



*White T-Shirt*  
Annan Affotey  
2020

# The Creatives' Curse: Youth & Fine Art in Ghana

*"It's all of these wealthy white collectors who are making huge money off of African artists during Black Lives Matter. These people must not care about Black lives at all."*

*Bennett Roberts, Los Angeles gallerist*

*"Ghana has a jobs-focused economy but a culture that loves art. [How do you reconcile that?] Let me put it this way, a bottle doesn't know the contents of the liquid it contains, and it has no idea if it's valuable. But someone outside looking in, they see treasure."*

*Amakai Queye, Ghanaian artist*

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<sup>1</sup> Freeman, N. (2020). *The Swift, Cruel, Incredible Rise of Amoako Boafo: How Feverish Selling and Infighting Built the Buzziest Artist of 2020*. [online] Artnet News. Available at: <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/amoako-boafo-1910883> [Accessed 21 Mar. 2021]

# The Creatives' Curse: Youth and Fine Art in Ghana

A system analysis by Sarah Ehlinger Affotey, Esther Ninshuti, Kwaku Kufuor, and Pelumi Olawale  
University of Oxford, Saïd Business School

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# I. Summary

Fine art represents a \$50.1 billion-dollar industry<sup>2</sup> but also has unique cultural value in the way it contributes to global conversations on social justice and imagination for a better future.<sup>3</sup> Fueled by the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, African art has seen an exponential rise in popularity and value in recent years,<sup>4</sup> and several high-profile Ghanaian artists have become international success stories.<sup>5</sup> In countries with robust supporting infrastructure, art represents a sizable fraction of GDP.<sup>6</sup> A country with deep social pressures to pursue science professions, Ghana has minimal enabling infrastructures for youth<sup>7</sup> to achieve successful careers in art. Furthermore, lack of data (artists, sales, prices, buyer identities, location of works) cloud whether the booming industry benefits Ghanaian artists or “middlemen” further down the value chain.

Given our personal awareness of the myriad barriers Ghanaian youth face in pursuing art, we tackled the industry’s opacity through stories. Informed by human-centered design,<sup>8</sup> our research examined the interactions of deep social, political, and economic structures that keep youth from entering and succeeding in the industry. While power inequities and social barriers were always present, the rapid rise of the industry and accompanying power shifts have presented a chance for a reset. Without a reset, the rising industry may place Ghana at risk to the type of exploitation synonymous with the resource curse.

# II. Problem Landscape

Five true stories (visual map pgs. 3–4) illustrate challenges that youth face along the journey. Upon first finding a passion in art, a youth might experience:

- Being beaten for going to a friend’s house to draw.
- Being forced to take a science class instead of art class.
- Being told that art is for drug users.
- Selling water and spring rolls to pay for art school and sneaking to class.

The opacity around how Ghanaian fine art<sup>9</sup> moves in the global market is problematic.<sup>10</sup> Information asymmetry and power dynamics are obvious when:

- A buyer bargains low, saying they own Picasso and Condo, though there is no proof. The artist is pressured to sell to be in such a collection.
- A buyer says a painting speaks to them and buys at or below asking price. Their “stamp of approval” allows them to auction it for 500x the purchase price (“flipping”). The artist can no longer sell affordable works because it would indicate a drop in their value, like a stock, and buyers would flee.
- Artists tell each other to watch out for certain buyers. Those buyers then use an art consultant to buy the work for them.

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<sup>2</sup> McAndrew, C. (2021). The Art Market 2021 - an Art Basel & UBS Report. [online] theartmarket.foleon.com. Available at: <https://theartmarket.foleon.com/artbasel/2021/the-global-art-market/> [Accessed 21 Mar. 2021].

<sup>3</sup> Jackson, D.A. (2020). PERHAPS: Envisioning an Ancient Future through Art, Afrofuturism, and the Fractal-Holographic Universe. [online] BLACK ART IN AMERICA. Available at: <https://www.blackartinamerica.com/index.php/2020/09/30/perhaps-envisioning-an-ancient-future-through-art-afrofuturism-and-the-fractal-holographic-universe/> [Accessed 28 Mar. 2021]

<sup>4</sup> Anonymous Los Angeles Consultant. (2021). Map the System - Art Consultant Interview. 1 Mar.

