

A NEW CHAPTER * A NEW CHAPTER * A NEW CHAPTER

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The ‘Universal’ Museum

by Nana Oforiatta Ayim

Museums as we know them, at least the so-called encyclopedic museums, are based on the lie of the objective; of a flattened ‘universal’ that comes from a single vantage point that, looking out at all the others, labels them, others them and mutes them by way of temperature-controlled glass cases.

Worse, this way of seeing has been posited as the ‘standard of care’ to which we should aspire; a standard of care that allows Western museum directors to unashamedly say that we might not be able to look after our own objects when they are returned to us—objects we created and that were taken, often violently, from us.

And yet, we have had many centuries of exhibiting, of seeing, of experiencing, of caring. Some of the

same objects that are present in the British Museum in London are also present in the kingdom I am from, including the stool or drum house of the palace in Akyem Abuakwa. The kente cloth that was worn by the Asante King (or ‘Asantehene’), Otumfuo Osei Prempeh I when Asante self-rule was restored in 1935, was worn last year by the present Asantehene when he came to my hometown to mark the 75th anniversary of the death of the Akyem King Nana Ofori Atta I. Thousands of people saw the cloth on the day, and millions more on their television screens and across social media on the days and months to come. The cloth was not just a holder of history, but was re-imbued with meaning on this occasion, which also marked the ending of a 300-year-old taboo between the two kingdoms.

There are countless other objects like this, whose evolving material state and continued use become part of their story. They are not stuck in a static past for a mere handful of people to see; instead, their past is made present as they become alive at Afahye, which translates as

the ‘meeting of the year’. These are cyclical events marking renewal and featuring displays of objects, design, works of art, acts of performance, reenactment, music, poetry and dance. People from all walks of life, and from across the country and diasporas, come together to engage with one another at Afahye.

The first exhibition I curated, which was the Liverpool Biennial in 2002, was within the form of an Akan courtyard house. I was very young and had no architectural or curatorial experience, but I knew I did not want to present works of Ghanaian art within the confines of a white cube space. So, with the help of installers and of the Austrian arts collective Gelitin (who were my neighbours in the warehouse we were exhibiting in), I spent the days before the exhibition building and painting until there was some semblance of the structure of an Akan courtyard house: of earthen walls and of separate, but interlinked, chambers.

The works were arranged in a shadow form of the courtyard structure. In the middle, where

ordinarily the Nyame Dua (God's tree) would stand, were El Anatsui's upright, burnt-headed sculptures, Akua's *Surviving Children* (1996), made of driftwood washed out to sea; poignant in a city which, all around, was still valorising the traumatic legacies of slavery through monuments and buildings.

On one side of the courtyard was a painting by Owusu-Ankomah and a film by Mawuli Afatsiawo. There were also furniture design pieces by Selassie Tetevie, on which you could sit to take in the work—but also commune, converse and drink the palm wine I had brought over in my suitcase from Ghana. Next to this, there was a space with a collection of clothes created by Araba Hackman that you could try on. Or, you could take your photograph against a backdrop made by Marigold Akufo-Addo, in approximation of early West African studio photography.

In the final space, the 'spirit room'—the room which, in the courtyard house, was reserved for communion with spirits, with the ancestors, the divine—there were instruments, and

