concourse of cultures. *Trans-vanguard*, is a shorthand term that snugly fits the peculiar breed of artists, who in spite of being heeled in their individual cultures are able to use that ground as formulaic for the creation of artworks

that address concerns and matters that affect both the local community and the world as a Cosmo polis, *tout le monde!* The intelligent spectatorship is left with the burden of reading the fleeting memorials that make the spectacles! Reflecting the global ethos of international citizenship, such artists deride cultural specifications that may tag them as “*Ghanaian artist, Nigerian artist*”, etcetera.

Trans-vanguards by dint of their “hyper-hybridity” collectively in varied voices speak a language that ascertains the colour and image laden metaphors of everyday speech taken from the places and spaces of Africa and the world (Anatsui, 1991). Hence, in hype-graphically articulated visual language, these oral metaphors are translated to rehearsed and caroused imageries that meet the gaze. Ben Shan (1964, p. 53) informs that the emergent artistry in its spectacles of colour and stark modernistic media makes visible the forms and shapes of man’s growth in artistry and aesthetic sophistication. EL, for example, creates his new art in unconventional material taken directly from recyclables and waste products of urban consumerism: flattened bottle tops, food cans and even discarded liquor bottle neck coiffures simulated as fabric clefts. These are all stitched together with copper wire threads. *Trans-vanguard* art works sophistication reflect legendary artistry in larger-than-life sculptural, graphic, architectural spectacles. Fascinatingly, the artistry even incorporates re-visualizations of the image laden metaphors encrypted in everyday pigeon of the marketplace in its imageries. Indeed, post 1960s art of this genre, was affective inspiration for the stained glass paintings in the boundless imageries of ecclesiastic religion. The works of the Nigerian glass masters: Y. C. A. Grillo and David Herbert Dale; and the other stained glass artists Frank Ugiomoh and Nsikak Essien in the post Vatican II Church are ready examples that come to mind (Graves, 2014).

1. Gleaning the Groundings of Artistic Substance

Disaggregation of the colonial world was initiated with the assumption of independence and self-rule by the former colonial territories. The intellectual leadership of the world, however, remained in the hands of the former masters. However, conscience and the collapse of the Enlightenment paradigm forced emancipation and a new revelation of truth: the Black contribution to the dynamism of the intellectual new world order was a *sine qua non* to the future. It is on this threshold that distinctive philosophical posture *Negritude* rebounds! I dare to allude that the engagement with literary paradigms, specifically Texts that inflect black resistance, such as the philosophy of *Negritude*, with inspiration from Philosophy and Poetry, particularly Jean-Paul Sartre’s ground-breaking preface to an Anthology of African and West Indian poetry, edited by Leopold Sedar-Senghor *Anthologie de la nouvelle poesienegre et Malagache de langue francias* (1948); and Aime Cesaire’s *Poetry and Knowledge*; in their anti-Cartesian epistemologies inspired the significant cultural roles of poetic imagination. In order to accomplish this I would briefly discuss Sartre’s aesthetic historicism and its response to the Enlightenment Cartesian paradigm that informed the *natural synthesis* 1960’s. I will then bring Sartre’s ideas regarding the place of imagination, poetry and myth-making to bear on my discussion of the inflection of Cesairean poetry and Sartre’s essay *Black Orpheus* (1967). Indeed, this paper lod

gesnegritude at the heart of the fight for black consciousness; and points to its entrenching of poetry and myth in the creation of awareness, culture and community.

Sartre like the anti-Platonic philosophers claimed that to understand earlier societies, a study of language and myth were indispensable, while emphasising the role of imagination and mythopoeic creation in the development of history. That vision can be appropriately called “aesthetic historicism”. Grant (2018) claims that such man-made method of historical criticism offers another view of history that connects mind’s eye, metaphor and myth to the creation of the gods by the poet. This suggests ways of knowing that implicates reason. Like the anthropologists and psychologists that emerged in the 20th century, the unconscious communicates that which is unknown by way of symbols, and some of these symbols purchase a social function. Living symbols compel unconscious participation and bestow a life-enhancing effect. Symbols of this latter kind, woven into mythic structures are the foundational influences that shape culture. My this the ruling element of the individual and society, worked over in time, explicated by awareness and group processes. Myths, poetry and art are the momentous means for understanding the spirit of a culture in a given epoch (Shahn, 1965). Pouching back into the past in an attempt to ground art, therefore, it is imperative to look at the material culture, indeed the art effects of one’s ancestry. Hence, in the search for essences that inspire the creative imagination for the visual artist, poetry and song; dance, masks and masking traditions; artifacts of material culture, textiles and architecture are the artists’ immediate resort.