<sup>5</sup> Gittlen, A. (2016). As Collectors Look to African Art, Accra Emerges as a Creative Hub. [online] Artsy. Available at: <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-ghana-s-capital-is-undergoing-an-artistic-renaissance>

<sup>6</sup> E.g. 4.2% in the US

<sup>7</sup> “Youth” is defined in this report as Ghanaians less than 40 years old

<sup>8</sup> IDEO.org (2015). The Field Guide to Human-Centered Design. Available at <https://www.designkit.org/resources/1>

<sup>9</sup> Herein defined as original paintings and sculptures

<sup>10</sup> Chambers, D., Dimson, E. and Spaenjers, C. (2020). Art as an Asset: Evidence from Keynes the Collector. *The Review of Asset Pricing Studies*, [online] 10(3), pp.490–520. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/rapstu/raaa001> [Accessed 28 Mar. 2021].

- A gallery gives an artist a solo exhibition but does not list the prices publicly. The artist trusts they are given the agreed 50%.

From an economic perspective, the question is how Ghana can enlarge the pie as well as their share of the pie. However, we believe social dynamics around youths' ability to pursue art, and around knowledge equity (what art is "good" and who has the power to add "value") present greater challenges. Our system analysis is thus divided into two key questions:

1. What barriers prevent youth from pursuing art?
2. What barriers prevent youth from succeeding once entering the art industry?

### III. Historical Framework and Methods

After Ghana achieved independence in 1957, the collective consciousness of the African diaspora was galvanized with a new sentiment of art and activism.<sup>11</sup> The simultaneous occurrence of post-colonization in Ghana and the Civil Rights Movement in the United States enabled an international exchange of intellectual capital amongst black thought leaders. For instance, historic interactions between Ghana's first president Kwame Nkrumah and Civil Rights' activist Martin Luther King Jr. created the ethos, voice, and foundation for a Pan-African world.<sup>12</sup> Although the 1960's and '70's is characterized by civil unrest and political agitation, some of Africa's most important works of art were conceived. It was during this time when Ghana surfaced as a breeding ground for black liberation and identity.<sup>13</sup> Since Ghana is historically positioned as a launching pad for African creativity, it was suitable to explore this landscape with the goal of uncovering the barriers that artists face while trying to pursue and succeed in creative arts careers.

Like the post-colonial and civil rights era, recent events around the killing of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter (BLM) Movement have released a catharsis of social, political, and artistic messaging. Historical periods of Black Renaissance have been many, each shaped by its own context and motivations. Current pent-up energy offers an opportunity for system reset -- another possible "rebirth."

Identifying these historical patterns presents a unique opportunity to revisit the Pan-African philosophies as we look forward to embracing the notion of Afrofuturism. This notion envisions a world where Black people play a central role in creating the world that serves them.<sup>14</sup> In imagining this future, it is important to value those who create since their creativity is pivotal in imagining solutions to a multitude of existential threats.

With art backgrounds related to finance, social impact, and sustainable development, our team members brought data beyond public knowledge such as sales prices and conversations with families, gallery owners, financial institutions, and collectors. Team members took two approaches to the research:

*Bottom-up* included in-depth interviews with Ghanaians who have pursued or forgone careers as fine artists. A Ghanaian nonprofit provided primary data on high schoolers. Data were collected from art collectors, consultants, gallery owners, educational institutions and other intermediaries.

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<sup>11</sup> science.jrank.org. (n.d.). *Arts - Africa - Pan-africanism, Negritude, Decolonization, and the Search for a New Identity*. [online] Available at: <https://science.jrank.org/pages/8378/Arts-Africa-Pan-Africanism-Negritude-Decolonization-Search-New-Identity.html> [Accessed 14 May 2021].

<sup>12</sup> Levitt, J.I. (2017). Beyond Borders: Martin Luther King, Jr., Africa, and Pan Africanism. *FloridaA&M University College of Law Scholarly Commons @ FAMU Law*. [online] Available at: <https://commons.law.famu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://www.google.com/&httpsredir=1&article=1249&context=faculty-research> [Accessed 14 May 2021].

