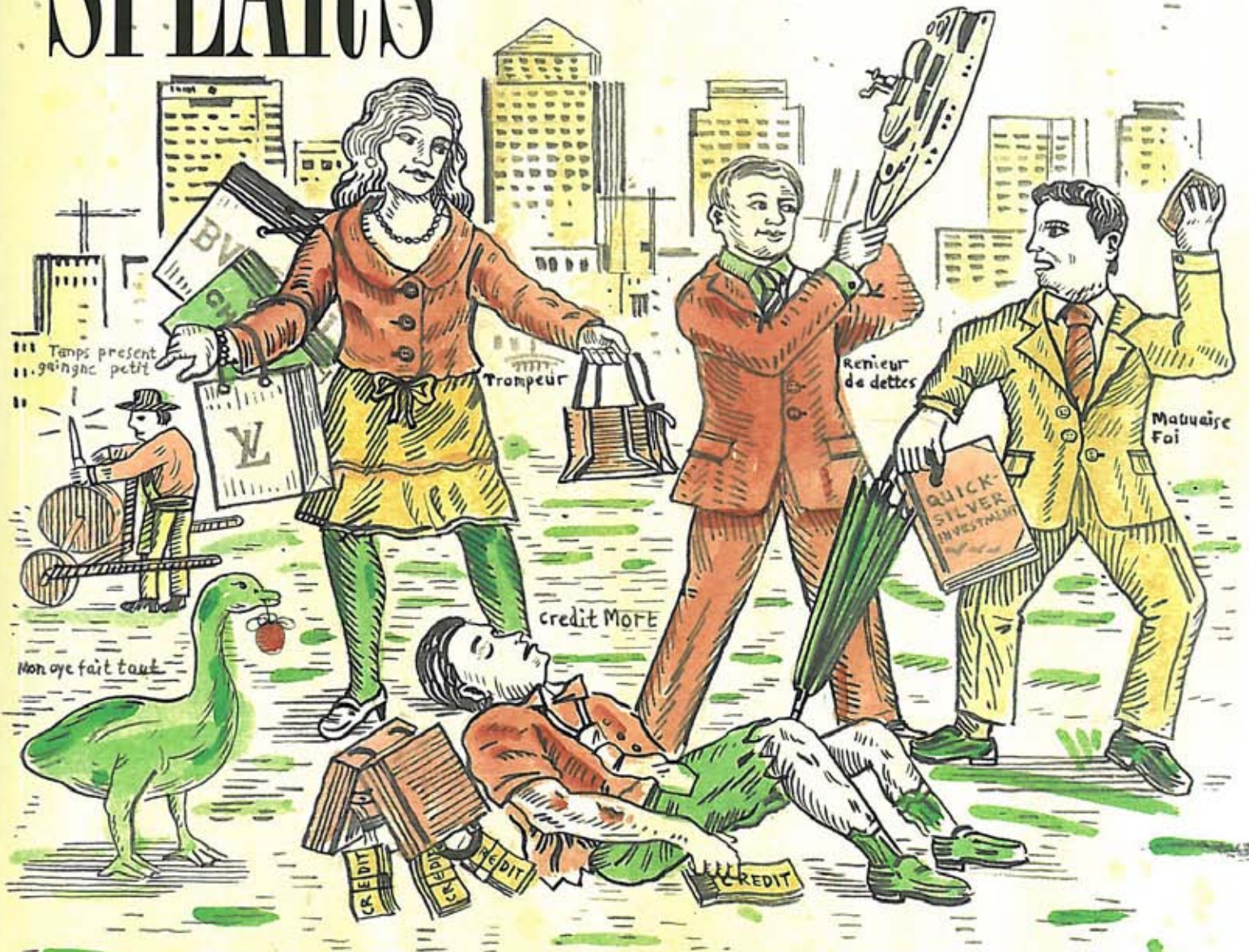


WEALTH MANAGEMENT, BUSINESS AND CULTURE: SHARP AND TO THE POINT

SPEAR'S



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SCULPT FIRST, ASK QUESTIONS LATER

Anthony Haden-Guest interrogates Ghanaian artist El Anatsui about the mysteries of creativity and the ineffable nature of beauty

The wall sculpture by El Anatsui was an absolute stand-out at Art Dubai earlier this year, a shimmering, glimmering waterfall of pixellated metal that seemed at once substantial and immaterial. It was then, when you got closer, that there was a kind of a delayed-action frisson when you saw that the art material used to make this shower of *pointilliste* matter was just so many squinched and squooshed twist-off metal liquor caps, the kind of party or saloon detritus that normally finds a natural, unlovely quietus in a gutter, a plastic sack or a garbage pail.

