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Ghanaian Curator Nana Oforiatta Ayim on Why the Future of the Museum Must Exist Beyond Art's Traditional Boundaries

Her vision for the second Ghana Pavilion in Venice is finally coming to fruition after a funding delay.

Christine Ajudua (<https://news.artnet.com/about/christine-ajudua-8290>), July 27, 2022



Nana Oforiatta Ayim. Photo: Fifi Abban.

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A dozen years ago, Nana Oforiatta Ayim worked in the Africa department at the British Museum. Since then, the Ghanaian art historian, filmmaker, and writer has been deconstructing the very idea of it—or rather, the very colonial idea of a museum as a “universal,” monolithic institution that at once “elevates the art object and distances you from it,” she said.

Oforiatta Ayim is behind Accra’s nonprofit [Ano Institute of Arts and Knowledge](https://www.anoghana.org/) (<https://www.anoghana.org/>) and its Pan-African [Cultural Encyclopedia](https://culturalencyclopaedia.org/) (<https://culturalencyclopaedia.org/>), a digital archive-in-progress of all things culture-related across the continent’s 54 countries. In 2016, with the architect DK Osseo-Asare, she created a small, kiosk-like [Mobile Museum](https://www.anoghana.org/mobile-museums) (<https://www.anoghana.org/mobile-museums>) to travel around Ghana while adapting with each new locale—not only exhibiting its collections, but also inviting local communities to contribute to them along the way.

Now, the Mobile Museum is gearing up to travel around Venice, Italy, where Oforiatta Ayim returned to curate the Biennale’s Ghana Pavilion for a second time, having launched it with the architect David Adjaye in 2019 to much [acclaim](https://news.artnet.com/art-world/ghana-pavilion-venice-biennale-1541425) (<https://news.artnet.com/art-world/ghana-pavilion-venice-biennale-1541425>). While the inaugural pavilion situated Ghana’s present in relation to its past, this year’s exhibition—“Black Star: The Museum as Freedom,” with large-scale installations by emerging artists Na Chainkua Reindorf, Isaac Nana Akwasi Opoku (a.k.a. Afroscope), and Diego Araújo exploring new modes of expression—is more focused on the future.

And, she said, “I think the future museum encompasses way more than just art.”

Before leaving Accra for Italy, where she is currently installing the final part of the exhibition in Venice—which lost government funding at the last minute due to Ghana’s financial crisis—Oforiatta Ayim spoke with Artnet News about her hustle to reimagine museums with and for the communities they serve.



Works by Na Chainkua Reindorf in the Ghana Pavilion at this year’s Venice Biennale. Photo: David Levene.

I’d love to hear about the inspirations behind the exhibition for this year’s Ghana Pavilion.

“Black Star”—obviously, it’s in the middle of our flag; it’s the name of our football team; but it was also the name of Marcus Garvey’s shipping line.

So it has these national connotations, but then also these very pan-African connotations—this idea of unity across not just the continent, but also of the diaspora, and also of Ghana having its Year of Return [in 2019; it is now hosting a 10-year Beyond the Return campaign].

Ghana has always kind of been placed as this kind of lodestar, leading the way of what could be possible for Africans and Black people across the world. It's fascinating to me that there are so many African Americans coming back—people like Chance the Rapper seeing Ghana as this place of possibility.

I invited a Brazilian artist, Diego Araújo, to be part of the exhibition because I felt like, What does it actually mean, this return? What is the message or connection that we're trying to build? What can it really do for us in terms of healing these wounds of the past and creating new connections for the future?

And then, what can it mean in terms of our cultural institutions?

I think the first exhibition, "Ghana Freedom," was about looking at the past, and where do we situate our present in relation to the past? I paired older artists with younger ones—Felicia Abban with Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, and Ibrahim Mahama with El Anatsui, and John Akomfrah with Selasi Awusi Sosu—so that it was very much about time.

With "Black Star: the Museum as Freedom," it's the idea of, How do we create freedom for ourselves now and in the future? And so the artists are really future-builders.



Isaac Nana Akwasi Opoku (aka Afroscope), "Dreamer" series, 2021. © Afroscope.

What sort of future, or futures, are they building?

So, Na [Chainkua Reindorf] is looking into mythologies of masquerading, which are so male-focused. She created this whole mythology around women and women's bodies, and these skins that women can put on for their own liberation. It's very much grounded inside this idea of women's freedom and inhabiting your freedom in such an incredible, empowering way.

Then Afroscope [the artist Isaac Nana Akwasi Opoku], he trained a robotic arm to draw in his likeness and created this museum within a virtual-reality space. He's really looking at to what extent can we expand technology to expand ourselves, and our own physical limitations—to what extent can technology set us free? And can we imbue it with a spirit?

