

Reframe, Reuse, Recycle: The Found Object in Post-Colonial Africa, Recontextualized
by Contemporary Artists

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Author, Igor Kopytoff wrote "...An eventful biography of a thing becomes the story of the various singularizations of it, of classifications and reclassifications in an uncertain world of categories whose importance shifts with every minor change of context."¹ In their lifetime, objects have very specific political, economic, or social contexts shaping the way they are used and perceived. Every item has a distinctive background that calls into question its maker, its owner or user, and its intended use. Such characteristics for an object change over time, especially when adopted by and changed by another culture to fit different needs and preferences. In his essay, "The cultural biography of things," Kopytoff argues that in Western society a "thing" has come to represent commodification of goods, rather than something with an individual identity that has been created through its context. As a commodity, these objects are quickly forgotten as culturally significant things and valued for the cost of production. With contemporary industrial production practices, things can be made to throw away, decreasing an objects' importance. However, in many parts of the world, the expense to quickly replace objects is too high for most. Thus, many see value in the reuse of an object, linking them within a broader global market of things. In fact, artists have long sought out such values in their reuse of what some might call discarded trash.

How do artists breathe new life into objects that no longer retain their original value? The increase in the consumption of mass-produced objects has removed aspects of the "maker's" role artists have historically embraced. The use of remnants of these items

¹ Kopytoff, Igor. "The cultural biography of things." *The social life of things: Cultural commodities in cultural perspective*. Cambridge University Press (1986). 90

helps artists retain valuable elements of their artistic identity by highlighting their creativity through the creation of art objects from “stuff.” These “things” need to be adapted, often even imperceptibly, in order for them to fit within their settings. Within a new sense of place, the object’s contexts are changed and attain a new sense of value. Artists working with found objects must take this into account in order to rework their perceived context within the realm of contemporary art.

Western thought has led many to believe that any change from materials that have been deemed “traditionally African” will result in less “authentic” art from each culture in the African continent. In reality, contemporary artists throughout many different countries in Africa use found objects, especially those developed for consumer-based societies, to problematize such assertions and misconceptions. El Anatsui, Gonçalo Mabunda, and Fally Sene Sow are examples of how the contemporary artist reimagines and explores object biographies to highlight the deeper, social, political, or economic contexts at play in their work. This paper investigates the way in which contemporary artists allow recycled materials to visualize the various complexities embedded within their own landscapes. Each of these artists has forged new meanings for old materials by using them to address issues that are crucial to local histories. All three are representative of the way in which artists from various cultures within Africa are asserting their heritage into works that also call into question contemporary and globally relevant issues. While El Anatsui creates work that encourages conversation about colonialism, Gonçalo Mabunda focuses more exclusively on the experience of living in a war torn state for sixteen years. Fally Sene Sow explores the usefulness of found objects within his interests in global, urban culture. The use of found objects and their individual

biographies become potent methods for these artists in their response, reflection and questioning of identity within postcolonial Africa.

Originally from Ghana, El Anatsui moved to Nigeria to attend and then teach at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka,² where he began working with notable Nsukka movement. This group is known to recontextualize Nigerian ideas and images within a broader Western approach, fusing local and global themes and styles together. In his recent work, El has distanced himself from the use of raw materials to work with found objects, and has made it known that he prefers using “whatever the environment throws up”³. Today, El Anatsui is best known for his large scale, wall hangings made of liquor bottle caps and copper wire. In an interview in 2008, he admitted, “When I saw the bottle tops, what struck me was that they are from bottles that have been used, and therefore human hands have touched them... People have gotten really drunk from these bottles, and therefore human hands have left a charge on them.”⁴ The artist sees value in the connection between human experience and the object. The old bottle caps are made powerful through use, as if the objects have been imbued with layers of history. The short amount of time of contact shared between human, bottle, and bottle cap has shaped the social understanding of what its purpose is and of its transient position in the lives of its users.

The artistic process of El Anatsui’s cloth sculptures also refers back to his own cultural identity. In Ghana, the production of *kente* cloth is integral to the regional history and the significance of the tradition is well known. This production utilizes strip

² El Anatsui.” Art21, accessed November 20, 2015, <http://www.art21.org/artists/el-anatsui>

³ Binder, Lisa M. 2008. “El Anatsui: Transformations”. *African Arts* 41 (2). UCLA James S. Coleman African Studies Center: 24–37.

