El Anatsui
In the Public Space

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Over the past two decades, the sculptor El Anatsui has gradually and firmly established himself as perhaps Africa’s most significant modern sculptor, exhibiting consistently at home as well as in the most reputable international spaces including the Biennale of Venice where he won a joint honourable mention in 1990, those of Havana and Johannesburg, and in 1995, the sculpture Biennal of Osaka where he won the Kansai Telecasting Corporation Prize. In the 1980s, he was a regular participant in international collaborations, especially in Germany, and in 1984 he spent an outstandingly prodigious period in residence in St. Ives where he produced over 120 ceramic sculptures in eight weeks. In 1992 Anatsui collaborated in the Amazonas environmental sculpture project in Brazil together with Antony Gormley, Marina Abramovic and Alfredo Jaar, among others. In Nigeria, where he has lived and worked as a university professor since 1974, Anatsui continues to produce new and challenging work in his converted church hall studio, from where he exercises enormous influence on the artistic landscape in that country and across the continent.

While much of Anatsui’s work explores the sacrality of the interior, hardly any contemporary artist is better able to elicit the given mystique of the public space, the social power and presence of the arena that replaces intimacy with awe and magnifies the arrestive existentiality of the public work, and, in manipulating these, replicate the rituality that enclosure so easily yields. Anatsui’s public sculpture is as much concerned with the rhetorics of place and space as with the processes and tropes of hierurgy, the recognition that in interaction the successful public work and its physical and social geographies combine with the humble bodily configurations of the viewer to create a contemplative encounter which occasionally parallels religious experience.

Public sculpture under and after minimalism in the 1960s and 1970s fell into the abrasive libido domini of American modernist practice, culminating in
Serra’s decidedly transgressive *Tilted Arc* in Lower Manhattan. *Tilted Arc* was meant by its creator to ‘redeem’ its locality, thereby acting as an aesthetic and transfigurative manifestation of Serra’s messianic intent. At the height of its incursion into the public space, high modernism replicated the innate desires and proclivities of the imperial imagination: the will to possess and conquer, the compulsion to dominate. The aesthetic and social space became a microcosm, a replica of the world and universe which western man must annex. Serra’s steel blade and Calder’s huge steel pieces sat on their locations emphatically and obtrusively, symbols of the triumph of reason and reiterations of man’s hold over nature and over his environment. As it began to slide into decline, it was as if the modernist sensibility had to make one final heroic effort to reinstate its philosophy of dominance. This in itself paralleled the US’s illusions of grandeur and monumental drive to reaffirm the greatness of western civilisation as the empires of Europe collapsed and new nations and discounted civilisations sprang to the fore. This was the era of space exploration, the ultimate affirmation of human greatness and of super-power nations. Rather than replicate the widespread interrogation of messianism going on in western society, art under American minimalism slipped into the service of grand narratives to become the visual signifier of a residual resistance against the restoration of modesty. The vestiges of extreme individualism and the will to impose upon the environment continued in public art. Although an artist like Richard Long has been portrayed as the purveyor of a different sensibility, an advocate of a “far more personal and understated view of sculpture” in the public place, the inclination to interfere with the environment is not entirely lacking in Long’s work, particularly in his footlines in the Sahara desert where his desire “to make images and ideas which mark the earth and the mind”, manifests itself.

Confessedly averse to this Nietzschean preoccupation with the subjugation of all reality beyond the self and the reduction of the work of art to a signifier of the individual will to power, Anatsui approaches sculpture in the public place as that which Arthur Danto succinctly describes as “the public transformed... us, in the medium of artistic transformation”. The essence of public sculpture, for Anatsui, is not to represent the individual desire or intent, but to seek to resolve a collective problematic. In this sense the public work becomes a reflection of the public will, a visual manifestation of group sensibility and collective philosophy. For Anatsui the public space provides opportunity to fulfil a specific and essential social role, which is that primal condition that Achebe articulates when he insists that in the societies that constitute his, and Anatsui’s, cultural heritage, “artists lived and moved and had their being in society, and their work was produced for that society”. In another essay, Achebe describes the art which results from this locational specific as one that is “important because it is at the centre of the life of the people and so can fulfil some of that need that first led man to make art: the need to afford himself through his imagination an alternative handle on reality”.