And Diego Araújo, who is a Brazilian artist, created this installation piece called *A Salt Congress*...

I pause because we haven't managed to put it up yet. The government pulled all funding from this year's pavilion a month before the opening because of the financial crisis. I'm still suffering the consequences of it now.

How did you manage to open the pavilion at all?

I have a great network of people that I've built over the last 20 years—that's how it happened. People that I know and that I work with just spread the word, like wildfire, that the Ghana pavilion had to be supported. In Ghana, I literally went knocking on doors. And people just gave, gave, gave.

And in Venice, the most beautiful thing was that we got so much support. We didn't have installers, we didn't have producers; all these people kept coming in, helping us to bead things, install things, to put this thing on the ground—I mean, it was incredible.

And so we were still free to create what we needed to create, despite the obstacles and despite the constrictions that we were dealt. We still were able to put ourselves into this global narrative and have resonance.

But it was unbelievably stressful. And still is, because we haven't finished.



Na Chainkua Reindorf, *Veil* (2022), in the Ghana Pavilion at the Venice Biennale 2022. Photo: David Levene.

Why was that particular piece—*A Salt Congress*—delayed?

It was like nine crates. It was so expensive, too—oh my God. Anyway, that's a whole other thing—the nightmare of logistics of getting it, hauling it to Venice.

But the piece is being installed right now. It's a sound installation. Diego's whole premise was: How do you create a language between Ghana and Brazil that's not born of trauma, and not born of separation, but that's a common language between us—that we create anew?

I found that fascinating. I spent three months in Brazil on a writing residency and it was astounding; the echoes and resonance that I felt from Ghana were just incredible.

So all three of them are looking towards something *future*—new languages, new mythologies, new technologies.

I really wanted this Ghanaian pavilion to be at the forefront, you know? Not just like, "Oh, here we are joining the conversation." No, we are actually at the *forefront* of this conversation.

In the West, the conversation is still very much about decolonizing museums.

To me, that's a whole other thing that has its own problems [laughs]. I mean, a lot of these spaces, if they were truly to decolonize, they would have to eat themselves up; they would have to basically

destroy themselves in order to rise again.

I'm not saying that they're disingenuous—some people, I'm sure, do want to grapple with this colonial past. But if they *really* want to do it, they would have to let go of maybe 20, 30 years of their careers. Like, the African studies programs or Africanists—their fields are colonial. There's no two ways around it.

I feel like the Western museum is based on, *I think, therefore I am*—like the white man of the Enlightenment who goes out into the world and collects things to bring back to the enlightened viewer.

And to me a whole new paradigm needs to be put in place, which is why I started Ano's Cultural Encyclopedia—it was almost kind of like a rebuff to the Enlightenment and to the whole kind of French *Encyclopédie*.



Ano's Mobile Museum in Accra, Ghana. Courtesy of Ano Institute of Arts and Knowledge.

How does that connect with Ano's Mobile Museum?

They connect in that the Mobile Museum is traveling around Ghana, and all of the cultural information that we collect from it is uploaded onto the Cultural Encyclopedia. And also the exhibitions and workshops that we do in the Ano space correlate to wherever the museum is at that time.

The aim is to deconstruct the idea of a museum as static and monolithic, to bring it into communities, and also to reevaluate—or think about—what has value, who gives value to what object, and why. And to create a kind of kaleidoscopic encyclopedia of the country—not an authoritative one or a definitive one, but a starting point.

You launched the Mobile Museum with Osseo-Asare in 2016, converting one of Accra's ubiquitous kiosks—small, quasi-legal structures that house everything from barbershops to groceries. How has it evolved since then? You recently reimagined it for exhibitions in Germany [[“Efie: The Museum as Home \(https://dortmunder-u.de/efie/\)”](https://dortmunder-u.de/efie/)] and at the Dakar Biennale [[“Nkabom: The Museum as Community”](#)].

In Venice as well—we've connected with people from the local community who are looking at themes that reflect or resonate with those of the Ghana pavilion, to do a Mobile Museum outside of the biennale later in the year.

We have what DK is now calling the *fufuzela*—these bamboo structures. The name comes from *fufu*, our national dish. So like music and food, the idea of the structure is something that everybody has access to—because they're open source, they're modular, anyone can put them together.

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We can add different exteriors, depending on what we come across. It's kind of a research project, in that we're learning so much as we go along; we don't have a fixed idea of what we're going to find. And I think, in a way, that's the beauty of it—we go and we research and we find out what's on the ground, and then create a structure accordingly.