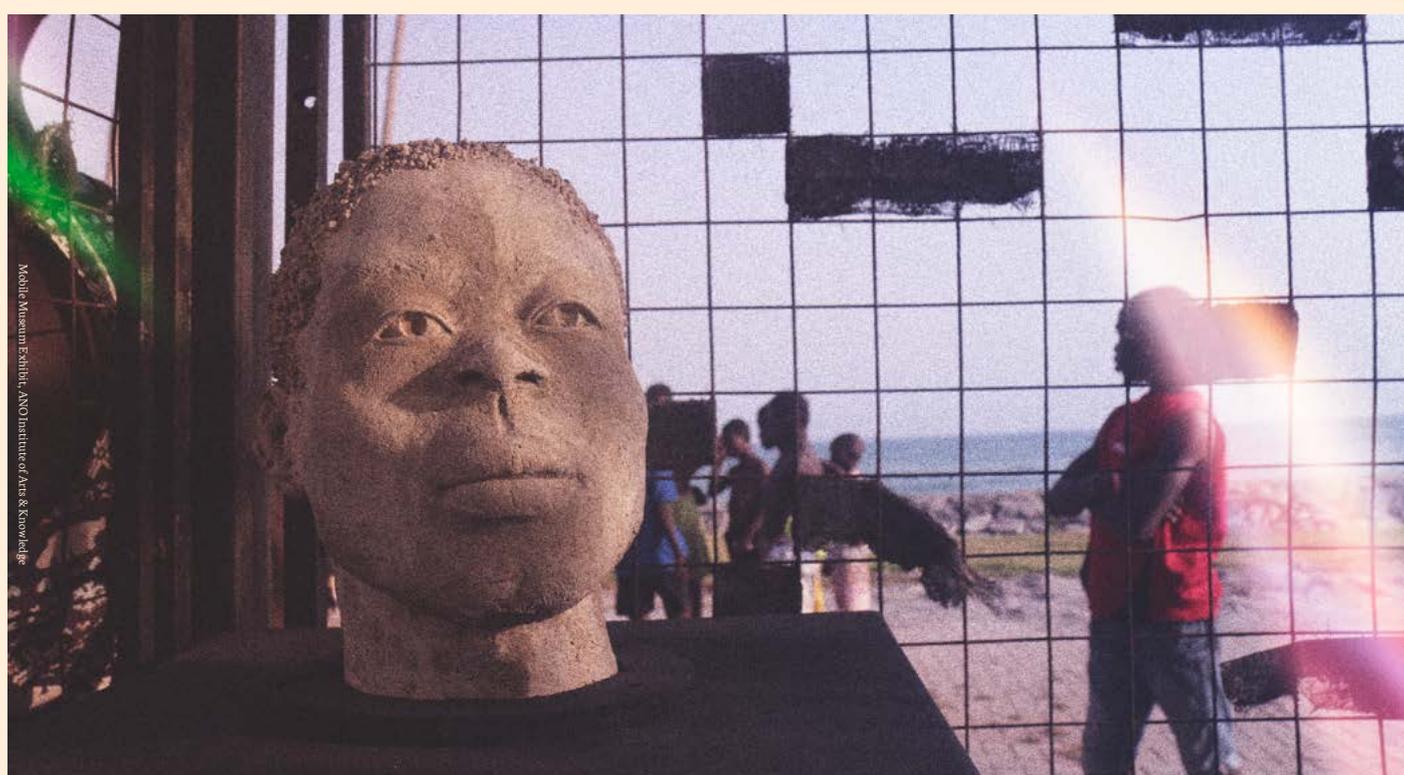
music by Panji Anoff and Nii Noi Nortey, as well as cushions by Nana Hema on which to sit. It was the space where, curtained off, people spent the most time, often many hours.

I teach a course on History and Theory at the Architectural Association in London, in which I aim to deconstruct the usually mono-cultural theories we are taught on histories, archives, institutions; to open up to other ways of seeing and being. Asked to imagine what museums might be if they were not the spaces we had inherited but rather something else, perhaps not yet in existence, one of my students, Anna, imagined the museum not as a museum but as a home for objects, with the requisite care that might come with that, and with each space in the museum created with this in mind. The notion reminded me of the spaces I have visited in Ghana where objects are kept and treated not as inert objects, but as immanent and alive.

We live in a time where the local and the global coexist, not as a function

of colonialism, but because they have survived it. This is therefore a time in which we can choose which elements to pick from in order to create a greater whole, much like the pluralistic faith systems of our pasts. With this in mind, I began to consider which structures we might select from the very best of Western museums—various art forms in a concentrated space—and of the Afahye—dynamic, many-faceted, inclusive and open-ended events. My thinking began with form, with questioning what type of structure might be right for our context, for as many people and experiences as possible, not just for a few.

I found that there was one particular structure on every corner, used for every imaginable purpose: the kiosk. It was used for low-income housing, for commerce, for entertainment, for shelter. I collaborated with the architect DK Osseo-Asare on the first Museum in a Kiosk in 2015, which was almost identical in shape and material to the traditional structure. We set it up at the Chale Wote festival in Accra, which is itself a reinvention of the Afahye.



