Memory, Material Transformation and Postcolonial Narratives in the Sculptural Practice of El Anatsui

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Abstract

This article examines the sculptural practice of El Anatsui within the framework of global biennales, postcolonial discourse and contemporary art institutions. It argues that Anatsui's transformation of discarded bottle caps and aluminium seals operates as a critical intervention into narratives of memory, colonial history and global exchange, and that the same works expose the tensions of the circuits through which they travel. By situating Man's Cloth, Between Earth and Heaven and Earth's Skin within the Venice Biennale and related exhibition contexts, the article explores how a practice rooted in local material histories is embedded in global systems of art circulation. Case studies of the Liverpool, Johannesburg and Havana biennales then interrogate the political economy of the biennale, showing how artists from the Global South become central figures in narratives of globalisation while being shaped by the institutional and curatorial structures that govern their visibility and reception. The article concludes by reflecting on what Anatsui's practice demands of its interpreters, and on what the biennale model, for all its professed idealism, continues to obscure.

Keywords: El Anatsui; global biennales; postcolonial discourse; material transformation; cultural visibility

Introduction

El Anatsui holds a distinctive place in contemporary global art discourse, one that raises pressing questions about material transformation, collective memory and the meaning of postcolonial identity in an age of accelerated cultural mobility. Based primarily in Nsukka, Nigeria, Anatsui developed a powerful visual language from the assemblage of discarded bottle caps, aluminium seals and copper wire, producing large-scale installations whose surfaces evoke woven textiles yet remain unmistakably sculptural. Works such as *Dusasa I*, *Man's Cloth* and *Between Earth and Heaven* have been exhibited at major international venues, including Tate Modern and the Venice Biennale, securing his place among the defining sculptors of the contemporary era.

This article situates Anatsui's work within the expanding global circuit of biennales and international exhibitions that has shaped contemporary art production since the late twentieth century. It examines how these institutional frameworks both support and complicate the reception of his practice, drawing it into wider conversations about globalisation, cultural mobility and the

politics of representation. While the work is deeply rooted in local West African histories of consumption and material reuse, its movement through global art institutions transforms it into a site of transnational interpretation, where questions of memory, colonial legacy and cultural exchange are continually renegotiated, sometimes productively, sometimes on terms that serve the institution more than the work itself.

The argument moves across several related concerns. It begins with the material and conceptual logic of Anatsui's practice, examining how the choice of discarded consumer objects connects to broader histories of colonial trade and cultural encounter. It then turns to the institutional contexts in which his work has gained visibility, asking what those contexts enable and what they foreclose. Drawing on case studies from the Liverpool Biennial, the Johannesburg Biennale and the Havana Biennial, it maps both the possibilities and the structural contradictions of the global art event as a space for encountering work from the Global South. It closes by returning to the practice itself, to what the work asks of us when we stand before it, and to what that demand might mean for how we think about contemporary art, postcolonial memory and the ethics of global circulation.

Material Memory and Assemblage

El Anatsui is a Ghanaian-born artist who has worked in Nigeria for much of his career. His sculptural installations take discarded objects and reshape them into monumental works that open onto histories of trade, memory and global encounter. Using bottle caps, aluminium seals and other found materials, he constructs expansive surfaces that carry the texture and appearance of cloth while quietly bearing the weight of the histories embedded in those everyday things, a quality evident in *Man's Cloth* (1999–2002) and *Dusasa I* (2007) (Binder, 2010; Picton, 2012).

The process is painstaking and deeply physical. Thousands of small metal fragments are flattened, cut and joined with copper wire to produce shimmering surfaces, such as *Earth's Skin* and *Bleeding Takari II*, that recall traditional textile forms, particularly the woven patterns associated with kente and other West African cloth traditions. On closer inspection, however, the apparent fabric is composed of liquor bottle caps and packaging materials collected from distilleries and recycling points around Nsukka (Plates 1 and 2). These are not neutral objects. They carry the residue of historical trade networks, particularly those through which alcohol entered Africa during European colonial expansion and the transatlantic trading system (Enwezor, 2008).



Plate 1. El Anatsui, *Man's Cloth*, 1999–2002. Aluminium (liquor bottle caps) and copper wire, 297 × 374 cm. British Museum, London. Image source: https://elanatsui.art/artworks/el-anatsui-mans-cloth-1999-2002.

