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in the preceding year (1996, or in some case, 1995). In all there are sixty-six publishing houses. University Press Plc, Ibadan, established in 1978 and with more than 1,000 books in print, could release only fourteen titles in 1995. University of Lagos Press, established in 1980, with 102 titles in print, released only three books in 1996. Again in 1996, Evans Brothers, established in 1966 and with over 2,000 books in print, released only ten books, and Fourth Dimension, established in 1977, with over 800 titles in print, released only ten books. The deduction could be reached that the decay in publishing hit an all-time high in the past ten years. If the companies above were publishing ten books or less annually since their establishment in the 60s and 70s, they could not have released such large number of titles that they have. While the contemplation of this landscape of decay depresses us, Spectrum Books, Kraft Books and Zim Pan African Publishers come, like unravished maidens bearing a bouquet of hope, with their 36, 16 and 15 new titles respectively in 1996.

Another interesting fact emerging from a study of the entries in this part is that Nigerian publishers have not yet come to grips with the mechanics of international book distribution. Most of the companies distribute their books through one outlet: their showroom/warehouse/office. Almost all the publishers have no overseas distribution agent/channel; only a handful have an arrangement with African Books Collective, and because ABC accepts a very limited number from one publisher at a time, this arrangement is grossly inadequate.

The other parts of the segment on Directories (parts 111-V) feature the directories of Book Printing Presses; Bookshops and Book Distribution Organisations; and Libraries in

Nigeria. Statistics from the entries here show some sixty-six book printing presses, seventy bookshops and book distributors, and 824 libraries. The libraries include state, national, school and special libraries.

Two most thoughtful inclusions in the Directory are the last two segments entitled Appendix and Indexes. The Appendix features questionnaires on all the directories. This will enable those who were not included to furnish information for inclusion in a future edition; it could also be used to update already published information. The Indexes - listed alphabetically by surname for authors, and business names for publishers, printers, etc., - make tracing any entry in the Directory a delight.

*Directory of Nigerian Book Development* is a well laid-out and timely publication that attests volubly to the editorial skill of Chukwuemeka Ike. Hopefully an update would follow soon. Perhaps, the Directory of Organisations Involved in the Production, Importation, and Distribution of Paper and other Materials for Book Development in Nigeria, and the Directory of Nigeria Book Publishing and Distribution Personnel shelved for lack of adequate data will be included then. For that future edition, the segment on published Nigerian authors should indicate the type of book written/edited by an author, and the ISBN. These pieces of information would help international acquisition librarians immensely. In its present state, however, with five directories (on Authorship, Publishing, Printing, Distribution - bookshops - and Libraries) the *Directory of Nigerian Book Development* is a unique reference material on the book industry in Nigeria.

Agbayi, a writer, is on the editorial team of Okike

## Under Western Eyes

Krydz Ikwuemesi

SINCE the beginning of this decade, there has been a re-newed interest in African art within Western art circles. This has given rise to a number of exhibitions and other projects focussing on African art in Western Museums, galleries and related institutions. Such international shows as Africa Hoy! Africa Explores, Les Magiciens de la Terre, Contemporary African Artists: Changing Traditions, Africa '95, The Poetics of Line: Seven Artists of the Nsukka Group, and Transvanguard are very familiar.

They are interesting, too, not so much for their scope and ambition as for the history they generate. In the characteristic Occidental tradition, each of these exhibitions is accompanied by quality publications, some of them grand narratives, which extend the frontiers of what could be seen as internationalist monologic artistic discourse led by the West. Out of the exhibitions cited above, The Poetics of Line and Transvanguard are the most recent and, in line with tradition, they have given rise to two separate books. The first, written by

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Simon Ottenberg, *NEW TRADITIONS FROM NIGERIA, SEVEN ARTISTS OF THE NSUKKA GROUP*, Smithsonian Institution Press in association with The National Museum of African Art, Washington & London, 1997, 302pp.

John Picton, *EL ANATSUI, A SCULPTED HISTORY OF AFRICA*, Saffron Books in conjunction with the October Gallery, London, 1998, 96pp.