Mobile Museum Exhibit, ANO Institute of Arts & Knowledge

The resonance of the Kiosk was even more than I could have imagined, partly because it was embedded in the community, and partly because the content was collected from and filmed within the community, and so spoke directly to it.

It did not seem enough to stage a Museum in a Kiosk only once, so I collaborated on a second version of the Mobile Museum with the architect Latifah Idriss in Accra in 2017. This time, we constructed a kiosk using metal and mesh, and made it modular so that it could better be transported. Its porousness to the outside world meant that you could see the exhibits in the Mobile Museum from the outside as well as the inside, making it even more accessible. Unfortunately, its material could not withstand the changing weather conditions and topographies of the country. The third iteration that we are creating at the moment here in Accra is another collaboration with DK Osseo-Asare, this time made out of bamboo, with the idea that communities around the country would be able to create their own Mobile Museum.

Whilst travelling the country on a research trip for the Mobile Museum, I asked many different types of people—fishermen, weavers, market women, lecturers, artists, politicians, priests, mallams, knowledge keepers and more—what art or culture means to them, and which kinds of structures they would want to see it presented in. Every encounter in every region informed and expanded what was presented in the structure, from works by contemporary artists, both internationally recognised and locally active to objects, documents, works of art and photographs from various community members, from leaders to stall keepers.