Alcohol was one of the principal commodities through which European traders penetrated African markets during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, functioning not simply as a trade good but as an instrument of social disruption and economic dependency (Akyeampong, 1996; Dumett, 1974; Olorunfemi, 1984). By gathering the caps and seals that accumulate at distilleries and recycling points across Nigeria, and weaving them into forms that reference West African textile traditions, Anatsui performs a kind of historical reclamation (Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, n.d.; Picton, 2012). He is not simply making art from waste; he is making art from the residue of a specific global encounter, and asking what that encounter left behind in the bodies and communities that experienced it.

Reconfiguring these remnants into imposing sculptural forms, Anatsui produces assemblages that function as visual metaphors for accumulated memory and layered historical experience, a quality particularly evident in *Gli (Wall)*. His installations appear fluid and almost organic, draped across walls in ways that suggest cloth rather than metal, yet they never quite shed the traces of their former lives as consumer waste. That tension between fragility and monumentality, between the discarded and the exalted, speaks to the way societies remember and reinterpret their pasts. In Anatsui's hands, memory is not fixed or stable. It is pliable, rearrangeable and capable of taking new form with each installation context, including those at the Venice Biennale (Enwezor, 2008).

These works are reconfigured with each exhibition. Unlike a painting or conventional sculpture, which arrives at a venue in more or less the form it left the studio, Anatsui's installations are inherently open. They can be hung differently, draped to catch the available light and shaped to respond to the dimensions and character of a particular space. This flexibility is not incidental; it reflects a deliberate philosophy. The work is not a fixed object to be passively received but a dynamic structure that generates different meanings in different contexts, insisting on the participation of those who hang it and those who encounter it. Memory, the work seems to suggest, is always an act of interpretation in the present, not simply the retrieval of something preserved from the past.

Standing before these works, one becomes aware of a slow historical accumulation: fragments of material culture gathered and compressed into something shimmering and dense. Works such as *Between Earth and Heaven* suggest that memory lives inside objects, and that histories tied to colonial encounter and global trade persist within the materials of everyday life long after their original contexts have been forgotten. Anatsui's art makes that persistence visible, turning transformation itself into its subject: how discarded things acquire new meaning, and how overlooked histories can be reassembled into something powerful and present (Picton, 2012).

Anatsui works with a team of assistants whose contributions are both technical and creative. Because the metal fragments are flattened, cut and joined by hand, each joint leaves its own trace on the surface of the finished work. This collective labour raises the questions of visibility, recognition and the distribution of value that run through the biennale system more generally.

Biennales and Institutional Frameworks

Anatsui's rise to international prominence was significantly shaped by his inclusion in influential exhibition platforms, notably the Venice Biennale, where he exhibited in 2007 and received the Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement in 2015, on the recommendation of Okwui Enwezor, curator of that edition (La Biennale di Venezia, 2015; ArtReview, 2015). Such events bring together artworks and architectural or historical settings in ways that span long arcs of cultural transformation, including periods of political change, economic restructuring and shifting social values. Within these environments, contemporary works arrive in spaces already shaped by layered histories of labour, migration and exchange.

Anatsui's practice, meticulous, physically demanding and deeply attentive to the afterlives of objects, serves as a visual counterpart to intellectual efforts to recover collective memory amid

rapid globalisation and cultural disruption. As Enwezor and others have noted, work of this kind pushes back against the suppression and flattening of memory that historical displacement and cultural dislocation tend to produce (Enwezor, 2008; Oguibe & Enwezor, 1999). In this respect, Anatsui's art is not simply about the past; it is an active intervention in the present, insisting that what has been discarded, overlooked or deliberately suppressed can be gathered, reworked and made to speak again.

Visually, the works make a striking impression in the large, often spare spaces of museums and galleries. Monumental and draped, they transform institutional walls into something simultaneously architectural and alive, at once sculpture and cloth, as the installations at the Royal Academy of Arts and the Venice Biennale demonstrated with particular force. Their material logic and historical weight sit in productive tension with the static authority of museum architecture, historically constructed to project permanence and cultural hierarchy (Binder, 2010). How a work of this kind is displayed, what interpretive frames are offered and whose knowledge is invited into the encounter are never merely technical matters. They are also always political ones.

This is especially significant given how Western museums and galleries have historically framed African objects. Where colonial-era display practices tended to position African artefacts as evidence of cultural difference, primitivism or ethnographic curiosity, works like Anatsui's resist such framing through their sheer aesthetic ambition and material complexity. They demand engagement and, in doing so, quietly challenge the assumptions about African art and African modernity that institutional spaces often carry without acknowledgement.

