

El Anatsui *Gawu*

John Gayer

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EI ANATSUI

John GAYER

Gawu

if breathing. *COQAO: Digituli et Axillae*, #207 is oval-shaped lump surfaced with finger-like appendages laid out like flattened coarse hairs. It too "breathes". *COQAO: Umbilici cum Digitis*, #10-16 is a bowl-like object that also comprises a surface of finger-like appendages, but here they stand straight up and away from the thing, trembling gently (excited? fearful?) and occasionally breaking out into noisy and violent shaking. *COQAO: Cubiti*, #27 is a ball-shaped thing, covered all the way around with breast-like extrusions that symmetrically coat the surface of the sculpture like some bizarre version of a soccer ball.

And finally there's *COQAO: Kaput cum Multibus Auribus*, #36. I consider it on its own because of potent real-world connections it brings to the fore. This biomorphic sculpture comprises an oval form the surface of which is entirely covered with the life-sized shapes of what appear to be human ears. This one too engages in motion, occasionally rocking back and forth in its case, as if restless, uncomfortable, or uneasy.

I choose the latter adjective, for the piece uneasily, if powerfully, evokes an experiment carried out in 1997 with what became widely known as the "Vacanti Mouse." Cow cartilage was transplanted onto the back of a bald white laboratory mouse, and, courtesy a mold implanted beneath its skin, was grown into something which resembled (and, in famous photographs which appeared worldwide, was mistaken for) a human ear.

Granted, the contexts of Sellars' work — aesthetic and otherwise — would tend to preclude any such similar misinterpretation, and, in any event, most of the work here tends closer to the novelty of the side show as opposed to trading in anything truly monstrous.

And yet, because of a single artifact, all bets are off. ←

Kathleen Sellars: *New Robotics Research*
Agnes Etherington Art Centre,
Kingston, Ontario
June 28 – October 19, 2008

Gil McELROY lives in Colborne, Ontario.

The sumptuous wall reliefs and golden field of mountains in *Gawu*, a survey of mostly recent work by Ghanaian El Anatsui at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African Art, fascinate the eyes and entice the body with their lustrous, if ultimately deceptive, beauty. Superficially bearing the features of traditional craft work as practiced in parts of Nigeria, Ghana and Togo, the bold designs and immense scale of Anatsui's compositions divulge a view sharply critical of contemporary life in West Africa. His output also undermines our assumptions about African art in general. Within the limits imposed by exhibitions such as MOMA's *Primitivism in 20th Century Art*, which emphasized the influence and historical importance of the human figure on Western art, non-figurative forms of expression have often been overlooked.

The work featured in this exhibition breaks down into two categories: free-standing sculptures and wall-mounted pieces, also referred to as "cloths." The very crumpled and prominently placed sculpture *Wastepaper Bag* (2003) not only greets visitors to the gallery, but also introduces the artist's principal theme. Standing over two metres high, this oversized and seemingly empty container — literally formed out of

discarded sheets of newsprint — rises up from a pile of discarded paper on the floor. Only upon closer inspection do we realize that the artist has utilized aluminum newspaper plates. In doing so, he not only identifies a major source of trash, but also argues for its management.