<sup>13</sup> science.jrank.org. (n.d.). *Arts - Africa - Pan-africanism, Negritude, Decolonization, and the Search for a New Identity*. [online] Available at: <https://science.jrank.org/pages/8378/Arts-Africa-Pan-Africanism-Negritude-Decolonization-Search-New-Identity.html> [Accessed 14 May 2021].

<sup>14</sup> Gipson, G. (n.d.). *Accept Terms and Conditions on JSTOR*. [online] www.jstor.org. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/j.ctvndv9md.9.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3A842b060cf9cf45268f3bc3b218d9714c> [Accessed 14 May 2021].

*Top-down* included discussions with financial institutions, political bodies, and reviews of recent sales in the news. Desk-based research “followed the money” to assess how much is lost to intermediaries outside the country. It included a review of NFT technology in the industry.

## IV. System Analysis

The system’s north star is: A domestic and global environment that enables Ghanaian youth to thrive (socially and economically) in the art industry. Though we viewed the system from the perspective of a Ghanaian youth wishing to pursue art and facing challenges along the journey, we identified several other stakeholders who would view the same system differently (Figure 2).

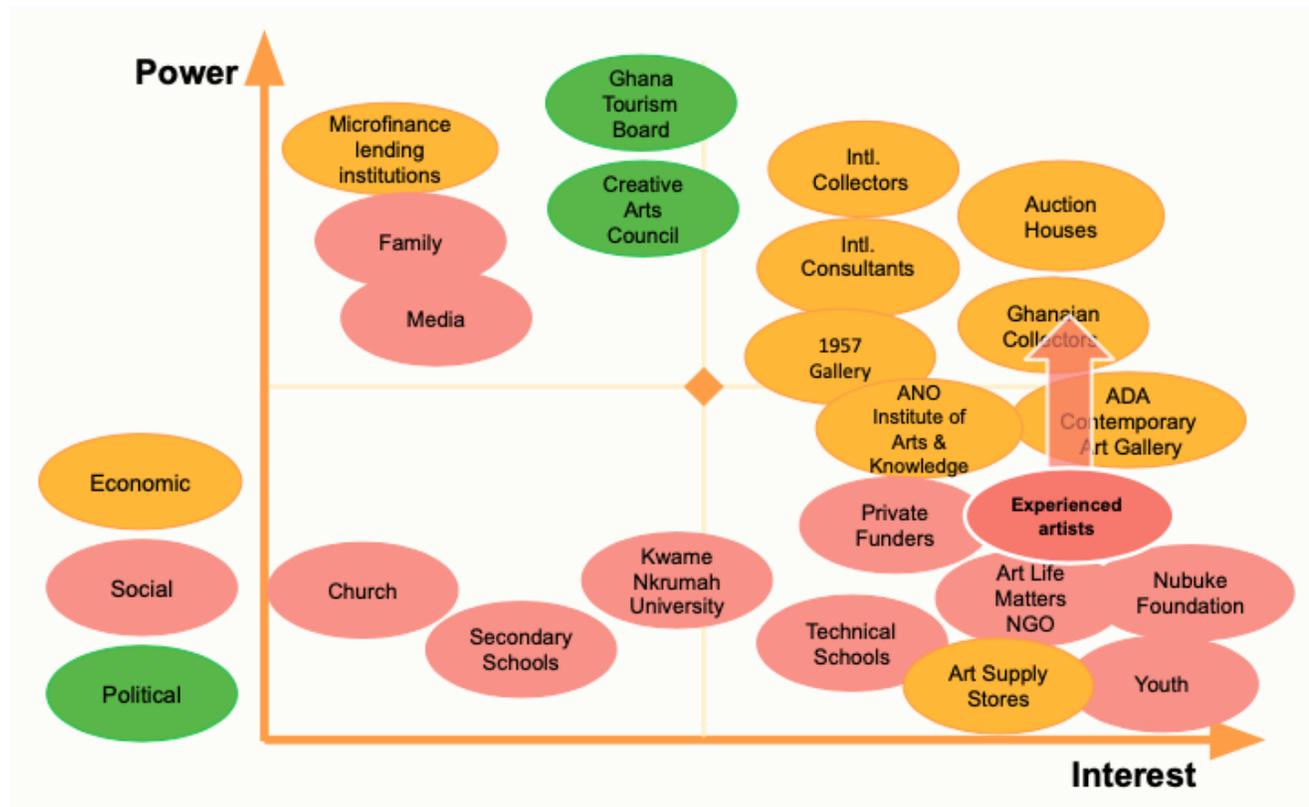


Figure 2: Stakeholder map

This plot is dynamic; youth are finding increased chances to gain power in the system. Shifting power is the greatest indicator of a system reset. As one artist said, “We used to have to beg galleries to show our work; now they are coming to us. The tables are turning.”

Through interviews with artists, consultants and other professionals connected to this space, we recognized the system map covered three themes [Visual Map pg. 11]:

- Social/informal integration of art in society;
- Political/formal integration;
- Socio-economic market forces.

These three main themes will now be examined in more detail.

## a. Social dynamics

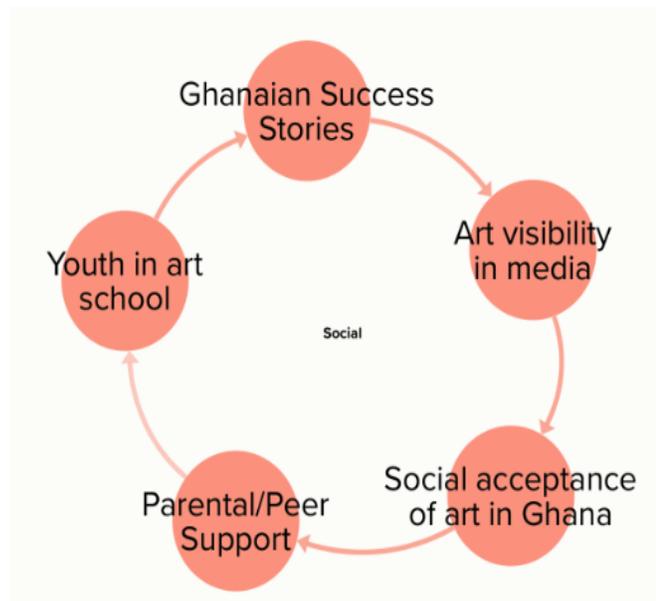
*“There is a belief that art is for weak minds. You have to be very intelligent to be creative. You create something from nothing! It’s a different type of intelligence - society hasn’t realized that.”<sup>15</sup>*