The aesthetic that Achebe refers to runs contrary to the Cartesian valorisation of the individual ego. And this without necessarily discounting the place and relevance of the spectator without whom work is, after all, incomplete and unfulfilled. It is indeed supported by the conditions and structures of the public work including patronage, commissioning, and the realities of presence in the public space, the communal geography which is inherently sacred by virtue of its commonality, that is to say, its essentially
social nature, as well as metaphysically. Within the cultures where Anatsui locates himself and his work, the public space is a potent locale. It is the locus of human interaction with other worlds and other beings, the arena of communion between the living and the dead, that site where, as Eliade put it, "the rupture of levels and, consequently, the communication with the trans-human take place". It is the public arena rather than the enclosed space that is the site for the gathering of ancestral presences, a recurrent subject in Anatsui’s work. To violate this space, therefore, or transpose the individual will upon it, is sacrilege.

The sacrality of the public site is illustrated in one of Achebe’s early short stories where, while landscaping his school compound a zealous mission school head teacher and his pupils cover an old foot path which, as he later learns, is the path of spirits, the thoroughfare of the dead and the unborn. By covering up the path, “the axis of the Universe, the Axis Mundi” as Eliade might describe it, is obstructed and subverted. When this is brought to the attention of the young head teacher, his response is to dismiss the elders of the town with a cynical offer to make an alternative path for the spirits, anything but destroy his marvellous showcase of decent gardening. Worried that their dead would no longer find their way to the other world, nor the unborn enter to be born, the community takes matters into its hands and destroys the landscaping.

The public space, therefore, is not one where the individual aesthetic, or individualist notions of artistic freedom or licence such as were evoked during the hearings on Serra’s steel blade, take precedence over the communal good. For an artist working in this site the details of this peculiarity demand a democratic aesthetic that places the shared sensibility on a par with, if not above, the individual desire and vision. Such a democratic aesthetic is configured in several dimensions whereby its pluralist manifestation may assume the form of communal participation at the level of either conceptualisation or realisation. Yet, it may manifest only on the level of the artist’s will to realise in the work a reflection of the communal sensibility or philosophical inclination rather than the mere individual vision.

Anatsui’s outdoor work is characterised by the above intent, namely to place in visual form the sensibilities of the group; to create, as it were, the transformed ‘us’. Anatsui’s first major public works in the 1980s were two sculptures commissioned by the University of Nigeria for the site of its new Faculty of Physical Sciences buildings in 1983. Both sculptures were executed in concrete with terrazzo finish. One of them, The Ambivalent Hold, is located in the courtyard of the buildings, while the other, For the Upliftment of Man, is located in the grounds adjoining the structures where it enjoys a different feel of the true outdoors without contestation from the architectural surroundings.

The two sculptures were collaboratively bid for by Anatsui and two other Nsukka sculptors and, eventually, his maquettes were chosen. The briefs were to create work that embodied the meaning and place of scientific knowledge and technology in society, as well as fit into the architectural landscape defined by the architects. Designed in a plain, modernist style and built in concrete, the structures of the Physical Science Faculty in Nsukka are functionalist and quite dense, with no pretensions to elegance. There is a mid-century emphasis on geometry and the grid, though the formality of the layout is redeemed by the rather modest heights of the building.

To fit the ambiance Anatsui, who has an aversion for working in metal, chose to return to concrete. Concrete is not only readily available, it can also be manipulated to simulate any other materials from stone to metal, thus
underlining its mutability and lack of fixed identity. For the two pieces, Anatsui chose to play on this mutability in order to, on the one hand emphasise the grittiness of concrete, and on the other exploit its subaltern nature. Though both sculptures are executed with a terrazzo finish, The Ambivalent Hold has a smooth, almost metal finish, while For the Upliftment of Man is executed with a contrasting feel, a ruggedness befitting its theme of tenacity and ascent. Anatsui conceptualises it in terms of the realities of process. The reality evoked

is not virtual: the weight and rigour of ascent are imbued in the idea, and this is manifest in the employment of the rugged finish as trope. On the other hand, smoothness is tied to the earth-bound *The Ambivalent Hold* in order to further underline the concept of ambivalence and undecided proclivity or identity. This way surface becomes a site of signification where Anatsui relates the multivalences of intent and imagination.

*The Ambivalent Hold*, which is also titled *Goddess*, is a solid, rotund, anthropoid figure seated squarely on the ground. In its huge hands the figure clutches a smaller figure, an offspring or creature of different species pulled close to its face. There is an indeterminate engagement taking place between the figures, and it is this which is the primary locus of signification. The hold is ambivalent, a cross between a crushing squeeze and a tender hug. The gesture is equally undecided, caught between affection and antipathy. There is an evocation of Cronus devouring his children, and yet the gesture in *The Ambivalent Hold* does not lend itself to such interpretive unilaterality nor does it carry the same finality. The signified here is science, and specifically the advanced knowledges of the atomic age, the huge, newly discovered energies and potencies of modernity which hold within them not only the ability to improve life, but at the same time the potential to destroy it, to annihilate. The goddess figure is nature and her energies which scientific knowledge reveals to us, and the little figure in her hold is humanity, Carl Sandburg’s diminutive, two-legged creature who amazes all creation with her ability to sit astride nature and these energies and defy their proportions and prohibitions. Anatsui defines our relationship with nature as a two-way doxa, an ambivalent affair existing at the split position between destruction and sustenance. The human is as ambivalent towards nature as is the latter towards the human. We both destroy that which sustains us.