I was introduced to El Anatsui by Elisabeth Lalouschek of London's October Gallery, at whose stand the piece was hanging. A rangy figure, he came across at first as a reserved, professorial figure rather than after the London model of the artist-as-life-force, but then so he should. Ghana-born, he has been teaching at the University of Nigeria since 1974 and is now on the high plateau of academe.

El Anatsui's initial material of choice when he began making his mature art had been tropical hardwoods, which he would work with a chainsaw. Indeed, it was a video of him doing just that, given to her by one of her artists, that first brought El Anatsui to Lalouschek's attention. Finding him was no doddle. 'This was before the internet,' she says. 'It was quite complex; all word of mouth.' She finally tracked the artist down by way of a Nigerian architect who was based in London. 'They were friends,' she says. 'He had a couple of pieces.' El Anatsui joined the October Gallery in 1993.

He started working in metal in the later Nineties and began making the bottle-cap-derived metal sculptures in the early Noughties. His reputation spread. At first this was

by way of an informal 'African network', which is made up of curators, collectors or institutions with a particular interest in cultural developments in post-colonial Africa, such as the Museum for African Art, which is part of the Smithsonian, and the British Museum, which bought two major pieces in 2002, one of which is now hanging in the Africa Gallery.

You might say that the second phase is now under way. Just as women artists feel it's rather a double-edged honour to be hung in a show of all-woman's-art, so artists from Britain, China, Africa, wherever would rather be, well, just artists. Which is what El Anatsui is, and a remarkable one.

At any rate, at Dubai he agreed to talk to me when he got back to Lagos. And that conversation follows:

'I don't think one should know too much about why you do things. Even trying to find out, it is just contrary to the creative spirit'

Q: Are the bottle caps you use just formal elements, like blobs of colour? Or is there a Pop Art component? I mean, are their histories also of interest?

A: Well, I don't think artists are looking for something that is hard and fast. I'm not looking for anything cut-and-dried as a statement.

Whatever I do is capable of being interpreted in so many ways. The caps have a formal presence, but at the same time there could be conceptual, sociological or historical dimensions read into them.

Q: I sometimes wonder if artists actually want to know the truth about why they do what they do — or indeed if they should...

A: As an artist I don't think I want to know precisely why I do things. Even trying to, as a matter of routine, rationalise, I find is most contrary to the creative endeavour. I believe



it's better to experience, to live things, instead of thinking them through. That way you can give yourself some surprises sometimes. Most times I may sit down to see if I can articulate something, a narrative concept manifesting itself in what I have done, mostly long after the act.

Q: Some artists in our time have had unprecedented financial success and really upped their production. When Andy Warhol called his studio the Factory it was kind of a dream; now for some artists it has turned into a reality. I see a freedom and a willingness to embrace the unexpected in your work.

A: Yes. Challenges posed by the medium or the process are very important aspects for me, and I think for most artists. Recently I went to museum where they were trying to install a work of mine. They wanted to arrange the elements in precisely the same way as in a reference photograph, but the elements fell and knocked each other over, which I thought was very interesting. They wanted to 'correct' it, but I asked them to leave it that way. I saw a new take, and a more dynamic one, on the work.

