

Question 4: From the series of FINE ART MAKING research strand lectures, choose a theme, movement, or selection of artists or designers that relate to your practice or interests, and construct a 2,500-word essay. Critically assess primary themes, key writers, and relevant practitioners.

BA Fine Art: Studio, Site and Context

Research in Context (ADAD5003)

Lecturers: Alex Duncan and Holly Slingsby

The use of materials in contemporary art: accumulating histories

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Table of contents

Introduction	3
Materials in modern and contemporary art	5
El Anatsui and bottle tops.....	8
Rakowitz and date syrup cans.....	14
Conclusion	21
References	22
List of Figures.....	25

The use of materials in contemporary art: accumulating histories

Introduction

A visitor to the Tate Modern this month will see what looks like a vast expanse of cloth filling the tall, several-storey space of the Turbine Hall, draped in a graceful curve down the narrow space. The ‘cloth’ shimmers with a variegated yellow (figure 1).



Figure 1. El Anatsui, *Behind the Red Moon* [metal bottle tops] 2023, installation view at Tate Modern, London.
Photograph: Daniel Hambury/Stella Pictures Ltd. Available: <https://www.standard.co.uk/culture/exhibitions/el-anatsui-behind-the-red-moon-tate-modern-turbine-hall-review-b1112219.html>.

A few years ago in 2018 anyone walking through Trafalgar Square would have seen a sculpture of a large winged bull on a plinth, with a strange multi-coloured texture and a shining silvery-gold support (figure 2).



Figure 2. Michael Rakowitz *The invisible enemy should not exist (Lamassu of Nineveh)* [10,500 Iraqi date syrup cans, metal frame] 2018, London.
Photograph: Tolga Akmen/AFP/Getty Images. Available:
<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2018/mar/28/fourth-plinth-review-my-heart-is-in-my-mouth>

Both of these works, considerable in scale, are made from materials of everyday life. El Anatsui's *Behind the Red Moon* (2023) was assembled from hundreds of thousands of bottle tops (Tate Modern 2023). Michael Rakowitz's *The invisible enemy should not exist (Lamassu of Nineveh)* (2018) was crafted from 10,500 date syrup cans (Rakowitz 2018). This use of everyday items to create large and very striking works of art raises the broader question of the use of materials in art, which is explored in this essay. The essay starts with a brief survey of changing ideas and traditions with respect to materials in art theory and practice. This helps to contextualise the work of Anatsui and Rakowitz within longer trajectories of art practice, and to highlight the significance of their choices of material.

Materials in modern and contemporary art

One of the main philosophical approaches to art theory has been the idealist tradition, deriving from the ideas of Plato and Aristotle. In this approach, which prioritises form, material is simply a base to be transformed into form by the activity of artistic creativity (Lange-Berndt, 2015, p. 12-13; Kemp, 2015, p. 35). Wolfgang Kemp identifies a second approach which became dominant during twentieth century discussions of sculpture, which prioritised material. In this approach, which he calls ‘form follows material’, material ‘took on the role of an interpretative authority’ (Kemp, 2015, p. 35).

Kemp argues that both approaches, by ‘either denying material or glorifying it’, ignore what matters: the historicity of materials (2015, p. 35). Kemp instead advocates an approach informed by the ideas of the German philosopher Theodor Adorno. Adorno talks of history accumulating in form and materials, saying ‘artistic imagination awakens these accumulated elements by becoming aware of the innate problematic of the material’ (Adorno, 1967, cited in Kemp, 2015, p. 35). Kemp elaborates:

All kinds of material exist in a broader historical context that we must understand as the material’s historical use. In this way aesthetic material is related to the use and mastery of materials in the world outside art as such. (2015, p. 35)

These different ideas about the question of material in art resonate with changes and developments in art practice. Moniker Wagner recounts how in the history of Western art, until the nineteenth century, one of the various hierarchies structuring aesthetic judgement referred to materials. Material ‘belonged to the lower sphere of everyday life’ (Wagner, 2015, p. 28). Poetry and music, as ‘purely ideal’, were considered superior to fine arts, while within art, drawing was considered the highest, then painting, and then sculpture (Wagner, 2015, p. 28). Within sculpture, materials were appreciated according to their monetary value as well as

permanence: 'For centuries particularly valuable materials, as well as those that guaranteed constancy, stability and dignity, came top of the material hierarchies in Europe and conferred social prestige' (Rübel, 2015, p. 94).