The City as Exhibition Site: Liverpool and the Biennial Model

Liverpool offers a telling case study in the relationship between the biennale form and the cities that host it. A port city whose historical wealth was built substantially on trade, including the trade in enslaved people, it provides a resonant setting for art that takes globalisation and its histories as its subject. The city's post-industrial fabric, its large vacant buildings and its ongoing urban transition created productive conditions for displaying work of historical weight, including Anatsui's monumental assemblages, which hung in Tate Liverpool during the Liverpool Biennial and transformed what had once been a storage warehouse into a space for reflecting on the goods and systems of exchange that had moved through it (Tate, 2012).

Whether or not the juxtaposition was intended, part of what makes the Liverpool context so charged is the connection between bottle caps linked to the alcohol trade and a city whose prosperity was built on the triangular trade that carried goods, enslaved people and commodities

across the Atlantic. Standing in that warehouse before those shimmering metallic surfaces, the viewer is invited to make connections that no interpretive label could fully articulate.

Anatsui's wall-based works, such as *Man's Cloth* (Plate 1) and *Between Earth and Heaven* (not illustrated), are made from materials gathered in Nsukka and hold the logic of both painting and sculpture without settling into either. Seen at institutions like Tate Modern, which bears the name of a sugar baron whose wealth derived from the same imperial economy that shaped Liverpool, the work acquires additional layers of meaning, its engagement with histories of imperial trade and global circulation quietly sharpened by its surroundings (Tate, 2012).

The Liverpool Biennial itself, in its early editions, was less a coherent curatorial vision than a dispersed aesthetic experience: artworks scattered across a city in the process of remaking itself, and visitors navigating with maps through encounters largely stripped of interpretive context. For most visitors, the experience amounted to art tourism more than genuine cultural exchange (Tate, 2012).

What the Biennial's catalogue reveals, however, is the network of interests that assembles around such events: businesses seeking brand recognition, national bodies promoting their cultural exports, regional institutions hoping for regeneration and universities chasing research profiles (Liverpool Biennial, 2010). It is within these networks that artists like Anatsui circulate, their works acquiring prestige and visibility but also being subjected to interpretive frameworks not always of their choosing (Binder, 2010).

The Global Proliferation of Biennales

The Liverpool Biennial is one instance of a much larger phenomenon that reshaped the international art world from the 1980s onward. The end of the Cold War prompted a substantial reorganisation of the art world's habits and ambitions. Just as capital moved across borders in search of new markets, a generation of nomadic curators began mapping their own circuits from São Paulo to Venice, from Gwangju to Sydney, and from Kassel to Havana. Artists like Anatsui found themselves drawn into this expanding network, their works participating in some of its most significant moments, including a landmark presentation at the Venice Biennale.

Some of these events were long established, such as the São Paulo Biennial, founded in 1951. Others were new formations responding to the post-Cold War realignment of cultural power: the Havana Biennial (1984), the Sharjah Biennial (1993), the Gwangju Biennale (1995), the Johannesburg Biennale (1995), the Mercosur Biennial (1997), Dak'Art (1998) and the Berlin Biennale (1998), among others.

The prevailing art-world reading of this proliferation has tended towards optimism: the rigid, singular, overwhelmingly white and masculine assumptions of modernism had given way to something more plural, more global and more genuinely diverse, like the woven cloth designs of Anatsui. In this expanded field, artists like Anatsui gained increasing prominence through widely exhibited works such as *Dusasa I* (Picton, 2012). Yet the proliferation of biennales does not automatically create conditions for genuine equity or meaningful exchange. It produces new hierarchies of visibility and new circuits of prestige that replicate older inequalities under the sign of diversity and inclusion.



Plate 2. El Anatsui, *Dusasa I*, 2007. Found aluminium and copper wire, approx. 288 × 360 in. (732 × 914 cm). Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City; installation view, Arsenale, 52nd Venice Biennale, 2007. Image source: https://elanatsui.art/search?term=+Dusasa+I. Dimensions: Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art (n.d.).

In its most idealistic form, the biennale model promises to bring the presiding standards of globalised art into productive friction with local artists and local circumstances, generating over time hybrid forms that speak both globally and locally and inhabit the in-between spaces that resist the homogenising power of the nation-state. The theoretical underpinning for this vision comes largely from Homi Bhabha and Stuart Hall, whose ideas about hybridity, diaspora and cultural difference circulate freely at such events and in the literature they generate. In practical terms, this framework helped produce a rise to prominence of artists from countries that had rarely achieved such visibility before, among them El Anatsui, whose practice around *Man's Cloth* has become central to global discussions of postcolonial materiality and contemporary African art (Picton, 2012).