*“Art is used for everything, from designing a cell phone to surgery to architecture. Ghana is becoming ugly - you can see it in our buildings and news sets - because we are unwilling to educate artists and pay for artists. There’s this saying in Twi that ‘this here, my child can do it’. People don’t think it’s a skill.”*

### Families

As the first enablers or inhibitors of a youth’s trajectory, parents hold high power in the system. Artists with artistic parents noted minimal barriers to attending art school. Other artists noted extremes of being beaten for drawing and attending four years of art school without their parents’ knowledge. Due to the strong causal link between parental support and youth in art school, we suspect there are many youths who wished to pursue art but did not.

Social dynamics at home and school represent a reinforcing loop (Figure 3). We had first thought financial constraints prevent youth from pursuing art school, but youth commonly found financial support through community.<sup>16</sup> We had also hypothesized that awareness of success stories would increase parental support, but as one interviewee mentioned, “My mom doesn’t care that Amoako [famous Ghanaian artist] was interviewed by Idris Elba. She wants to see art on the local news in the local language.” In our system map, visibility of art and social acceptance of art connect success stories and parental support.



**Figure 3:** Social feedback loop

<sup>15</sup> All quotes without a citation are from an interviewed artist, but are unattributed for anonymity

<sup>16</sup> Sarpong, M.M. (2021). Map the System - MicroInsurance Interview. 11 Mar.

## Educational institutions

Around 65% of the class at one of Accra’s best high schools had wanted to take courses in art but were not permitted.<sup>17</sup> While there used to be four art schools in Ghana, the recent closure of Ghanatta College of Art and Design leaves only one (Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology), which as a university limits nontraditional students. An increase in youth attending art school would indicate progress towards the north star.

