# Shared Content in Transnational Communities in Real and Virtual Environments: Art Education in the Context of Globalization

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## ***Summary***

*We are currently observing a trend towards greater politicization of art education in many countries, as new challenges lie ahead in the context of globalization. Intercultural learning, empowerment or participation are decisive keywords in this context. They represent a specific direction that can be distinguished from nationalistic tendencies. Globalization that is accepted as new challenge with huge potentials in this paper, needs new formats. This paper will explore a transnational project between partners in South Africa, Ghana, Cameroon and Germany around topics like decolonialization, sustainable development and heritage, using new technologies.*

## Shared content in transnational communities

In recent years, art teaching in Germany has adapted to the increasing diversity in classrooms caused by the intensification of migration movements during the last 100 years. The Nuremberg Paper of 2013 (Lutz-Sterzenbach, Schnurr, Wagner 2013, p. 325 ff.) is a good example of this. The Bavarian pilot project "schön.wie schön” (beautiful.how beautiful) 2015 - 2017 also reacted to the increasing migration movements and their consequences for teaching at schools. The results are published: Wagner, Wenrich, Ratzel 2017. It looks like that concepts for a sensible intercultural art education, tested in daily praxis, are available in Germany.

What was not yet apparent until the first half of the 2010s, however, was the great significance of the discourse on decolonization in the cultural sciences, which is now also reaching art education. In German cultural policy, this discussion is currently carried out most clearly and vehemently related to the question of restitution of looted art. At first it was mainly about returns of former Jewish possessions, stolen during the Nazi-regime. But now it is also about dealing with looted art from Africa in the period of colonization. Many ethnological museums in Europe are confronted with such demands. Furthermore, the example of the fundamental critique of the Humboldt Forum in Berlin shows that the subject is much more complex and has enormous dynamics that go far beyond the question of restitution. One of the central aspects of this regards art education as well, the question of the question of the ‘canon’ and its interpretation.

Of course, there has always been a critical discussion about the canon in art teaching. This is an issue already in daily praxis at school. Whenever the next lesson has to be prepared, e.g. on the subject of Baroque painting, it has to be decided which works will be presented: e.g. by the Catholic Rubens or the Protestant Rembrandt or the 'proletarian' Caravaggio – or even a female (!) artist, who is very seldom mentioned at schools, like Artemisia Gentileschi? After the decision it has to be clarified which works should be selected. These questions are the same again and again on all other levels: with textbook editors, with curriculum makers, with curators at museum etcetera. What should they show? And which stories, narrative should they tell about them?

It is interesting to note that in many European countries over the years a far-reaching consensus has developed regarding the question which artists are relevant in education. Unfortunately, precise overview figures are not available, but on the basis of the studies from Austria (Kirchweger 2014) and the Netherlands (Bevers 2005) a trend can be assumed. This trend is clear: the European top ten are (in this order): Picasso, Le Corbusier, Matisse, Michelangelo, Rodin, van Gogh, Kirchner, Cézanne, Rembrandt, Giacometti, Brancusi and Mondrian - supplemented from Austria by J.L. David, Leonardo, Duerer, Goya, Rubens, Klimt and Pollock.

The good news is that there is obviously no canon in any of the countries studied that would push national artists. It is obvious that it is a ***European*** ***canon*** that does not care much about national borders. But it is, as you notice at second glance, a quite Western European canon. Surprisingly, not even very influential Russian artists like Malevich and El Lissitzky or many other Eastern Europeans like Mucha or Kupka found their way into this core canon. And North Americans (if we think of a "transatlantic" Europe) like Warhol or Jeff Wall are also missing. (Austria, after all, includes Jackson Pollock.) It is an uncompromising Central / Western European profile we are facing. There is also a clear temporal profile that focuses above all on the Renaissance period and the classical modern era (with a little bit of the 19th century). The fact that all artists are men seems just as expectable as the dominance of painting. I assume that this profile – with slight shifts to include artists from one's own country – looks very similar in most European countries.

