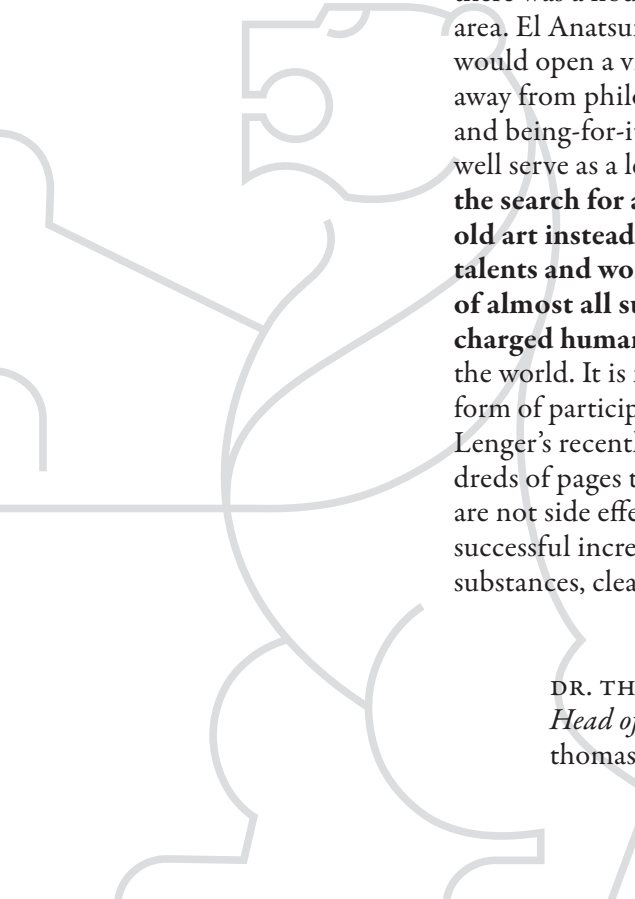


# Poetic Participation, Political Slowness

El Anatsui: *Behind  
The Red Moon* (detail)  
Turbine Hall,  
Tate Modern, London  
10 October –  
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Let us assume for a moment that it is individual artists who store essential knowledge for the human race. Others parrot it back or copy it down without much understanding. Barnett Newman summed it up unforgettably: “Aesthetics is to the artist what ornithology is to the birds.” While some creatures chirp and fly, others are busy constructing a corset. From today’s perspective, roughly seventy years after that much-quoted aphorism, the Ghanaian sculptor El Anatsui, born in 1944, may well be our wisest art philosopher. Working with clay, he discovered that shards were more important as containers for offerings to the deceased than the earthen vessels that are normally made from this material. Working with wood, he discovered that it was straight rulers, above all, that could be obtained as ideal tools from natural materials. **Thus Africa, as El Anatsui pointed out with a smile, was divided up with rulers by leaders of several European countries invited by Otto von Bismarck to the Berlin Conference of 1884/85. Countless indigenous tribes, cultures, and geopolitical bonds were irreversibly separated. The result was the continent of European colonies, a huge land mass covered with razor-straight borderlines.** In 1957, as a young man, El Anatsui experienced Ghana’s independence as a restoration of God’s omnipotence. He dreamed of creating a science of his own. He did not want to see the world through received images but primarily through spiritual vision. Long after working with clay and wood, he turned to the lids and caps that are removed from containers almost everywhere in the world, for example in order to consume drinks. These small, usually colorful plastic or metal parts are assembled in his studio into large tableaux, wallfilling reliefs that have an uplifting effect. This is not an exercise in recycling. **The primary focus is on the production of growth and increase from barely noticeable parts, enabling the participation of neighbors in collectives, including children and even teachers. This growth, in turn, generates immense visual wealth. One-way streets, like the idea of a simple before and after, do not interest El Anatsui.** Anaxagoras, the first philosopher of Athens, teaching at the time when the Greek mainland was scaling back its centuries-old pre-Christian colonialism in the Mediterranean and establishing democratic structures, considered the idea of anything arising fullfledged out of nothing to be impossible on purely logical grounds.: “No thing comes into being or perishes, but on the contrary, it is from things that are that it is mixed together and into which it separates out.”



Anaxagoras also declared that entirely pure, unmixed substances were inconceivable. We should note that for El Anatsui, the current debate about colonialism and the need for a movement of redress is not an issue. Indeed, the word “decolonization” has explicitly lost its meaning for him. **Already in 2019, he said, “Cultures take a long long long time to form. You can easily destroy them in no time.” Cultural destruction cannot be reversed by ideology. Cultures always arise from new encounters, he says; what matters to him above all are the longterm effects.** You encounter something you haven’t seen before; that novelty could be of interest. Europe, and to a large extent North America, tend to prematurely interpret this phenomenon in linear terms. New beginnings are expected to be made as quickly as possible, and their consequences should be immediately perceptible as well. In other parts of the world, El Anatsui says, “you might see that whatever is happening in the West now happened in other places. Take conceptual art for example. In the Western canon, it’s dated to very recently, whereas I would say the first instance of conceptual art that I know of happened at the founding of ancient Mali in 1235.” At that time, Africa saw the rise of the so-called Lion King Sundiata Keita, who expanded his vast empire from Timbuktu to the Atlantic coast after a series of military victories. Today’s Ghana was part of it. In this great and ancient country of Mali, there was a flourishing gold trade, even though there were no gold mines in the area. El Anatsui could have come up with other concepts, preferably such as would open a view on large possibilities. For the rest, though, his art has moved away from philosophical absolutes, from any dichotomy between being-in-itself and being-for-itself, giving way instead to a sensuous atomism which could very well serve as a learning program for visual art. **The principle of “All in All,” the search for a “Slow Culture,” the occasional return to an appreciation of old art instead of constantly seeking out new and, as often happens, weak talents and works — such considerations could lead to a universal blending of almost all substances, and gradually also to the relaxation of overly charged human emotions.** Both physically and psychologically, we are part of the world. It is not only in art that human beings search for a decidedly poetic form of participation. Slowness can be an elixir; it can also be a drug. In Friedrich Lenger’s recently published “Global History of Capitalism,” we learn over hundreds of pages that global inequality and ecological devastation on the planet are not side effects but distinguishing characteristics of the purposeful and quite successful increase in human prosperity. We ourselves are most likely impure substances, clearly composed of disparate elements.

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