## Risks

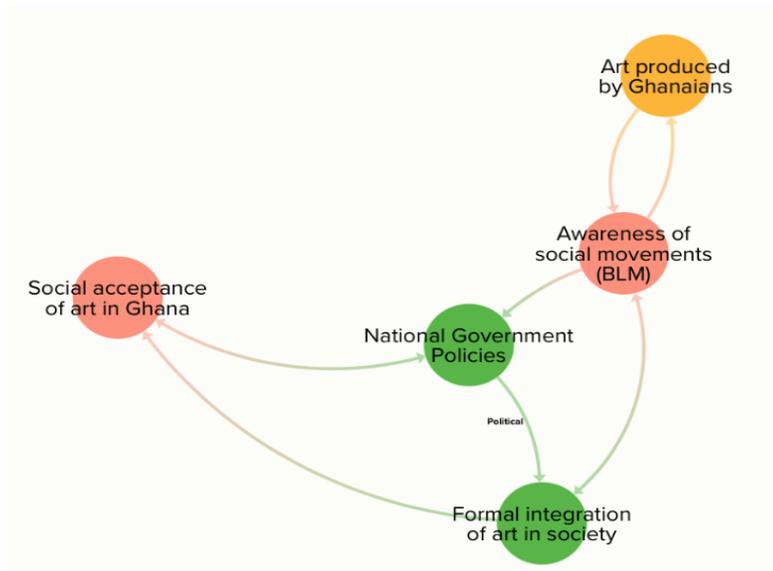
Even if Ghanaian success stories became more visible in Ghanaian society, there could be unintended consequences to the shift. Three interviewees mentioned the cultural shift around professional football as a career. While once seen as a wasteful pursuit for poor children, football became respected as a profession as international players returned to Ghana and funded community parks “in the name of football”. However, success meant expensive equipment, hired coaches, and private academies, which turned the industry into “a rich person’s profession.”

### b. Political dynamics

*“The national museum has been closed now for years. And we never even had a national gallery, which tells you about our government. They want something from which they’ll get money right now. But little drops of water make a mighty ocean.”*

*“There are annual awards for science students, but never one for art. There are no national clear-cut blueprints or objectives. Every government comes, toys with it, goes away. And that repeats. There should be a national program that every government has to follow.”*

Interviews revealed that the political environment plays a connecting role between the social and economic dynamics at opposite sides of the system (Figure 4).



**Figure 4:** Political forces

<sup>17</sup> Agyare, E. (2021). *Map the System - Art Life Matters Interview*. 19 Feb.

## Social ← Policy

Though social support starts in the household, national policies can shape perceptions. For instance, the government defines academic disciplines; the Ministry of Education presents annual awards to students in science and math. Lack of a national gallery or art schools creates a void of formal institutions that would feed social acceptance or “informal” infrastructures encouraging youth.

## Policy → Economics

In addition to monetary value, art has high positive social externalities. It would therefore seem logical for a government to support the industry.<sup>18</sup> Art can drive tourism or increase tax revenue from new intermediaries (galleries), but Ghana’s political system is not conducive to developing a long-term enabling environment for a formal creative arts sector.<sup>19</sup> There is high political competition and desire to attain immediate revenue instead of revenue that could help a future administration. Artists mentioned the gap of not having a long-term blueprint that all administrations must follow. In 2020, Ghana passed a Creative Arts Bill<sup>20</sup>, but its contents were unknown to artists and nonprofit interviewees.

The BLM movement influenced the Ghanaian Government in several ways, fueling their “Year of Return” designed to host the black diaspora in Ghana. However, the government did not use the flux of tourism to showcase Ghana’s art, possibly due to the lack of existing formal infrastructures. These structures could have looped back into global BLM discussions and encouraged the production of more Ghanaian art.

