

# ARTISTIC FREEDOM INITIATIVE

## OUR IMPACT: AFI in 2025



2025 ACN Cohort, from left to right: Cansu Korkmaz, Nazanin Noroozi, Yasmeen, Lama El Homaïssi, Achiro P. Olwoch, Bart Was Not Here. Photo courtesy of AFI.

# ARTISTIC FREEDOM INITIATIVE

In 2025, AFI was named a **laureate of the Global Pluralism Award**. We were recognized for our **outstanding legal services and advocacy for international artists at risk**.

## HIGHLIGHTS:

- Provided **\$1 M in pro bono legal and resettlement services** to artists at risk.
- Assisted **378 at-risk artists and dependents from 26 countries** who were impacted by censorship, persecution, and forced displacement.
- Drove negotiations on artistic freedom with the **UNHRC, UNESCO, and the European Union**.
- Hosted **5 concerts, 1 multi-day assembly, and 1 United Nations side event** in New York City and Geneva.
- Was featured in the **New York Times, Global Citizen, and Art Newspaper**.



# AFI'S 2025 IMPACT

**378**

Individuals assisted

**240**

Individuals assisted with legal services

**\$1,000,000**

Total

through AFI's Legal, Resettlement, and Public Arts Programs

This includes:

**112**

Individuals assisted with resettlement

Pro bono services provided across AFI's programs in 2025

Since our inception in 2017, AFI's direct legal and resettlement services have remained at the core of our mission to provide safety, stability, and visibility for artists at risk.

These numbers represent just a snapshot of AFI's impact this year. We are leading on research and policy advocacy that champion the right to artistic freedom globally. Through our arts events, we are building bridges, awareness, and solidarity among arts and culture audiences as well as diaspora communities.

As we support artists in our network through their relocation and resettlement journeys, the art they make and courageous acts of creative resistance they undertake hold up a vital mirror and provide hope in uncertain times.

Read on to learn more about our holistic support for those on the frontlines of the fight for artistic freedom.

# STABILIZING ARTISTS' LEGAL STATUS

AFI secured legal immigration status for at-risk artists and their families, providing pro bono consultations and filings of visa, asylum, family and spousal reunification, and employment authorization applications. Recipients of legal assistance came from 19 countries and included:

- A trans-nonbinary visual artist seeking asylum in the United States
- A writer and his family of six who received green card approvals
- A musician, his wife, and their two children who were reunited after three years of separation
- Two at-risk artists filing same-sex marriage-based green card applications
- Sculptors, ceramicists, filmmakers, folk musicians, culture workers, and many other artists seeking safe haven following forced displacement



Through our partners at the ONWARDS Coalition, AFI's legal team co-hosted information sessions providing accessible immigration information for at-risk artists, scholars, advocates and culture workers.

# EMPOWERING RESETTLED ARTISTS

**In addition to assisting artists with housing, healthcare, and financial resources, AFI created customized, paid professional development opportunities for artists in our network:**



## New York City Artist Safe Haven Residency Program (NYCASHRP)

AFI's coalition-led residency program provided year-long tailored professional development for curator and interdisciplinary artist Margarita Kuleva (Russia), photographer Fatimah Hossaini (Afghanistan/Iran), and musician/composer Mehrnam Rastegari (Iran). These artists were also provided with 12 months of stipends covering living and artistic expenses. This holistic support enabled the creation of new works: Margarita produced a full-scale exhibition *Inhale/Exhale* at Residency Unlimited, Mehrnam developed an album and performed at Joe's Pub, and Fatimah presented her photography exhibition *Beauty Amidst War* at Yale University.



## Afghan Artists Protection Project (AAPP)

AFI co-created paid year-long fellowship placements at The New School for writer Mujib Merhdad (Afghanistan), photographer Fatimah Hossaini (Afghanistan/Iran), and musician/composer Waheedullah Saghar (Afghanistan). These placements provided direct support for Afghan artists and contributed to the preservation of Afghan cultural heritage.