This very one-sided and characteristic profile, however, appears to be extremely problematic today. This is especially true with regard to the way we have to perceive the world in which, for example, Europe is a global province (Chakrabarty 2010). Different functions of images in diversified cultures and milieus (historically and contemporarily) also raise the question of whether we are still up to date in art teaching with the existing, latent canon. This is especially true if we want to fulfil the claim of general education. General education promises to prepare the children for the world to come in all areas.

If contemporary art exhibitions are seen as trendsetters and also impulses for art education, we can expect that this canon will change soon. For example, Newall (2017) examined the documenta-exhibitions from 1968 - 2007 with regard to the artists' origin (in this case their place of residence). She observed a clear trend: the proportion of artists from Europe / North America declined continuously during this period, from 98% in 1968 to around 60% in 2007. (More recent figures are not yet available.) Accordingly, the proportion of artists from Asia, Africa and Latin America – in this order – increased continuously. Epochal exhibitions of the 1980s, such as 'Les Magiciens de la Terre' in Paris in 1989, or the 3rd Havana Biennial, also in 1989, contributed to this observable opening.

But these trends still play hardly any role in current art education, at least in Germany. This is why a group of art teachers in Bavaria has now joined forces to think about it and, above all, to try out new paths. A broad spectrum of actors is represented within this group, the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich, teacher trainers, the Institute for Curriculum Development (ISB), some pilot schools, and the Association of Art Teachers (BDK), an NGO. The Bavarian Ministry of Culture and the Federal Ministry for Cooperation (BMZ) support the work. The group works closely with the Chair of African Art History at the Ludwig-Maximilian University Munich and the ‘Museum Fünf Kontinente’ (Museum Five Continents) in Munich.

The core idea of this project, which is funded for the period from 2019 to 2022, is to enter into dialogue with partners from other regions of the world, especially from the Global South. The colleagues in Bavaria are cooperating with partners from the University of Education in Winneba, Ghana. Other, already active partners have been be found in South Africa and Cameroon. Negotiations are underway with other possible universities in Nigeria, Kenya, Uganda, Oman and Hong Kong.

Within the framework of the project, we want to exchange ideas with these partners about the respective canons in art teaching, cultural history and art education. By canon we mean the collection of objects of 'visual cultures' that are considered particularly important in the respective country. We address the question of how cultural memory (in the medium of an 'image') manifests itself and how this pictorial memory shapes our ideas of the world in which we are part of (Assmann 2000). In this way it is automatically also about our ideas about the future of the world. I.e. it is about objects (art works, architecture, design, daily life objects, handicrafts etcetera) that are relevant in education. The 'Sustainable Development Goals' of the United Nations (UNO 2015) offer a meaningful normative framework for this.

This can only happen in joint dialogue with all partners. In order to create a meaningful basis for cooperation, we have jointly developed criteria for the selection of objects:

1. Each object has aesthetic and conceptual qualities. It is complex and inspiring.
2. Each object is understood as an expression of worldviews and at the same time also as powerful with regard to the formation of these worldviews.
3. Each object has relevance for education in today's globalized world. This also includes the question of transcultural entanglement and migration trajectories.
4. Each object is a starting point to learn to understand other imageries and the world views represented therein from different perspectives.
5. Each object is related to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) of the United Nations.

In order to fulfil the criterion of multi-perspectivity, neither the objects / artists selected by the each partner for their country nor the interpretations are influenced. Selection and interpretation will only be clarified internally, i.e. in the respective national teams. In a second step, the selected objects and texts are fed into a database in order to facilitate a dialogue between the partners on this basis. The resulting material should then help to thematise the questions asked at the beginning about the canon for art lessons in our school and thus expand the respective view of the world of images. The internet database (see screenshots) will be accompanied by a handbook to be published in 2022. This handbook will show how unfamiliar pictorial worlds and unfamiliar worldviews can be integrated into art lessons. It will present ways in which the global diversity of imageries can be used for contemporary education to prepare our children for the world in which they live and will live.