The arrogance of patriarchal models is that they come in and they impose what they think is right for us in terms of structure, but I don't even know what's right for us. I may know what's right for me and my tiny little community in Accra, which is quite a cosmopolitan arts community, but that might not be right for a community in Tamale; it might not be right for a community in Kumasi.

In a way, the Mobile Museum is as much a research tool as it is an exhibition model. It's trying to be humble in its premises, and hoping that within the journey, what we find are things that we don't even know yet, that we can't even imagine.



Installing Ano's Mobile Museum in Elmina, Ghana. Courtesy of Ano Institute of Arts and Knowledge.

Tell me about the National Museum of Ghana (<http://nationalmuseum.ghana-net.com/index.html>), which originally opened in 1957, and which you helped reopen in Accra last month; it had been closed for seven years.

The National Museum was always thought of as a national gallery. In the 1960s, [then-president] Kwame Nkrumah actually commissioned these Italian architects to build a new national museum. Then obviously we had the coup, and he was deposed, and the museum, as it was envisaged, never came to be.

But its foundations are still there. And so with all of these ideas that we have, I thought: Why don't we create a museum for our context and for our time?

I wanted to do it with David Adjaye initially, but now obviously, David is doing so many projects here in Ghana—the National Cathedral (<https://www.adjaye.com/work/national-cathedral-of-ghana/>), you know—that it became: What if we invite the next generation of designers to think about what a museum can look like?

This is something that is being supported by the ministry of tourism—this idea of us having a competition and creating a space for this future museum where the national museum was originally intended to be.

Is that something you're still actively working toward?

I am, but I'm *really* tired of working with government [laughs].

You know, I was asked to be the lead curator [of the National Museum], and I initially had this whole plan of creating a kind of decolonial institution. And then the minister of tourism comes and

says, “Well, actually, you only have a week to finish the exhibition.” A week!

Oh, wow.

Because it was on his political agenda. And so this whole deeply thought-through narrative got sidelined by politics.

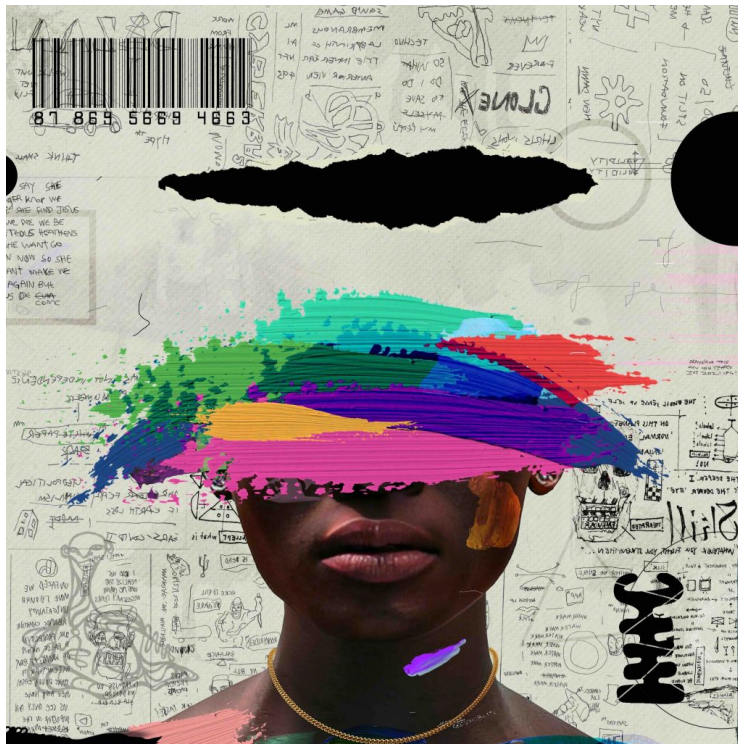
It’s not the same as in the global north, where institutions are already built, infrastructure exists, and, you know, if you want to be a curator, an art historian, you just do that one thing.

I used to say, when I first set up Ano, that we didn’t just have to be the creatives—we had to be the creators of our own narratives. And now, 20 years later, it’s even bigger than that: It’s not just that we have to be the creators of our own narratives—we also have to be the creators of our own structures, and our own infrastructure.

And then, not just of our own infrastructure, but of our own resources, too.

On the one hand it’s really exciting, because I would never have been able to do what I’m doing here and now in the U.K., for example. I’m imagining new structures, and I’m pretty much certain that I’m gonna be able to dream them into being, because I don’t have the rules and the regulations, etcetera, of a place like London.

But at the same time, it means that I pretty much have to do *everything* myself [laughs]. And it’s really tiring!