### c. Economic dynamics

*“So not only do we artists in Ghana have to create the work with more expensive paint; we are expected to sell it for a lower price than if we were in the U.S.”*

*“People come to you and buy so cheap. Then you see it on their website at a high cost and it breaks your heart. I’ve given my works to people who tell you they are doing an exhibition. I gave 11 works to someone who said he would go and sell them for me; up till now, no communication on whether work has been sold or not. I do not know whether the work is still with him.”*

While global market forces might not directly influence a parent’s support, it is significant in allowing youth to succeed once in the industry. Every artist interviewed mentioned a time when they were forced to sell a painting for less than it was worth. Financial precarity is a symptom of a much more disconcerting underlying reality – that the industry economics of Ghanaian art inherently places art creators at a significant disadvantage to other players when compared to their peers in other climes. This disadvantage is evidenced by the wide disparity in pricing power between demand side players (galleries and private collectors) and art creators, creating an art scene rife with exploitative and opportunistic behavior.

Several interviewees added that after some time they would find out that their work was sold again for a premium. Given rising demand, sale prices, and incidents of flipping, the percentage of profit going to artists has declined (Figure 5). For artists in Ghana, this can mean the difference between continuing or leaving the profession, as art materials cost more in Ghana than abroad. Despite international success stories, there are underlying beliefs that value is added by intermediaries. Some artists decried racist views that artists who have not worked abroad are unaware of the value of their work and are thus weak in price negotiations.

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<sup>18</sup> Kahraman, B. (2021). *Map the System - Economics Professor Interview*. 16 Mar.

<sup>19</sup> Mantey, M.O. (2021). *Map the System - President of Ghana Creative Arts Council Interview*. 11 Mar.

<sup>20</sup> Ngenbe, T. (2019). GH¢10m Loan Approved for Creative Arts Industry. *Graphic Showbiz*. [online] 20 Dec. Available at: <https://www.graphic.com.gh/entertainment/showbiz-news/gh-10m-loan-approved-for-creative-arts-industry.html> [Accessed 21 Mar. 2021]

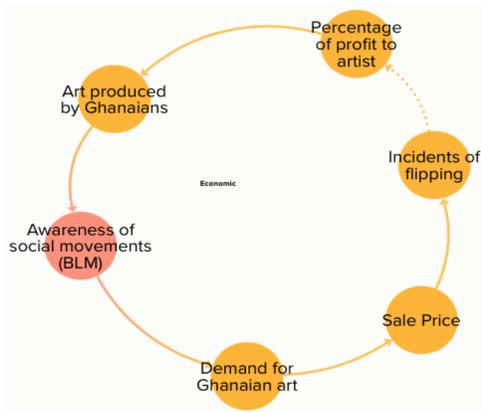


Figure 5: Economic dynamics

#### d. Power dynamics – iceberg model

*“Flipping didn’t used to be this bad. It’s almost as if the market is too hot. Education has a lot to do with it – Ghanaians get scared and think this could be their only shot. It’s a problem of information asymmetry.”<sup>21</sup>*

Understanding the layout of the system, allows us to see how power imbalances occur at both social and economic levels. This is shown via an iceberg model of the system (Figure 6).