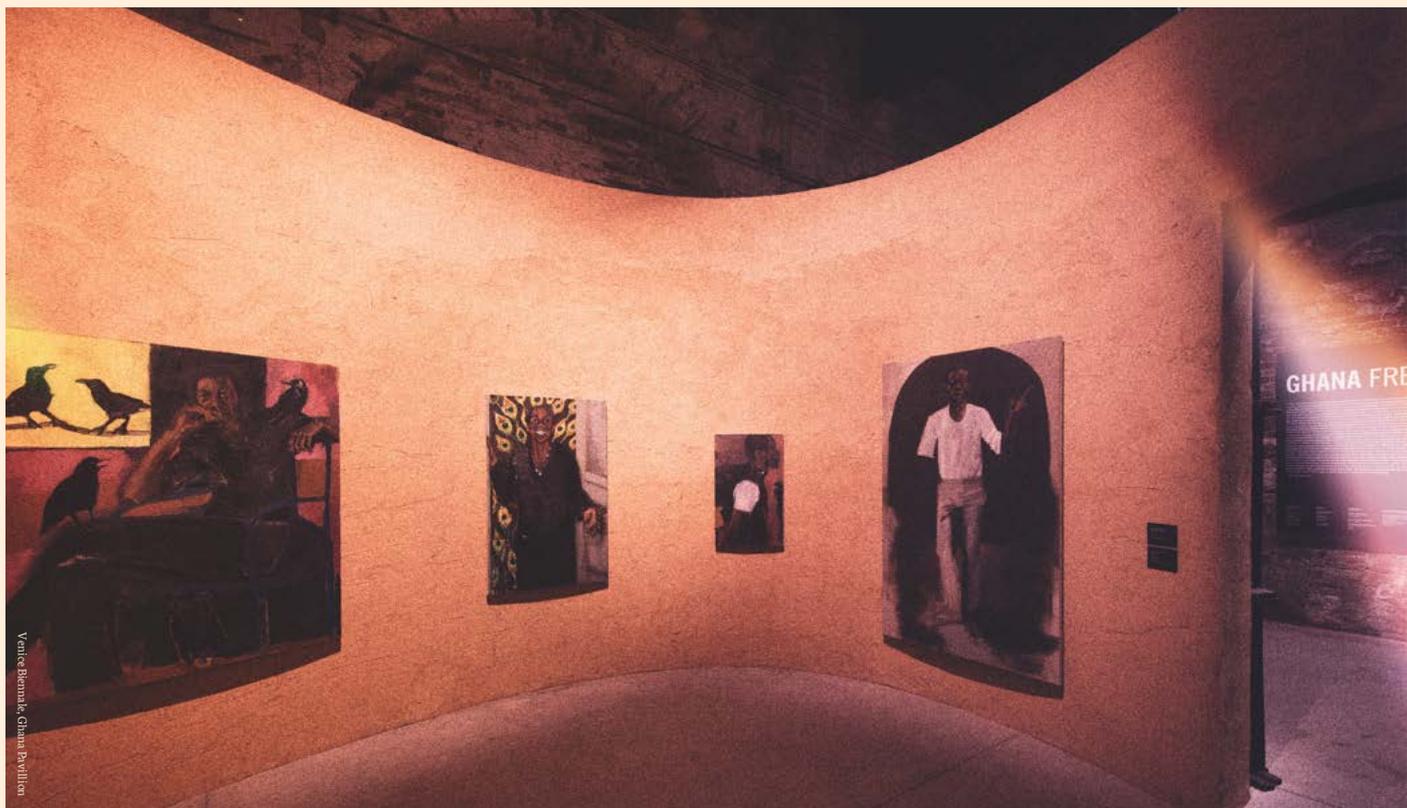


How could this kind of engagement translate on a national level—both the community engagement, ownership and interaction, as well as the connection and resonance that come from such engagement? Could we stage workshops with schools, universities, community leaders and others in order to enable lots of different voices to be heard and included—representing the broad spectrum of realities, gender, class and standing, rather than just the big figures of history such as its kings and politicians? Could we include multiplicities of interpretation? Or histories that are somehow intangible, comprising more of the senses than just visual, including touch, taste and smell?

One way is to decentralise; to stop putting all of our efforts into central institutions that live in capital cities, but instead to have constant and active strategies of engagement in various regions. Another way is to bring community ownership, curatorship and narrative-making into the museum itself, so that exhibitions are not just organised statements, but explorations and co-creations. Yet another is to rethink how we exhibit objects and narratives; in what constellation and to what extent we separate them from their contexts. There

are so many ways to bring the museum home, especially during this moment in which so many of us are rethinking the imperialist model that Western museums were constructed to serve; a flawed model that was then exported around the world.

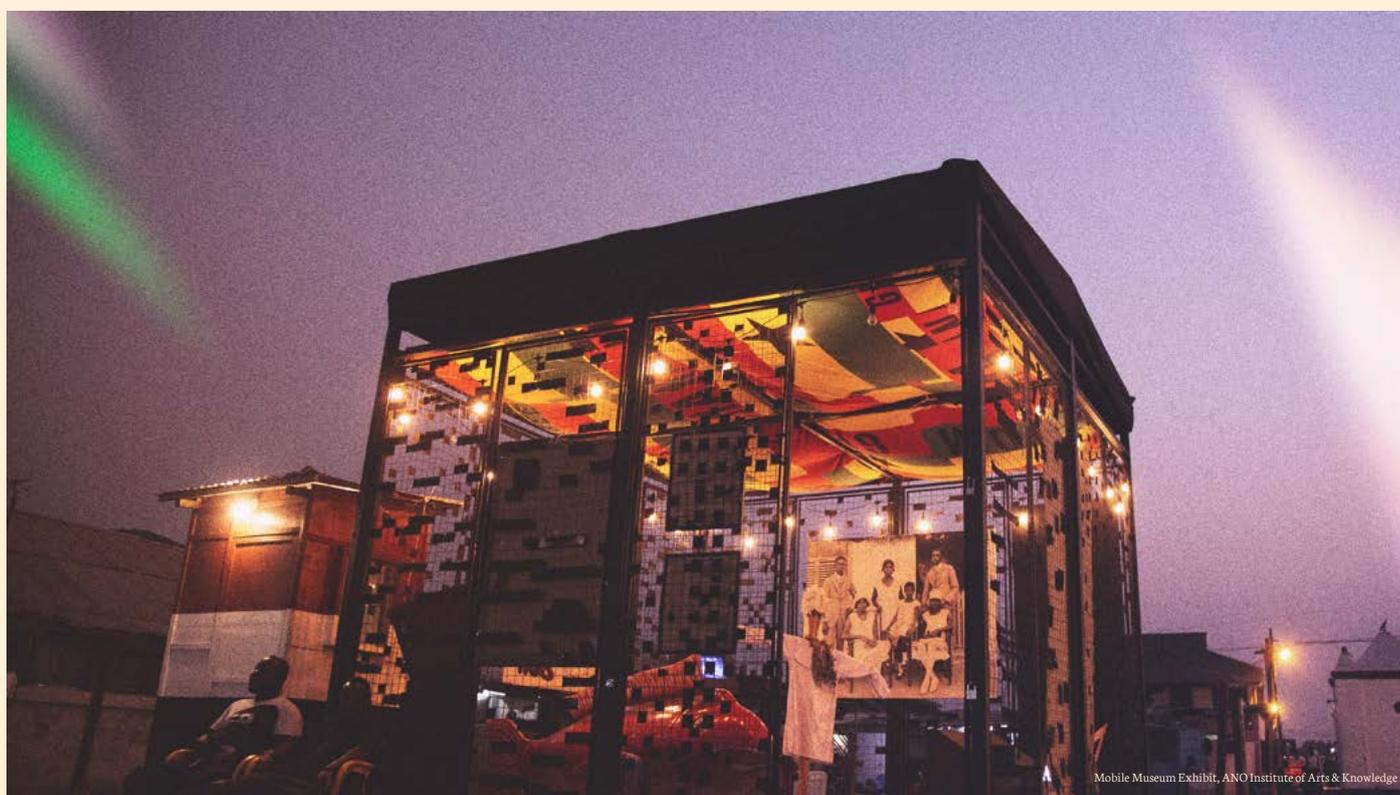
In Ghana, we have our National Museum and our regional museums. We have museums that are part of monuments, telling layered narratives: of migration and exchange, of separation and fragmentation through the Atlantic slave trade and of nation building. We have themed institutions, such as the Museum of Science and Technology, that can serve as generative creative centres—whether for our space programmes or for the many technology hubs that are emerging across the country. We have museums in national parks where the work spans many professional fields, such as environment, animals, archaeology and community. All of our museums can be made more dynamic and engaging if we can move away from calcifying hierarchies, and instead acknowledge that we need to constantly learn alongside people, who are just as important as objects.



