

The Issue of Cultural Memory in Postcolonial Art. History and Recontextualization in El Anatsui's Creation

Raluca SCHIPOR-BABAN¹

Abstract: *Postcolonial theory is defined by the inevitable repercussions of economic, political, social and cultural control over peripheral countries, in order to exploit them. The phenomenon is known as apartheid, referring to segregation and repressive regime. The present study highlights one of the most important exponents of the postcolonial artistic phenomenon, El Anatsui. His African art make a decisive contribution to identifying a true postcolonial cultural biography. The problem of cultural heritage and collective memory is analyzed in relation to the inevitable aspects of postcolonial society, such as the devaluation of the individual or his depersonalization. This paper proposes a distinct perspective on the identity problem of colonialism and its recurrence in contemporary art.*

Key-words: *postcolonialism; racial identity; apartheid; diversity; cultural memory*

1. Introduction

This paper addresses a series of theoretical notions that refer to postcolonial theory, which is defined by the inevitable consequences of controlling countries for the exploitation of population and land, but also the entire cultural heritage of colonialism, which was the basis of an authentic and remarkable art. As a result of the removal of the oppressive regime and the independence of the people from the former colonies, there was an inherent aspect of major artistic importance: the whole tradition, a real legacy laden with cultural experiences, became a defining aspect of postcolonial civilizations.

Far from referring strictly to the period of time after which a nation gains its independence, postcolonial theory also refers to the human consequences that have arisen as a result of control over it. The transmission of cultural succession has a real importance, as well as the approach to the way in which the society of non-European people was perceived from the perspective of Western cultural knowledge.

2. The Artistic Context of Postcolonialism

A study of contemporary artists in postcolonial Africa, published at an annual conference at Bowling Green State University (BGSU) in Ohio, initiated by Hanna Lee Stanhouse² of Miami University, Oxford, investigates a number of defining issues regarding individual identity and its recontextualization, which occurred as a result of major political and social changes. The study begins with a fair analysis of the phenomenon, belonging to Ygor Kopytoff, professor of anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia. It is questioning the status of the non-artistic object, with a distinctive background marked by the economic or political context, which experiences, from contemporary industrial production

¹ "George Enescu" University from Iași, Faculty of Arts and Design, email adress raluca_schipor@yahoo.com

² Hanna Lee Stanhouse. 2016. "Reframe, Reuse, Recycle: The Found Object in Post-Colonial Africa, Recontextualized by Contemporary Artists". *Africana Studies Student Research Conference*, pp. 1-12.

practices, its reuse, based on the circumstances that determine its authentic value³. The idea of reusing objects that have a real artistic value is developed, along with that of recycling those found, through which the entire public's perception of them is reconstructed. The trend of recontextualization (often involving the recycling process) is one of the great interests among contemporary artists.

El Anatsui, Gonalo Mabunda and Fally Sene Sow are certain examples of how the artist submits the object to perception, thus highlighting the social, political or economic context. Its biography is explored, the way it can be interpreted and perceived, but especially the role that time plays in relation to the meanings prior to decolonization.

The research proposed by Hanna Stanhouse focuses on the idea of cultural heritage and the complexity of the way in which contemporary artists understand the exploitation of this stock of visual information, discussing relevant issues globally. The directions approached are different, while having a common denominator: the distinct perception and the inherent changes that have occurred over time.

An exhibition organized in collaboration with the Hayward Gallery in London, the Kunstpalast Museum in Dusseldorf, the Pompidou Center in Paris and the Mori Museum in Tokyo, entitled “Africa Remix: Contemporary Art of a Continent”, featured works by 73 African artists from 25 countries. Launched in 2005 at the Hayward Gallery in London, the project was curated by Simon Njami, co-founder and editor-in-chief of the Parisian *Revue Noire*. Originally opened in Dusseldorf in the summer of 2004, the exhibition is characterized by an unprecedented amplitude, marked by a strong eclectic character and including different generations of artists, as well as various types of creations, featuring traditional approaches along with advanced media techniques.

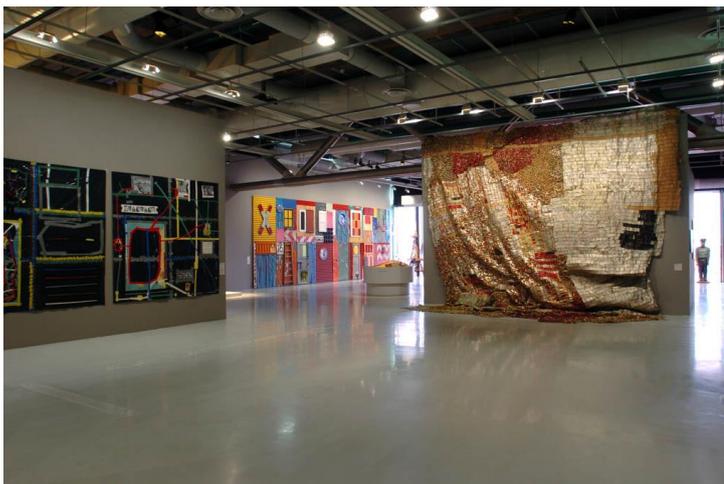


Fig. 1. *Africa Remix: Contemporary Art of a Continent*, 2005, Hayward Gallery, London

