

AI, Artists and Africa

A toolkit and conversation starter

We are all a bit overloaded with Artificial Intelligence news these days.

It can be hard to figure out what to take seriously when there is so much hype and fear mongering. This is a resource for African artists, filmmakers and other creatives on how to navigate the AI landscape and how to integrate AI into their work ethically should they chose to do so. We need more artists to make themselves heard in these conversations so please dig in and let us know what you think. Do you use AI in your work? Are you worried about your future as a creative? What are the specific needs of artists working in Africa when it comes to AI?

Since ChatGPT started the generative AI boom in 2022 it has been impossible to ignore the topic and things have been changing fast. There are new tools, new debates and also plenty of hype and hyperbole to navigate. So let's all calm down and take stock of where we are and what this means for us in Africa! With all the focus on generative AI it is easy to lose a sense of perspective. AI has been around for decades and is



a field of study that includes machine learning, deep learning, natural language processing, computer vision and robotics. We have been using predictive AI and applied AI technologies for years, whether we have been aware of it or not.

The current generative AI moment has highlighted interesting tensions with regards to creative uses of AI in Africa. At Electric South we have been wondering how to approach AI from a specifically African and artist-led approach since reading Mozilla's [Creating Trustworthy AI whitepaper](#) in the depths of the pandemic lockdowns in 2020. In November 2023 we were able to address the topic at our annual [New Dimensions Lab](#) with support from Mozilla. We invited a number of artists to give talks about how they engage with AI in their work (link to artist section below) and held a one-day workshop on AI with the participants of the lab and invited creative industry and civic tech practitioners and stakeholders.

Here are the issues that came up during the workshop:

- **We want to make sure that Africa is represented in developments in AI.**
- We need Large Language Models (LLMs) for a variety of African languages. We need image generators that can accurately create images from specific African prompts. If you want to nerd out on why this is important take a look at the [recent GSMA AI for Africa report](#). We also want indigenous sovereignty so that these models are not extractive and so that communities have the right to keep themselves and their knowledge offline if they so wish.
- We want tools that are accessible on a continent where many people still struggle to get meaningful connectivity and where we are also dealing with issues of inequality, poverty and unemployment. This is why initiatives like [Common Voice](#), which makes voice recognition open to everyone, are so necessary.
- We know that AI companies are using [human labour](#) to do work training AI models and providing moderation services and that some of the most traumatic and badly paid work is relegated to the majority world.

Here are the issues that came up during the workshop:

- We want to make sure our data and privacy are protected.
- We want to know more about the implications of open source AI models for Africa. Are there specific safeguards we need for open source models on the continent?
- We know that AI encompasses biases that can be racist and have dangerous implications as these biased models are applied to things like loan applications or criminal profiling.
- We also know that the compute for these AI models has environmental impacts that will often be felt first in regions like Africa.
- We know that AI literacy is essential to navigate issues like misinformation, disinformation and deepfakes and to increase trust in documentary and journalism.
- In short, we want to protect ourselves against further damaging and extractive practices in the digital realm. We know we need to engage with AI and that we need to collectively work towards responsible, trustworthy, just and ethical AI. We want to prioritise people, especially those who are most vulnerable.

What does this have to do with me?

Artists can play a role in ensuring that those involved in building AI technologies consider and respect the diverse cultural, social, and artistic expressions and needs of the continent.

Artists are also very good at thinking critically about the present and the future - beyond the narrow lens that is often applied in Silicon Valley for example. The Making a New Reality toolkit for inclusive media futures underlines why we need to be doing this work now. How do we work towards an open, fair and progressive future? We need a diversity of voices in the conversation to figure out the values we need to put AI to positive and progressive use. Regulation and governance is one part of this but we all need to get involved to shape these values.

How worried should I be?

We are actually very excited about the affordances of some of these new tools. There is so much creative possibility.

