

A Temporary Public

by Margarita Osipian



A workshop can act as a temporary social space that offers an agile and responsive format to address and respond to social and political changes. A workshop is also a means for cultural organisations to deepen relations with their existing audiences and connect to new ones. In this article, Margarita Osipian takes the Elevate Festival in Graz, Austria, and A4 in Bratislava, Slovakia, as case studies for examining how the format of workshops and informal education within a festival feeds into audience development. She interviewed Bernhard Steirer, Roland Oreski and Daniel Erlacher of Elevate Festival, and Slávo Krekovič and Ľudovít Nápoký of A4, to dive deeper into these questions.



A4, Workshop Modular Synthesis on VCV Rack by Ondrej Spiritza, 2019

A Temporary Public

How can we envision, design, develop, and enjoy environments in which one learns ‘with’ someone else instead of ‘from’ or ‘about’ others, as Deleuze suggested? How can we invent, create, and compose ‘spaces of encounter with signs’ in which distinctive points ‘renew themselves in each other, and repetition takes shape while disguising itself?’ What would make these spaces different to the ones we have been forced to experience in the past?

Florian Schneider, (Extended) Footnotes On Education ¹

Elevate Festival originally emerged from an event concept called Exit Space, a dance floor in a club where hundreds of people came to dance and talk to one another. Exit Space was initiated after a meeting between 27-year-old Daniel Erlacher, who was running the record label Widerstand Records, and 55-year-old Christian Wabl, a co-founder and activist from the Green Party in Graz who was inspired by the record label’s link between (electronic) music and political content. This link reminded the older activist of a time when ‘music not only accompanied the revolutionary potential of a society, but was an active part of it.’² The meeting between Erlacher and Wabl led to an event

concept that combined music and political discourse. The collaboration lasted for two years and produced six Exit Space events leading up to the first Elevate festival, which was organised in partnership with the Green Party Academy who provided the financial support to get everything off the ground.

The dance floor is understood as a space for resistance, thanks to, for instance, the work of Bogomir Doring.³ Doring demarcates what he calls the ‘dance of urgency’—something that arises ‘from the emotions that occur in times of personal and collective crisis’.⁴ For him, the collectivity formed on the dance floor can also extend beyond it, acting as a political body. Within festivals and cultural organisations, the dance floor is not the only space to form a political body—informal educational initiatives are also spaces for political and social engagement that facilitate the creation of a temporary public.

In opposition to the clearly demarcated (and often static) groups that exist within formal educational structures, workshops allow for a more agile and responsive relationship with an audience—allowing the audience to take shape around informal educational initiatives. This text takes the Elevate Festival in Graz, Austria, and A4 in Bratislava, Slovakia, as case studies for examining how the format of workshops and informal education within a festival feeds into audience development. What artistic approaches and tools are being used for audience development? How do you build and sustain a public through programming? During the quarantine, I interviewed Bernhard Steirer, Roland Oreski, and Daniel Erlacher of Elevate Festival, and Slávo Krekovič and Ľudovít Nápoký of A4, to dive deeper into these questions.

While Elevate and A4 have very different organisational structures, they both employ similar methods of audience development. They approach the relationships between workshops, the larger curatorial programme, and the communities they are addressing in a comparable way. A4 is an independent cultural centre focusing on contemporary forms of professional theatre, dance, music, film, visual art and new media. The centre organises more than 300 cultural, art, and social events each year, ranging from performances and movie screenings to exhibitions and workshops, as well as the annual NEXT festival for adventurous music and sound art. Elevate, on the other hand, is an annual interdisciplinary festival held over the course of four or five days in a variety of venues in Graz, which combines critical political discourse, contemporary music, and art.

In her article ‘The Workshop and Cultural Production’, Anja Groten conceives of workshops as a space between ‘work and leisure’ that offers a ‘framework for social gathering, producing, and sharing knowledge’.⁵ Particularly within the festival context, the workshop acts as a temporary social space that comes into being and takes shape in relation to the overarching theme of the festival or cultural programme. Workshops allow for the creation of a flexible space that can address urgent and contemporary questions, with participants developing skills around new tools and techniques. If we want to ask how a festival can address and respond to social and political changes, then the workshop offers an agile and responsive format to address the fast pace of our contemporary social and political lives.