Isaac Nana Akwasi Opoku (aka Afroscope), “Dreamer” series, 2021. © Afroscope.

What’s your vision for the museum, or a museum, of the future—or for the structures that you’re imagining and dreaming into existence?

There’s a community across the global south, whether in Bolivia or Vietnam or the Bahamas, where I speak with creatives and future dreamers about what kind of structures are possible. And the fact that they span not just art, but also politics and ecology and the environment and education, is what’s really inspiring to me—because the art world paradigm is one that’s way too narrow right now. I can’t operate and exist in a paradigm that literally speaks to itself.

When you go to the opening of the Venice Biennale or the Dakar Biennale, or even in an exhibition in Accra, what you find is other people who know and appreciate the arts already—other artists or curators or thinkers or academics or art lovers. Which is fine and great; it's a family, and I'm not knocking it at all. But what about the rest of the world, people who could be just as impacted or inspired or as expanded by art? How are we speaking to or exchanging with *everybody*?

And so I think the future museum is one that encompasses way more than just art.

First of all, it would be really grounded within our context, where we maybe look at spiritual traditions, indigenous knowledge systems, local materials, things that grow here and that are sustainable and thoughtful in the way that they are built and created, but also one that speaks to everyone—you know, various members of the community, not just the elite. And then also that encompasses these different ways of being—not just the arts, but also philosophy and ecology and the environment and education.

For example, at home—and when I say “home,” I mean my hometown, which is up near the Atewa rainforest—we have the Odwira festival. And in the festival you have art, poetry, music, dance. It's this incredible exhibition model, like a *Gesamtkunstwerk*—this total work of art, with the highest artistic forms of expression all coming together in one. And everyone participates in it. It's like every single object that you see in the British Museum is on display, and embodied.

It's a form that's been around for centuries and centuries. When you leave, you've learned and you've been uplifted and you've been enlightened and you've come together as a community. I've always been very inspired by experiencing that firsthand.

You have these days as well where you are supposed to go to the elders for history and mythologies. There's also dance and drumming and the design of the cloth, which *speaks*. And the drummer who drums a kind of historical poem will pour libation to the tree that he's cutting from, and ask the tree, “Can I cut you?” And then he *listens* to the tree.

It's not a desecration of nature and the environment, but an encompassing of it. And so for me, a future museum would be one that encompasses all of these different elements of life, rather than excluding them.



I understand you're working on a new project outside of Accra, in the countryside.

That's kind of the future for Ano. We have a bit of land up in the mountains, in Aburi, and we're creating a farm and school.

We'll still have Ano in Accra, but in Aburi we're creating this new kind of space, looking at the next generation and the next 20 years of Ano. We're creating a school based off everything that we've gathered over the last 20 years—the indigenous knowledge systems, material that we've gathered through the Pan-African Cultural Encyclopedia.

And a farm is part of that, because for me now, it's not just about the arts or education, but about the whole of it, the ecology. So the idea is also that the kids and residents who come through are growing their own foods, creating, cooking, eating—all of that will be part of this whole process of the museum being *life*, from beginning to end.

So that's the next phase. We're fundraising for it right now.

What inspired this?

With the whole debate around restitution that's been happening, a group of us have come together—Africans who are working actively towards restitution—largely women, interestingly enough.

At the beginning of this whole restitution resurgence, there was so much required of us. People would call us and be, like, "Can we interview you about this?" "Can we talk to you about this?" It was almost like this exploitation economics, where we were supposed to represent the African voice in a sea of whiteness.

And we talked so much [among us] about how we preserve our mental health, our physical well-being, our own selves within this work, which is so taxing—not just in terms of the actual work, but also, you know, when you are going into these institutions, which are majority white and to a large extent still steeped in violence, how do you take care of yourself? How do you protect yourself?

How do we make sure that we have support mechanisms for each other, where we check in with each other and make sure that we're O.K.? Because this work of restitution is not just about objects coming back—it's about repair; it's about healing. It's emotional work. It's spiritual work, as well.

So you're creating a sort of infrastructure for self-preservation?

Yeah. And creating spaces that are not just about coming in to do this work—they are spaces of care, and they're spaces of growth.

There's been so much damage. There's been so much trauma. There's been so much separation. I feel like so many of us have been working, working, working so hard to undo this and to heal and to repair. But in the process of that, you know, sometimes we damage ourselves, or we work ourselves into the ground.

And how do we do the opposite of that? How do we create spaces where we can flourish, where we can have joy, where we can have ease? Where we can put our hands into the earth and grow something on a hilltop and still be contributing to our growth?

So that's where I'm looking next—towards us, and inwards, to create these spaces.

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