## **An example: Two perspectives on one artwork, El Anatsui’s Rising Sea**



El Anatsui, Rising Sea 2019, copper (wire) and tinplate / aluminum (bottle tops), 14,38 m x 6,90 m

El Anatsui (born 1944) is a Ghanaian sculptor active in Nigeria. He is internationally known for his huge “bottle-top installations” like “Rising Sea” exhibited in Munich (Haus der Kunst) in 2019 and discussed here. El Anatsui was selected to act as a member on the International Society for Education through Art (InSEA ) world council in 1992 for his work in education. Patrique deGraft-Yankson, University of Education in Winneba Ghana, and Ernst Wagner, Academy of Fine Arts in Munich Germany, have written the following interpretations of “Rising Sea” – in a parallel writing process. Both authors knew nothing about each other’s texts, so the texts were created independently from each other.

### Interpretation by Patrique deGraft-Yankson

*The Rising Sea* by El Anatsui is a naturalistic presentation of an ocean in turbulence, which elicit attention through both grotesquery and finesse. The work, which covers an area of about 14,38 by 6,90 meters, is made up of several pieces of flattened aluminum bottle tops stitched together with copper wires into a massive sheet of grey wall overlay.

To achieve the intended illusion, the artist manipulated portions of the *metal fabric* into large series of ridges of different sizes that combine into an irregular rhythm randomly positioned across the surface of the sheet to simulate sea waves. Beyond supporting the movements of the sea waves, the rhythm created by the raised portions of the work also provides narrow range of values that effectively bring out the three-dimensionality of the work and transforms the otherwise flat sheet into an illusionistic volume.

Like the texture of oil paints in Van Gogh’s *Starry Night,* the texture of the stitched pieces of metals sheets introduce energy into the work, bringing out the fluidity of the sea and the potency of the mesmeric sea waves. Indeed, improper disposal of those materials used (and many others) is causing a lot of nuisance in his home country and other parts around the globe, with the sea being the most affected. Therefore, right from the materials used to its marvelous finishing, it is not difficult to discern a blend of severe censuring and admonition in the voice of the artist. The sea is, in the way presented, depicted as rising against improper treatment; and El, by the pains taken to stitch every piece of material together, seems to emphasize the need to make it our business to salvage the sea from improper handling.

The sea, which has served as an important source of livelihood for Ghanaians over the centuries invokes multidimensional viewpoints and draws out divergent responses and reactions depending on its relationship with the people. Among the coastal dwellers (and indeed a very great population of Ghanaians), the sea is considered an important resource for commercial activities, an arena for entertainment and recreation and grounds for spiritual exploits and worship.

He himself being born in the coastal town of Anyako in the Volta Region of Ghana, El seems to know so much about the sea. Growing up, he most likely experienced the sea being perceived, treated and *utilized* in many different ways. Besides its major use for commercial activities and other useful ventures, he might have listened to many stories about the sea as a god (with other inhabitants), as a provider and as a friend. He might have learnt about how the sea and her inhabitants contribute to the fortunes of the people. He might have witnessed how people got healed as they bathed in the sea, or had their fortunes turned around as they threw some coins in the ocean and made their requests known to the sea.

Beyond this, he might have also been warned about the consequences of flouting the taboos and other prohibitions that regulate the “use” of the sea, including forbiddance from desecrating the sea with unhealthy practices such as defecating in the sea, throwing filth into the sea or wearing sandals or shoes in the sea and the need to observe the tabooed fishing days, and so on. Besides, another important thing which Ghanaian coastal dwellers take very seriously is the need to adhere to physical signs and conditions of the sea, which have various local interpretations and implications. For instance, there are periods when the sea is considered as “full”, during which times the sea waves “rise” and become more intense and turbulent. Fisher folks are supposed to take a rest from “climbing the sea” (as they say in the local parlance) as the sea is likely to be unfriendly, and therefore unconducive for fishing.