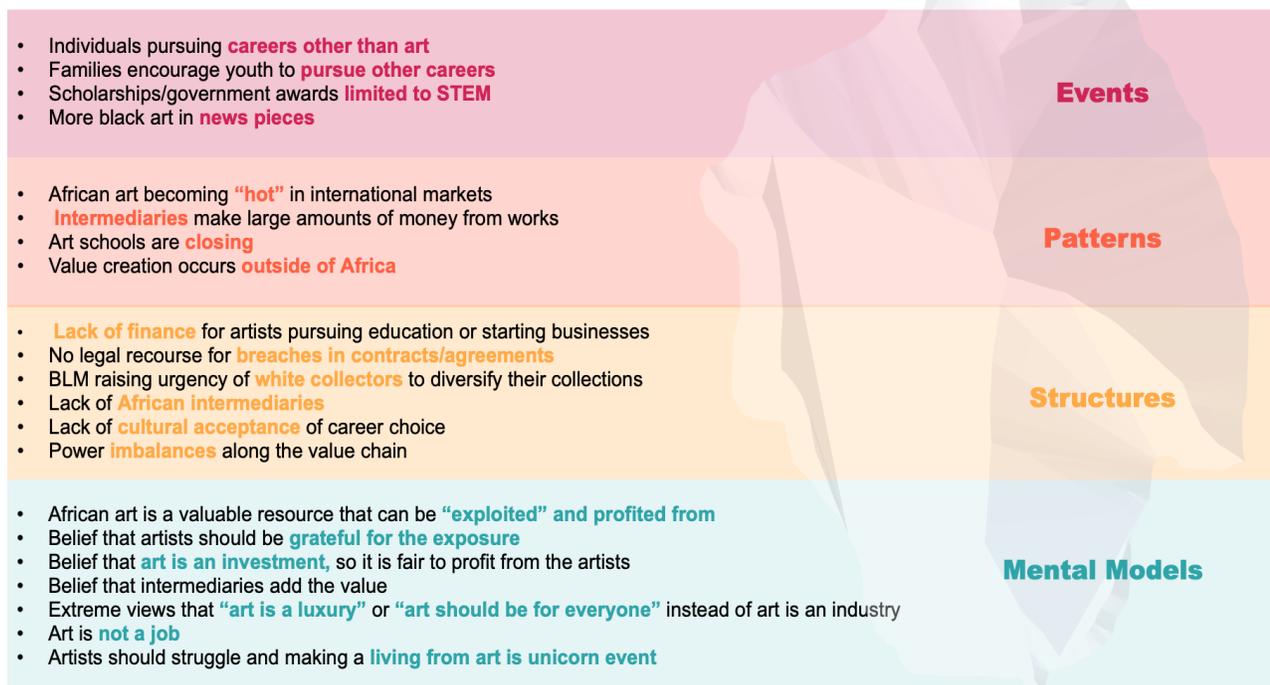


Figure 6: Iceberg model

Mental models, though hardest to shift, would create most change to structures and patterns. This will be particularly challenging in terms of changing culture, but economic inequities are also persistent.

<sup>21</sup> Interview with a Los Angeles-based art consultant

## V. Solution Landscape & Leverage Points

As we identified leverage points, we looked for areas that were already in motion. We first outlined existing solutions to changing culture and power dynamics in the market (Figure 7).