Since the early twentieth century these hierarchies and value systems have been progressively overturned. Art movements such as cubism and surrealism incorporated materials of everyday life into art works (Godfrey, 1998, p. 24-25). Feminist artists rejected the gendered dualisms underpinning conventional hierarchies (Wagner, 2015, p. 29). In the 1960s Eva Hesse experimented with perishable materials such as latex, fibreglass and string. Through these new materials, Hesse and other female artists 'rid themselves of tradition' (Hessel, 2022: 299). By the 1960s the Western art world was gripped by a 'crisis in medium' (Foster et al., 2007, p. 534). Practices of postminimalism, process art, conceptual art, performance and installation emerged in response, seeking to redefine the parameters of what should count in art. Arguing that 'a work of art needs only to be interesting', Donald Judd claimed that 'any material can be used' (cited in Foster et al., 2007, p. 534). Robert Morris argued that 'materials should be allowed to find their own forms in response to principles such as gravity' (cited in Hopkins, 2000, p. 149). He made works of materials in process, such as strips of felt cascading from hooks to the floor. Moving beyond materiality to the historicity of materials, Carl Andre's spare sculptures explored the social relations of proletarian labour embedded within industrial materials (Rahtz, 2012).

These various moves which expanded the range of materials used to make art took place in the context of critical dialogues *within* the longer trajectory of western art (Foster et al, 2007; Godfrey, 1998). Other artists have employed diverse materials as a way of stepping *outside* the constraints of western art. For example in 1969 the Brazilian artist Artur Barrio issued a manifesto:

Owing to a series of situations in the plastic arts, pointing to the increasing use of materials considered expensive for our, my reality, in third world socio-economic terms (including Latin America), due to industrialized products not being within our, my reach, but in the power of an elite who I contest, because creation cannot be conditioned, creation has to be free.

Therefore, based on this socio-economic aspect, I make use of materials which are perishable and cheap in my work ... (Barrio, 2015, p. 71-72).

While the Western art world went through its crisis of medium in the 1960s, one of the artists turning away from these debates to find his own, more local materials was El Anatsui.

El Anatsui and bottle tops

The Ghanaian artist El Anatsui has lived and worked in Nsukka, Nigeria, since 1975. During his long career he has worked with materials such as market trays, pot shards, wooden mortars, cassava graters, evaporated milk cans. The art college in Kumasi, Ghana where he studied in the 1960s (the decade after independence) was still affiliated with the University of London and based on European traditions: ‘the staff and professors came from Goldsmiths ...my schooling was steeped in the English art school tradition’ (in Enwezor and Anatsui, 2011, p. 99). Anatsui subsequently immersed himself in local materials and cultural practices to explore Ghanaian and African traditions (Anatsui 2009). Moving to Nsukka in the 1970s he joined a group led by the writer Chinua Achebe who were engaged in a profound questioning of the cultural and political legacies of colonialism (Okeke-Agulu and Enwezor 2022). Anatsui explains the idea of *sankofa*, ‘going back to retrieve’, which informed their shared reflections:

It is a way of drawing on the past, historicity, what lessons this offers... To me it implied even the need to search immediately around. Right after art school, my practice revolved around materials, processes, forms, and ideas largely from my immediate environment and circumstances (in Anatsui and James, 2008, p. 43).

Since the late 1990s Anatsui has worked mainly with liquor bottle tops, using these to construct vast pieces of indeterminate, flexible form. They have a restricted colour range, mainly yellows, golds, reds, silvers and blacks according to the arrangement of the metal bottle tops. These works are made with a large team of assistants employed from the area surrounding his studio in Nsukka (Anatsui and James, 2008; New Museum, 2022).