We also know that people are worried about their jobs being replaced or their work being scraped and used without their permission. Artists need agency in this conversation and to demand accountability from tech companies around issues like credit, compensation, consent and control if your creative work is used in training data for AI models. We need to look at the whole life-cycle of AI tools and not just the final result. This is why some people are asking that the training data be scaled down considerably and include more information like model cards so that we get more information on what is in it. We also believe that human creativity is about process and cannot be reduced to outputs. Take a look at some of the artists using AI critically in their work ([link to artist section below](#)) for inspiration on how to use AI without being used by it. Many technologies

have been introduced before that have replaced certain jobs and created others. There is a great deal of terrible work being produced by AI right now from the arts to journalism and science - and increasingly the data being scraped is misleading and erroneous work created by AI. Garbage in, garbage out. We hope that by including the artist community in this conversation we can have some impact on the future trajectory of AI and collaborate to make it work for us and our communities. The future is not written yet.



I want to try some of these generative AI tools.

Great! Here are a few to try if you want to experiment with image and video creation. We are not recommending any in particular and only some are free.

Hugging Face

A community platform
- lots of open source
models to choose from

DALL-E2

Image generation

Artbreeder

remix and collage

Runway

Video generation

Davinci

Image generation

Stability AI

Suite of tools

Midjourney

Image generation

Deep Dream Generator

Image generation

Want to learn more?



Try a Curious Refuge
AI storytelling course.

Who are some immersive artists engaging with AI in their work?

These artists all gave talks at the New Dimensions Lab in 2023 about how they use AI in their work. You can see their talks online except for Brett Gaylor because technology failed us that day.

Karen Palmer

How to use Storytelling & AI to Save our Futures

Karen Palmer is the Storyteller from the Future. An award winning artist and TED Speaker. She creates immersive film experiences that watch you back using AI and facial recognition, immersing the audience in a near future world of AI and surveillance. As an international speaker she highlights the potential impact of AI from a social justice perspective and the necessity to democratise AI.

Sandra Rodriguez

Disrupting Narratives - Creative XR + AI as Acts of Resistance

Sandra is a creative director and producer known for her work in the realms of VR and AI experiences. Her creative endeavours have spanned feature films, interactive projects, web-based initiatives and immersive non-fiction experiences, earning her a multitude of prestigious awards, among them the Golden Nica award at Ars Electronica and grants from the Sundance Institute and MacArthur Foundation, amongst others. From 2016 to 2021, she held a leading role as a lecturer and program lead for HackingXR at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), overseeing the university's first official class dedicated to the creation of immersive media.

Brett Gaylor — Context Jamming, Creative Research & Semiotic Resistance

Brett Gaylor is a multi-platform media producer and researcher. His recent releases are *Welcome To The Metaverse*, an AR project for the 2023 International Symposium on Electronic Art in Paris, and *Discriminator*, an interactive film that had its world premiere at the 2021 Tribeca Film Festival. His 2020 documentary *The Internet of Everything* broadcast in more than 20 countries. For *Do Not Track*, *OK Google* and *Rip! A Remix Manifesto* Brett received the International Documentary Association award, a Peabody Award, the Prix Gemaux and three Webbys.

Francesca Panetta — Synthetic Media

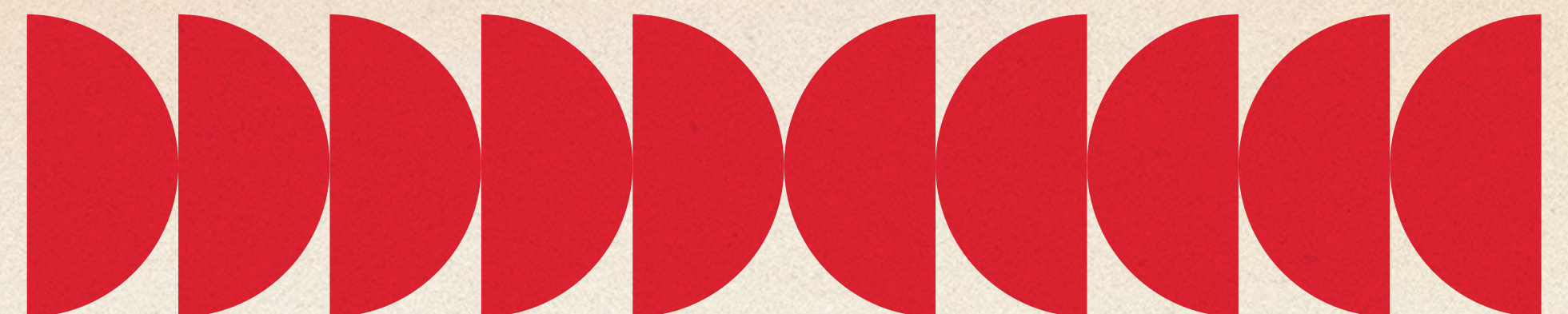
Francesca Panetta is Director of the AKO Storytelling Institute at UAL. She is an Emmy Award winning director and artist, considered an industry leader in the the word of immersive and experimental storytelling. As an immersive artist and journalist she uses emerging technologies to innovate new forms that have social impact.

