

# H-Net Reviews

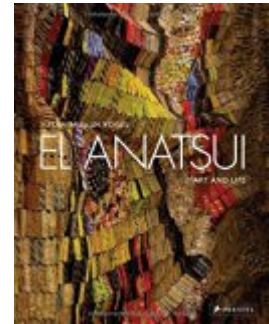
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Susan Mullin Vogel. *El Anatsui: Art and Life*. Munich: Prestel Publishing, 2013. 175 pp. \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-7913-4650-2.

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Published on H-AfrArts (February, 2014)

Commissioned by Jean M. Borgatti



## The Lives of an Artist

Susan Mullin Vogel's *Art and Life* provides a compelling and comprehensive scholarly survey of this well-known artist's career. Vogel was ideally positioned to write this biography, as she has extensively interviewed the artist, as well as his colleagues, critics, and students, over the course of producing two documentary films: *Fold Crumple Crush: The Art of El Anatsui* (2011) and *Anatsui at Work* (n.d.). In addition, she has discussed his work in courses on African art in the Department of Art History and Archeology at Columbia University. With 134 illustrations, all in color, this tome is a fittingly sumptuous counterpart to Anatsui's art. Whatever its appearance, however, this is not a coffee table book but a scholarly monograph, and the closing section containing an exhaustive chronology, exhibition history, and bibliography, is but one example of its value as a reference.

The preface announces that the book's focus will be "on the theories of Anatsui himself, and of the Nigerian art world in which he works ... a kind of archeology of Anatsui's ideas" (p. 6). Vogel's main argument, supported by close attention to his artistic development, is that Anatsui's work has shown a consistency of approach and subject from the beginning of his career to the present. Since so much of the literature on the artist concerns his "bottle top" or metal hangings from 2001 on, the attention to his oeuvre as a whole permits a far deeper understanding of his achievement. For instance, despite the fact that the 2010 Museum for African Art exhibition included a solid selection of his early work, the essays in the otherwise excellent catalogue for "El Anatsui: When

I Last Wrote to You about Africa" did not address the earlier work in any detail. In Vogel's introduction, "Reaching Venice from Nsukka" the art historian addresses the perception that somehow Anatsui "suddenly" made work that was entirely without precedent in his oeuvre, causing him to leap out of "nowhere" (Nsukka) to "international prominence" (Venice). "In reality," she counters, "neither was at all sudden or unprepared for" (p. 10).

Further, Vogel argues that the misconception that his work was a sudden, late, unexpected development derives from the fact that "Anatsui is the first and only black African artist to achieve global recognition at the highest levels while living and working continuously in Africa" (p. 11). This led to his critical isolation during a time when African artists who entered the world stage lived for the most part in Europe or the United States. With this premise established, she prepares the reader to learn about the context of Anatsui's work on all levels: biographical, cultural, and artistic.

Formally, Anatsui has always worked across media, because what concerns him at bottom is his artistic idea. Anatsui's first international exhibition took place in 1995 at the October Gallery in London, at which time arts professionals were becoming aware of the fact that modern and contemporary art had always been global. Now, of course, contemporary artists spin across the globe following one biennale or art fair after another. Anatsui's career is part of this trajectory from a predominantly European-based to globally based art world, but some-

how he has managed to negotiate it with his feet on the ground.

The text is separated into two sections—“Life,” consisting of five chapters, and “Art,” consisting of three chapters. The two sections tend to overlap, perhaps for the simple reason that life and art are inseparable. The first chapter in section 1, “Starting in Ghana, Living in Nigeria,” begins with Anatsui’s childhood and early education in Ghana and ends with his entry into the global art world. In each chapter and subheading, Anatsui’s words are highlighted in bold, so that his voice appears on every page. I found this extremely rewarding, even if, or perhaps even because, Anatsui occasionally contradicts himself and/or the author! Yet, even simple statements like that which opens the chapter, provide insight into an independent and self-motivated individual: “El is a name I gave myself. It has no meaning in Ewe” (p. 24).

Leaving his home country to teach at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, in 1975, he found himself in an environment of exceptionally creative colleagues, including Uche Okeke, head of the department, and the prominent writer Chinua Achebe. As Vogel notes, “It would be a mistake to underestimate the stimulation and support he received from a vital African art world whose very existence may be unsuspected by mainstream art critics” (p. 41). When many valued colleagues departed with the decline in the Nigerian economy in the 1980s, Anatsui remained, continuing his efforts to “indigenize” his art practice. The comments of Anatsui’s Nigerian colleagues and students, as well as the accompanying reproductions of their artwork, are of especial value in establishing the context of the artist’s work and expanding the text beyond the typical monographic study. In 1980, when, following a residency at the Cummington Community of the Arts in Massachusetts, he started working with a chainsaw to create free-standing and wall-relief wooden sculptures, Anatsui also began to enjoy increasing international recognition. He was, as Vogel notes, excluded from such major exhibitions as Okwui Enwezor’s “The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa, 1945-1994” in 2001. However, he did participate in the Dak’Art exhibit in Senegal in 2006 that led Robert Storr to include him in the 2007 Venice Biennale.