Factors that cause the “rising” of the sea may not be ordinarily known. However, according to coastal dwellers, there is always something sinister about a rising sea – either somebody got drowned, or someone or a group of persons might have violated the rules of the sea god – and what motivated El in his presentation of the Rising sea might not be any different from what are traditionally believed. Probably the sea is fed up with deliberate dumping of wastes and toxic materials into her bowels. Therefore, she must rise!

But the “full” or “rising” sea is not as unfriendly as it sounds. Though it prevents fishing activities, which might be one way of *punishing* the people for disrespecting her, it also affords the people the opportunity to dry up their canoes, mend their nets and relax in the beautiful view of the sea along the coast. The occasions of the rising sea also witness other people who just move along the shores to observe the large waves that gather in the deep ocean, roll angrily towards the shoreline and dissolve tumultuously at the shore in a creamy white lather. The views at the seashore during these periods are nothing short of aesthetical experience that is shared by different kinds of observers with different perceptions, questioning, discussing, enjoying.

In so many ways therefore, the spectacle of observers in front of El Anatsui’s gigantic reconstruction of the *Rising Sea* gives so much semblance to the natural phenomenon, and this is a fundamental underpinning to the success of El’s work.

Culturally, the *Rising Sea* could be perceived as an allusion to the dynamisms in life, which sometimes rise against human tendencies and restrict mundane behavior, at the same time ensuring regularization of natural behaviors. What is important is to identify what is causing what, and how to seek for the right solutions.

For it to be presented as an aesthetic piece of work, El is probably saying that, *the Rising is Sea* is frightening; it is confusing; it is chaotic. But she is still beautiful, because in the right time, when given the right treatment, she will calm down so we have nothing to fear. She is still our god, our friend, our provider and our protector.

### Interpretation by Ernst Wagner

El Anatsui (\* 1944) created 'Rising Sea' 2019 specifically for a particular wall in a comprehensive solo exhibition of his oeuvre entitled “Triumphant Scale” at the ‘Haus der Kunst’ in Munich. Like many of his other works, “Rising Sea” is a large-scale piece comprised of thousands of flattened liquor bottle caps (extrapolated approx. 190.000) that have been tied together with copper wire. It hangs like a large tapestry from ceiling to floor and though it looks solid, it is flexible and has a seemingly textile structure. The effect is monumental and magnificent; it impresses by the sheer size as well as by the sensual materiality of the almost infinite number of small, shimmering pieces of tinplate.

To see the composition we need to view the work from a distance. The sculpture is divided into three starkly contrasting horizontal zones. A vibrantly colored strip runs along the bottom. It appears fragile and becomes thinner and interrupted as it runs toward the lower right corner. The broad, massive, monochrome grey zone in the middle falls with heavy folds. The third zone at the top is a narrow, shiny, silver and smoother appearing plane that rises from its lower edge on the left in a sharp line upwards to the right, like a ‘Silberstreif’ (i.e. glimmer of hope).

Nearing the work, we discover bright flecks of color that emerge out of the shimmering mother-of-pearl gray middle zone. While some of the flecks appear to build concrete figurations others seem to be randomly dispersed. In the lower right corner small speckles of color gravitate toward and buzz around a concentrated cluster of speckles. We are enticed to move closer and to discover more details. Individual bottle tops become recognizable out of a speckled ‘field of pixels' or 'threads in the fabric’. One recognizes and reads the labels "Turn to open" and the names of African high-proof alcoholic beverages that are popular in Ghana or Nigeria where El Anatsui lives and works (KP Beverages, Bacco , etc.)

As with an impressionist painting, this work enables and requires two different viewing positions: close up and from a distance. Both perspectives tell different stories. In contrast to impressionism, El Anatsui’s stories address political and social issues of highest relevance. From a distance, the rising water level caused by global warming is addressed, to which the title of the work 'Rising Sea' refers. “Reading” from left to right, sculptural folds in the large gray middle area remind us of mighty waves that are in the process of destroying the narrow, speckled strip on the floor that we may associate with human dwellings and their fragile situation. The ‘Silberstreif’ is dwindling and so is hope. Obviously, this meaning is addressed directly and in all clarity.