Through the rhetorics of scale, *The Ambivalent Hold* of course establishes the paradoxical relationship between an overwhelming nature and a daring species, yet emphasises the fictionality of human illusions of dominance over nature. But even more importantly, the piece reflects a worldview that is not specific to the artist but to a culture which brings an essential scepticism and ambivalence to the reading of modernity and its irreverence towards nature, a culture which is built on a different rationale and a contrasting, more conciliatory attitude towards nature and its forces. In *Sexual Personae*, Camille Paglia identifies the enormity and arbitrariness of nature’s energies and humanity’s putativeness alongside this force. She describes the human species as “merely one of a multitude of species upon which nature indiscriminately exerts its force”.¹⁰ In the face of nature’s vast and difficult powers, she observes the crucial distinction between the West and its modernity, which she identifies as “Civilised man”, and the other cultures. While the earlier “conceals from himself the extent of his subordination to nature”, the latter are inclined to recognise and acknowledge this, and thus to devise structures and systems which reconcile them to this knowledge, and provide a lever for a level of harmonious existence alongside nature. For the West science becomes a strategy for concealment and denial, a device by which it is hoped “that by naming and classification, by the cold light of intellect, archaic night can be pushed back and defeated”.

Paglia does however demonise nature as ugly and irredeemably horrific, if only to fabricate a dark and impossible antagonist against which ‘western man’ struggles and triumphs. The contrary is, of course, more accurate, namely that nature is a paradox of benevolence and harshness, an ambiguous combination

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of the destructive and the regenerative. In this sense, nature is indeed a grand parallel of the human species with the latter’s equally paradoxical combination of the creative and the destructive. The reality of their engagement, therefore, is more one of mutual ambivalence than of the pitched antagonism upon which western proclivity to unmediated assault on nature is predicated. Anatsui’s reading of our relationship with nature, of which indeed we are part, reflects that of those cultures for whom nature is not merely chthonic mayhem and indiscriminate and demonically inhospitable, but also the mother. Nature is not Cronus devouring his offspring, but the source of all things. Detailing the place of nature in the Igbo world, Achebe describes its primal force — energy — as “the essence of all things human, spiritual, animate and inanimate”. Nature is not the Cartesian Other against which the arsenals of scientific discovery must be hauled, but instead part of us, the encompassing extension of the self with which existence must be constantly negotiated, reminding us of Goethe’s insistence that “Man doesn’t know himself any more than he knows the world, which he only has access to through the interference of two inextricably united conditions, the world in himself and himself in the world”.

In essence, Anatsui does not bring to The Ambivalent Hold an individualist vision. Instead he meets the responsibility of creating a public work which is a visual transformation of the collective worldview, a transfiguration of the group. In For the Upliftment of Man, he again interprets the collective reality of human striving. Here, rather than locate the figures square on the earth as he does nature in The Ambivalent Hold, he places them in space, suspended from the ground on pillars. In other words he raises them off the ground, and positions them in process, in the frame of desire. This location is one of fragility and uncertainty from which the possibility of descent is a perennial condition. The human is not master, and knowledge or science is not an absolute pedestal. Only nature has the stoichiometry which we find in the mother goddess of The Ambivalent Hold. The invocation is not so much of flight as of a painful, delicate ascent, and the precariousness of this acclivity correlates with the coda mentioned earlier summarising the worldview of most west African cultures: No Condition is Permanent. The symbolism in For the Upliftment of Man, therefore, is not of the escape of the spirit or of transcendence. Instead, it is of a weighted uplift, a gradual, arduous task of ascendance. In the form of the figures we find nobility, but not heroism, and this nobility derives in no small part from the collective spirit rather than from the isolated striving of the individual soul.

In these two sculptures Anatsui translates a worldview into form, and this form placed in the public space represents both the collective vision and the appropriate spirit of its geography. The integrity of the public space as the locus of the collective idea and the nexus of contact between worlds is fully realised. In encountering the space and the form, the viewer is provided opportunity to affirm the ideas which sustain her group and her world.