Simon Ottenberg, with the title, *New Traditions from Nigeria: Seven Artists of the Nsukka Group*, studies the origin and development of Uli as a creative idiom in modern Nigerian art. It uses the works of Uche Okeke, Chike Aniakor, Obiora Udechukwu, Tayo Adenaike, Olu Oguibe, El Anatsui, and Ada Udechukwu as a pedestal from which it advances its thesis and conclusions. The second book resulting from the exhibition 'Transvanguard' is *El Anatsui: A Sculpted History of Africa*, it is a collection of essays on the world-renowned sculptor, written by John Picton, Gerard Houghton, Yukiya Kawaguchi, Elizabeth Lalous-chek, Simon Njami, and Elizabeth Periwillis. Although the books are published in two different parts of the Occidental World - the one by the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., and the other by Saffron Books in conjunction with the October Gallery in London they share a number of conceptual similarities on which I shall focus presently before examining their individual characters and merits.

First, the books bring up the issue of the relevance or otherwise of the 'intimate outsider' in the study of African art. They are written by people whose antecedents would repute as 'experts in African art'. But beyond that, at a more critical level, those 'experts' appear to be the same old voice, the voice of neo-colonialisation, the voice of the ventriloquist West, seeking to speak for itself and the rest of the world. They are thus a clear example of the Westerncentric, neo-expeditionist interest in African art suddenly manifesting at a very remarkable period in history. Although it would be most unfair to dismiss the two publications as part of the usual fin de siecle gropings by peoples, groups and intellectuals for new ideas, fresh spin-offs and challenges outside what is known, one cannot obviate the fact that they are fairly rich in the trappings of the postmodernist discourse in its sense as an empty harangue on the newness of a rechristened old child. In other words, neither Ottenberg nor Picton et al tells us anything new. Uli as a modern idiom is almost half a

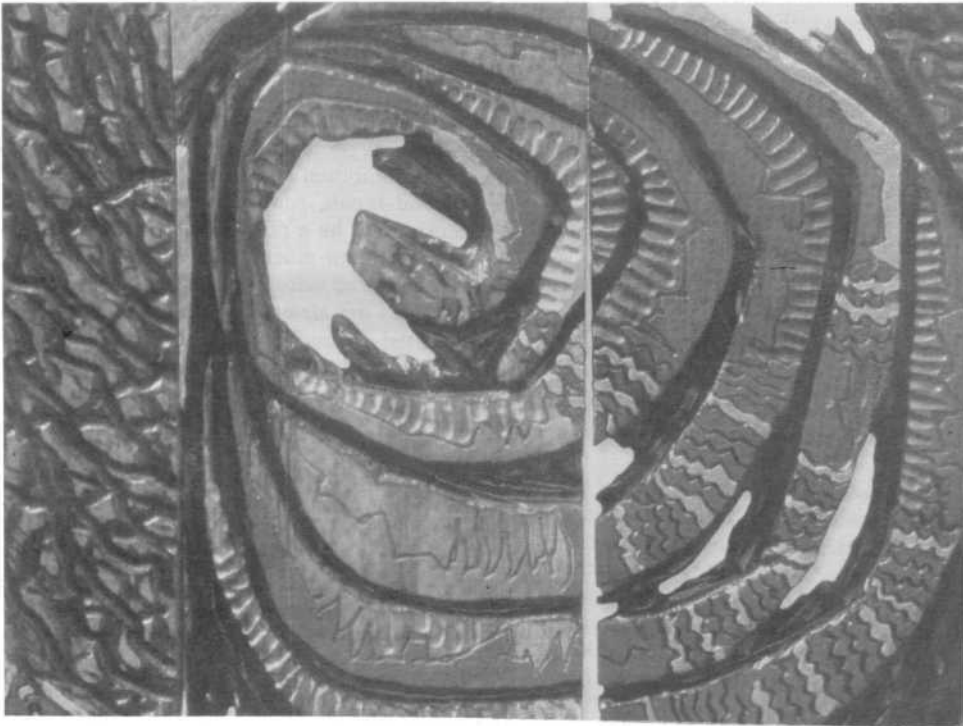
century old; Anatsui's dexterity and transcultural vision as a sculptor blossomed many years ago. Both issues have been part of the continuing debate - unsophisticated as it might be - on African art here on the continent. The two publications then must be seen as part of a discursive continuum and not the heralds of an alternative, if more authentic, critique, which they seem to pretend to be. In the nascent politics of globalisation, the above view is very important, for as Everlyn Nicodemus puts it, 'if we do not take every opportunity to influence those people who are in charge of the keys to the exhibition spaces in North America, Europe and Japan, contemporary African art will continue to be a playground for fancies'. One may ask, how much of the African 'influence' - the African voice - shapes the theses of both books? I am afraid it is almost minimal, appropriated through books, oral interviews and sundry publications. But in spite of that 'influence', one cannot rule out the ever greater influence of the author's subjectivity or what Everlyn Nicodemus describes as the 'curator's subjectivity,' especially in reference to one who is well immersed in the waters of the anthropological, 'neo-primitivising' Self-Other psychology which pervades Western thinking. Thus in spite of their reliance on some materials by 'intimate insiders', the ultimate voice which emerges in the books - and that is normal - is that of the authors bolstered by the abundance in their environment of research and publishing facilities which often breeds 'heavy intellectualisation and theorisation in postmodern Euro/American art criticism; ...mechanism for hiding, rather than dealing with, the very basic struggles for survival of African-born artists and others.' Although Ottenberg professes to eschew this technique and does so to a considerable extent, it is almost fully at work in the other book. Nevertheless, despite their similarities in this respect both books ultimately paint the picture of a 'terra incognita'. They invoke that point of disequilibrium which is bound to emerge 'when the brutally efficient Western field confronts economically weak and not yet much devel-