Verde Biennale, Ghana Pavilion



Verde Biennale, Ghana Pavilion



Mobile Museum Exhibit, ANO Institute of Arts & Knowledge

In 2019, I curated Ghana's first pavilion for the Venice Biennale, which is one of the world's oldest exhibitions—an event often described as the Olympics of the art world. When I first attended in 2001, there was an 'African' pavilion with artists from Ghana, South Africa, Algeria, Nigeria and Cuba. The structure was situated far from the centre of the biennale, where the 'First World' countries' pavilions were located. It was then that I decided that, one day, I would do a pavilion just for Ghana—not Africa—and that it would be built in the middle of the biennale, equal amongst other 'First World' nations. It would not be abandoned by the margins.

It was also at that 2001 edition of the Venice Biennale that I met the architect David Adjaye, with whom I would work 18 years later to create the first Ghana Pavilion. Again, its form was inspired by historical architecture from Ghana, but this time the interpretation was done by an internationally renowned architect, who is himself Ghanaian-British.

I knew that I wanted interlinked chambers; separate, but coming together in unity, like the knowledge systems I had studied. I knew that I wanted to incorporate the notion of dualities that honour the unseen as well as the seen, and for those dualities of form and content to be in conversation with the works: El Anatsui and Ibrahim Mahama in sculpture; Felicia Abban and Lynette Yiadom-Boakye in portraiture; John Akomfrah and Selasi Awusi Sosu in film. I knew that, in order to translate some of the completeness of experience, there needed to be sight, sound, smell and sensation. I knew that I wanted there to be a balance in representation, across time, gender and place. And I knew that the Ghana Pavilion could act as a template for what a museum in Ghana might look like: one that was grounded in our ways of seeing and being, not divorced from the world, but embedded in it; equal, side by side.

We live in a moment that has not yet settled into shape. In many ways, this lack of definition presents us

with opportunities to break from the past and imagine radical new futures that are, as yet, unformed. Museums can play an irreplaceable role in this because they can bring us together to see anew. They help us to reflect, to exchange and to create. Museums can allow us to imagine new worlds and notions of the 'universal' in which, rather than one culture imposing its ways on others, we instead embrace the many pluralities of being. Instead of being told what to think, we can engage in mutual respect; in listening and in exchange.