

AKWAABA!

Kuonyesha in the City of Welcome



Earlier this year, The CivFund received an invitation to a convening in Ghana. What a great opportunity to strike two birds with one stone! No, I am not a poacher, but rather a true lover of nature, the arts, adventure, and the wild. So, no birds were harmed on my watch, just to be clear. We were determined to make the most of this opportunity in Ghana, not only to attend the convening but also to meet the seven artists that the Kuonyesha Art Fund had supported over the last two years yet had never met in person.

The Kuonyesha Art Fund began in 2019 in Uganda, and by 2023, it had become crystal clear that the need for such a fund across Africa was immense. Funding for the creative arts remained meagre across the continent, even as the number of talented, emerging artists continued to grow. Coupled with the arts' undeniable impact on community solutions and its unique employment opportunities for youth, this presented an urgent and worthy social justice cause, one worth advocating for at all costs. The creative arts offer a powerful platform for storytelling and cultural documentation, while also enabling countries to project soft power through their foreign missions by celebrating their culture and artistic expression, take Jamaica, for instance, globally recognized for its reggae music and culture.

The Kuonyesha Art Fund's expansion to serve the rest of Africa was both timely and strategic. It unlocked unique opportunities for collaboration and peer learning among artists, allowing them to share experiences and expertise across borders.

As the Ethiopian Airlines captain gave the usual pleasantries and guidance, announcing our landing at Kotoka International Airport and the outside temperature of 27 degrees Celsius, I realized that the warmth and excitement in my heart matched, or perhaps even exceeded, that number. I could hardly wait! We were warmly greeted with "Akwaaba" by the immigration staff, and it was truly a breath of fresh air. The Ghanaian immigration team looked sharp in their deep green uniforms, and they were both professional and efficient in ushering us into Accra. There were no unnecessary delays or probing questions, unlike the unpleasant experiences I've had at other airports I'd rather not name here. At Kotoka, my passport was swiftly stamped, no visa required, and I was warmly told, "Enjoy your stay in Ghana." And yes, I fully intended to take that advice to heart, literally!

The hotel airport shuttle arrived right on time, and we zipped through the streets of Accra. Being a Sunday, traffic was light or even non-existent, and in about twenty minutes we arrived at the Alisa Hotel, North Ridge. After checking in and settling into my room, the fatigue from nearly twelve hours of travel, including a layover, finally hit me. I needed a brief rest. But first, I made sure to text the seven artists, letting them know I had arrived safely in Accra and was looking forward to our conversations in the days ahead.



“Woezo loooo daavi,” meaning “welcome sister,” was the first response I received from Sitsofe Attah. “Woezor loo,” added Bridget Adabe and Karen Happuch in unison. I instantly felt at home and knew I was about to meet not just fellow artists, but kindred spirits, my artistic siblings from across Africa, now based in Ghana. It was truly heartwarming.

The arts captivate us because they forge deep, lasting connections with audiences, evoking emotional and intellectual responses that transcend language and culture. This connection holds power because art mirrors both the artist’s and the viewer’s values, experiences, and historical context, allowing it to resonate on a personal level.

That resonance was unmistakable as Karen Happuch shared her journey, over twenty years of experience as an artist. We met over tea on Monday, and what a powerhouse she is. Karen, an animation artist, was supported by the Kuonyesha Art Fund to complete her film *Abrefi Koto*, a production that proved wildly successful and filled cinemas in Accra. It also earned her the distinction of being the **first female artist in Ghana** to produce and premiere an animated film.

Over the years, Karen experienced self-doubt and many of the challenges familiar to women in creative spaces. Few believed that she, a woman, was the talent behind the powerful visuals from KHPC Studios. But Karen kept going, and time proved them wrong. Today, KHPC is a household name in animation, video, and graphic design in Accra. Beyond her studio, Karen also serves on the media team at her local church. She is immensely gifted, yet so grounded, never boastful or arrogant despite her remarkable achievements.

When I met Jesse Sunkwa Mills, his calm and gentle presence was immediately disarming. He speaks in a rich baritone, each word laced with thoughtfulness and emotional depth, an artist of undeniable intellect and skill. His work, *The Guardians*, an animated film also supported by Kuonyesha Art Fund, completely captured the hearts of audiences in Accra. Every screening was sold out.