Identification of works: El Anatsui - *Sasa*, Gonalo Mabunda - *Eiffel Tower*, Sunday Jack Akpan - *Chef de la police*, Antonio Ol - *Townshipwall N10*, Yto Barrada - *Grand Royal Turismo*, Moeshekwa Langa - *Collapsing Guides*. Photo: Jean-Claude Planchet, Museum Fund of Temporary Exhibitions, Kandinsky Library, MNAM-CCI / Pompidou Center (source: <https://histoiredesexpos.hypotheses.org/1181>)

³ Ygor Kopytoff. 1986. “The cultural biography of things: commoditization as process”. In *The social life of things. Commodities in cultural perspective*, ed. by Arjun Appadurai. Massachusetts: Cambridge University Press, pp. 64-91.

In his essay, Clive Kellner (chief curator at the Johannesburg Art Gallery), published in the study entitled "Africa Remix: Contemporary Art of a Continent"⁴ by Simon Njami, it is invoked the idea of multiple identities facing African civilization, mobilized by The post-colonial "subject", and which must be constantly monitored until they reach maximum effectiveness.

In the exhibition's catalog at the Hayward Gallery in London (entitled "Identity and History"), Simon Njami presents the idea of a contemporary Africa, as the fruit of history modified by others, which makes it impossible to separate the individual from its historical context. Extremely suggestive and disturbing in terms of the meanings, the exhibited creations propose a analysis from the perspective of the present, but investigating the retrospective framework in which they were made. Designed on a monumental scale (both in terms of location, the number of participants involved and the meanings), the exhibition "Africa Remix: Contemporary Art of a Continent" is shaping up to be a real impact, with the merit of highlighting a range of artists less known to the general public.

The project includes internationally renowned creators, such as El Anatsui, one of the most famous representatives of African art, included in the 44th edition of the Venice Biennale, Gonçalo Mabunda (present with the Eiffel Tower made from recycled weapons), or Jane Alexander (present with "African Adventure", an installation that explores the subconscious of hybrid, mutant characters, affected by a violent society). While El Anatsui (b. 1944, Ghana) signs original creations based on the exploration of colonial culture, Fally Sene Sow (b. 1989, Senegal) inquires a reality, bordering on words and images, in which the use of found objects it is interpreted in an urban culture that involves techniques such as collage. Scraps of cloth, discarded packaging are extracted from the everyday environment and recontextualized, receiving distinct meanings - "Mbedd-Burr" / "The Street Belongs to God", 1914.

3. History and recontextualization in the creation of El Anatsui

One of the most prestigious artists of the postcolonial movement that emerged in the West Africa in the last decades of the twentieth century, El Anatsui investigates, through his creations, social, political and historical aspects of the period before independence.

He stands out as an artist whose originality lies in the recontextualization of ideas and images related to Nigerian culture (although originally from Ghana, he began teaching at Nsukka University in Nigeria, including joining the Nsukka movement). The interpretation of traditional concepts is done against the background of a broad Western approach, in which the found object becomes the raw material of his creations. Internationally known for monumental installations, in which he uses "anything throws the environment"⁵, El Anatsui explores the valences of the usual object, considered non-artistic (such as fragments of crockery, pieces of newspapers with printed texts, aluminum lids from liquor bottles or copper wire). Constituting only a stage of personal research and its artistic evolution, the interest in them is interpreted from the perspective of printing a memory, caused by the touch of various people who came into direct contact with them. Thus, the common objects own, in the artist's interpretation, traces of the emotional load with which they were invested, as an effect of their widespread use. The collective memory imprinted on them a recent history, marked by a relative period of time in

⁴ Simon Njami. 2007. *Africa Remix: Contemporary Art of a Continent*. Johannesburg: Johannesburg Art Gallery, pp. 22-25

⁵ Laura Leffler James. 2008. "Convergence: History, Materials, and the Human Hand - An Interview with El Anatsui". *Art Journal*, pp. 36-53.

which simple contact created a connection between the individual and the transient experience of touching the object.