1.1 *The Texts and Poetry*

Let us now explore the foregoing notions of poetry, and myth to see how they aid an insight into how the poetry of *negritude* accomplishes the task of imaginatively reconstituting the identity, culture and history of people in spite of geographical and colonial domination. I hope to show that this poetry fits the model of a myth-making poetic. Hence, the visual artist in attempting to “reinvent” himself/ herself engages the force of lyrical language akin to the manner of the myth-making power of the *negritude* poets, who actively evoke and elevate black identity, and effectively undermine the domination of the colonialist *natural-synthesis dicta*.

Suffice it to state that the Rationalist paradigm of the Enlightenment, imposed a certain epistemic picture, of *Man the Rational Knower facing Nature the Unchanging Object of Knowledge*. Natural synthesis was a residual product of that epistemic shift. This paper takes the view that the rationalist notions of scientific rationalism goes against the grain of a modernist analogy. Instead, it makes sense to claim that the humanistic study of Language and its undercurrents of poetry gives the study of man and nature a fuller discursive frame. Coupled with poetic imagination with its profound knowledge, lyrical language digs deep into the nature of being. Aime Cesaire affirms that at the heart of poetic knowledge, lies an astonishing mobilisation of all cosmic and human forces. This governs the poem in the entirety of experience that it unravels.

Further claiming that myth binds us to the source of being; and the mythopoeic imagination connects us to nature to our ancestry and history; Cesaire points out that the unconscious which all poetry

appeals to is the receptacle of the kinship which connects us to nature. Poets have long known that life cannot proceed with-out symbols and myth (J. Morse Settery). Great poetry, like Léopold Sedar-Senghor's *Anthologie de la nouvelle poesienegre et Malagahe, Anthology of the New Black and Malagacy Poetry* (1985) and its Introductory essay *Orphee Noir* culled from Jean-Paul Sartre's *What is Literature and Other Essays* (1988); and the Poetry of Aime Cesaire create a living counter-myth from the insights, sentiments, thoughts and visions of black poets.

Patrick Hutton (1972) reminds us that it is not man's existential involvement with the physical world that is crucial for the way man fashions his own artistry. Instead, Hutton insists that the process of creation is entirely the product of imagination; indeed, imaginative creation is the means by which man's consciousness of the world unfolds. Reminiscent of the Negro Renaissance poet Langston Hughes' *A Dream Differed*, the black artists' dream of a positive revival did not die but manifestly exploded in ground-breaking spectacles. However, these feverish reincarnations foisted critically in Foucaultian feats "*resumptions, disappearances, and repetitions*" (Michel Foucault, 1987) are captured and transmuted in spite of their evanescent memorials, in symbolic representations.

1.2 Historical and Geo-Political Contexts

Articulated in the Texts: *Revue Noire* and *NKA* (henceforth, *RN & N*) EL's *oeuvres* inspired the debenture of the 1960s "*natural synthesis*" paradigm. Achilles Mbembe (2015) intuits that while aiming at the widest possible international art world the African artists of the day engaged the folkloric as the hidden shadow in the definition of their art in the plurality of art world's and media to affect the "tourist gaze" in seminal dialogues of cultural identity in the African art world. Hence, the framing of the African body, urban sites and the dynamics between African aesthetics and the Western outlook, the cynosures were the texts, *RN & N*. In the same vein the simulacra's of Kwame Nkrumah's *Sankofa* ideological *cultural turn* (1965) with its idiosyncratic notions of consciousness in self independence, project the plurality of the personality of the artist. Indeed, a post critical reflection on the history of aesthetics would under score the place of cultural traditions, belief systems and performed exchanges extant connected to folklore infused to the practices and processes in art fabrication.