Workshops offer an environment for learning that functions outside more rigid academic structures—providing hands-on learning, direct interaction with musicians, artists, and programmers, and the creation of a (temporary) community. As Groten writes, ‘[t]he potential of the workshop as a space for experimenting with new forms of social and technological interaction lies in its being an iterative process, constantly in flux’.⁶ In their capacity to build and develop a new skill set within a community, workshops also contribute to the creation of social and cultural capital. When we talk about audience development, the audience can have many roles outside that of a spectator or listener. Workshops that teach coding, or different tools for making music, help to build the base for a future audience, as well as for future artists or performers for the festival.



Elevate Festival 2020, *Workshop Decolonizing Technology*



A4, *AIAM Workshop* by Robert B. Lisek, 2019

Curating Alternative Education

Since their inception both Elevate and A4 have included workshops in their programming. As Slávo and Ľudovít from A4 told me, that means that they’ve been holding workshops for more than 14 years, with the workshops changing over the years. They’ve ranged from course-based workshops to sound workshops as a community-building tool to workshops that targeted specific groups by filling a gap in formal education. For A4, the workshops were prompted by the need to expand the community of practitioners around them in relation to the kind of artistic production and programming they were engaging with. As Slávo, the artistic director, noted during our interview ‘in the beginning online tutorials were few and far between, so having these workshops was very important’.

For A4, the curatorial approach to the workshops is linked to the act of building a community of young people working within a specific creative field. These kinds of workshops have mostly been related to sound art, experimental music, digital music, visual art, and interactive media. On the other hand, workshops that are geared towards children focus on visual art history and practical training, and are split between two age groups. Both of these kinds of workshops take a ‘bottom-up’ approach, with the hopes that they can help with increasing audience engagement and the formation of a future audience.

As an independent cultural centre, A4 hosts quite a diverse annual programme encompassing a wide range of genres – theatre, dance, music, film, visual art and new media. The workshop programme is an important element of the annual festival. Slávo stated that the main topic that workshops focus on is the ‘creative and critical relationship to technology and the artistic practice’. Overall, Slávo and Ľudovít see their workshop programme as filling a gap in the more formal education systems that are used in Bratislava’s visual art and music schools. A4 has a track record for being the place for experimental and electronic music and their programming reflects this – reaching an audience of people that are interested in these practices.

Elevate has included the workshop format in every festival. These workshops include music workshops for children, technical and skill-building workshops, workshops with speakers, and workshops with musicians. The organisation of workshops was prompted by the wish to make better use of the resources that were on hand during a festival, encouraging visiting artists, speakers, and musicians to share their skill sets and knowledge. The intentions and aims behind the workshops were a mixture of self-empowerment for participants and to help, promote, and foster the local cultural scene. The workshops were led by artists, but also educators, so that with these overlapping skill sets they could both perform and teach at the festival. The speakers from the discourse programme were also included in this exchange, with their workshops serving as a platform for knowledge transfer, or a more intimate interaction around a specific topic.

As Elevate is an annual festival, Bernhard, Roland, Daniel and the Elevate team develop the programme and the theme throughout the year. A workshop can be included in the programme because a speaker or artist who is already part of the programme may offer a workshop that really fits the theme of the festival, or a workshop itself is interesting enough to be included. In general, workshop topics and ideas emerge out of other parts of the festival. It is not so common that workshops are sought out directly. However, Daniel noted that the team at Elevate can create and bring in their own workshops, like the *Riot in the Matrix* workshop,⁷ which focused on teaching the audience about Matrix, an open standard for decentralised, real-time communication that can be used to power chat rooms, messengers, and even the Internet of Things.