Figure 3. El Anatsui *Behind the Red Moon* [metal bottle tops] 2023, installation view at Tate Modern, London. Photo © Tate (Ben Fisher Photography). Available: <https://artlab.hyundai.com/project/hyundai-commission-el-anatsui>

The three works currently in Tate are the largest Anatsui has made (Tate Modern 2023). They hang down from a vast height, their scale on an altogether different magnitude from that of the viewer (figure 3). This enormity defies the viewer to grasp their basic material content, which is only apparent on close inspection. Seen from afar, the works appear like vast ship sails or theatre curtains, with draped and billowing or folded and creased forms (figures 3, 4).



Figure 4. El Anatsui *Behind the Red Moon* [metal bottle tops] 2023, installation view at Tate Modern, London. Photo © Tate (Ben Fisher Photography). Available: <https://artlab.hyundai.com/project/hyundai-commission-el-anatsui>

The works have a strange surface texture and appearance because the large whole is based on very many small units, which provide a differentiated impression like pixels. The arrangement of these small units in combination forms broad swathes of colour and pattern; their linking enables flexibility (figures 5 and 6).



Figure 5. El Anatsui *Behind the Red Moon* [metal bottle tops] 2023, in the process of being installed at Tate Modern, London, September 2023. Author's photos.



Figure 6. El Anatsui *Behind the Red Moon* [metal bottle tops] 2023, in the process of being installed at Tate Modern, London, September 2023. Close up showing material construction. Author's photo.

It is the unit parts – something so ordinary as folded and flattened bottle tops, sewn together with wire – which ground the work in the familiar realm of the everyday, while it is the sheer number of connected elements which gives rise to awe. So many bottle-tops, hand-sewn together!

Anatsui discusses these features of scale and labour. He explains that the potential of the material, bottle tops, is best realised on a large scale. A small scale is too domestic, while a medium scale does not yet allow expression of the material (Enwezor and Anatsui, 2011, p. 101). He considers already-used materials such as mortars and bottle-tops to be charged with life. This charge is then intensified by the many hands which go into the making, as ‘the life of the region becomes imbued into the work’ (New Museum 2022).

The scale, as well as the shimmer of reds, golds and silvers, are suggestive of luxury, splendour, majesty or divinity. However the combination of material and form also suggests distinct historical significations, especially the piece in the industrial space of the Turbine Hall, which evokes a ship's sail (figure 3). The bottle tops, Anatsui says, have 'a lot to say about history' (in Enwezor and Anatsui, 2011, p. 104). He emphasises the historicity of his materials and the histories of slavery, colonialism and trade they embody: 'The bottle caps I use are linked to liquor, which has historical associations, since hard drinks played a prominent role in the earliest contact between Africa and Europe' (in Anatsui and James, 2008, p. 48). Anatsui uses material sourced from local breweries across Nigeria. His artistic imagination, in the words of Adorno, awakens the broader historical elements accumulated in this material: 'working with bottle caps makes me feel like I'm using a medium which was there at a particular time in history, when the contact between the three continents started' (in Enwezor and Anatsui, 2011, p. 104).

Michael Rakowitz and date syrup cans

The Iraqi-American artist Michael Rakowitz also works with everyday materials imbued with histories. Rakowitz, of a younger generation than Anatsui, was born and grew up in the United States. He studied in the 1990s at the State University of New York, and Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Rakowitz recounts how as an undergraduate he was encouraged by minimalist teachers to avoid all narrative content in his work. He was later taught by Joan Jonas, pioneering feminist performance artist who had been part of the New York art scene of the 1960s, who encouraged him to embrace ‘storytelling’ in his work (Rakowitz, 2021).

What stories did the Lamassu tell in London? Quite unlike the neighbouring lions surrounding Nelson’s column, in their familiar static bronze, this creature seemed alert (figures 7 and 8).



Figure 7. Statue of lion at the foot of Nelson’s column, Trafalgar Square, London.
Available: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/5XTL5rP0x4P1ZfbsFJffCnC/11-fearsome-facts-about-lions>



Figure 8. Michael Rakowitz *The invisible enemy should not exist* (Lamassu of Nineveh) [10,500 Iraqi date syrup cans, metal frame] 2018, London. Available: <http://www.michaelrakowitz.com/the-invisible-enemy-should-not-exist-lamassu-of-nineveh>.