⁴ El Anatsui, and Laura Leffler James. “Convergence,” 38

weaving, the process of weaving individual strips of cloth in order to later assemble them into a larger cloth assemblages. While working, El Anatsui uses copper wire to assemble aluminum bottle caps into sections, creating designs through the various colors of the caps, which becomes a large, fabric-like structure.⁵ The piece, *Between Heaven and Earth*, on view at the Metropolitan Museum of Art,⁷ almost four feet high and over ten feet wide, is apparent in its connection to cloth's materiality, with its folding and textile-like qualities. Due to the materials El Anatsui chooses to use, however, he is not only resituating something that is widely considered "traditional" within the scope of contemporary art, as defined by Western institutions, but is also adding to the "cultural biography" of a bottle cap so that it can be included into the scope of fine art. Through the use of liquor bottle caps and labels, the works develop an ability to communicate with colonial and postcolonial topics such as alcoholism, mass-production, and waste management. El Anatsui reshapes the identity of the material from bottle seal to discarded piece of metal, to an artistic tool speaking to the problem of alcoholism in Africa. The transformation is not unlike how *kente* cloth itself became a signifier of identity and heritage shortly after Ghana's independence.⁸ Perhaps El is once again appropriating the power of *kente* to speak with a global voice, albeit in a much more critical tone.

The bottle caps he uses are local and are indicative of the extent of alcohol abuse in the region. Because these materials are of local and international origin, El visualizes a

⁵ Anatsui, El, Lisa M Binder, Anthony Appiah, Olu Oguibe, Chika Okeke-Agulu, and Robert Storr. 2010. *El Anatsui: When I last wrote to you about Africa*. (New York: Museum for African Art.)

⁷ Figure 1. El Anatsui. *Between Heaven and Earth*. 2006. Mixed media sculpture. Metropolitan Museum of Art.

⁸ Lisa Binder. "El Anatsui," 24.

direct global connection to problems of alcoholism he perceives around him. Another layer El is perhaps suggesting is the common argument that alcoholism is a product of the colonial encounter. They also have come to signify the first instances of contact between Europeans and Africans, in which liquor played a significant role.⁹ In this, the material has a dual purpose. The bottle caps show the problems of the present, while alluding to the presence of direct changes brought by colonization. These materials contribute to the modern idea of sustainability, as El Anatsui uses objects that would otherwise be left as detritus. In his massive wall hangings, the artist hints at the much larger number of bottle caps and trash that has unfortunately taken a visual place in African landscapes. The result is the higher quantity of “stuff,” but with limited resources to dispose of it. El Anatsui instead removes this debris from circulation by creating a new use for it within his art. Through El Anatsui’s success in the global art market, he is bringing attention to the adaptability of “traditional” African art and their relevance in contemporary society.

Gonçalo Mabunda creates art that attempts to reconcile with Mozambique’s civil war, a conflict that consumed many of his formative years. The war began shortly after independence from Portugal and ended with the Rome Peace Accords in 1992, and caused a death toll of over 1 million of Mozambique’s residents.¹⁰ Following the war, the Christian Council of Mozambique exchanged weapons owned by citizens for other valuable goods in an attempt to demilitarize the civilian population. The group then gave the weapons to a group of artists to use as media for their work.¹¹ Mabunda utilizes these

⁹ El Anatsui, and Laura Leffler James. “Convergence,” 48.

¹⁰ Tester, Frank James. “Art and Disarmament: Turning Arms into Ploughshares in Mozambique.” *Development in Practice* (April). Taylor & Francis, Ltd (2006): 169

¹¹ Tester. “Art and Disarmament,” 169-171.

decommissioned weapons from the war in order to engage in a deep conversation regarding Mozambique's recent history.

Mabunda's *Eiffel Tower*, 2002, fashioned out of weapons from the civil war, probes the audience to question the roles various powers played in their own growth and Mozambique's.¹² In this work, Mabunda manipulates civil war weapons into large scale sculpture in order to address the exploitation of African people and their resources.¹³ Mabunda achieves this by creating a small-scale Eiffel Tower, a symbol of Western industrial innovation, from war materials from a civil war that began at the end of colonization. The original Eiffel Tower was created for the 1889 World's Fair¹⁴, the same exposition in which people from Africa were placed in exhibits and exoticized in an attempt to justify the occupation of their land. The weapons used act as a jarring reminder of the role of African resources in the growth of these nations due to the grotesque nature of the weapons themselves. Visually, the reused weapons are discomfiting, stopping the viewer in their tracks with the inherent uneasiness typically felt by their intimidating presence. The guns, originally introduced to the region by foreigners, reference the negative changes that colonization generated. These weapons were later used in the fight between political agendas resulting in instability after Portugal had changed the socio-political fabric of the Mozambique. With these firearms, Mabunda brings up questions regarding fault, and the role of European colonization in the war. Coupled with the Eiffel Tower reference, the materials call attention to the

