# Dreaming Digital: Mapping the Intersection of AI and the Arts

## Policy Brief

### Why this brief

This brief distills the findings of Dreaming Digital: Mapping the Intersection of AI and the Arts for artistic organizations working in Africa and the Middle East region. Its purpose is to map the conditions, practices, tensions, and openings already visible in the field, not to advance a new thesis or to outline an operational strategy.

The report's central argument is clear: AI does not enter the arts as an abstract technological wave. It arrives through uneven infrastructures, fragile funding systems, linguistic asymmetries, platform dependencies, and the lived demands of artistic and community-based work. In this landscape, the question is not simply whether artists use AI, but under what material, linguistic, ethical, and institutional conditions they can do so on their own terms.

### What counts as AI in this brief

Here, and in the report, AI refers not only to standalone generative systems for text, image, sound, or video. It also includes AI functionalities embedded in creative software, such as editing, mastering, and enhancement tools, as well as platform-level systems that shape the visibility and circulation of cultural content through recommendation and moderation. This broader scope matters because many artists encounter AI less as a single, named technology than as a layered set of capabilities distributed across tools, platforms, and infrastructures.

### Key findings at a glance

- AI is already present in artistic life across the region, but its uptake is uneven and shaped less by technological enthusiasm than by access to infrastructure, training, and locally relevant tools.
- Connectivity, compute, electricity reliability, hardware costs, payment friction, and cloud access do not sit in the background. They define the practical horizon of experimentation and the scale of what can be made.
- Language is not a secondary issue. Arabic dialects, mixed registers, and many African languages remain unevenly supported, with direct consequences for artistic expression, audience address, and cultural continuity.
- AI enters practice as a tool, material, collaborator, and constraint. It appears in writing, performance, image making, sound work, archives, and immersive forms, but it often does so through friction, improvisation, and partial adaptation rather than seamless integration.
- Economic precarity, extractive data practices, authorship ambiguity, consent fragility, and legal uncertainty continue to structure the field. Institutions therefore matter not as neutral hosts, but as mediators of access, ethics, and collective learning.

## Infrastructure sets the horizon of experimentation

Across Africa and the Middle East, the ability to work with AI is shaped by the physical realities of bandwidth, storage, electricity, and hardware. A visual artist testing generative tools may need to upload and download large files repeatedly. A musician working with AI-enabled plugins or cloud mastering services depends on uninterrupted sessions. Curators and producers managing archives, streaming, or remote collaboration require transfer and storage capacities that exceed ordinary personal use. When these conditions fail, artistic workflows fragment.

These pressures are visible in Tunisia, though not in uniform ways. The country reflects a broader regional tension between growing digital ambition, entrepreneurial energy, and the uneven material conditions that shape access to advanced AI workflows. In practice, this does not prevent experimentation. Rather, it often channels experimentation toward browser-based, collaborative, or selectively scaled forms, depending on available infrastructure, institutional support, and access to tools.

## Language is a central artistic question

The report treats language as a core analytical pillar because it is both an artistic medium and the interface through which many AI systems are directed. Even when artists work primarily with image or sound, they usually meet the machine through prompts, scripts, parameter settings, captions, or metadata. This means that uneven language support becomes an aesthetic issue, not only a technical one.

For artists who think, compose, and perform in Arabic, Tamazight, Swahili, Wolof, Hausa, Amharic, or mixed linguistic registers, the choice is often between translation and distortion. Translation into English may increase system performance, but it can thin tone, rhythm, humour, and register. Direct use of under-supported languages can produce outputs that feel inaccurate, generic, or incomplete. In Arabic, the asymmetry is particularly visible: support for Modern Standard Arabic has improved, yet dialects such as Tunisian Derja, Moroccan Darija, Algerian Dziriya, Levantine varieties, and Gulf speech remain unevenly represented. Over time, this imbalance risks reshaping what artists imagine to be sayable, legible, or producible through AI.

## AI inside artistic practice

The report makes clear that AI should not be understood only as infrastructure, policy, or ethics. It also enters artistic practice itself. Across the region, artists are testing it in composition, dramaturgy, sound, archive work, and simulation. In many cases, the artistic interest lies less in a polished output than in the act of editing, staging, composing, or contesting what the system produces. Failure, glitch, mistranslation, and incompleteness become part of the material.

This matters because the region is not only receiving AI from elsewhere; it is also reshaping it through situated practice. Low-data approaches, community-held archives, language-focused initiatives, festivals, labs, and peer networks show that artists are building ways of working with AI that are closer to local memory, local language, and local rhythm. These practices remain fragile, but they already challenge the idea that meaningful AI art must mirror the infrastructures or aesthetics of Silicon Valley or the Gulf.

## Labor, rights, and the pressure of extraction

AI enters a cultural economy that is already precarious. Cheap, instantly generated media now competes directly with forms of paid work that often sustain early-career artists: poster design, basic video edits, background music, promotional visuals, and other entry-level commissions. This creates downward pressure on fees and threatens the first rung of the professional ladder. At the same time, artists who do integrate AI absorb new costs. They must learn unfamiliar tools, pay for subscriptions priced in foreign currencies, and spend time troubleshooting systems whose use is often not reflected in higher compensation.

The report also highlights a deeper extractive dynamic. Styles, voices, dialects, oral traditions, and visual repertoires are scraped into global training sets without consent, credit, or compensation. The paradox is stark: artists may end up paying to use tools partially trained on cultural materials taken from them. This is intensified by the invisible labor on which AI systems depend, much of it performed in African contexts under precarious conditions. Seen from the perspective of the arts, AI is therefore not only a productivity tool; it is also a site where labor, data, and cultural memory are being reorganized unevenly.