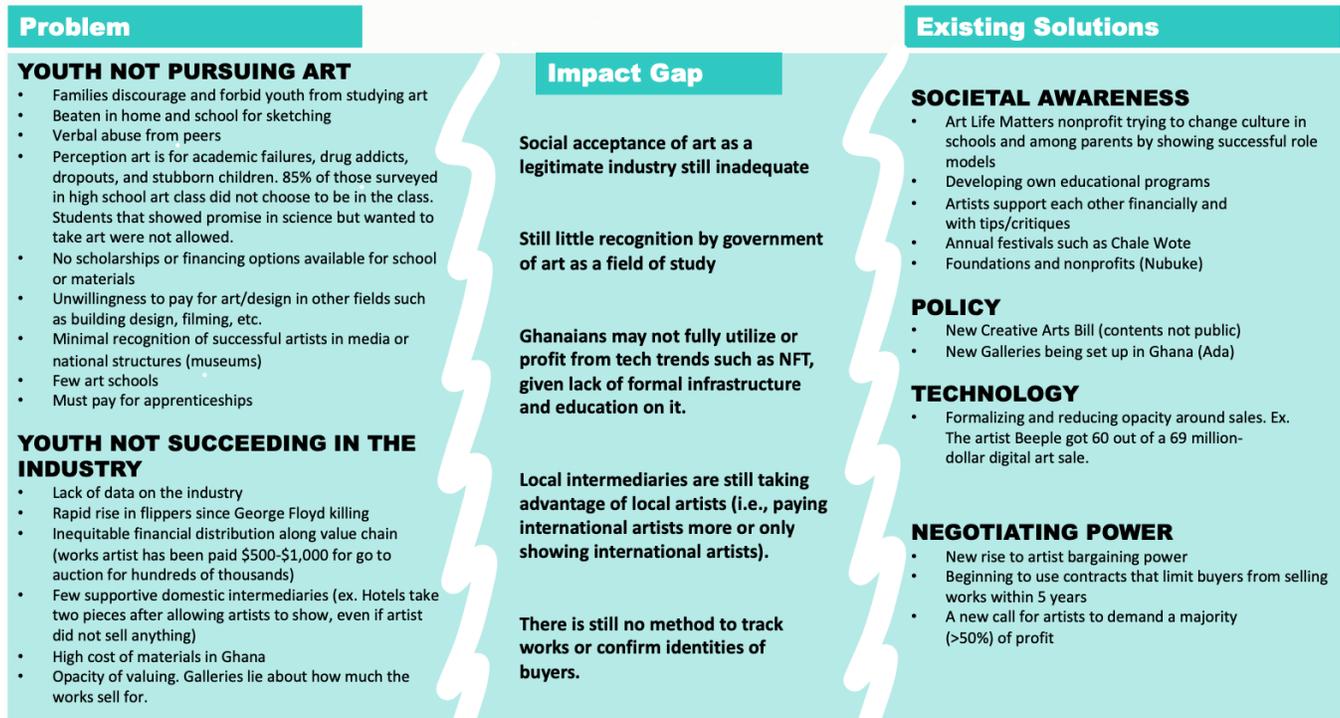


Figure 7: Impact gap canvas

### Levers

Any lasting solution must incorporate elements that tilt the balance of power in favor of the artist. To achieve this power redistribution, one needs to recreate a system that builds transparency and accountability into an otherwise opaque supply chain, while democratizing the process of value addition and price discovery for the artist. Yet, we understand that solutions which villainize actors will limit their adaptability and success.

#### 1. Informal integration of the art profession into Ghanaian society

Lever: Growth of parental and societal conscious awareness of art as an industry. Though art permeates Ghanaian culture from bright clothing to dancing, there is not a conscious recognition of art as an industry.

Intervention: Showcasing art in the local news (interviews, placing art behind newscasters), stories in magazines in local languages and creating documentaries of successful artists such as Ablade Glover would combat the mental model that art is not a job. As an interviewee mentioned, "If parents see it, they change. We are visual people. We want to see a picture of the food on the menu at a restaurant. Art needs to be put on TV and magazines to create the story."

Result: Parental awareness of how art contributes to culture, the training involved, intellectual depth, and career paths would foster more students entering art school, a metric of progress towards the north star.

#### 2. Formal integration of the industry within Ghana

Lever: National recognition of art as an intellectual pursuit and professional career path.

Intervention: The National Government can offer an annual student award for art. They could also start a national gallery, possibly run through a private, independent operating body to prevent favoritism as administrations shift. A friendly regulatory environment would encourage local collectors and galleries to open and keep the value chain closer to Ghana, also feeding into parental support.

Result: Awards would make a statement of the legitimacy of art as an academic discipline and encourage shifts in societal mental models as described above.

### **3. Collective action to reclaim power**

Lever: Young artists, more than the older generation, are transparent about their careers, styles, prices, and professional contacts.

Intervention: As more artists demand 50% or more of profits or require buyers to sign a contract not to sell the work within five years, they create a standard practice. If they call out flippers, the end purchaser begins to lose power they gained from the industry's opacity. One solution which addresses all the elements described above is the use of Non-Fungible Tokens (NFT's). NFTs are computer files combined with proof of ownership and authenticity. Since NFTs have unique valuations set by the highest bidder, artists who want to sell their work as NFTs can sign up with a marketplace and then "mint" digital tokens by uploading and validating their information on a blockchain. Ghanaian artists need training on NFT and the future role of technology in the art industry.

Result: This challenges the mental model that the most value is added by those further along the value chain. It tracks ownership and prevents misrepresentation of identities.

## **VI. Looking Forward**

This analysis was contextualized by the role of art in historical movements around racial identity. African art in prehistoric times symbolized stories that contributed to the continent's rich cultural heritage. Colonialism saw African art taken to Western nations without any value captured by the value creators. In light of renewed movements around racial equity, there is hope that shifting mental models will increase the ability of Ghanaian youth – across professions – to use art as a way to imagine and create a more equitable and prosperous future for themselves and the world.

### **Acknowledgements**

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