Violeta Ayala AI as Alchemy: Transforming Codes into Social & Cultural Narratives

Violeta Ayala is a filmmaker, AI innovator and creative technologist. As the first Quechua member of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Ayala combines traditional narrative with cutting-edge technologies like XR, VR, and AI. Her notable works include the critically acclaimed interactive VR animation “*Prison X*” (Sundance, Cannes, SXSW) and the AR experience “*Las Awichas*” displayed on London’s Strand. Ayala has directed powerful documentary films such as “*La Lucha*” (2023), which helped secure disability pensions in Bolivia, and “*Cocaine Prison*” (2017). Her films have premiered at major festivals and broadcast globally.

Want to dive deeper?

- Get some inspiration from [Everything is a Remix](#) and take a look at how this [documentary about Brian Eno](#) uses generative AI so that the film is never the same twice.
- [Privacy and AI](#) are inextricably linked.
- Pollicy do some excellent research on data and tech in Africa. Read their reports on [African women in AI](#).
- Learn more about AI harms and biases from the [Algorithmic Justice League](#).
- Dig into ethical AI issues in Africa with the [African Observatory on Responsible Artificial Intelligence](#).
- Learn about deepfakes, synthetic media and generative AI with a human rights perspective from [WITNESS](#).
- Want to see some very cool work on African language models? [Lelapa AI](#) have recently released [Vulavula](#).
- Read this fascinating [Primer on AI in/from the Majority World](#)
- Lots of creative applications of AI with an African focus in [HERRI: AI in Africa issue](#)
- Check out the work of the [Distributed AI Research Institute](#)
- [Black in AI](#) is a place for sharing ideas, fostering collaborations and discussing initiatives to increase the presence of Black people in AI.
- Consider how [design justice principles](#) might shape how we think about and use AI, in particular around centering the voices of those who are directly impacted.



What's missing?

We see this as the start of a conversation around artists and AI in Africa. We will be unpacking many of these ideas over the next year in further research and convenings. For example what if we came up with something like [this from Promising Trouble](#) in the UK but written by/for creative communities in Africa with our own policy recommendations.

Are there any tools or resources you think we are missing? Do you have a point of view we have not considered here? Have you looked at the [South African AI plan](#) or the [AU Continental Artificial Intelligence Strategy](#) - what are your thoughts?

Please get in touch, this will be an evolving project and we'd love to hear from you. We believe strongly that we must all be part of building the sustainable future for artists and creativity in Africa that we want!
info@electricsouth.org

→ **Produced by Electric South,
Supported by Mozilla.**





AI, Artists and Africa

Artists

Agnes Ndegwa
Busisiwe Mgwanya
Hallie Haller
Joanna Oluoch
Karin Slater
Lindokuhle Nkosi
Mahoutondji Kinmagbo
Mika'il, The Muezzin
Nana Isaac Opoku
(AFROSCOPE)
Nickson Kimaro
Shameelah Khan
Soha El Mosly

Advisors

Brett Gaylor
Brian Afande
Diana Williams
Sandra Rodriguez
Dale Deacon
Jason Stapleton

AI workshop guests

Chenai Chair
Refiloe Hlabioa
Lerato Hlatshwayo
Eduardo Cachucho
Gareth Steele
Vulane Mthembu
Grace Meadows