The inscriptions on the bottle tops tell another story, the story of alcohol and slave trade during European colonialism in West Africa. Thousands of Africans were sold and taken across the Atlantic in ships to cut sugar cane in the Caribbean plantations to make rum. The rum was shipped to England and then later sold to Africa. Rum with its high alcohol content became another means of dominating an already exploited people. In the course of time, West Africans commonly used rum and other forms of alcohol for libations. However, El Anatsui only uses discarded bottle caps from liquor made in Africa today.

In turn, the process of 'sewing' the individual metal pieces together is an important, additional cultural-historical referral to El Anatsui’s roots in West Africa where there is a long tradition of weaving colorful textiles.

The close-up view of “Rising Sea” thus speaks of the past in West-Africa. Whereby the view from the distance, speaks of the future, a future that directly and indirectly affects the world globally. The narrative strands are connected by the idea of upcycling: discarded bottle caps become art, the cheapest material becomes sumptuous beauty, the past becomes present and future, regional colonialism becomes the narrative of a global threat.

It is important to remember that it is a black artist from Ghana exhibiting this threatening beauty in a space that was built in Munich to serve National Socialist racism. The title of the exhibition 'Triumphant Scale' alludes directly to this context, which Okwui Enwezor, the initiator of the exhibition, was certainly aware of. The Nazi regime, a regime without scale, built the Haus der Kunst, a building that broke all scales. El Anatsiu’s magnificent, grand scale triumphs over the excessive Nazi scale.

**Challenging the Western concept of art**

As an artist, El Anatsui is a representative of the Global South as well as of global art. He displays past and present catastrophes in decorative splendor. We can understand this message through classical analysis and interpretation on the base of the iconography of material and motifs. This system of decoding is familiar to us and confirms our Western expectations of a work of art. However, the simple explicitness of the content of El Anatsui’s work, poses a challenge to Western expectations of open, complex, self-contradicting art.

According to the latent notion of the community of art experts, if there is a clear content in art it should be as ironic, witty or distanced as possible. Hence, the intrinsic value of art (l'art pour l'art) eludes ideological appropriation and art gives no instructions for action. None of these tenets of Western art is is evident in Anatsui’s work. "Turn to open” with an arrow pointing up or down is the instruction repeated thousands of times in the middle section of “Rising Sea”. The sentence can be read as a directive for us to act on the challenges of our time.

El Anatsui thus negates the ‘prohibition' of unequivocal, direct symbolism and narration in the Western concept of art and its associated prohibition of politics and agitation. As a global artist, he challenges this concept. In addition, it is interesting to note that El Anatsui, unlike most Western artists, often leaves the responsibility of installing his work in exhibitions to the respective curators. In every exhibition, the same works look a little different, or quite different: folds will fall differently, pieces will be grouped differently and work that has been previously exhibited hanging on the wall may even be presented lying on the floor. With this artistic strategy, he formulates an unmistakable position from the Global South. Thus Western dominance loses its normative power in art and culture in general. The world becomes more diverse and polycentric.

## **Why El Anatsui’s artwork was chosen**

El Anatsui’s artwork is an outstanding example to be included into the project as it meets the criteria given above in an excellent way (following the same order).

1. The piece has an extraordinary aesthetic and conceptual quality. Visits with various groups of art students from the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich showed that it is a very good starting point for intense discussions and that it inspires own artistic creation as well.
2. ‘Rising Sea’ expresses the perspective not only of a Ghanaian artist in the context of decolonialization but it also represents a specific worldview of the Global South in the context of art. The experience with our students has demonstrated how their worldview changed through their examination of the artwork.
3. El Anatsui is a ‘global artist’ based in Nigeria. He brings in important topics of high relevance in respect to decolonialization in contemporary art.
4. The example of two parallel interpretations that have a common ground but also interesting, productive differences regarding the approach and the results. It is an exciting starting point to learn from two different perspectives, one from Germany, the country the piece had been shown, and one from Ghana, the country the artist is from.
5. Both interpretations agree that the artwork addresses important ‘Sustainable Development Goals’ (SDG) of the United Nations, mainly SDG # 13 (Climate Action) and # 14 (Life below Water). Thus a strong link between the artwork and crucial societal and environmental challenges can be drawn.