With his back to the National Gallery and looking down on Nelson's lions, the Lamassu must have been an extraordinary sight. This work was a replica of a statue located in Nineveh, northern Iraq (figure 9). In terms of form the work faithfully reproduces the original.

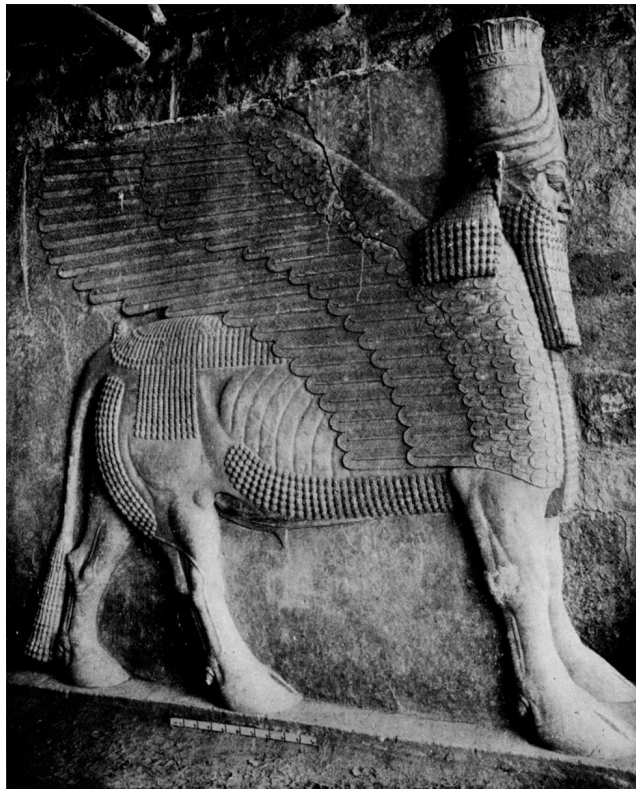


Figure 9. Unattributed photograph of an original Lamassu in Iraq.
Source: BBC 2016, 'Museum of Lost Objects: The Winged Bull of Nineveh'.
Available: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-35669056>

From a distance, depending on the light, Rakowitz's Lamassu has a dull, metallic surface appearance. Yet on a sunny day against a blue sky the work appears garishly colourful and, from up close, the strange surface seems ever more incongruous with the creature's powerfully graceful and majestic stance (figures 10 and 11). The red and white pattern on two of the bull's legs jars with the more muted greenish-silvery-reddish colours of the rest of the statue, unapologetically insisting that the material makeup of this monumental work consists of mundane food packaging.



Figure 10. Michael Rakowitz *The invisible enemy should not exist (Lamassu of Nineveh)* [10,500 Iraqi date syrup cans, metal frame] 2018, London. Available: <http://www.michaelrakowitz.com/the-invisible-enemy-should-not-exist-lamassu-of-nineveh>



Figure 11. Michael Rakowitz *The invisible enemy should not exist (Lamassu of Nineveh)* [10,500 Iraqi date syrup cans, metal frame] 2018, London. Available: <https://www.ft.com/content/8cf2ce3e-819d-11e9-9935-ad75bb96c849>

In terms of scale this work is consistent with its supporting plinth, which was originally designed for an equestrian statue (Burch, 2017, p. 63). The bull fits in well, proudly occupying this position in Trafalgar Square. It is as if he has recently landed, with a purpose, taking his place confidently in this already statue-filled location. He has cousins in London: a pair of original 'human headed winged lions' currently live in forced exile in the British Museum, looted from northern Iraq in the nineteenth century by Sir Austen Henry Layard. These creatures were made in 865BC-860BC during the period of the Assyrian ruler Ashurnasirpal II (British Museum, 2023; figure 12).



Figure 12. Colossal statue of a winged lion from the North-West Palace of Ashurnasirpal II. Asset number 32860001. British Museum, London. Available: <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/image/32860001>.