¹² Figure 2. Gonçalo Mabunda. Eiffel Tower. Mixed media sculpture. 2002

¹³ "Gonçalo Mabunda." Jack Bell Gallery, accessed November 23, 2015. <http://www.jackbellgallery.com/artists/29-Gon%C3%A7alo-Mabunda/overview/>

¹⁴ "About the Tower." The Eiffel Tower, accessed November 23, 2015 <http://www.toureffel.paris/everything-about-the-tower/themed-files/69#03>

complicated relationship between European and Mozambican, the regions' history and the advancement of industry.

Fally Sene Sow, or Fally as he is often known, lives within the limits of the Colobane Market in Dakar, Senegal. *Marché Colobane* has grown dramatically within the last two decades due to urbanization, the increase in international, and the heightened demand for cheap, imported materials. The market is known for its ability to have anything and everything, and it is widely accepted that one can find all that they need at Colobane. The artist's work captures the fluidity and the fast pace nature of the constant circulation of objects in and out of the marketplace. As a resident of the city and market, Fally's work is influenced by the ways in which both commercial energies intersect with his private life. Sow stated "in the market, everyone becomes a character... buyers, sellers, everyone,"¹⁵ suggesting that the Colobane Market forces its participants to play those specific roles. Much of Fally Sene Sow's work often takes on the appearance of an opening scene of a theatrical production; the figures are rendered in a way that shows the bustling activity of the market and the buildings reflect the high volume of "stuff" and the movement of the characters as if part of an unfolding theatrical play..The artist used raw materials to create his work before realizing that his world was permeated with objects that could be used as materials for his art. Instead of simply painting the whole of his work, Sow incorporates bits of glass, fabric, and other scraps of refigured discarded trash to render the people, automobiles, buildings, and market goods he experiences every day. The result is a type of recycled two-dimensional assemblage, in which found objects literally make up the participants of the Colobane Market. The material, most likely detached from larger gum wrappers or unsellable second-hand clothing, is integral to the

¹⁵ *Market Imaginary*. Dir. Joanna Grabski. Perf. Fally Sene Sow. Indiana University Press, 2012. DVD.

identity of each form, bringing together his interest in collapsing his marketplace and the domestic lives within it as an interconnected experience.

Fally Sene Sow's 2010 piece, *Rocade Colobane* or "Colobane Bypass", shows an incredibly dynamic setting of the Colobane Market.¹⁶ Taxis, buses, and economy cars are shown going in all directions, some even appearing to be overturned or in collision with market stalls. The high density of traffic within the work shows the market's identity as an integral point of interaction between the coast and interior of Senegal. Likewise, the volume of merchant stalls in the piece illustrates the ability of the Colobane Market to connect Senegal with the rest of the world, through a global, commercial industry. Random objects occupy the area around stalls as well as the road, blurring the distinction between the space of the automobiles and of the actual market. The blending of realms adds to the appearance of a sort of visceral interpretation, as if one is literally experiencing the market through the window Sow provides.

In an interview, Sow stated, "...each object carries its stories and attempted lessons."¹⁷ His work demonstrates this ability of an object and that of an artist to utilize these stories and lessons to create a new object, a piece of art, in which context and use is reimagined. He, like El Anatsui and Mabunda, has taken it upon themselves to redefine and object's worth within today's globalized world of commodities. In doing so, they call on distant and recent histories to challenge the assigned values and uses of objects that are significant to their own individual localities and experiences. In doing this, these artists demonstrate that African art is dynamic and reactive to the cultural changes that continue to alter the landscapes of each region within the continent. Analysis of selected

¹⁶ Figure 3. Fally Sene Sow. *Rocade Colobane*. 2010. Mixed media collage on glass.

¹⁷ *Market Imaginary*. Dir. Joanna Grabski. Perf. Fally Sene Sow. Indiana University Press, 2012. DVD.

works by El Anatsui and Mabunda and Sow shows us how commodities or mass-produced goods are transformed and reframed, expanding their objects' cultural biographies to tell even more stories, this time about the changing historical and global contexts that make the African experience so complex, layered and diverse.