# LAUNCHED IN 2025: ARTIST COMMUNITY NETWORK

## Artist Community Network (ACN)

This year, AFI launched an incubator for NYC-based artists at risk. Led by and for artists, the ACN builds creative leadership and community in exile by facilitating spaces for professional growth and deep relational work. Throughout the one year pilot, AFI is working with six at-risk artists to co-create opportunities for peer mentorship, community building, professional development, digital archiving, network-building, and the production of artistic events.

Nazanin Noroozi (Iran), Achiro P. Olwoch (Uganda), Bart Was Not Here (Burma), Cansu Körkmaz (Turkey), Lama El Homaïssi (Lebanon), and Yasmeen (Lebanon) are the ACN's pilot cohort.



This year, beneficiaries of AFI's assistance received a **combined total of \$318,000 in resettlement support for living and creative expenses**. This has directly enabled artists to develop new work, participate in fellowships and conferences, showcase their work at concerts and exhibitions, build networks with industry partners, and create strong communities with their peers.

# COLLABORATING IN GENEVA

**In order to expand the protection of artists at risk and artistic freedom in Europe and beyond, AFI catalyzed the creation of an independent sister organization, Initiative pour la Liberté Artistique (ILA), in Geneva, Switzerland. AFI jointly with ILA has:**

- Supported 209 at-risk artists, culture workers, and dependents.
- Joined the Council of Europe's Advisory Board of "Free to Create."
- Partnered with Hospice Général and Etablissement Vaudois d'Accueil aux Migrants (EVAM) to support employment for at-risk artists through arts events.
- Worked with Global Citizen to issue a Call to Action demanding the German government reform visa policies for Afghan immigrants.



**In addition to providing direct services for at-risk artists, ILA is leading transformative work at the intersection of technology, the arts, and human rights through digital projects preserving contemporary Afghan art.**

# LEADING ON RESEARCH & ADVOCACY

**From co-hosting side events at the United Nations to supporting strategic litigation under international human rights law, AFI strengthened our capacity to protect artistic freedom and at-risk artists through legal and policy advocacy by:**

- Publishing “Early Warning: the politicization of Slovak arts and culture” with Slovakian civil society organization.
- Co-hosting a U.N. side event with Amnesty International and Human Rights First spotlighting the U.S.’s refusal to participate in its Universal Periodic Review.
- Co-drafting and becoming one of the first signatories to Bratislava Declaration, a collective call from cultural workers, institutions, and civil society across the EU demanding urgent, enforceable protections for artistic freedom and institutional independence.
- Submitting an amicus brief in defense of a Polish visual artist that successfully commuted their sentence from a criminal blasphemy charge to a non-criminal vandalism charge.

**Drawing from these successes, in 2026 AFI will launch the Artistic Freedom Monitor, an interactive data platform tracking threats to artistic freedom in the United States.**



AFI Senior Officer of Global Policy and Advocacy Johanna Bankston speaks at "Cultural Freedom and Security in Eastern Europe" organized by the Penn Cultural Heritage Center. Photo by Eddy Marenco.

# GALVANIZING ARTS AUDIENCES

AFI artist Mai Khoi performing at the CEC ArtsLink Assembly. Photo by Destiny Mata courtesy of CEC ArtsLink.



In New York City and Geneva, AFI created platforms and opportunities for artists at risk to present their work. When we convene local audiences for events, we amplify the art and lived experiences of artists at risk, raise awareness about artistic freedom, and spark important dialogue.

**In early 2026, AFI will produce events curated by the pilot cohort of the Artist Community Network. Together, they will present a visual arts exhibition and a performance of three solo plays.**

## In 2025:

- ILA / AFI presented the Heritage & Exile concert series in Geneva. Hosted at Studio De Agostini, these three concerts featured female musicians Maryna Krut (Ukraine), Elaha Soroor and Mashal Arman (Afghanistan), and Niaz Nawabi (Iran). The series spotlighted cultural heritage at risk across Eurasia.
- AFI produced two concerts with musician-in-residence Mehrnam Rastegari during her NYCASHRP residency. She performed with her Persian psychedelic band Chogan at the ArtsLink Assembly at La MaMa Theatre and with her Eurasian fusion band Senavazi at Joe's Pub.
- In partnership with CEC ArtsLink, AFI produced the two-day convening "Defending Each Other" in support of resettled artists at risk. The assembly brought together 40 speakers, including AFI artists and staff, and 100 attendees across the fields of artistic freedom, immigration, academia, philanthropy, and social justice.