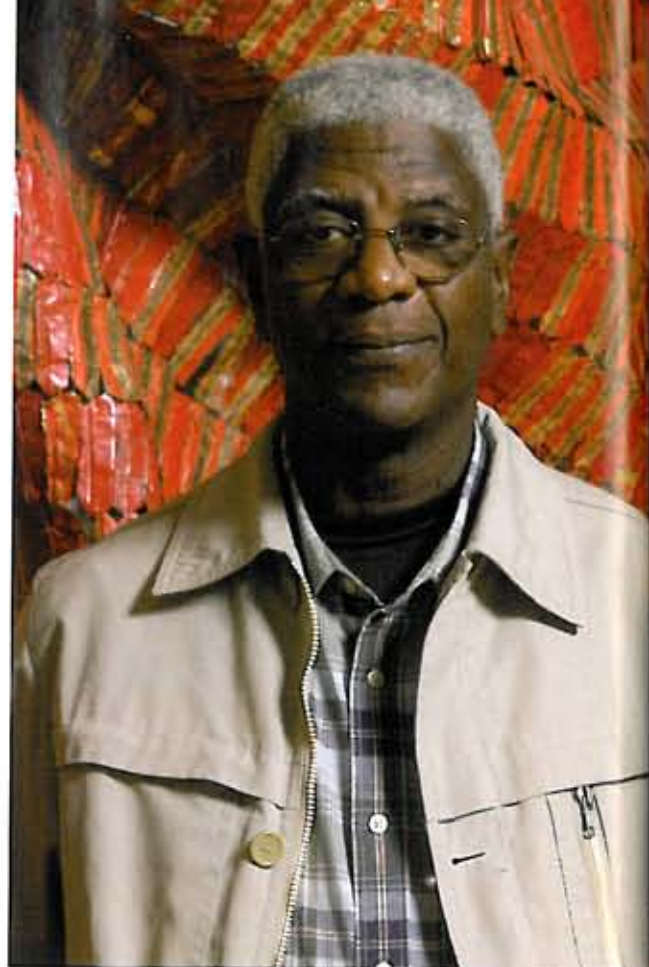
There are most times elements of accident in my work. My feeling is that things shouldn't be absolutely determinate, or fixed. Art is about life and the two are indeterminate. I have been operating in this way a long time, since I worked with wood strips which were individual but grouped into compositions in which one could play around with the sequences, the levels or the intervals of the strips. There were many variables about the work and this is what has grown into what I do now, creating shapes which are very neutral, can be made into other forms and are not final. They are just temporary.

Q: I understand that you only saw examples of major Western art in the flesh, so to speak, relatively late in your career. But maybe that was an advantage? There's a freshness in your work which might come from simply not having been drenched in art. Does that make sense?

A: You might look at it that way. There are times when works of other artists inspire you to explore a related idea. At other times there is the feeling of déjà vu — one feels, 'Oh, this is an idea that I have — and it has been done already!' The dictum 'knowing robs us' can work in both ways, inspiring you or ending your search along a particular path.

Q: I understand that you like to work on several pieces at the same time. I'm interested in the different ways that artists keep their energy flowing: do you know when things are going well? Is there something going on inside you that you can recognise?

A: What sometimes might happen is that you are working on a piece and that spark might have waned a bit. You are stuck. And then out of the blue there's a fresh spark for a new work, so you have two or more ideas contending. In the process you might be lucky enough to have the new work suggesting what can move the former works, freshen



Clockwise from top left: El Anatsui; his 2007 work *Fresh and Fading Memories, Part I-IV*; *Fading Cloth* from 2005; 2003's *Wastepaper Bag*. Previous page: El Anatsui's *Flag for a New World Power*, from 2004

your imagination. I have found it's a very good way, whereby ideas or works feed off each other.

Q: Although your work is labour-intensive and requires many hands, you have avoided being either fetishistic or 'crafty'. It's not too fussy.

A: I work with many assistants now. Initially I was working all alone in the studio, and then I had one assistant. But with so many people now, it's a more animated and dynamic environment and I think this passes on to the works. There's a lot of chatting and banter, for instance, and at times it can be very refreshing. It not only takes the pressure off, it also adds great variety to work. The challenge is how to coordinate all these elements. Work does not end with one decision; I review it many times over.

Q: Many artists in the West have a distrust of beauty and the sublime. It's as though beauty were an accidental by-product. Your work has great beauty. Is that the intention?

A: I think beauty can come about in so many ways, and is the result of the search to make unique statements, to represent hackneyed and ordinary things so they acquire new meanings or attract fresh attention. I believe I do not aim at creating beautiful objects, but rather at trying to understand the media and processes I work with, and my practice is to dwell on a particular medium or process for long periods — several years — in this quest. *f*