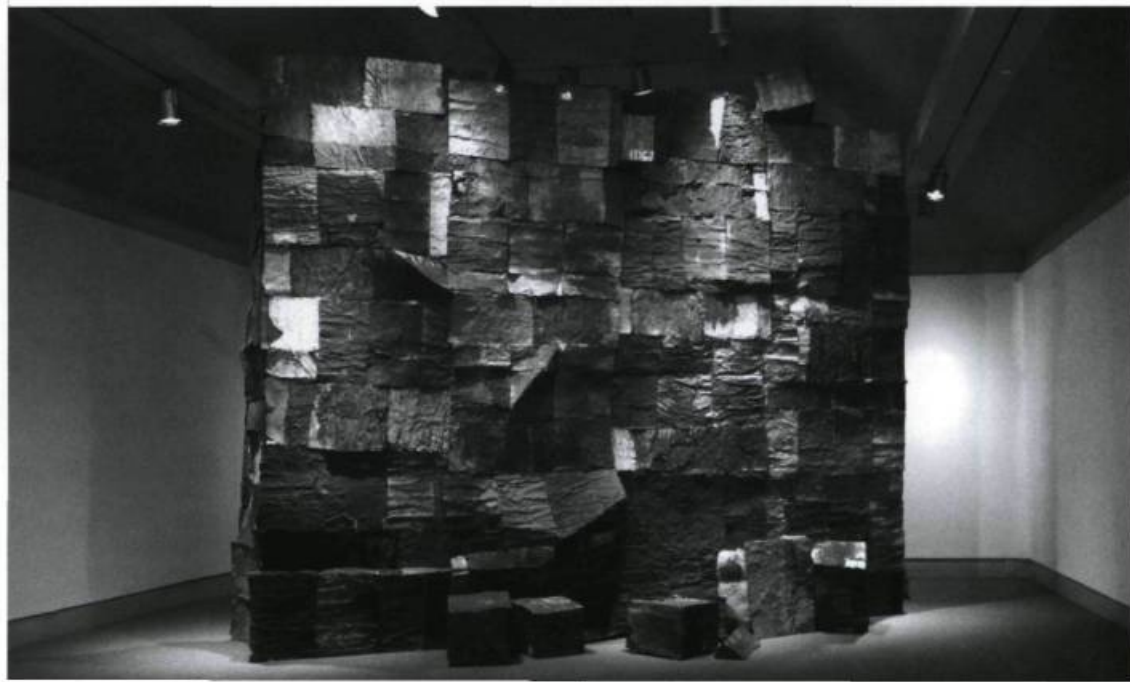
Anatsui delivers the same message in a more subtle manner through *Peak Project* (1999), the earliest work included in this survey. Made from the lids of imported tins of fresh milk, it forms a veritable landscape of small brassy mountain tops. And the *Peak* in the title happens to be the name of one brand of milk. Spreading before us, the range appears impenetrable. Joined with copper wire, the many pierced discs and exposed wire ends pose a risk to our flesh. The expansiveness of the installation brings icebergs to mind. While its glittering presence aims to distract us, the idea of an unseen threat cannot be escaped. The imposing *Crumbling Wall* (2000) reveals how even simple forms of recycling only temporarily mitigate the effect. Constructed out of scrap sheets of metal that were reused as graters for the production of a staple food, the work ironically suggests a ruination build up in one fell swoop.

In the "cloth" pieces we see non-traditional materials blended with customary practices. Made using innumerable aluminum fragments — recovered liquor bottle covers — joined with bits of copper wire, the artist, with the help of student assistants (Anatsui currently directs the

sculpture section at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka), creates flexible objects that reach out from the wall to articulate space in massive rumples and folds. In visual and technical terms these works remind us of large abstract paintings, tapestries, wall reliefs and, considering the tile-like elements from which they are built, mosaics. What sets them apart from these static configurations, is their inherent sense of movement. Full of colour and energy, the flexibility of these pieces enables them to be reconfigured for each installation. This not only lends them a performable aspect, but it also lets them be re-experienced as new works.

Anatsui manipulates his medium with a command that bears deftness and originality. Simple processes — he sorts the aluminum pieces according to colour or uses them randomly, he shapes them by cutting or folding, or leaves them intact — lead to richly complex compositions. The golden centre of *Skin of the Earth* (2006), for example, fades into a border of comprised of red and black. This evocative work's appearance disavows its material reality in at least two ways. Its colour and sheen indicate a lovely leathery skin, whereas its topography points to the surface of the ground. Red highlights break up the black edges. They imply fresh wounds in an, otherwise, charred perimetre.

Other abstract works include *Andinkra Sasa* (2003) and *Many Moons* (2007). The former composition refers



EI ANATSUI, *Crumbling Wall*, 2000. Collection of the Artist. Photo: Martin Barlow/Oriel Mostyn Gallery.

El ANATSUI with *Peak Project*, 1999.
Photo: Martin Barlow/Oriel Mostyn
Gallery.



to a type of dyed cloth with stamped designs that the Akan of Ghana use when mourning. This enormous work billows and sags. Its darkly toned, stratigraphic bars of colour twist across ridges and curves. The combination of frayed edges, sombre colours and a structure connoting turbulence endows the work with an undeniable air of sorrow. The latter work derives from a tradition of identifying villages according to their market day. In its web circular shapes butt up against rectangular regions subdivided into patches of solid or variegated colour. This lively, open-ended composition possibly serves as one or more of the following: flag, map, calendar, or pared down representation of a village. From a distance its texture bears a malleability that suggests giant finger tips may have had a hand in shaping it.

Perhaps to Western eyes, *Blue Moon* (2008) stands as the most accessible, yet undeniably prosaic piece. Representative of the artist's early interest in jazz, the rippled surface and bare branches that extend beyond the edges of this arid moon-scape cannot save what amounts to a staid and overly sentimental visual arrangement. It proves to be the only lackluster entry in an otherwise fantastic exhibition.