"*Effecting a post critical turn*", Anatsui's artwork and that of artists of same kindred spirit affected a confrontation of critical procedures, beyond a position-taking of inclusiveness. Arts of the post 1960s did effect a break from the erstwhile avowal of the historical separation of fine art from those uncritical forms located in commercial and material culture. In a global context, therefore, their art makes aesthetics just one of the varied traditions informing the many encounters with visual culture. This is characteristic of the pull towards a pluralistic image of art that reflects the conditions of identity. In fact, the master in singular expressions force to the notice Simon Njami's distinctions between Africa and Africans, between identity and nationality; between expression and politics (2016). Hence, by dint of artistic intuition and "*the critical light shed by anthropology on cultural relativity and intercultural relationships*" (Annie Cohen Solal, 2018), the *Magicienne de la Terre Show* (1989) heuristically legitimized and synchronically established the direction of the *oeuvre* of the newartist and the

discourses of art.

The epoch of the post 1960s, replete in momentous ground-breaking events, saw the mythical “*opening of the window to let in a breath of freshness*” (Vatican II) by the Roman pontiff John XXIII as the epitome of the great new beginnings permitting exchanges and interactions with other territories, hitherto-fore excised from history and civilized discourse. The Christian Church as a principal institution of the modern West in the seminal Vatican II event marked the instigation of the shuffled geo-political ethos in the spirit of the new age. Keying onto that ethos and as a principal promoter of the visual arts and culture in the West, It made sense to see the cleaver age of an emancipation of the arts and visual cultures of the Other art worlds in future evangelization and Church. Parting ways with the French academy and set traditions of exhibition-making, but implanting a narrative foisting embedded peculiarities of artistic slants reflecting idiosyncratic oeuvres, contexts, history and styles, emerged. Hence, with perspectives that recognized the former colonial places sovereignty, and the critical lenses of academe’s leading philosophers like Jean-Paul Sartre and a host of other dynamic actors, who debunked western arrogance, the West made gestures supportive of art and artistic styles from the third world, specifically Africa and Oceania.

Well-travelled artists, therefore, became the meteors of the new art world canvassed by *RN* and *N*. Key to the indispensable role of being instrumentalities of change, these texts became intellectual templates of essential changes and of contemporary transformations heralded by the Shows and the Texts that they recite. The urgency to take a critical look at the complex phenomena represented by “hyper-hybridisation” was urgent. EL Anatsui should be perceived as a qualified individual straddling the hypothesised new tracks of artistic globalisation initiated by *RN* & *N* but hemmed on the tapestry of key European sponsored international exhibitions of the day. A provisional garnering of that artistic substance is documented by key exhibitions, for example, *Seven Stories about Africa* (1969), *Magiciens de la Terre* (1989) and *Africa-Remix* (2007).

1.3 How Did EL Do It

Creating the ambience that envelopes the craftsman through the affective presence choreographed in mythical statements of creative rituals, only the initiate is privileged to be acquainted. In heraldic invocations, speechless imageries and images all hyped on the unconscious but in playful dream-like fashion, the artist’s decent into himself dares like Sartre’s “*Orpheus to claim Eurydice from Pluto*” (Sartre, 1967); transposes the pictorial elements in traditional *Ewe Kente* fabrics (literally simulating the “weave and weft processes” of *Kente* and its design elements onto his new artworks. By becoming lyrical in thoughts and imaginative creation, the consciousness of his world unfolds. Jean-Paul Sartre (1967) again describes this scenario *by rolling on the ground like a possessed man tormented by himself, by singing his own anger, by exhibiting his wounds, his life torn short, by becoming most lyrical, that the black poet is most certain of creating a great collective poetry*”.

In rejection of rationalist “*natural synthesis*”, but embracing the mythopoetic imagination EL plunges deep into his true actuality (world of “dream and childhood innocence”); connecting to nature, culture,

ancestry and history. True to the *Sankofa* dicta, a resort to “*the aesthetic principles and values of the past*”, as a groundswell for understanding the intuitions of modern expression (Kofi Antubam, 1963; Kwame Nkrumah, 1965; Leopold Senghor, 1963); the master tapped into the “*collective consciousness*” (Carl Jung, 1927) to reformat cultural memories employing the strategies and media of modernism. Thusly, enacting a personalised discursive space for the narrating of postcolonial visual production that shocked the world, EL made Africa’s contribution to “*universal civilization*” (Leopold Senghor, 2010).