## Authorship, consent, and institutional responsibility

Questions of authorship do not disappear when an artist uses AI; they become more complex. When a work combines hand-drawn material, recorded sound, filmed footage, or community-derived stories with generated outputs, credit becomes unstable. So does artistic control. Generative systems can echo existing styles, motifs, and voices without clear acknowledgement, while legal norms around copyright, moral rights, data protection, and likeness remain unsettled across the region.

For community-based and socially engaged work, the issue is sharper still. Consent cannot be reduced to a technical checkbox when projects involve photographs, recordings, stories, or local knowledge shared in relationships of trust. People may agree to participate in an artwork without fully understanding how AI systems may transform, store, circulate, or reuse their contribution. Institutions therefore have a distinct role. They can build shared literacy, clarify baseline expectations around transparency and attribution, act as buffers between artists and platforms, and create channels through which concerns can be raised before harm is normalized.

## A fractured regional ecosystem

The report identifies a strong asymmetry in the regional funding landscape. Gulf countries are investing heavily in AI infrastructure, new media institutions, and digital prestige projects, while many artistic ecosystems in North Africa and across the continent continue to work with minimal AI-specific support. Existing digital arts funding rarely accounts for the compute needs, linguistic inequities, infrastructural costs, or ethical stakes specific to AI. The result is an uneven field in which some experiments become highly visible while many others remain under-resourced, short-lived, or impossible to sustain.

This asymmetry matters culturally as well as materially. Without long-term, accessible, community-based forms of support, the cultural future of AI risks being narrated from a narrow set of centers, while other artistic worlds remain treated as sources of data, aesthetics, or content rather than as sites of authorship and agenda-setting.

## Illustrative pistes already visible in the report

The report's forward-looking elements are framed as openings that emerge from existing practice, not as recommendations or a program blueprint. For circulation to artistic organizations, the most useful openings are the following:

**For artists**

- Treat AI outputs as material rather than as finished work. The creative act often lies in editing, arranging, translating, staging, and reframing what the system produces, including its errors and absences.
- Work with language as an artistic interface. Prompting, dialect friction, translation, and script instability can become part of composition rather than problems to hide.
- Build locally rooted inputs where possible. Small archives, community-held materials, and low-data approaches can shift AI use away from passive consumption of global models and toward situated making.
- Use festivals, labs, and peer communities as production infrastructure. Shared spaces already lower barriers, circulate techniques, and sustain critical discussion where formal support is weak.

**For artistic organizations**

- Document what is already happening. Mapping tools, workflows, breakdowns, and recurring ethical questions inside an artistic network can become a durable institutional resource.
- Provide modest shared scaffolding. Basic access to accounts, equipment, connectivity, space, and internal literacy can make experimentation more realistic without requiring a full technical laboratory.
- Treat language and consent as design constraints. Multilingual facilitation, attention to dialect and script, and clear practices around attribution, data use, and community understanding should be built into programming from the start.
- Host the dialogue that is often missing elsewhere. Bringing artists, technologists, legal voices, and funders into the same room can reduce isolation and clarify uncertainty.

## Roles artistic organizations can play

Organizations working from socially engaged, community-based, or artist-centered positions can function less as technology showcases than as institutional infrastructures of care and mediation. The report identifies four especially relevant roles:

- A listening hub, where artists, technicians, and local partners can describe their experiences with AI in their own terms.
- A laboratory for careful experimentation, where small groups test tools under conditions shaped by consent, transparency, and artistic intent.
- A bridge between practice and governance conversations, translating artistic concerns into language funders, regulators, and technology actors can hear.
- A reference point for ethical questions, especially around authorship, consent, and the use of community-derived material.

## Toward dignified technological futures

The report closes with the idea of dignified technological futures. In this framing, dignity is not rhetorical. It names a set of practical conditions: artists understand what a tool does and where its training material comes from; communities retain the right to say no; linguistic diversity is treated as a design requirement; experimentation does not override safety, credit, or sustainability; and institutions have enough organizational and technical capacity to support work without outsourcing every decision to external platforms.

## A sequence for institutional learning

The report also distills a sequence through which institutions can move from observation to grounded practice without turning the work into a rigid strategy:

- Understand the ground. Map how artists actually encounter AI, which tools they can access, where infrastructure fails, and which fears or hopes are most present in daily practice.
- Translate this understanding into shared language. Name the main risks and possibilities in terms that make sense to artists, producers, technicians, and funders.
- Co-design practical guidance. Develop clear principles and simple procedures for consent, data use, authorship, and credit that can function under real constraints.
- Test ideas through small, carefully framed experiments. Short residencies, labs, or collaborative projects can work as sandboxes where tools, ethics, and artistic questions evolve together.
- Consolidate what is learned. Document successes and failures, share them with peers, and keep frameworks grounded in lived practice rather than abstract ideals.

This sequence does not turn the report into a blueprint. It names a practical path through which AI can become less an external force and more a negotiated medium shaped by artists and communities.

Under these conditions, AI becomes one instrument among many in the cultural toolkit. It can assist restoration, translation, composition, documentation, and experimentation, but it does not determine what counts as valuable art, which memories matter, or which languages deserve to survive in digital form. For artistic organizations, this is the report's most important finding. The future of AI in the arts will be shaped not only by models and platforms, but by the institutions, publics, and creative communities that decide how these systems are received, contested, and reworked.