In chapter 3 of section 1, “Discovering the Metal Sheets,” Vogel turns to the work based in metal. The initial sculptures from the early 2000s, constructed either from printer’s plates or from Cassava graters, were evocative, but so fragile and inflexible that they were dif-

icult to transport to the international exhibition circuit. In 1998, however, he had also begun using the lids from cans of Peak evaporated milk and, in an oft-told tale, the bottle tops he found in a “curious bag in the bushes.” The latter resulted in the “Gawu Group,” eleven seminal pieces made between 2001 and 2004. Vogel carefully traces the development of this series, through to successful exhibitions in New York galleries in 2005 and 2006, at which time Western-based critics began to praise his work, while at the same time asking whether the bottle tops had already become a gimmick.

Wisely, in chapter 4, “Working in Nsukka,” Vogel returns to Nigeria for an extended review of Anatsui’s working environment and methods. A wonderful two-page color spread of Anatsui visiting Nsukka’s recycling market opens the book itself, and Vogel makes the important point that apart from accidentally finding that initial “curious bag,” Anatsui is an active participant in this thriving commodities exchange. (However, he now purchases the bottle tops from a local distillery, where empty bottles are returned for recycling). In other words, his work is not made from “rubbish” but from items offered for re-use. In turn, Anatsui is a major employer, for the process of creating the hangings is labor-intensive. At any given time, at least forty assistants work in various capacities under his direction and that of his studio manager and former student, Onyishi Uchechukwu. It is precisely this sort of information on the sources and execution of the artist’s work that contributes to the greater understanding of his oeuvre that this text provides. The reproductions of his studio where he supervises works in progress, and the details of “the bottle top palette” and joining methods are invaluable. This chapter should motivate the reader to view the film *Fold Crumple Crush*, where the viewer may spend time in the artist’s studio, university, and home, and become thoroughly familiar with his working process.

As rewarding as is this account of his career, there is a disjunction that results from the two-part division of the text into “Life” and “Art.” It is not until chapter 7, somewhat awkwardly titled “Bottle Top Hangings as an Art Form,” that Vogel returns to the role that recycling as an idea plays in Anatsui’s work. Surprisingly, the artist states flatly that he is not interested in recycling: “I transform the caps into something else” (p. 126). Rather than the artwork being on some level a commentary on materialism and consumption, then, the artist avers that he sees it as comparable to an Igbo pot, which “has been transformed into a spiritual dimension by being placed on a shrine” (p. 126). In addition to his unexpected in-

terpretation of the hangings, it is also initially surprising that he chooses to refer to Igbo pots rather than the African textiles with which his work is generally associated. The Igbo pot analogy is understandable because of his lifelong interest in the fragment—a topic Vogel discusses at length—but the emphasis on a spiritual dimension to his work receives little elaboration elsewhere in the text.

The last chapter in section 1, “Entering the Global Art World,” which recounts Anatsui’s well-known triumph at the 2007 Venice Biennale, is perhaps the least satisfying in the book, as it begins with a reply to the Western critics who found the stunning Venice hangings too beautiful; for example, Michael Kimmelman referred to them as “eye candy” (p. 82). No one complains that the labor-intensive mosaics in St. Mark’s basilica are “too beautiful,” and I see no reason why Vogel felt obligated to provide a strained response to such superficial commentary, however prominent the speaker. The latter part of this chapter focuses on the issue of Anatsui’s status in the contemporary art world. Despite the quibbles about his work’s beauty, the response to his work has been overwhelmingly, if not deliriously, enthusiastic, leading Anatsui to comment that on this second trip to Venice he was accepted by the art world as “just an artist,” rather than with the qualifier “African.” Of course, the West African cultural context remains central to any understanding of his work. Yet, Vogel explains that even though Anatsui’s central ideas and methods—the principle of “unfixed form,” his use of assistants, his focus on often temporary and ephemeral installations, and use of ordinary materials may result from his African heritage, they are also present in contemporary art globally. Moreover, he was introduced to Western modernism as a student, well before his first travel abroad, and that knowledge affected his practice both as an influence and a model to rebel against. Vogel concludes that “Anatsui is solidly grounded in his sense of himself as an African artist, and at this stage in his life has transcended the need to parse the origins of his practice” (p. 93). Although I do think that it would be important to chart more carefully how those origins are parsed over time, perhaps no step-by-step progression can be defined in what has been an intuitive process. And as with most contemporary art, the global and local contexts are impossible to disentangle.