Anatsui’s art offers nuanced commencements in surfeits of fleeting memorials that bracket a groundbreaking *pictorial turn*. Challenging the neocolonial power games, BETWEEN EARTH AND HEAVEN and OLD MAN’S CLOTH (Figures 1 & 2), among his many works in the new genre, unveil and devastate the traditional western compartmentalization system of signs. In fact, the artworks discuss African artistry as the overarching mechanism of change that affects a de-centering point of view from the erstwhile “natural synthesis” cognomen. In real political terms, these position-takings framed in artistry; symbolically recast the Sartrean and Foucaultian metaphor of power through the opposition *invisible/ visible* in a political assertiveness. In fact, these images inflect on Black arts contemporaneity by simply “*unpacking*” coloniality (Sallah & Ifitiker Dadi, 2001, p. 6). Indeed, these works replete the framing of the expectations of ambitious articulations of visions of consciousness recited in international global Exhibitions like *Magiciene de la Terre* (1989) and *Africa Remix* (2007)

In a graphic retort to the mythical “*eternal return of the same*”, in palling to polytemporal analogy (Bruno Latour, 1993) I engaged the metaphor and legend of the “Python’s all seeing Eye” (Alagoa, 1979) to kernel the discourse of the new imaginary. Insisting on the discovery of their own way of “seeing”, EL gave meaning to it in his work through the realisation of this new gaze that Sartre (2017) alludes to. Beset, therefore, in deconstructing a past and daring to invent a future in a present time that is synced to perpetual renewals like the symbolic python movement, Anatsui created art that symbolised the times fusing a new language that reflects that aspiration in a lexicon logy that would be readable by all, irrespective of history and milieu. Inured in a *Foucaultian* template (Michel Foucault, 1987) this visual artist dared to get out of the cosset and affect that new spirit of independence! Accepting the visual artist means being able to decipher the original language in which each artist’s narrative addresses the world. Communicating to Africa and the world the artist attempts to express the “puzzles” that constitute narratives in language, “*one of the instruments that transform the frenzied world of sensations into a world of objects and representations*” (Henri Delacroix, 2016). The work of art is an ample exegesis of the relationship between artistic creation and creative consciousness.

Preceding the details of this essay, it is important to situate EL Anatsui’s biography. George Kubler (1962, pp. 6-9) notes that artists’ lives knit together the fleeting mementos of traditional and progressive art practices, while forcing them into the framework of a symbol. The biography of the artist, offers a provisional gleaning of his artistic substance.

1.4 Kofi Emmanuel “EL” Anatsui

“EL” born in Ayanko, Ghana, 1944; but bred in Kumasi, the historical capital of the Asante kingdom. A globally acclaimed sculptor, Anatsui trained at the College of Art, University of Science & Technology, renamed Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, Ghana (1965-1968). Tutored in Western canonic art and practice but eclectic and Africanist, he majored in sculpture and art education. Anatsui is Professor Emeritus of sculpture, University of Nigeria, Nsukka; and Ph.D *honoriscausa*, Legon, Ghana (2017).

2. Art Works Between Earth and Heaven (Figure 1)

The Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Grey Art Gallery, both in New York concurrent 1978 shows (Christopher Spring, 2012) ebulliently demonstrate the phenomenal inspiration of textile traditions as foundations for the artistry of El Anatsui. Both expositions demonstrate that the field of artistic practice on a global stage had been expanded. In fact, in both Shows the artist used textiles traditions as a means towards discussing ideas, and concepts which had no natural or even continental limitations (Spring, 2012).

Anatsui’s employment of cloth as theme taps into the worldwide cognizance of its cultural power and value as a commonplace material and symbolic item of African culture. In *Gawu*, Oriel Mostyn Gallery, Llandudno, Wales (2002) Anatsui’s installations attained global recognition. In unique metal foil creations, Anatsui pursues a theme of transformation, challenging the tag of metal as a stiff and rigid medium; but rather showing it as a soft, pliable, almost sensuous material (Anatsui, 2012). Created with “many hands”, these metal sculptures, for example, *Men’s Cloth* and *Between Earth and Heaven* (Figure 1 & 2) constantly change in shape and luster according to the different curators who install them. Indeed, the *simulacra* variations of metallic folds virtually transmute into spools of new shapes and forms depending on the handling. The *Kente* narrow-strip cloth is an all-encompassing presence. Anatsui’s cloth makes metal a unique fluid medium. El simulates the string of wrappers as insinuations to the narrow-strip bands of the *Kente* yarns. He positions the narrow strips of metal foil (simply wrappers) in elaborate alternate formations then “sews” them up “selvage to selvage” with metal strings creating *reinterpretations* of typical *Kente* yardage. The finished piece is either in alternate-pattern format or in random idiosyncratic layout. The use of varied colourful metal wrappers allow *Between Earth and Heaven* palette to be dramatically intensified. Created by Anatsui in the 1990’s, this metal tapestry, defies a *facile* classification.