Leaving *Gawu* can be compared to returning from an exotic journey. We arrive in familiar surroundings, fatigued, but still stirred by the exciting ideas and experiences running through our minds. Like in any exhibition, we search for influences in the work. *Wastepaper Bag* reminds us of Oldenburg, *Peak Project*

coupled with Anatsui's interest in fabric brings Anne Hamilton to mind. But what really grabs us is his focus on contemporary reality. This the artist achieves with resourcefulness and resilience. By virtue of his material sources, the work forces us to consider economical issues such as the effect disposable goods have on societies ill equipped to deal with them. And in the mourning cloth titled *Andinkra Sasa*, political issues come to the fore. In *Ewe*, Anatsui's native language, "sasa" means patchwork, an idea the artist equates with the balkanization of Africa by European powers. Despite such critical underpinnings, the work maintains its energy.

Gawu, which also derives from *Ewe*, has several meanings. Included among them are the terms "metal" and "a fashioned cloak." As such, it brings together material, object, and identity and mirrors the multiplicity evident throughout the exhibition. We can take in the work at so many levels. It causes us to appreciate the laborious technique, marvel at the visual complexity, draw relationships with traditional practices and re-evaluate our views regarding changes occurring in a part of the developing world. Altogether, it makes for an invigorating experience. ←

El Anatsui, *Gawu*
Smithsonian Institution's National
Museum of African Art, Washington, DC
March 12 – September 2, 2008

John GAYER is an art critic who contributes regularly to Art Papers. His reviews have also appeared in *C, Canadian Art, New York Arts and Framework: The Finnish Art Review*. He is currently based in Dublin, Ireland.

Sentier Art³

Pascale BEAUDET

Tout d'abord, quelques remarques d'ordre lexicologique. Les œuvres dont je vais parler dans ce texte sont souvent rangées dans la catégorie « d'art in situ », terme qui peut prêter à confusion. En tant qu'œuvres faites par et pour un paysage naturel, elles peuvent être ainsi qualifiées, mais le terme a d'abord été appliqué – et l'est toujours – à des œuvres créées dans un contexte urbain. Jean-Marc Poinot relève que l'expression a été utilisée pour la première fois par Barbara Rose, dans sa monographie sur Oldenburg, publiée en 1970; Daniel Buren l'a employée l'année d'après lors de son exposition au musée Guggenheim de New York¹. Poinot indique que « l'in situ est une des formes les plus caractéristiques d'intégration de l'œuvre de sa circonstance d'apparition². »

Les œuvres in situ peuvent se décliner en différents types : depuis les parcs de sculpture gérés par des musées aux événements d'un été, jusqu'aux interventions impromptues et éphémères. Dans le cas qui nous occupe, le parc ne jouera pas le rôle de conservation d'une institution muséale, mais celui d'un propriétaire privé. D'ici à une quinzaine d'années, les œuvres seront disparues. En conséquence, les artistes devaient choisir des matériaux non toxiques, tout en étant relativement pérennes, une démarche assez rare au Québec, surtout pour des œuvres extérieures.

Quatre artistes ont donc été invités à produire une œuvre dans le cadre d'une résidence de deux semaines : Ingrid Koivukangas, une Vancouveroise, Steven Siegel, un États-Unien, et Nicole Vincent et Suzanne Ferland L., deux Québécoises, cette dernière étant à l'origine de l'événement. Chacune et chacun choisissait le lieu où il voulait intervenir et le thème de son œuvre.



→
Steven SIEGEL,
This one is flat, 2008.
Journaux récupérés.
Photo : Michel Dubreuil.

On ne peut pas non plus se servir du terme *land art*, marqué au coin des années 1960, ou d'*earthwork* dont le sens est lié à son matériau constitutif. Pour l'occasion, on se contentera donc d'art in situ, qui signifiera œuvre placée dans un contexte naturel et accessible au public. Autrement dit, des œuvres d'art public, créées dans un parc et, en ce sens, l'expression « site-specific art » serait applicable. L'instauration d'une œuvre change le contexte où elle s'inscrit, et elle le définit, même si on pourrait croire le contraire lorsque les artistes cherchent à s'intégrer au milieu naturel (comme dans le cas présent). Leur intervention ne peut que souligner la présence du culturel au cœur du naturel et leur irrémédiable interpénétration.

Le Parc régional du bois de Belle-Rivière étant un lieu fréquenté surtout par des résidents du secteur, la démarche avait un double objectif, pédagogique autant qu'artistique. Les artistes ne partagent ni parenté formelle ni réflexion commune, leur démarche respective s'appuyant sur des fondements philosophiques allant de l'essentialisme à une forme de structuralisme.

Ingrid Koivukangas est l'artiste qui s'est inspirée le plus du contexte naturel du parc. Cette artiste et professeure d'origine finlandaise a choisi trente-trois animaux parmi sa faune relativement abondante et en a peint la silhouette à l'ocre rouge sur autant de hêtres, retenus parce que leur écorce a formé les pages des tout premiers livres. Les