Beautifully crafted, the film tells a story rooted in African identity and showcases characters who look like the African youth watching them, heroes saving their own city. Jesse shared that growing up, he rarely saw himself reflected in the animations he watched. That disconnect drove his desire to create stories that African children could identify with. His dream is for his animations to grace major international stages like Cannes, and for African kids to one day celebrate their birthdays dressed as his characters. With his talent and vision, it’s only a matter of time, we can bet on that.

Next, my ever reliable and wonderfully chatty driver, Kennedy, took me to Wajaolo, another part of the city, where I had an appointment with Awura Abena, the visionary behind the fashion brand “Wear Ghana.” For the past twelve years, Awura Abena has built a movement celebrating fashion that is proudly designed and made in Ghana.



Art often presents fresh perspectives or conveys powerful social, political, or personal messages. Awura Abena's work does just that. "Wear Ghana" started humbly in her mother's garage but has since grown into a respected fashion house with its own flagship store and a separate production warehouse. From rolls of fabric to finished garments, the entire process is handled meticulously under the guidance of Agnes, her production supervisor.

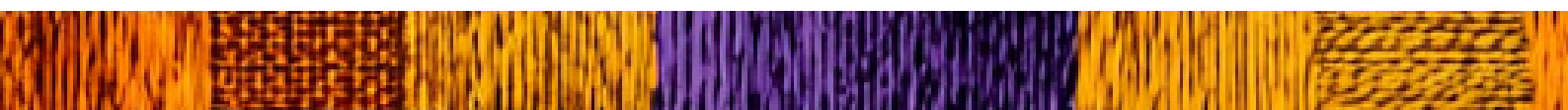
Meeting Awura Abena, one is instantly struck by her elegance and strength. She wore a bright yellow dress with African print detailing, and her hair, styled in twin cornrows adorned with cowrie shells, fell all the way down her back. Her fashion sense was as intentional as her words. She exudes mastery in fashion entrepreneurship, and her authenticity shines through every detail.

"Wear Ghana" doesn't just create clothes, it tells stories through colour, texture, and pattern. It draws you in, turning window-shoppers into lifelong admirers. Awura Abena is now scaling new heights through her latest project, *Republic of Africa*, a cross-continental collaboration that will see designs in stores across Africa, celebrating our shared identity as one Africa, one people.

Our next appointment was with David Asare, a documentary film artist. I had the privilege of first meeting David a decade ago in Cape Town during an artist capacity-strengthening fellowship. Fast forward to 2023, and our paths crossed again, this time in his hometown, Accra. David had invited us to meet at the Nubuke Foundation, an arts center located in East Legon. At the time, the Foundation was hosting a photography exhibition featuring works that challenged viewers through their realism and visually intriguing effects, inviting closer inspection. The exhibition was memorable, and the building itself, boldly curved and cuboid-like with grey stone walls, was a striking piece of architecture in its own right. As with all great exhibitions, the presentation, through lighting, sound, and spatial design, elevated the experience, creating a rich, immersive environment that deepened both emotional and intellectual engagement.

When David arrived, we found a quiet corner in one of the studio spaces and immersed ourselves in the world of film. His latest documentary explored the dangers of plastic waste in communities, an issue not limited to Accra, but one of global concern. The impact of this work was evident: shortly after the documentary's release, David was awarded additional funding from the National Film Academy in Accra. The selection process was highly competitive, and David emerged as the sole recipient of this prestigious award.

David shared that the Kuonyesha Art Fund was his first-ever grant, and it marked a turning point in his two-decade-long film career. For the first time, he was able to complete a documentary without his crew being burdened by logistical challenges or the anxiety of whether the project would reach completion. He praised the Kuonyesha Art Fund for its trust-based approach and flexible, transparent funding processes, describing the production journey as a "cool breeze", smooth, empowering, and artist-centered. It was, in his words, a dream come true.