From thousands of liquor bottle tops flattened then positioned in an *anatsuistique* colour scheme, and stretched together with copper wire; his remarkable overarching composition emerged. The completed luminous free-standing installation has a pliability that the artist subsequently exploits. Impressing seemed “creases and folds” into the surface bestows it with an animate billowing quality, writes Christine Giuntini (2008, p. 66). This I call the standard Toga effect! Anatsui challenges the notion of metal as stiff and unyielding; thusly offering endless possibilities for reshaping and reconfiguration.

Christine Guitini at the Met installation overseen by El himself (January 6, 2008) describes *BETWEEN* as dazzling and vibrant tapestry expanding outside from the gallery wall on which it hangs. This spectacle in deep radiance suggests the magnificence of the *Kente* Toga, in lush gold tones attributive of high royalty, warmth and insinuations of the glee of long life and prosperity. In *BETWEEN EARTH*, the predominant gold foil represents a phenomenal elevation of the commonplace accumulation by its artistic conversion.

Anatsui, aptly described as a student of Africa's history of migration, trade and its historical development (Uche Okeke-Agulu, 1999) intuitively in characteristic casualness a narrative on the precious mineral resource, Gold, exported from old Gold Coast to the world. In hindsight, it is fascinating to recall that the same networks that evolved to exploit West African gold eventually shifted focus to trade in slaves. In exchange for the human cargo, merchandise and commodities like liquor and textiles were imported into the West African region. All these associations converge in *BETWEEN* with otherworldly resplendence strengthened by allusions of human short comings. The sheen of the expensive silk threads obtained by unraveling imported fabrics incorporated in the *Kente* at the beginning of the 18th century is here formally evoked by the artworks' shine and its passages of multicoloured weave (Figure 3). The alcoholic spirits poured as libations honouring ancestors and also consumed in large quantities are concretely manifest in this work, composed of bottle caps discarded by a single population. This highly pixelated "*complexsification*" master piece, offers innumerable picture possibilities in embryonic envelopes and vistas of wonder for the aesthetic pleasures and enjoyment for viewers at any show. Simulating different textures, different forms at the disposal of the installation hands and the curator at any one show, offers fresh views giving the illusions of newness. Anatsui uses the *leit motif* of *Kente* cloth as a means of engaging a conversation with his audience. It is an engagement with a *concienziento* and its intelligent spectatorship!

2.1 *Old Man's Cloth* (Figure 2)

Made of a complexification foil liquor bottle wrappers linked together in a technique that El describes as part of the "nomadic aesthetic", *MAN'S CLOTH* reflects the artist's open offer to the curators' participation in the creative process. Hence, with the emergent fluidity of forms and shared indeterminacy in the envelopes and shapes that characterise his works, EL breaks new ground in art making. The curators and their handymen are authorised to try their hands at forming what the artist has provided as a starting point (Anatsui, 2011). The mosaic of brands of liquor labels and their inscriptions have names linked to events, people; hallow allusions to *Kente* congruent traditions of same practice. History in Africa finds its "dialogue" in cloth! Despite the conversion of real liquor bottle neck label coiffures, the grim realities of the Middle Passage, in which liquor was primary merchandise exchanged for the human cargo of slaves, is memorialised. For Anatsui the bottle neck wraps were iconic to a history. Miraculously engaging commonplace "Bottles capping" fashioned in Europe for the transfer of drinks from European merchants to African markets (transformed to flat wrappers, as artifact) is indexical symbolised as historical ground breaking technology. Inscriptive of

the currency of trade, Anatsuiintuits the significant development of trade and merchandising in Africa from Europe beyond the slave trade: “*So I think drink has a lot to do with the link between the continents; that is a historical fact!*” (Anatsui, 2011).