With topics ranging from video mapping⁸ to mapping the future,⁹ Elevate Festival has workshops connected to all three strands of the programme: music, art, and discourse. Workshops that are part of the discourse programme are usually explicitly curated around a specific theme and contribute most to a feeling of intimacy among the audience. The core team of Elevate festival has different perspectives on the workshops. During our conversation, Bernhard and Roland noted that they have mixed feelings about workshops in the music programme. These are always free and there is no business model connected to them yet, contrary to the music programme itself, which is bringing in money through entrance fees. The discourse programme of Elevate is always free, so it would make more sense to align the music workshops with the discourse programme model. Another difference was that audience members could only join the workshops that were part of the music programme by applying and registering beforehand, while the discourse programme workshops were usually open with no need to register.

Setting Goals

The inclusion of workshops into a festival or cultural programme usually emerges from a series of goals that the organisation has mapped out. The goals of the children's workshops at A4 are generally the most specific and clearly defined. They need workshop leaders who can work with children and speak the local language. In some cases A4 brought over workshops that they knew were successful in other cities, and in other cases they tried to develop ideas with artists and musicians they already knew. In general, these workshops arose from a combination of opportunities offered by the people who were already part of the festival and the regular programming. Similar to Elevate, A4 also looks for artists who can give a workshop. An example is Robert B. Lisek who was performing at A4 and was also able to host a workshop around the theme of AI and music.¹⁰ Throughout the years, A4 has used different workshop structures. For the regular workshops that happen over the course of a year, they focus on introductory courses to specific programming languages and software used in production. For the SuperCollider sessions for instance,¹¹ they wanted to build regular sessions or meet-ups with the same group of people over a period of time. Creating a series of successive workshops distilled the audience over time, with only the most interested people continuing with them.

For Elevate, it was a bit harder to pin down the goals and processes of development for the workshops. Daniel mentioned that the goal is always to go deeper and to be inspired, citing the example of a psychedelics workshop¹² from the 2020 festival. This workshop was very interactive and allowed the audience to intensively explore whether psychedelics can act as a catalyst for rebuilding connection with ourselves, each other, and nature. In relation to the discourse programme, the workshops add a layer that goes beyond listening to a speaker talk about a specific topic. The *Decolonising Technologies* workshop¹³ asked the audience to engage in a collective deconstruction of contemporary Internet-based technologies through the act of creating speculative fiction. This kind of workshop allows for a more in-depth exploration of a specific topic through a more interactive and hands-on approach. The team at Elevate noted that most of their workshops are taken as they are, and they rarely develop workshops themselves. However, it was clear that if the team has ideas for workshops, they are often developed in relation to the audience and the themes chosen for that year. For example, in the 2020 festival a talk about AI and music attracted an audience of twenty school children, and the speaker was asked to adapt the talk for them.

Audience Response

So what is being offered to the participants of the workshops? A4 wants to teach the audience specific tools. The underlying idea is to expand the community of people who are active practitioners as a way to contribute to the programming in the future but also as a way to build the audience base. The social aspect of the workshops is critical for building an audience base and developing people's interest in tools and cultural topics. In Bratislava, the communities that are interested in the intersection of art and technology are not very developed, so there is a lack of skills—either the artists don't have tech

skills or the technologists don't have the creative skills. For instance there is still no local community that is actively using an audio synthesis and algorithmic composition tool like SuperCollider. As Ľudovít pointed out, this is different in larger cities where there are more professionals who are interested in specific tools and technologies.

A4 doesn't have specific data about the participants in their workshops, but knows it is a very active group. The type of audience that attends workshops depends a bit on the level of the workshop. If it's an introductory workshop, the audience is usually mixed, with half of the audience being beginners who are curious and want to do something creative, and the other half having more experience but wanting to learn something new. Some participants work in the tech sector, but join in order to play around with new tools in more creative ways—showing that the workshop really fills a gap. The number of participants declines as the workshop becomes more specific.

Slávo and Ľudovít made it clear that their audience really enjoys the communal aspect of the workshops and actively communicate what they miss in the workshops and ask about follow-ups. Public presentations are not normally part of the adult workshops, so it is hard to know what the audience response is. However the results of the children's workshops are presented to a small audience, with a very positive response, and parents are often really surprised about what their children accomplished in just one or two days.