Interestingly, although all seven artists lived in Accra and were beneficiaries of the same program, they had never met. One of CivFund's intentional strategies is its *movement-building approach*, which fosters peer-to-peer learning and knowledge exchange. To this end, we organized a lunch meeting at Alisa Hotel on Friday, where all the artists could finally connect. They all confirmed attendance, except Karen, who was filming a wedding that day due to the growing demand for her film expertise.

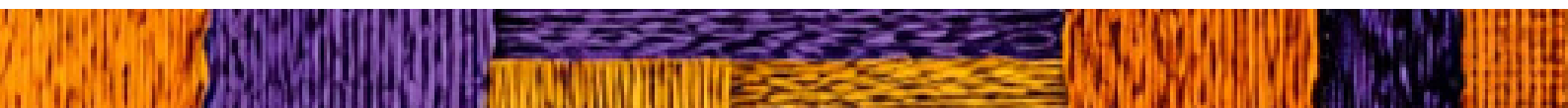
Lillian Tamale, the CivFund Manager, opened the gathering with welcome remarks and an overview of CivFund's history and its ethos of partnership. As plates of spicy, flavourful jollof rice and other authentic Ghanaian delicacies were passed around, the room filled with laughter and warm conversation. A shared sense of deep gratitude began to take root.

"For the first time, I felt affirmed, seen, and heard as an artist when I applied and was selected," said Sitsofe, a creative who uses dance as a medium for healing, communication, and the reaffirmation of African identity, values, and womanhood. In many ways, art is grounded in both storytelling and context, serving as a compelling lens into the artist's world, culture, and historical realities. Sitsofe emphasized that in her work, we don't rely on artificial intelligence but rather *ancestral intelligence*, drawing from her roots, history, and culture to shape the present.

Through reflection and engagement, art captures attention by allowing audiences to see themselves within it, whether through shared emotions, philosophical resonance, or sheer curiosity. Dance has become a vast and ever-expanding horizon for Sitsofe Attah, both as an artist and as a custodian of African legacy.

Adelaide Larbi-Amoah, whose film project on dance in the community had once stirred, energized, and intrigued her local audience, had since traveled abroad for further studies. Upon hearing that I was in her hometown, Accra, she quickly connected me with her producer, her sister and creative partner in the making of the dance film. Aphua Larbi was swift to arrange a meeting, and we had a wonderful time connecting. Their collaborative film, titled *Loud Silence*, is now positioned for submission to upcoming short film festivals across the globe, and we eagerly await the accolades it is sure to receive.

Bridget Adabe had faced many disappointments, having applied to numerous artistic calls, most of which disqualified her due to age restrictions. Yet as she pointed out, creativity knows no age. Though discouraged, she never stopped creating. So, when she saw the Kuonyesha Art Fund's open call, welcoming artists of all ages, it felt like a divine intervention. She applied immediately and was selected. As she shared this pivotal moment in her life, her voice trembled, and her eyes welled up with emotion.



Bridget's artistic practice involves repurposing plastic and fabric offcuts into wearable, one-of-a-kind jewellery pieces. Her work is nothing short of extraordinary, showstoppers, really. It's almost unbelievable that such stunning creations are entirely handmade from recycled materials. When she opened her jewellery pouch and displayed just a few pieces she had carried, we were all stunned. Several of us couldn't resist purchasing pieces on the spot to take back home as gifts.

The atmosphere at the lunch had become one of creative synergy and possibility. Collaboration opportunities were born in real-time as the artists connected, laughed, and shared ideas. They made plans to stay in touch, visit each other's studios, and attend each other's events. In many ways, this gathering marked the birth of a mini art movement, a new fraternity of creatives rooted in shared values, support, and the spirit of Ghanaian hospitality. Over plates of jollof rice and peals of laughter, something meaningful had taken root. *Akwaaba!*

In essence, the power of art lies in its ability to move us profoundly, challenge our intellect, and serve as a mirror to the human experience, one that is both personal and universally understood. As we drove away with Kennedy, laughter still ringing in our ears, I was overcome with awe and deep gratitude. These artists had opened their lives and shared their creativity with the world, and Kuonyesha Art Fund had been fortunate to walk alongside them on that journey.

© **Elizabeth Mbabazi**
Kuonyesha Art Fund Lead