A contemporary master, EL has mined his landscape for locally available materials and idioms of expression; and reversed them into personal creations with an entirely new syntax. Embracing a visual language culled from the colours and patterns of *Ewe* and *Asante* strip weaving; swarmed in *Adinkra* motifs, he appropriates the glittering legacy of those regional millennial textile traditions with echoes of their cultural significance. In virtual reality of the classic Ghanaian *Toga*, monumental in scale and highly sculptural in the way they drape the body as the apparel of leaders, resplendent in undulations that evoke tactility, El renders freshness (Figure 3). The artwork awash in the resplendence of gold, red, and black transmogrifies the fancy of finely woven silk into the medium of base metal. *HEAVEN* is a tribute to the grandeur of West African aesthetics grounded in strip-woven textiles and reflects upon the sculptural nature of cloth. Anatsui’s transformation of base metal is fresh, and enchantingly original!

3. Conclusion

EL in dynamic “networking” of lines, colour and ephemera schemed on what Hans-George Gadamer (1986, pp. 123-126) aptly described as “the playfulness of art”, and asimulacra of textures of *Ewe* and *Ashante* art world; keyed into the discursive frames of the *RN & N* texts. Daring to create a bridge from the invisible to the visible; and from the specific to the universal, the artist affirmed the unique contributions of the poetry of negritude to “universal civilisation”. In forms that defused through myths, imageries and legends in fact, dreams and fancies; a historical milieu emerged. In concert with the kin-folk consciousness of the erstwhile cultural policies of Senghor and Nkrumah, Anatsuiutilised endogenous imageries, manmade factory products; even direct engagement with modernist *oeuvre* keen on artistic agency grounded in African epistemologies, picked from the “*privilege contact zone*” (James Clifford, p. 1997) to create artworks. With Sartrean audacity, harped on the privilege of visibility and debunking *natural synthesisabsolutism*, El initiates a conversation on art and beauty. Casting asunder western grandstanding on “aesthetics universality” and “beauty”. Instead, engagement calls for a reading of “internal beauty” and stories only readable through “dialogue” with the artworks. This is beauty that contributes to the artworks’ meaning only the intelligent spectatorship discerns. This aesthetic stance dares the timeworn teaser of form versus content. International bienniales set the pace of a normadism with hipper-connected artists (such as EL) report the transnational flux while defining new intercultural identities. These shape the advent of the writing of Black art into history.

Paws on the grounds of history, but a keen nose in the air, reflecting an imbueement of the *R N & N* proposals, Anatsui’s seminal works focused on the imperative of an undiluted nationalistic consciousness wheeled on independence and freedom. Indeed, for Kofi El Anatsui, modernism had only a legitimacy if it is based on one’s originary art traditions and culture. It is from this vantage point that it can then seek to appropriate foreign ideas and technology (Uche Okeke-Agulu, 1999, p. 156).

Thus, breaking away from the Universalist dicta of the *Negritude* 1960s; but thrust upon a new reconstructive “seeing process”, such modernity with ingenuity in sync with a synthesis reflective of the intellectual clime of the day (Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 1945) crystalised the new. In varied portmanteaus, the artist bestrides the tracks of development in the hybridisation of art for the purposes of a “re-seeing process” in a postmodernist paradigm. That régime took on a dual toll (i) a retooling process in the present and a resurgence of own *oeuvre*; and (ii) the artist, therefore, dared a reconciliation between so called African identity and a certain idea of worldliness reflective of cosmopolitanism in lines, colours and native imaginary, as a mastery of that orphic descent.

Moving forward with line/lines, colour, voice and iconography that eludes “*globalisation and uniformisation*”, Anatsui re-appropriates the moment of consciousness, countering education and training; but engage in a production of individual vision. The intellectual feat affected newness through conceptual frames that schemed ancestral authority, continuity within egalitarian principles and consensus building. EL and artists of the same kin, therefore, inflected an epistemological shift in a progressive outlook that inscribed new contemporary experience with meaning. Deeply investing in African locales, the artists discussed in this paper draw attention to the entrenchment of histories that have wetted the imagination, and narratives of African art worlds. Without rigidifying Euro-centric paradigms, but de-centering from the avowed natural-synthesis cognomen, these artworks make critical statements that point the way forward for the emergence of a decentered cultural aesthetics. Okwui Enwezor (2010) intuits that the artists of the post-colonial time like EL, engaged in a process of disaggregating the frames of colonial modernity such as the ethos “*natural synthesis*”. In a word, “*sankofa*” called for a return to the aesthetic principles and values of the past as grounding for understanding and redirecting modern expression. The artists reinvented and developed art forms that emphasised a new personality. In the process, they created counter narratives that defrocked the machinations of outside forces.