El Anatsui’s most impressive public work, perhaps, was done in 1984, a year after the Nsukka commissions, as part of an international symposium of artists in Cuxhaven, on the North Sea Coast of Germany. Offering to the Weather was Anatsui’s first earth work, and was conceived not as mere form or sculpture, but as ritual performance, and as effectual propitiation. Executed close to the sea, Offering consisted of Altar, a high ritual mound erected with an earth mover, upon which Anatsui set a black pot. Having set up this high altar, Anatsui then organised a procession round it in which the other artists, dressed in white, performed as ‘acolytes’ while he ascended the mound to present an
offering to the elements. Cuxhaven had known a long dry spell prior to the symposium, which inspired Anatsui’s choice of work for the site. Immediately after his offering, it rained.

The purpose of all ritual offering or propitiation is to seek restoration after cosmic rupture, to reestablish the balance and harmony between worlds without which cataclysm visits a community. Whereas a phenomenological frame might provide a different explanation for the lack of rain in Cuxhaven, an ultimatist interpretation would nevertheless locate such phenomena in the realm of the metaphysical whereby social or physiographic realities are only a symbolic manifestation of cosmic configurations. Negative physiographic
manifestations merely figure disruptive cosmic mutations requiring restorative ritual response.

On a visual and structural level, Offering attests to Anatsui’s deep, universal knowledge and understanding of the morphology and processes of ritual behaviour. It is noteworthy that for the altar in Offering, Anatsui erected a ritual mound, a form associated more with Middle Eastern and Mediterranean than with African rites, the favoured ritual site in Africa being the grove. The mound, however, is surmounted, but also complemented, in Offering, by the ritual pot, an essential ritual element in Anatsui’s own culture. The pot is both receptacle and mnemonic sign, and it is within it that the necessary rupture of worlds occurs and the different cosmic planes empty into one another, thus precipitating the required reversal in physiographic conditions. At the same time, it is a geocultural symbol, representing its provenance within a different locale. The acolyte dressed in white introduces yet another sensibility with its references to Christian processional ritual, and specifically to Catholicism. The Cuxhaven altar and performance, therefore, is an anthology of cultural signs and variations collating elements from different geographies to create the ultimate universal ritual site.

The invocation of the elements from this site corresponds to the primeval invocation of life and of firmness unto Earth, variants of which form the foundation of most myths of origin and creation. Yet it builds itself upon ascent, the act of going to meet the gods. This ascent may be related to flight and the abolition of weight, the desire as Eliade put it, to “move freely between

*Offering to the Weather, 1984, performance, Cuxhaven, Germany.*
earth and heaven”. The symbolism of flight, argues Eliade, “expresses an escape from the universe of everyday experience... it is at the same time transcendence and freedom that one obtains by ‘flight’.”

The employment of ascent in ritual equally implies a terrestrial rather than subterranean location of spiritual agents. For Anatsui this is an unusual gesture when, instead, the pattern within the cultures of his background is for the gods or ancestral spirits to descend to earth, or indeed for them to be sought not on high but within the sacred niche of the communal shrine or the crossroads whence they emerge from their subterrrestrial abodes. In yielding to a reverse of the latter, Anatsui exhibited great sensitivity to the cultural and ritual peculiarities of his location, without which neither his work nor its ritual configurations would be successful. As public art and as ritual form, the Cuxhaven altar and performance succeeded because the work not only responded to a social condition and need, but also because it homologised a disparity of cultural peculiarities, and conflated codes from various historical moments and places.

Anatsui felt at one with the social ambience of Cuxhaven, and recalls close interaction with the local people, including an elderly woman who wept upon encountering Altar, and related to him the story of a family ritual object, a wooden tray, which her grandfather had left them as a charm against barnfires, and which, according to her, worked on several occasions. There was thus a level of affinity which meant that Offering to the Weather, and the altar upon which it was performed, instead of being transgressive impositions on the site and locality, indeed fitted in. The ‘us’ which the work transformed, therefore, was not merely Anatsui’s culture or individuality, but the culture and locality within which the work was produced also, as well as the cosmopolitan cultural condition that occasioned it. It is this aesthetic of relevance that Anatsui brings to public art.

It is this aesthetic of relevance that Anatsui brings to public art. In stepping out into the public space, Anatsui consistently recognises it as a site to inhabit but not to conquer, an arena of negotiation where the artist must find a point of entry consistent with the nature of the outdoors as social and democratic. The ethos behind this approach is an ancient one which derives from the human knowledge that as we step out of the intimate spaces of the interior and the body into the public, we venture into an arena that forbids the profane gesture, and where art, as a manifestation of our endeavours to place a handle on reality, also finds its scaffold for efficacy by affirming rather than violating the integrity of this geography.

13 Eliade, op cit, p 101.
15 Anatsui, Interview with Olu Oguibe and Eddy Udenta, Nsukka, 1988, unpublished.