oped art structures,' like a child trying to dominate a new set of toys. But beyond this neo-expeditionist spirit, one must acknowledge that the books represent serious intellectual contributions which like most new publications enrich existing traditions. Each book achieves this goal through methodical approach to its subject, subtly advancing the current debate on new internationalism vis-a-vis African artists. *New Traditions from Nigeria* is, for instance, a landmark in the documentation of the dynamics of the Uli paradigm. Although it is every inch an ambitious presentation, the author exhibits a good level of modesty in coming to terms with his theme. He is aware of the skepticism of contemporary African artists toward 'hegemonic Euro/American art criticism', be it postmodernist

conjecture. Ottenberg's approach is largely hermeneutical. He looks at generational development of Uli, starting with Uche Okeke and Chike Aniakor. He has put Obiora Udechukwu and El Anatsui in the second generation. Next to them are Tayo Adenaike and Olu Oguibe and Ada Udechukwu in that order. Ottenberg seems to follow this pattern also in looking at the works of these artists, appraising their histories, growth, intellectual disposition, techniques and stylistic individuation. His analysis and inferences are insightful, but one needs to take another look at his periodisation of the artists, as some earlier works seem to disagree with his position. Of particular note here is his attempt to separate Obiora Udechukwu from Uche Okeke and Chike Aniakor. Although Udechukwu was Okeke and Aniakor's student

in the early 1970s, the three of them have developed simultaneously, with Udechukwu carrying the Uli crusade much farther than the others. Age difference and student-teacher relationship apart, Udechukwu belongs with Okeke and Aniakor to the same Uli period which can be described as 'neo-classical'. Outside this boundary, the next generation (with particular reference to *New Traditions*) would comprise El Anatsui and Tayo Adenaike. Olu Oguibe and Ada Udechukwu would belong to a third generation. Although

Ottenberg's line of classification does not take much away from the substance of the book - considering that he is entitled to his argument - it must be pointed out that this factor could be misleading especially for a book which has the destiny of becoming the 'Bible' of modern Uli in the Euro-American world. One expresses this fear not only in relation to the selective nature of the book and its classifications, but also - and more especially - for the female representation in the book, Ada Udechukwu. Ottenberg's criteria for selecting this particular female artist is not known. The choice is, in itself, not necessarily controvert-