# CELEBRATING AWARDS & PRESS

**This year, AFI is grateful to be recognized as a leader on the frontlines of the fight for artistic freedom:**

- AFI was named a laureate of the Global Pluralism Award for outstanding direct services support and advocacy for international artists at risk. We were selected from among 380 international candidates for this biannual award.
- AFI was featured in a New York Times article spotlighting rollbacks on federal arts funding and museum independence in the United States.
- Global Citizen spotlighted AFI's legal assistance and preservation of Afghan cultural heritage through the Afghan Artists Protection Project (AAPP).
- "Early Warning: the politicization of Slovak arts and culture" was covered by several European media outlets, including Creatives Unite, the Network of European Museum Organizations (NEMO), and Culture Action Europe.
- AFI was featured in several chapters of On The Move's report on protecting and supporting at-risk artists, including a case study on the NYC Artist Safe Haven Residency Program and a chapter about inclusion initiatives for at-risk artists in the United States.

**AFI staff presented at convenings led by the National Endowment for Democracy, WOMEX, CEC ArtsLink, ICORN, DePaul University Law School, ET International Theater Conference, United Nations General Assembly, and the Universal Periodic Review of the United States.**



AFI Co-Executive Director Ashley Tucker and AFI Board Chair Dinesh Khosla. Photo by Gareth Smit.

# IN OUR ARTISTS' WORDS

Ultimately, the truest measure of AFI's impact in 2025 is not found in numbers, but in the voices of the artists we support.

We are grateful for the trust that thousands of at-risk artists, culture workers, advocates, and scholars place in us each year.



## Bart Was Not Here

Multidisciplinary Artist & 2025 ACN Cohort Member

"AFI has been nothing but insightful, patient, and resourceful for me and other creatives I know. Settling in America can be really hard, and AFI made the experience a lot easier for me knowing I have this organization to count on. I absolutely appreciate the effort they put in and the love they have for this work."



## Achiro P. Olwoch

Writer, Director, Producer & 2025 ACN Community Artist Leader

"AFI found me at my lowest and helped me up with legal services and housing. After I was 'settled' they continued recommending opportunities and programs that benefit me, my art and my career. They care about my progress, my falls and my triumphs. They have continued being there each time I need it and I am forever grateful."

The AFI team is proud of all we've achieved alongside our community in 2025. While this has been a challenging year for many, we remain steadfast in our mission to champion artistic freedom.

We look ahead to 2026 with both hope and resolve, and ask you to join us as defenders of artistic freedom next year and beyond.

# HONORING PARTNERS AND SUPPORTERS

**AFI is grateful for the partnerships and coalitions that sustain our work and empower artists at risk.**

Partners include Art Action Foundation, National Queer Theater, Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts, Joe's Pub at the Public Theater, Residency Unlimited, Tamizdat, La MaMa Experimental Theatre, CEC Artslink, On the Move, the ONWARDS Coalition, Berkeley University, Stanford University, Penn Cultural Heritage Center, Hospice Général, Etablissement Vaudois d'Accueil aux Migrants, and Democracy Forward, among many others.

This work would not be possible without the generosity of our donors including the SDK Foundation for Human Dignity, the Mellon Foundation, New York State Council on the Arts, Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, National Endowment for the Arts, the Darby Foundation, the Mosaic Fund, and the DJ McManus Foundation. We also extend our deep thanks to the many individuals who support our work throughout the year.

**Follow us in 2026**



LAMA EL HOMAÏSSI | ARTIST COMMUNITY NETWORK  
MAI KHOI | INDEPENDENT  
SAHRAA KARIMI [MODERATOR] | INDEPENDENT  
YASMEEN | ARTIST COMMUNITY NETWORK

ARTSLINK  
ASSEMBLY  
2026  
DEFENDING  
EACH  
OTHER