A more international audience attends the annual A4 festival. Therefore the workshop structure differs somewhat from the regular A4-programming. The festival workshops are organised in response to artists who are at the festival, and there is often a public moment where the workshop participants perform using the tools or technologies they learned. During the festival there is always an audience for workshops, which is not the case for the year-long programme.

The response to Elevate's workshops from the community and the festival audience has always been very positive, with workshops having a consistently good attendance. As Daniel mentioned, they know that their audience appreciates the workshops because they show up even on a Sunday morning after a late night dancing in the Dom im Berg. Elevate does not usually collect data on their audience or their response, but in the context of Re-Imagine Europe they distributed a post-festival survey to get direct feedback. In addition, Daniel is working on having people register for workshops, rather than just keeping them open, which would provide more information about the audience.

Audience Development

In the process of developing a workshop programme, it is important to understand whether the programme takes shape primarily from the perspective of audience development, or whether the focus is on the artistic concept and the audience is then built around it. A4 prioritises the artistic vision and the importance or relevance of specific tools or topics. They are constantly on the lookout for tools that open up new

creative possibilities and then try to create a community around that tool. The question then is if different, or new, tools are being used as tools for audience development? At A4, Ludovit conceded that their approach to building a community wasn't particularly sophisticated, but that they were trying out different approaches to reaching an audience and working with general computer programming languages that people might be interested in learning. They also often utilised the network of the workshop leaders, with many participants joining in this way.

For Elevate, Daniel was clear that thematic content comes first, and the workshop and symposium programme is built around it. The workshop programme is always connected to speakers in the programme. Whether a workshop is interesting for a specific audience, such as the AI and music workshops, is often a side effect of the process and not the main intention. The psychedelics workshop triggered an audience development that they hadn't anticipated. In regards to the music programme, Roland noted that they always start from the artistic approach. In terms of new approaches or tools for audience development that arise from an artistic vision, Bernhard and Roland made it clear that it is part of their method of booking artists, to think constantly about who the audience will be for different musicians. For example, when they presented the Acousmonium,¹⁴ they identified students from the university and music students as an integral part of the audience. When Pamela Anderson was part of the 2019 discourse programme, they reflected on which people, and how many of them, would show up for certain parts of the programme. Daniel added that they want to improve on audience development and make more lasting connections with the audience. Registration for workshops would allow them to continue their relationship with the audience beyond the festival.

Audience Compositions

How do you build a diverse audience and find people who want to take part in workshop programmes? Daniel noted that Elevate builds the workshop audiences based on experiences from previous festivals and workshops. There have been workshops where they have talked first to specific groups or communities who they thought would benefit from the workshop. In such cases they rely on the communities to spread the word about the workshop and assist with this element of audience building. This is a bottom-up strategy for audience development that starts from targeting communities who would be interested in the workshop. Connecting the dots between artists, musicians, and audience is an integral part of their motivation for the workshop programme and the festival itself. Bernhard noted that if an artist or musician teaches a specific skill during a workshop, they focus their energies on bringing together an audience that would benefit from the workshop – especially individuals who can build on their current skill sets and further develop their career.

A4 often targets students from the art schools in their promotion and communication, even though there is still a bit of rivalry between formal and informal education. They also target the online community of creative professionals and share promotional material to build an audience. Another strategy is to keep contact lists of previous

workshop participants and communicate regularly about upcoming activities that might interest them. A4 has a reasonably consistent attendance, with a handful of people who participate in all the workshops. Slávo noted however that at this point they are struggling to attract a large enough audience for the workshops, which is what they want to focus on developing. Since most of the workshops are introductory, they should be able to attract a larger audience. Previous workshops have been male-dominated and they're thinking of having workshops targeted specifically at women. There is even less gender diversity in children's workshops than in adult workshops, and they are investigating how to attract more girls in general.