What artists like Anatsui bring to this scene, however, is something qualitatively different from the media-saturated spectacle associated with much of the Euro-American art establishment. The material and historical density of works like *Earth's Skin* and *Between Earth and Heaven*, grounded in sustained, years-long engagement with discarded objects and local histories of consumption and trade, stands at a considerable remove from the image-driven, market-oriented production that dominates certain sectors of the international art world (Picton, 2012). This work has shifted conversations about what contemporary sculpture can do and address, appearing at the Venice Biennale in ways that repositioned global debates about materiality and postcolonial memory (Enwezor, 2008).

Any platform seeking to make Third World perspectives on art and culture visible to a largely indifferent mainstream has had to rethink its mandate in light of these shifts. The challenge is increasingly not invisibility but what one commentator calls a condition of excess visibility, in which cultural difference becomes highly marketable. The global circulation of works like Anatsui's bottle-cap installations becomes as much a commercial phenomenon as a critical one (Oguibe & Enwezor, 1999). The danger, in other words, is not simply that African art is ignored but that it is celebrated in ways that domesticate its critical force, absorbing it into market logics that drain it of the historical specificity that makes it meaningful.

The Johannesburg Case

There are occasions when the contradictions within the biennale model become impossible to contain, and the Johannesburg Biennale offers the most instructive example in the African context. It was established in 1995, shortly after South Africa's first free election, as a means of reconnecting the country with the international cultural world after decades of cultural boycott. The first edition mounted an ambitious and diverse set of exhibitions, presenting Johannesburg as a city prepared to take its place in global contemporary culture. Local South African artists who might have offered more troubling or complex perspectives on the state of the nation were largely excluded, and many observers felt the event projected an unduly celebratory image of a society still deeply marked by structural violence and inequality. Critics within South Africa took particular issue with what they perceived as the imposition of an alien cultural event on a region that had neither the infrastructure, the audience nor the political conditions to receive it on anything like equal terms. Thomas McEvilley, among others, noted with evident astonishment that many in the Black community appeared unwilling to participate in what felt like a spectacle staged primarily for international visitors (Picton, 2012).

The second edition (1997–1998), curated by Enwezor on the theme *Trade Routes: History and Geography*, sought to respond directly to these criticisms. It was a more politically engaged and theoretically rigorous event, in which race, colonisation, migration and the movement of peoples and goods across global networks took centre stage. These are concerns that connect directly to the material histories embedded in works like Anatsui's *Gli (Wall)*, which reconfigures industrial waste into layered historical commentary (Enwezor, 1997). Despite this more searching approach and its deliberate emphasis on South-to-South connections rather than the familiar North-South axis, the structural problems of the first edition proved difficult to overcome. Local artists and critics continued to feel that African production was being subordinated to a cosmopolitan preoccupation with global hybridity and theoretical sophistication. Media and lens-based art dominated the programme, areas in which few local artists had been able to develop expertise or gain access to resources, while more tactile, materially grounded practices were relatively marginalised, in striking contrast to the material engagement exemplified by Anatsui's own work (Tate, 2012).

The Johannesburg Biennale also faced financial difficulties and curatorial challenges, as it attracted limited sponsorship and public-education budgets. These constraints reduced community awareness and access, and the city council's fiscal crisis limited the event's physical footprint. The Biennale attracted far fewer visitors than anticipated and was shut down a month early; no further editions followed because of funding constraints.

The Limits of Cultural Exchange

Even the most apparently successful biennales contain versions of this tension, and the Havana Biennial illustrates a different dimension of it. While Cuban society is generally more educated than many of the countries where biennales have struggled to find local audiences, the Havana event has always been organised primarily with foreign visitors in mind. Internationally celebrated works, including monumental installations by artists such as Anatsui, tend to find their largest and most attentive publics in elite museum circuits abroad rather than in the communities most geographically proximate to the conditions they address (Picton, 2012).

The Havana Biennial of 2000 is illuminating in its specificity. It recorded a large turnout of American and European curators who were guided to selected studios and private gatherings, attended an opening that was financially inaccessible to most Cubans, and experienced a carefully managed version of Cuban contemporary art. In the days that followed, many installations were found non-operational, and venues had closed early, and the sense of a cultural event staged for

foreign consumption rather than local engagement was difficult to avoid. The cultural exchange that biennales promise had, in practice, operated almost entirely in one direction, from South to North and from local context to international interpretation, with limited reciprocity. Santiago Sierra's contribution to the 2000 Havana Biennial made this power asymmetry its explicit subject.