Part 2 of this book contains three chapters: “Concept and Practice,” the aforementioned “Bottle-Top Hangings as an Art Form,” and “Art Now: Breaking Apart, Breaking Free.” In the first few paragraphs of “Concept and

Practice,” Vogel answers some of the questions raised in the previous chapter: first, she returns to her argument that there is a consistency in Anatsui’s working process that is found throughout his art, and second, that “Anatsui’s understanding of both the African and the British art cultures of his early adulthood was the foundation of his later ability to make art bridging the local and the global” (p. 99). The first part of the chapter argues that even in his early work Anatsui was exceptional among his African contemporaries in eschewing figuration. Indeed, in 1963, Nigeria’s most eminent artist, Ben Enwonwu, had “condemned abstraction as a Western art form alien to Africa,” and so Anatsui had a formidable force to try to counter. Yet, however abstract, Anatsui’s art is quite literally grounded in its environment in his use of recycled objects, which, in his words, “have been put to intense human use.... To me, their provenance imbues or charges them with history and content” (p. 104). Vogel then turns to the second major aspect of his work, the “unfixed form,” which she connects with the artist’s own nomadic life, and the migrations of the Ewe people generally.

The next chapter, which addresses the metal hangings (variously referred to as bottle top hangings or metal sheets), has a careful discussion of the influence of West African textiles on Anatsui’s work, one that avoids the simplistic associations that have been drawn previously and roots it in the draping and folding properties of cloth. Calling the weaving of cloth a “labor-intensive” process becomes a dramatic understatement when applied to Anatsui’s studio operation. Nearly one hundred days of labor on the part of his many assistants are required to prepare the materials for a small work, and months more are needed to join individual blocks into a sheet. “Anatsui’s hangings demand a kind of handwork—obsessive, repetitious, and long—that has virtually disappeared from the developed world and is increasingly rare in traditional regions.... [T]he art world cannot avoid knowing that this kind of grinding labor is done by people who are not strangers to hunger—one of the poignant opposites Anatsui so richly embeds in his complex artworks—and in this sense to approach the voluptuous beauty of these draped sculptures is to encounter hardship and want” (p. 127). (I would be more convinced that the metal hangings are a monument to the “relentless, repetitious labor that fills the lives of millions around the world” if a footnote had reassured me that his assistants are being paid a living wage.) Given the complexity of the idea of recycling, then, more might have been said about its relationship to “unfixed form,” as the artworks themselves

can cycle through different configurations.[1] In his numerous exhibitions, Anatsui has frequently left decisions about the draping of the metal hangings up to the curatorial staff, while he has reassembled older work to create new forms. And finally, although the materials are not technically rubbish, they surely must relate to the environmental concerns in his most recent metal hangings.

The last chapter discusses the rapid changes in Anatsui's style after the Venice Biennale triumph of 2007. I found this chapter especially important because it would have been easy for Anatsui to continue to make artwork similar to that which had been so critically and commercially successful in the past. Instead, he has continued on his own path. Under the subheading "Gathering and Bonding," Vogel quotes Tokyo-based curator Yukiya Kawaguchi, who suggests that the keywords in Anatsui's recent work are words like "*bond, ties, relationship, link, linkage*" (p. 134). Vogel suggests that Anatsui's own lack of connection—torn from his childhood home in Ghana because of his mother's death, and still considering himself an outsider in Nigeria—has precipitated a departure from the ordered early metal hangings to the transparencies and gaps in the current work, a reprise, she convincingly argues, of the "Broken Pots" of the 1970s. And, moving from biographical to political context, she argues that "just as Anatsui's art holds in tension the forces of

binding together and breaking apart, Africa's recent history show the forces of schism in precarious balance with the drive for national cohesion" (p. 139).

The chapter and book ends with a summary of the artist's current directions and a brief expression of regret that this book would not be able to chart them. Vogel concludes, "So far we have only one certain fact about the artworks he is creating now: Anatsui is trying something new" (p. 154). So true. It is refreshing that despite the formidable scholarship in this monograph, Vogel does not consider it to be the last word. Instead, she graciously offers that to the artist, whose continuing voice, alternatively accommodating, elusive, and contradictory, speaks on its own.

#### Note

[1]. For instance, I thought at first that the wooden reliefs in the "Gravity and Grace: Monumental Works by El Anatsui" exhibit at the Brooklyn Museum last year (February 8, 2013 to August 18, 2013) were a new departure, as they looked so different from the reliefs in the 2010 Museum for African Art exhibition. However, Kevin Dumouchelle, the curator for the Brooklyn exhibition, assures me that Anatsui had simply "tweaked" the reliefs from the late 1990s.

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**Citation:** Pamela Allara. Review of Vogel, Susan Mullin, *El Anatsui: Art and Life*. H-AfrArts, H-Net Reviews. February, 2014.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=38755>



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