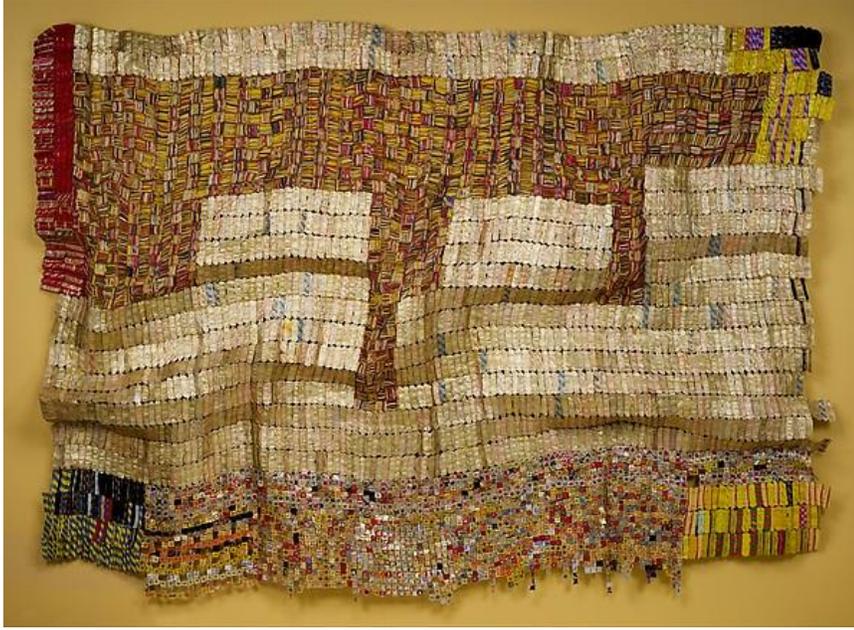


Figure 1.
El Anatsui. *Between Earth and Heaven*. Mixed media sculpture.
2006 Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Figure 3.
Gonçalo Mabunda. *Eiffel Tower*. Mixed media sculpture. 2002.
Pompidou.

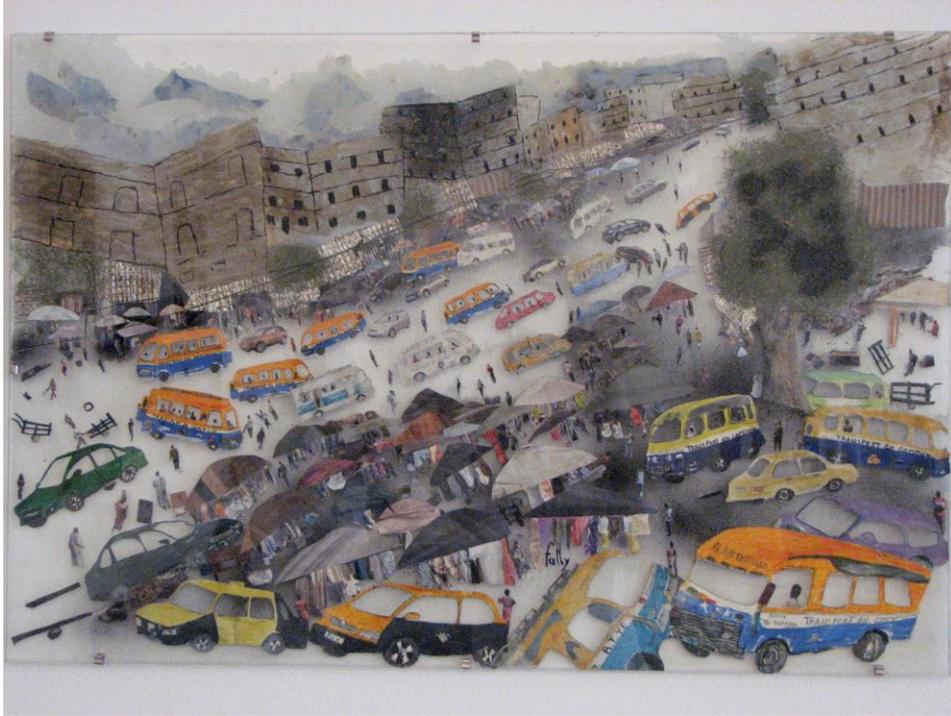


Figure 3.

Fally Sene Sow. *Rocade Colobane*. mixed media collage and glass. 2010

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