Academic Collaborations

In 2020, Elevate festival collaborated with the local university, Kunstuniversität Graz, on the presentation of the Acousmonium, as part of the Re-Imagine Europe program. This collaboration has since then intensified, and collaborations with the Institute for Electronic Music and the University of Applied Sciences in Graz have been initiated. The intention is to continue to deepen this relationship with the university. Bernhard gave the example of a conference organised with the Institute for Musicology, with lectures both at the university and at Elevate. These kinds of collaborations contribute to audience development, with students or school classes attending the festival. The students range from high school age or younger (13 to 17 years old) to those in their early- or mid-20s.

While collaborations with universities and art academies are integral to audience development, there is also a unique importance in facilitating informal forms of education, such as workshops or masterclasses. These allow for an overlap of different fields, bring in an international element, and allow for interactions with artists and musicians in a deeper and more direct way. 'For these workshops', Daniel stated, 'The context is different, which is important. (...) This interaction might give you more inspiration in a short moment than you would get inside of a classroom'. The festival is a free space for creative response, and 'they have the role of being a fertile ground for many things to grow'.¹⁵ While the setting is different, there are still important connections to be made between the festival programme and university programmes—they are all part of one ecosystem.

For A4, the importance of these informal educational structures is that they contribute something that is lacking in formal education. There are hardly any programmes at the art academy in Bratislava that include electronic or digital arts, which means there isn't a pool of students who are learning to use electronic and digital tools. However, there will be possibilities for future collaborations with the Academy of Fine Arts and Design since they have added a department for digital art. Slávo pointed out that they feel they have influenced some of the practitioners and people who are teaching at the university now, who are responsible for formal education. He added that fifteen years ago the impact of technology was debated among a small circle of artists or theorists, and now it is a global issue. The interest in the relationship between technology and art and culture is growing, and A4 has been at the forefront of highlighting this importance within their community.



Elevate Festival 2020, Workshop Decolonizing Technology

Filling A Gap

Every cultural organisation and festival exists within the larger ecosystem of a community. So how do the workshops relate to the local community and the younger generation? As Daniel stated, Elevate aims 'to inspire, to share information, to change things for the better, to activate'. If they can do this for a younger generation, then all the better. Roland noted that one of the venues that they worked with employed someone with links to schools, and this relationship enabled them to reach a younger audience. As a team they would like to engage even more with young people and several schools have invited Daniel to speak about the process of organising a festival, so some of the younger generation get to

hear about Elevate. Seeking out and engaging with a younger audience benefits Elevate as a festival, because these young people can become the new audience and participate in the festival programme. It is also very important to share the value system that is being developed in the discourse programme with a younger generation by means of conversations about democratisation, civil society, climate change and human rights, and by 'presenting alternatives which can contribute to a better future for everyone'.¹⁶

The *Climate Emergency – What's Next?*¹⁷ workshop was a great example of how Elevate connects to the local community. This workshop did not originate with the core team, but was proposed by an activist who has been affiliated with Elevate for many years. The festival was able to 'elevate' the kick-off for this project and connect it to smaller towns around Austria. By connecting the project to the festival they were able to help promote it and increase an audience base for both themselves and the project. As Daniel made clear, bringing together these systems, and these different audiences, was a technical challenge: they had six outposts and two parts in the programme (lectures and workshops), as well as a joint live session with all the outposts. Since 2009,¹⁸ Elevate festival has been engaging with topics relating to the climate crisis and local community-supported agriculture (CSA).¹⁹ Uli Klein, who manages a farm that is part of a CSA project, has been a guest on several panels at the festival and presented a workshop in 2014 about food sovereignty and solidarity agriculture.²⁰ After these presentations, membership in a local CSA increased significantly – demonstrating the mutual benefit that can emerge from building and sharing audiences between community initiatives.

Future Developments

What other future developments are Elevate and A4 aiming for with their workshop programme? Bernhard noted that previously Elevate organised more workshops but decided to decrease the amount of new workshops because of the lack of new audiences. With a new generation of visitors, and the collaboration with the universities getting stronger, they plan to have more artistic workshops examining specific topics in much more depth. Elevate also would like to extend the duration of the workshops. Participants would pay more but then have a deeper commitment. This will help solve some of the financial issues around how to fund workshops, particularly those connected to the music and art programme.