The Lamassu of Nineveh is part of an ongoing project, *The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist*. Since 2007 Rakowitz and his assistants, working with Iraqi curators and archaeologists, have been making replicas or ‘surrogates’ of some of the eight thousand objects destroyed or looted from museums and archaeological sites in Iraq since the US-led invasion of 2003 (Snow, 2022; Rakowitz, 2007). This critical practice of making faithful copies speaks to earlier European traditions of making replicas through casting (Lending, 2017), while directly challenging Europe’s colonial practice of removing artworks and artefacts from around the world to fill museums and collections in the West (Hicks 2021). But this is not a cast; Rakowitz had no access to the original, which was destroyed by ISIS in 2015 in the chaotic aftermath of the US-led invasion (Snow 2022, p. 104). Instead he chose to craft this creature out of date syrup cans.



Figure 13. Date syrup can.
Available: <http://www.michaelrakowitz.com/the-invisible-enemy-should-not-exist-lamassu-of-nineveh>.

Like Anatsui, Rakowitz considers his material to be historically charged: the cans are ‘laden with historical significance’, from the personal to the geopolitical (Rakowitz, 2018). The date palm is of enormous cultural value in Iraq, manifest in the proverb ‘A house with a date palm will never starve’ (Rakowitz, 2019). The cans were sourced in the US, however, not Iraq. They are ‘detritus of the objects in diaspora’, representing ‘the meals that we would have made if we were still in Mesopotamia, or the kind of family gatherings that we would have made’ (Rakowitz, 2021). Until the recent US-imposed sanctions and war, dates were Iraq’s second most important export after oil. Rakowitz explains that in the 1970s Iraq had 30 million date palms; only 3 million remained after the 2003 war (Rakowitz, 2018).

These cans have histories of culture and family life, invasion, war and economic devastation accumulated within them. Being made of this packaging material, the replica of the ancient Lamassu brings contemporary histories of violence and tragedy to the centre of London, connecting the recent looting to that of the nineteenth century. Rakowitz considers the date cans a ‘kind of urgent material ... fragments of cultural visibility that are enlisted to make these things that are invisible’. His sculptures ‘are made in life size ... from the materials that allow for us to reappear in life size’ (Rakowitz, 2021).

Conclusion

In foregrounding the historicity of materials, Kemp asserts that the ‘fundamental, historical constitution of materials ... does not disappear in the act of artistic transformation either by placing emphasis on form, or by retreating into material’s structural laws’ (2015, p. 36). Anatsui and Rakowitz both make use of materials chosen for their historicity. In both cases, though in different ways, it is the interaction between material and form which defines the work.

In Anatsui’s sculptures, the bottle tops cumulatively amount to vast entities with flexible, indeterminate form and awe-inspiring scale. The works gesture suggestively to long and wide histories which connect continents. In Rakowitz’s works the historical constitution of his material brings a contemporary political charge to the ancient forms that he replicates. The beauty and scale of Anatsui’s works inspire wonder and reflection, while Rakowitz’s ‘surrogates’ articulate a sense of urgency and defiance.

The use of everyday materials to create huge, monumental art creates a specific kind of relationship with the viewer. Monumental works such as statues were traditionally made from expensive materials like marble or bronze which were beyond the realm of everyday life and ordinary working people. The works of art thereby adhered to and reinforced the unequal, hierarchical relations of the social order, not only in their size but in their material distance from the ordinary and everyday. The works of Anatsui and Rakowitz are monumental in scale and form, but not in their material. This establishes, instead, a relationship which adheres to the everyday and the realm of ordinary working people, and challenges the structures of authority and power which sustain an unequal social and global order. Taking a piece of ordinary food or drink packaging and using this as the core art material invites the viewer to wonder, question and reflect on social and historical as well as aesthetic concerns.

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List of Figures

Figure 1. Anatsui, E. (2023) *Behind the Red Moon* [metal bottle tops] installation view at Tate Modern, London. Photograph: Daniel Hambury/Stella Pictures Ltd. Available: <https://www.standard.co.uk/culture/exhibitions/el-anatsui-behind-the-red-moon-tate-modern-turbine-hall-review-b1112219.html>. (Accessed 4 December 2023).

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