ELAnatsui, Visual Arts and Intersection with Knowledge attempts a reading of artistic narratives, typical of storytelling. Indeed, EL’s expressed visions in metaphors and idioms that acclaim personal content and styles that are readable to the *elan vital* and persons with an education undergirded in a *concienciiciente* (Paulo Friere, 1964). Declaiming *1960s natural synthesis* EL presents expressive images of nascent African philosophy emphasising embodied essences that encapsulate notions of “at-homeness” rather than the avowed abstraction of a world expressed as an equation. Debunking the template of the *Negritude* tradition, the master, achieved a “seeing power” (Maurice Merleau-Ponty, p. 1984) demystified in a spiritual experience, “born again”! Deconstructing perceptions and assumptions of *universalisations* but distinctively imploding identity, revision, nomadism, and cross-culturalism the new artistry became the *leitmotifs* in an endogenous definition of self (Njami, p. 2012). With the revolutionary literature of the 90’s, principally *Revue Noire*, as the instrumentality of growth, development and change; Anatsui and artists of the same kindred spirit, made momentous the experiences of that time the actuality “*by forcing what was ever fleeting into the calm framework of a*

symbol” (Beat Wyss, 1988). That framework was even most critically symbolized in the artist’s rejection of Western modes and materials in favor of sustainability and indigeneity. With unconventional art making indigenous materials taken from commonplace everyday consumer by-products: bottle tops and liquor neck wrappers, all weaved together *Kente* waft-like with copper-wires and strings monumental art works emerged!

Grounded on the word “gaze”, in terms reminiscent of Alagoa’s *The Pythons Eye* (1979) but asserting the *Faucaultian* myth that nothing is new; only an “eternal return of the same”. *The Python’s Eye* validates the view that once the artist captures histories as pits of real inspiration in present imagery, it becomes automatically frozen in time. The future, therefore, reflects an extrapolation of the lived instant, a projection that holds through the strength of the artists’ personal vision, in the light shed by the gaze. This is the real essence of the artistic works. Little wonder, that the artists delve into the domain of metaphor and legend. Henry Focillon (1995, p. 20) intuits that a work of art awaits reactivation. The artist dared to activate that tensed up and dynamic terrain that lives and is animated from within. Gaining mastery of one’s own image translates comfortably to mean introducing individual version of self, in accordance with our cultural codes and aesthetics; while re-appropriating the measure of time, *The Python’s eye*.

In spite of the reincarnation of a living collective memory, with its rituals and sacred experiences of commencements, however, modern-day art and its artists face the reality of the credibility of the reinterpretations of endogenous history. That is the task for future work: keeping history intact in the spate of reinterpretations of oral history and tradition in their continuous re-workings to suit the codes of artists. To give meaning to individual works, a deconstruction of the past and inventing a future is a hard nut to crack! However, Simon Njami (2016) draws attention to the ethos validated by Hayden White in *Metahistory* (1973), Alagoa *et al.*, emphasizing every approach as fragmentary, illustrating that we are simply part and parcel of a puzzle whose general delineations escape us to the very end. In *nouvelle* imaginaries taken from both extant histories, even fancy imageries and vignettes culled directly from the twentieth century, all embodied in *BETWEEN EARTH AND HEAVEN* and *OLD MAN;S*, simply put are metaphors that undergird the universal truism that every art work is an incarnation of some earlier form. Overwhelmingly enduring is the fascination with Presence, the banalities of life, and the recognition of the spiritual connectedness (Bruno Latour, 1993) of everyday objects as the stuff of art, while entrancing the playfulness of art with unprompted creativity. Anatsui in poetic “reincarnation of the same”, imaginatively recreates the mythical and mystical ethos of African artistry.