Agwologwo (coils of the python), 1988, by El Anatsui

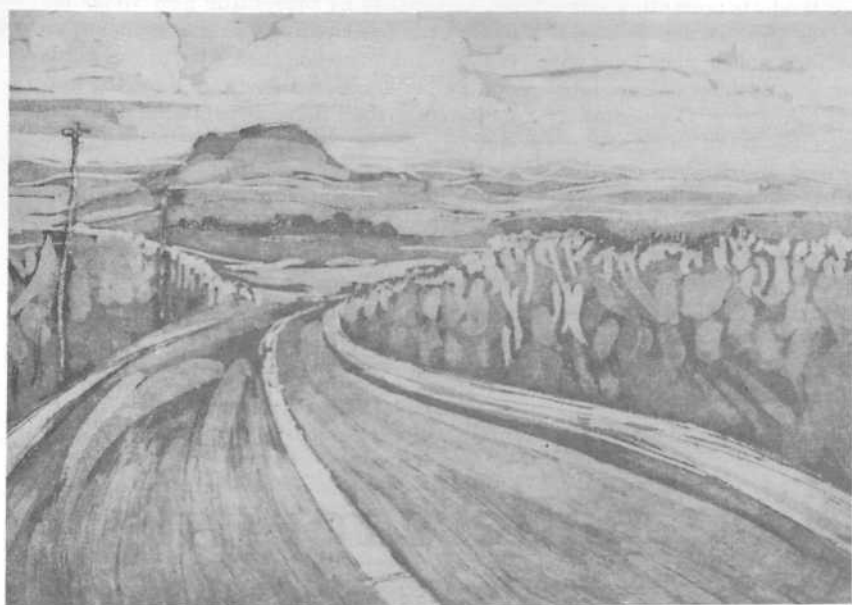
or not. Ipso facto, one observes a palpable attempt by the author to achieve some degree of balance between his own judgement and the artists' perception of their work and themselves. In this regard, he engages simply in the presentation, rather than the re-presentation of the artists, avoiding as much as he can 'overly erudite' ideas of postmodernism which, according to him, do not seem to be compatible with 'the problems of social life in Nigeria and other African countries'. Whether or not this methodology distances the book from 'the (West's) hegemonic, acquisitive, and racialistic attitudes' may remain an issue for

ible, as he had all the discretion to select his specimen. It only becomes questionable when Ottenberg briefly mentions Ndidí Dike and Chinwe Uwatse in an attempt to paint a holistic picture of feminine contribution to the development of Uli. This is bound to be so, as the two artists (Dike and Uwatse) have consistently espoused the Uli principles in their works, and have been active professionally. Equally questionable is the presence of Olu Oguibe in this book. It would seem that he has imbibed too much of the postmodernist zeitgeist to really fit into Ottenberg's label of 'Nsukka artists'. If Ottenberg sought to use his work to illustrate recent developments in Uli, he is not fully successful, because of the overbearing external influences in his work. Like Ada Udechukwu, his inclusion also amplifies the absence of some important exponents such as Chuka Amaefuna, Ray Obeta,

more vivid picture of the implications should have been painted as a matter of history. One such attempt in the concluding chapter of the book appears not to be far-reaching enough. Aside from these observations, *New Traditions* is a great book, not in itself, but in its potential to provoke new thought on Uli. Its greatest asset is its accessibility - the simplicity of the author's language - and its rejection of the bombastic tone of the postmodernist school. As hinted earlier, it is in this regard that *A Sculpted History of Africa* contrasts with *New Traditions*. Its language and discursive parameters are postmodernist par excellence. It derives from a concept woven around Anatsui's work by the October Gallery. The concept, advanced by Gerard Houghton, is a postmodernist coinage. He calls it 'transvanguard' and uses it to describe Anatsui's reach beyond the home-

stead, and to validate his location in the Western mainstream. The book was published by the October Gallery to give 'an insight into the artist himself and his sources of inspiration,' and to make 'critical assessment of his work'. To a large extent, the book succeeds at both tasks. Consisting of six essays, one in German, one in French, four in English (with one translated from Japanese), the book metaphorically reflects the multilingual nature of Anatsui's artistic diction. Using Anatsui as a springboard, the authors touch generally on definitive issues in African art, subtly making a case against the hard-edge traditional-contemporary binary which Picton describes as the creation of 'old heart museum ethnography and anthropology,' and which, to paraphrase him, has almost ordained the so-called traditional

as the archetype of African art. Even 'in the context of the persistence in Europe of a 'myth of primitivising', the authors seem to agree that Anatsui, the transvanguard, dipped in the brew of Adeinsibuli, largely transcends such a myth. It is Picton himself that leads this argument, and with great wit and charismatic logic, he concludes that 'African is not the label El Anatsui necessarily always requires'. One refrain which seem to infect almost all the authors, if not all is the insistence on Uche Okeke's influence on the work of Anatsui. This issue is almost over-emphasised as if Okeke himself were the personification of Uli. It was Uli, among other art traditions, that sharpened Anatsui's vision from the late 1970s and