## **How students can work with the artwork and the two interpretations**

Taking the potentials and the educational relevance just mentioned into account, a group of art-teachers in Munich has come up with ideas on how students could work with the object and the interpretations given. Some of these ideas are presented below. In this collection, an artistic and a linguistic approach are distinguished. At the end of each idea, the competencies the students should acquire are addressed. (Wagner & Schönau 2016)

### Examples of a creative, art oriented approach

1. Two groups of students read (only) one of the interpretations each without seeing the artwork. Now the students draw on a sheet of paper how they imagine the artwork. Then they compare their results (1) between the two groups and (2) with pictures of the original. (Competencies addressed: imagine, translate text into images, interpret comparatively)
2. El Anatsui uses disposable material found locally. This material always carries a specific meaning. The students consider which disposable material could represent the place where they live or their region / country. They collect this material and spread it in a suitable place on the ground. Now they dicuss possible arrangements or compositions. The definition of the topic can be done before or during that creative process. (Competencies addressed: imagine, create, interpret)
3. The students produce a basic structure of the same size of El Anatsui’s work in a suitable, large room and consider how they can design a surface, a 3-dimensional image on this structure. They develop a technically sensible solution, that also fits temporary storage. (Competencies addressed: make, meet technical challenges)
4. The students develop as many creative ideas as possible on how to respond to the threats of global warming. In small groups they select one of those ideas and realize it in such a way that it can be presented in a public place. (Draft, create, make)
5. The students research specific local craft traditions that tell something about the history of the region, e.g. in a local museum. They develop ideas, how they could use these craft skills in working with contemporary materials. The results can be offered to the museum to create an exhibition out of them. (Competencies addressed: research, analyse, draft, create, make)

### Examples of a linguistic approach

1. The students compare the two interpretations with particular attention of the respective consideration of the sea motive. Which image of the sea is produced in each case? (Competencies addressed: analyze, interpret)
2. In comparison of the two texts, the students examine the respective methodological procedures and the argumentation. (Competencies addressed: analyze, compare, reflect)
3. The students formulate a thesis, which of the two interpretations could make the artist El Anatsui happier. They justify their assumption. (Competencies addressed: analyze, evaluate)
4. What are the differences in respect to the representation of the sea by El Anatsui and European artists like C.D. Friedrich, W. Turner, G. Courbet? (Competencies addressed: compare, interpret)
5. The students compare art works that pursue similar pictorial strategies, such as the use of fabrics by Richard Morris, Joseph Beuys, or Christo, the application of ornamental splendor in Gustav Klimt's ‚The Kiss‘, the utilization of an ‚all-over‘-structure in Jackson Pollock's drippings etcetera. They develop a mind map that places El Anatsui in the context of current or historical artistic positions. (Competencies addressed: research, analyze, compare, interpret, visualize)
6. The students research examples of how contemporary artists and creatives react to the threats of global warming. They design an exhibition based on their findings. (Competencies addressed: research, analyze, interpret, visualize, communicate)

Decolonization plays an important role in current art discourses. The students research different points of view regarding this issue in the arts and reflect on El Anatsui’s stand point within this context. (Competencies addressed: research, analyze)

## Conclusion and outlook

The coming years will show to what extent the concept presented here actually contributes to decolonizing the latent canon of German art education. The most important factor will be the acceptance by the teachers. Their legitimate concern is, among many other goals, to also convey the foundations of our own (Central-) European culture. All of this must be done within the short time available. It certainly will be no problem to include global, contemporary artists from the Global South, such as El Anatsui. These have long since arrived in the current art system. It becomes more difficult with historical works of art from other regions of the world that are not directly received in Europe or have not been, but that are of great importance in the respective region.

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