References

- Africa Re-Mix Anatsui, El. (2011). *ELANATSUI at the Clark (in conversation with Uche Okeke-Agulu)* (p. 11). Sterling & Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts.
- Alagoa, E. J. (1979). *The Python’s Eye: The Past in the Living Present*. Inaugural Lecture Series I,

- University of Port Harcourt.
- Altschuler, B. (1994). *The Avant-Garde in Exhibition: New Art in the 20th Century*. New York: Harry N. Adams, Inc.
- Anatsui, E. L. (1991). Artist's Studio Notes. In *Catalogue Old and New: An Exhibition of Sculptures in Assorted Wood* (p. 7). National Museum, Lagos, SNAAP Press, Enugu.
- Banchetti-Robino, M. P. (2011). Black Orpheus and Aesthetic Historicism. *Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy*, XIX(2). <https://doi.org/10.5195/JFFP.2011.495>
- Catalogue: Anatsui New Worlds. (2015). In A. Gilvin, & J. R. Stomberg (Eds.), *Mount Holyoke College Art Museum* (pp. 50-53).
- Enwezor, O. (2010). Modernity and Postcolonial Ambivalence. *South Atlanta Quarterly*, 109(3), 595-620. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-2010-008>
- Gitti Salami & Monica Blackmun Visona. (2014).
- Graves, P. N. (2015). *Many Lamps Same Light, the Stained Glass Paintings of Nigeria's prime artists: Y. C. A. Grillo and D.H. Dale*. <https://doi.org/10.4314/afrev.v9i4.15>
- Houghton, G. (1998). EL Anatsui and the Transvanguard. In *ELANATSUI A Sculpted History of Africa* (p. 29), John Picton with Gerard Houghton et al, Saffron Books & October, London,
- Kwami, A. (2014). Kofi Antubam, 1922-1964: A modern Ghanaian Artist, Educator, and Writer. In G. Salami, & M. B. Visona (Eds.), *A Companion to Modern African Art* (p. 218). Wiley Blackwell Companions to Art History. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118515105.ch11>
- LaGamma, A. (2009). The Poetic of Cloth. In *The Essential Art of African Textiles, Design Without End, Metropolitan Museum of Art* (pp. 9-23). New York.
- Martins, Jean-Herbert. (1989). "Preface" in *Magiciens de la Terre* (p. 9). Exhibition Catalogue, Paris: Ed, du Centre George-Pompidou.
- Mbembe, A. (2015). The Value of Africa's aesthetics. In *Arts and Culture/13*. <http://mg.co.za/article/2015-05-14-the-value-of-africa-aesthetics#.V...>
- Ogbechie, S. O. (2011). El Anatsui's intercultural aesthetics and the representation of Africa in global culture. In Y. Kwangushi (Ed.), *A fateful Journey: Africa in the works of El Anatsui* (pp. 38-39).
- Okeke-Agulu, U. (1999). The Quest for a Nigerian Art: Or a Short Story of Art from Zaria and Nsukka. In O. Oguibe, & O. Enwezor (Eds.), *Reading the Contemporary, African art from Theory to the Marketplace* (pp. 156-157). Institute of International Visual Arts (InIVal) Kirkman House, London.
- Oyelola, P. (2003). Nku Di Na mba ne Eghelumbanni. In P. C. Dike & P. Oyelola (Eds.), *NKU DI NAM MBA Uche Okeke and Modern Nigerian Art* (p. 19). National Gallery of Art, Lagos.
- Sedar-Senghor, L. (1985). *Anthologie de la nouvellepoesienegre et malagahe de langue francias, Anthology of the New Black and Malagacy Poetry*. Paris.
- Sedar-Senghor, L. (2014). Joanna Grabski's "The Ecole des Arts and Exhibitionary Platforms in Post-independence Senegal. In G. Salami, & M. B. Visona (Eds.), *A Companion to Modern African Art*

(p. 277). Wiley Blackwell Companions to Art History.

Shahn, B. (1963). *The Shape of Content* (p. 53). Harvard University Press, Cambridge & Massachusetts.

Soyinka, W. (1976). *Myth, Literature And the African World*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge CB2 2RU. United Kingdom.

Spring, C. (2012). *African Textiles Today* (p. 236). The British Museum Press, London.



Figure 1. *Between Earth and Heaven*, El Anatsui, Medium: Aluminum, Copper Wire

H. 86 3/4 x W. 128 in. (220.3 x 325.1 cm), 2006. ©El Anatsui. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.



Figure 2. El Anatsui, *OLD MAN'S CLOTH* (Detail)



Figure 3. *OLD MAN'S CLOTH*, 2003, El Anatsui, Harn Museum of Art

Gainesville, Florida, aluminum and copper wire, 487.7 x 520.7 © El Anatsui. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.