The Road to Nsukka, 1987, by Obiora Udechukwu

and possibly Barthosa Nkurumeh. Although Ottenberg makes some references to Amaefuna's work, including a photograph of one on page 74, one would think that the works of this highly experimental artist who died in 1993, are a major breakthrough in Uli and should have been given greater consideration in the pacesetting publication. Besides, the author could have given some more attention to the wider 'Nsukka group' in the form of a summary, not only to further enlighten the reader on the endless possibilities in Uli, but also to reflect on what has happened in the arena beyond his chosen specimen. If the selected artists have left a considerable weight in their trail, as Ottenberg rightly suggests, a

it comprises several artists. One must also remember that Anatsui, before coming into contact with Uli and Okeke's 'natural synthesis' theory, had been involved in the Sankofa philosophy way back in Ghana. These experiences, coupled with his interaction with other artists in Aka and other fora, have contributed to his intellectual and artistic resource. And he blends this with a clear perception of global art trends. This outlook owes as much to Okeke as it does to all the other contributing factors. Together they have enabled the artist's work to shift 'effortlessly between African and Western aesthetic sensibilities, mastering both but belonging to neither one exclusively' and thus making 'an appropriate example of the transvanguard'. Although each author tries to look at Anatsui from a different standpoint, there seems to be some sort of harmonisation in some of their postulations, especially in relation to issues of definition. Each is aware that he/she is presenting a familiar stranger to the Western audience and attempt is thus made to shed some light on the work of the artist - this new entrant into the highly-policed confines of Occidental internationalism. Of the six authors, however, Elizabeth Peri-Willis' contribution remains the most insightful and composite, not only for its more accessible language but also for the author's ability to weave history, analysis and interpretation into her narrative. This is perhaps enhanced by her earlier personal contacts with Anatsui during her sojourn in Nigeria in the 1980s. In sum, the book epitomises the postmodernist claptrap about its own perceptive generosity and its acclaimed belief in the universality of man and

his vision usually encapsulated in art, culture, science and technology. Simon Njami echoes this sentiment on page 72 when he says that 'La leçon que nous donne depuis quelques années l'art contemporain africain, l'art contemporain tout court, est que tout art est nécessairement le fruit d'un processus de collage et de permanence'. In effect, nothing really new is said. We are presented with the excitement and astonishment of the West at a re-discovery, the re-discovery of African art, garnished with the techniques of art history and criticism. Interestingly, however, *A Sculpted History of Africa* is a harbinger of a gathering culturo-artistic invasion which holds several implications for African art and the African identity in the next century. New Traditions encodes the same potentials. But beyond these possibilities, these books may also change our own perception of our art and our approach to its dissemination. They may do so, not necessarily by presenting new vistas before us, but principally by challenging our 'intimate insiders' to lick their lips, in the words of Chinua Achebe, rather than allow the har-mattan to do it for them. In contemplating this challenge, Mosquera's warning recurs, vis-a-vis the books under discussion: 'the desire and power of the postmodern West to curate the rest of the world now begins. If we uncritically accept it, flattered by being at all payed attention to, we will soon find ourselves in a new, even more sophisticated form of cultural colonialism.'

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## Literature Matters returns

**T**HE newsletter *Literature Matters* issued by the Literature Department of the British Council in London returns after a pause in publication, or at the least a cessation of appearance in Nigeria, for some while.

*Literature Matters* reappears in a new design format, but not any less committed to the former literary tributes, conference, seminar and other event reports, directories of new book publications from the UK, announcement and reflections on topical issues by writers and critics.

The newlook, now characterised by page-head illustrations, retains the former succinctness and textual economy.

Issue No 25 (January 1999) carries a me-

morial on recently deceased poet, Ted Hughes and among others, reports on the festival of writing from *Commonwealth islands*, Mauritius, July 1998, the Booker Prize and the Edinburgh Book Festival.

The well-produced, UK-printed paper, however, records in its prefatory sections on a recent and regrettable racial insult on the writer, Caryl Phillips who was on a reading tour overseas from 'someone close to the Council at an official dinner' which Alastair Niven, director of Literature notes with sadness but definitely with a resolve that henceforwards, 'All managers in the Council will have mandatory race awareness training, to which resources will be committed and the consequences of which will be closely monitored'.