A4 noted that they are in the midst of a strategic planning process for the entire organisation, and the educational programme is one of the areas they would like to develop further. They will systematically re-evaluate their previous programming and set up some more structure for the educational programmes. They are also developing a new project within Erasmus+ (the EU subsidy programme that supports education, training, youth and sport in Europe), organising educational seminars that focus on art and education. Overall they want to focus on structuring the educational programme, developing a long-term strategy, and formalising their role as an independent cultural centre within the educational system. Inspired by the move online that was triggered by the corona crisis, A4 is also thinking about having online tutorials on modular synthesis

and on how to work with SuperCollider. These have the potential to open up a larger audience and increase engagement. The music and AI workshop received a lot of interest, and the hopes are to move into these more specialised topics in the near future.

These future developments show that workshop programmes are a vital part of festivals and cultural initiatives. As informal educational structures they provide opportunities for local participation, teach new skills, build ties between local and global networks, and contribute to social inclusion. Both Elevate and A4 develop their programming with the artistic vision at the core of the process, and with the audience being built as a response to this artistic vision rather than the artistic vision being shaped by the audience. The focus on the artistic vision creates a unique educational space that fills gaps within more formal learning structures and institutions and helps to raise the bar on emerging technologies and cultural and political discourse.

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BIOGRAPHIES

Daniel Erlacher (AT) is one of the founders of the Elevate Festival in Graz. He coordinates the discourse and documentary film team of the festival and the Elevate Mediachannel. Before working with Elevate he promoted music events in Graz (1995-2011) and ran a record label (1996-2013). Being an advocate for free and open source software/hardware, he regularly lectures on topics like human rights, public and social media, decentralised communication and data protection.

Slávo Krekovič (SK) is a musician and sound artist, musicologist, contemporary music and new media art curator and cultural organizer/nonprofit activist. He is the organizer and curator of series of experimental music and multimedia events, including the annual NEXT Festival of Advanced Music (since 2000) and Multiplace new media culture network festival (since 2002). In 2004 co-founded independent cultural centre A4 – Space of Contemporary Culture in Bratislava, where he holds the position of deputy director and music curator.

Ľudovít Nápoký (SK) is project manager and volunteer coordinator at A4 in Bratislava.

Roland Oreski (AT) is the co-founder of the Elevate Festival and Deputy Chairman of the AV-Kulturverein disko404. He has more than 15 years of experience in cultural management, and curated numerous events and festivals.

Margarita Osipian (CA/NL) is a curator, researcher, and writer living and working in Amsterdam. Engaging with the intersections and frictions between art, design, technology, and language, she organises collaborative projects both in formal institutions and in more precarious and fleeting spaces. She is part of The Hmm, a platform for internet cultures; a member of the Hackers & Designers collective; and an editor and curator for Versal, an art and literature journal based out of Amsterdam. She has done programming and curated exhibitions for the W139, Salwa Foundation, TodaysArt, Bits of Freedom, Tetem, Hackers & Designers, and Mediamatic, amongst others.

Bernhard Steirer (AT) is the co-founder and organiser of the Elevate Festival. He is a music lover, DJ, co-curator of the music programme of the Elevate Festival, and the driving force behind the participation of the organisation in European collaboration projects.

CONTEXT

This article is part of the *Re-Imagine Europe* publication. The publication collects articles, essays, interviews and reports about audience engagement for interdisciplinary arts organisations. It aims to share knowledge gained throughout the *Re-Imagine Europe* project with professionals in the cultural sector who would like to gain a deeper insight in audience development and capacity building.

Re-Imagine Europe (2017-2021) is a four-year project of ten cultural organizations from across Europe, responding to the current social and political challenges. With a programme of residencies, commissions, symposia and workshops, the project partners stimulate both artistic production and audience development. They experiment with new ways of reaching out to their audiences, motivated by the ambition to develop a broader and more engaging approach to audience development and capacity building.

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