The work involved paid sex workers concealed inside boxes that then served as seating for the event's guests, a pointed commentary on the exploitative dynamics that can structure encounters between art tourists and local populations. It was uncomfortable precisely because it treated an issue that the Biennale's official discourse preferred to leave unexamined: the extraction of local experience and cultural material for the benefit of an international audience that consumes, interprets and moves on (Enwezor, 2008). That dynamic is not entirely foreign to the situation of artists like Anatsui, whose works circulate within Western museum contexts that bring their own interpretive frameworks and do not always engage deeply with the local histories from which the materials derive.

The structural problem, as critics have consistently noted, is that biennales tend to address a cosmopolitan art audience rather than local communities. Their institutional format descends from the international trade fair, in which nations compete to project their most prominent cultural offerings. Although many biennales have moved away from the national pavilion structure, the underlying competitive logic persists. The curators who move through this system are internationally networked, fluent in global art discourse and at home in any number of institutional contexts. They consult local voices and attempt to incorporate local perspectives, yet their primary frame of reference is necessarily global and hybrid (Enwezor, 2002). As Carol Becker and others have observed, this creates a structural tension that individual events, however thoughtfully curated, cannot resolve by curatorial means alone. The problem is not one of intention but of structure (Becker, 1998).

Discussion: Postcolonial Critique and the Politics of Visibility

The implications of these structural tensions extend beyond any individual biennale or exhibition context. They raise fundamental questions about what it means for artists from the Global South to participate in global art systems whose terms of engagement were largely set elsewhere. For Anatsui, the question is particularly charged, given that his materials are themselves evidence of those systems: the bottle caps and aluminium seals that carry the residue of colonial trade networks are the very medium through which he addresses the histories that shaped them.

Postcolonial criticism offers useful frameworks, particularly in its attention to how visibility and recognition in Western institutional contexts can come at the cost of interpretive autonomy. The risk, as Oguibe and Enwezor (1999) and other commentators have argued, is that the celebration of African art within global circuits can function as a form of aesthetic appropriation, taking the formal and material innovations of artists like Anatsui and absorbing them into narratives of cultural diversity that serve the institutional needs of museums and biennales without challenging their underlying assumptions. The works become evidence of globalisation's generosity rather than critiques of its histories.

Decolonial approaches push further, asking not just how existing institutions can be made more inclusive but whether the frameworks themselves need to be rethought. From this perspective, the question is not simply whether Anatsui's work is adequately interpreted within Western museum contexts, but whether those contexts are capable of the understanding the work demands. The material knowledge embedded in his practice, including knowledge of specific trade routes, communities, traditions of textile production and uses of objects, may exceed what any institutional label or catalogue essay can convey. The work carries a set of references and relations that belong to a particular place and history, and encountering it in a global museum necessarily involves some degree of translation and loss.

This is not an argument for restricting the circulation of such work; quite the opposite. It is an argument for greater honesty about what institutional encounters can and cannot offer, and for greater investment in the contextual knowledge that would allow audiences genuinely to engage with what the work contains. It is also an argument for attending more carefully to the terms on which artists from the Global South enter global circulation: who sets those terms, who benefits from them and whose interests they ultimately serve.

Conclusion

Examining Anatsui's practice within the context of global biennales reveals the complexity and contradictions of the systems through which contemporary art is produced, circulated, interpreted and consumed. His works, from *Earth's Skin* to *Gli (Wall)*, consistently demonstrate what it looks like when discarded materials are reconfigured into forms that carry layered histories of trade, consumption and colonial entanglement. At the same time, the biennale framework within which such works travel exposes the structural limits of contemporary art globalisation. Biennales promote values of cultural exchange, hybridity and transnational dialogue, yet they also reproduce hierarchies of visibility and institutional authority that shape how artists from the

Global South are framed and received, and how much of the critical meaning of their work survives encounters with contexts not designed to receive it.

Anatsui's practice and his presence at different biennales present him as both a participant in and an implicit critique of these systems. His works seek to sustain history and an informed attention that goes beyond aesthetic admiration. They ask us to sit with the histories embedded in the materials, to follow the trade routes implied by the bottle caps, and to understand what was given up and what was taken in the exchanges those materials represent. That is a more demanding kind of encounter than most biennales are structured to facilitate. It is, perhaps, exactly the encounter that the work, and the histories it carries, deserves.

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