Considered an important exponent of African art, Anatsui incorporates, in his creations, ideographs and indigenous motifs, proposing a coexistence of evocative symbols with their involvement and approach from a contemporary perspective. At the border between sculpture, tapestry and installation, his textile works refer to his own cultural identity, in which the production of *kente*⁶ canvas belongs to the regional tradition. In a similar way to the original weaving of individual strips in a unitary canvas, the artist introduces, in the structures he created, unique elements such as copper wire or aluminum caps, giving the whole ensemble the precious look of royal fabrics. By creating connections between materials and textures, between what is usual, without aesthetic value and what gives it this value, by relocating tradition in the field of contemporary art, El Anatsui contributes decisively to the creation of a true postcolonial cultural biography. The involvement of collective memory, as a constituent part of the national past, has the effect of exploring the past and the countries of the society to which it belongs, while investigating, through the typological symbolism of the objects used, major social problems such as alcoholism, aberrant waste production and mismanagement. By recycling, in a new sense of the term, the artist reshapes cultural identities. The same individuals who were perceived through poverty and alcoholism (an important problem facing Africa), can be perceived through the spectrum of tradition that characterizes them. The critical activism message has, in this light, a strong social impact.



Fig. 2. El Anatsui, *The Beginning and The End*, aluminum installation (liqueur bottle caps, copper wire, tin foil), 2015, Royal Museum of Fine Arts, Brussels (source: personal archive)

Assuming the role of contributing to the survival of the tradition and transmitting it in the future, the artist uses a traditional graphic system, creating models with multiple semantic features. Between December 2017 and December 2018, El Anatsui exhibits one of his monumental works, suggestively titled “The Beginning and The End” (2015), at the Royal Museum of Fine Arts in Brussels. Created from aluminum caps and copper wire, the installation suggests the idea launched in his previous projects, that of reusing and recontextualizing the object. But the meanings are multiplying: its tapestries, apparently metallic, also indicate a possible erosion of the elements used. The symbolic meanings are thus overwhelming. The transmission of the tradition from a past marked by struggles and oppression is not without risks.

⁶ Traditional silk and cotton fabric, made by weaving strips of cloth. Originally made by the Akan-Ashanti ethnic group in Ghana, this fabric was worn by each tribe and was considered sacred.

Apparently expensive, the material created, which conveys the recurrence of the idea of royal fabric, is in fact a set of simple objects, liable to be thrown away. The perception is thus conditioned by all the factors that formed the basis of the whole approach, the beginning and the end ("The Beginning and The End"), requiring a bilateral interpretation: decolonization, so the end can be interpreted as an end of traditions, just as the beginning may constitute the post-colonial artistic act. Or the beginning and end of a culture that, paradoxically, dies with the disappearance of the oppressive system.

Exploring the contrasts of life marked by cultural heritage, but also by the need for revolutionary change, both in everyday life and in self-perception, El Anatsui creates, through his art, a wide range of critical observations on the risks to which the individual submits in the current period, considered neo-colonial from this perspective. Negative aspects of the individual are identifiable by a symbolism of the minor details that characterize its existence in detail: seemingly rich, royal, its fabrics are made of materials either recycled or justified as attributes of poverty and lack of opportunities in a society that devalues the individual.



Fig. 3. El Anatsui, *Fresh and Fading Memories*, Aluminum and Copper Wire Installation, 2007, Fortuny Palace, Venice

(source: <https://writinginrelation.wordpress.com/2015/03/19/el-anatsui-beautiful-and-sensate-objects/>)

Realizing remarkable projects on the theme of collective memory in relation to the individual one, the artist participates, in 2007, in the Venice Biennale with "Fresh and Fading Memories". The original is present both in terms of location and the work itself. The installation covers the central façade of Fortuny Palace in St. Mark's Square, Venice, a historic building⁷ that houses an art museum. Reminiscent of Christo's famous wraps and his interventions on public space, Anatsui's installation projects a complex metallic pattern that vaguely refers to traditional "kente" fabrics, impressing by fading them ("fading memories"). The projection of past times (suggested by the existence of individual strips of material and the impression generated by the old royal garments) overlaps with the acceptance of the present, visible in the details of the material.

Beyond the suggestion of the collective memory and of the cultural heritage, the original consists in the process of transforming the insignificant, small worthless objects, into

⁷ Reference is made to Palazzo Pesaro Orfei, a building dating from the 15th century, specific to Venetian Gothic architecture. From 1902 it was transformed into the Fortuny Museum, also known as the Fortuny Palace, being open to the public since 1975.

monumental sculptures. The metaphor involves social aspects, with reference to the individual subjected to abuse and devalued in the colonies and his independence in the current period, the ability to create and transit times, blurring them; to transform himself in turn. “Fresh and Fading Memories” deals with human psychology, the traumas of colonization, as well as exploring their fading over time.



Fig. 4. El Anatsui, *Fresh and Fading Memories* - detail, Aluminum and Copper Wire Installation, 2007, Fortuny Palace, Venice

(source: <https://writinginrelation.wordpress.com/2015/03/19/el-anatsui-beautiful-and-sensate-objects/>)

The installation hanging from the historic walls reveals a complex construction process: the aluminum covers are flattened and woven together with copper wire, creating a huge suspended drape, with metallic, sculptural reflections that record the folds. The materials found (metal fragments, wire, aluminum caps - with double reference to the sale of slaves and liquor), often recycled, are metamorphosed into sumptuous surfaces, which have the appearance of gilded fabrics once considered sacred. Involving a limited color palette (red, gold, black and metallic gray), its huge suspensions evoke Byzantine mosaics⁸. The sacred is perceived in a distinct way, by the correlation with the tradition, but also by the act of metamorphosis to which the used pieces are subjected. Organized according to color, shape, size, small aluminum objects (reminiscent of poverty and alcoholism, fundamental problems of society devalued in the time of colonizers) leave visible brands and inscriptions - a mirage of economic and social exchanges, of apparent freedom. Mediocre symbols of banality and consumerism are reimagined and identified as objects whose value lies in the general appearance. Authenticity is found both externally and in internal meanings, in the concept of changing perception in relation to context, in a society marked by prejudices.

⁸ Karen Rosenberg. 2013. “A Ghanaian Artist Goes Big”. *The New York Times*



Fig. 5. El Anatsui, *Timespace*, installation of aluminum and copper wires, 325 x 495, 2014 (photo: Jonathan Greet, source: <https://elanatsui.art/artworks/el-anatsui-timespace-2014-2>)

Through its suspended installations, Anatsui involves various connections, from reuse (with reference to the worthless object), to transformation (of each piece used, as a substitute for the individual) and transcendence. The boundaries of the place are violated, the time frame is relative (“Timespace”, 2014). Its fabrics can integrate colonial history as much as the present. Connections are created between consumerism and the transformation of waste into art.

Monumental works bring to the fore, beyond the dramatic aspects of history, a number of the cruel effects of capitalism - excessive waste production, doubled by the acute lack of a recycling culture. In addition to the purely aesthetic analysis and the formal interest in color, texture, materiality and integration into the urban space, Anatsui's installation highlights aspects related to consumerism and waste creation, ethics and environmental policy.

4. Conclusions

Extremely versatile, through different visual perception and appreciation depending on distance, his works share, at the same time, defining aspects of poverty and the postcolonial struggle, just as they are characterized by opulence. El Anatsui investigates the significance of Ghanaian / African aesthetics, but uses an elaborate formal process with reference to composition, line, shape or materiality. His art, characterized as a globalist one, invokes a strong “primitive” feeling, identifiable in the multiple references to tradition. Paradoxically, however, the Western present (visible through the culture of consumerism already suggested) is found, in a versatile way, along with colonial history.

The factor that intimidates and amazes is, certainly, the artistic approach and the creation of a true authorial signature, through the transparent and reflective canvas, at the same time metallic and infinitely malleable. Their versatility is highlighted when exposing the same piece in different spaces, the flexible material being extremely permissive in terms of handling and suspension procedures. Regardless of the monumental size of the suspended fabrics, the series of micro-objects is revealed. It is an act of revelation that the receiving subject can experience more than once.

Known in most of the world's museums (such as the British Museum in London, the Pompidou Center in Paris, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Young Museum in San Francisco, the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, the Kunstpalast in Düsseldorf and the Vatican), Anatsui's works impresses through the implicit metaphor of the transformation of

the object, through the perception of both the meaning and the aesthetic factor, especially through the connections made with its own history and culture.

References

Books

- Ferguson, Russel, Martha Gever, Trinh T. Minh-Ha and Cornel West (eds). 1999. *Out There. Marginalizations and Contemporary Cultures*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York and The MIT Press.
- McEvelley, Thomas. 1992. *Art & Otherness: Crisis in Cultural Identity*. Kingston: Collection „Documentext”.
- Njami, Simon. 2007. *Africa Remix: Contemporary Art of a Continent*. Johannesburg: Johannesburg Art Gallery.

Article (in book)

- Kopytoff, Ygor. 1986. “The cultural biography of things: commoditization as process”. In *The social life of things. Commodities in cultural perspective*, ed. by Arjun Appadurai, 64-91. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Cambridge University Press.

Article (in journal)

- James, Laura Leffler. 2008. “Convergence: History, Materials, and the Human Hand - An Interview with El Anatsui”. *Art Journal* 67(2): 36-53.
- Rosenberg, Karen. 2013. “A Ghanaian Artist Goes Big”. *The New York Times*
- Stanhouse, Hanna L. 2016. “Reframe, Reuse, Recycle: The Found Object in Post-Colonial Africa, Recontextualized by Contemporary Artists”. *Africana Studies Student Research Conference* 1-12.