On Weaving Webs of Care

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INTRODUCTION

Participating in events like festivals, workshops, or camps can be challenging for those arriving alone or with specific accessibility needs. Samuel Eberenz's response is to practice webs of care – instigating the creation of small groups of up to six people to foster mutual support for each other, paying special attention to access needs and structural dynamics. Inspired by Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha's disability justice framework of 'care webs' and by activist 'action groups' used in civil disobedience, webs of care redistribute responsibility for well-being from a few individuals or designated teams toward a more collective social system.

Drawing on webs of care at two annual events, Labor mit Utopieverdacht (LUV) in Germany and Elevate Festival in Austria, this pilot study examines how they function as an added layer of relationality adaptable to different scales and atmospheres. The web formed at LUV was crucial for discussing and addressing access needs and how to mitigate inequalities within such a self-organised environment, creating space to experiment with organiser versus participant dynamics and shared responsibility. At Elevate Festival, webs of care offered festivalgoers an optional, low-threshold way to build temporary micro-communities for connection and exchange, addressing the programme's theme of climate collapse as well as the event's social and physical challenges. Across both settings, webs of care emerge as flexible, context-sensitive microstructures that strengthen relationality and cultivate a culture of responsibility – valuable not only in explicitly sensitive settings but also in more peaceful environments for people seeking deeper connection.

Climate Collapse – Not Alone in This, Elevate Festival 2025. Photo by Peter Hutter

Weaving New Webs of Care for Temporally Bounded Contexts

It can be challenging to take part in a festival or camp by yourself, without any close persons by one's side. Forming affiliation groups, or what we call 'webs of care' of roughly 4 to 6 persons, can help add an additional layer of connection to the experience, somewhat levelling the imbalances in how socially integrated participants are. They can take on a crucial role in creating accessibility and responding to needs for care and exchange. Furthermore, webs of care function as intermediaries between the individual participant and the broader group dynamics, playing a role in supporting consensual, collective decision-making. With this text, I aim to present and reflect on webs of care in the context of two different events that take place each year, Labor mit Utopieverdacht in Germany and Elevate Festival in Austria.

The idea for introducing webs of care was inspired and informed by Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha's book *Care Work – Dreaming Disability Justice* [1]. The Canadian-American poet, writer, educator, and social activist writes about 'care webs' in the context of disability justice practices, for example through the Creating Collective Access network [2]. Piepzna-Samarasinha also draws the arc back to STAR House, a safe space for trans* persons of colour in New York City, founded by Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera in 1970. In essence, care webs are groups of individuals (who may be disabled, able-bodied/non-disabled, or a mix) working together to provide care and access to resources for each other, reducing dependence on support from the state or biological families (which might be unavailable or oppressive). In this way, creating care webs shifts the idea of access and care of all kinds (disability, child, or financial) from the individual and institution to the collective.

The second source of inspiration came from activist experiences, namely the concept of affiliation groups (or 'action groups') formed for political action such as acts of civil disobedience [3, 4]. In this context, the focus is on mutual support in extreme situations and on a fast yet consensual way of making decisions in a non-hierarchical activist setting, even under the threat of repression.

It is worth noting that both care webs and action groups come from contexts of elevated vulnerability and urgency, that are facing direct institutional neglect and/or the risk of repression by, or clashes with, police, security guards, or with proponents of the radical right. However, less precarious settings could also benefit from forming affiliation groups as a space for exchange, care, and mutual support. It is important to acknowledge that the two cases described in this study are embedded in more privileged environments compared with the ones that informed our weaving of webs of care. Employing webs of care in more peaceful contexts can nevertheless serve as a 'dress rehearsal' for more dire occasions.

Labor mit Utopieverdacht Use Case: Revealing an Additional Layer of Relations

The future inspires our current reality as much as our actions determine its realisation. What future do we want? What future do we deserve? What can we do to get there? The Labor mit Utopieverdacht (called LUV for short and Lab of Im:possibilities in English) is a self-organised, one-week, transdisciplinary space for collaboration, where questions like these are asked and discussed, where knowledge and skills are shared, and structures are challenged [5]. During the lab, there is a strong emphasis on process over output. The main topics and the methodological approaches follow from individual and collec-tive priorities and experiences. A daily plenary meeting offers space to organise as a group; that is, to communicate and align plans and ideas, hear offers and requests, share insights, and also address needs, ideally resolving tensions and conflicts within the group.

Since starting in 2015, LUV has evolved from a student-organised summer school to an unconference-like week, convening 30 to 45 participants from Switzerland, Germany, and Austria. Participants are of different ages but mainly between their mid-twenties and late thirties. Some of the participants and organisers join almost every year, while others return every now and then. Roughly one-third of the participants each year are attending for the first time.

Who does or does not feel invited to join? Who is included and safe enough to embrace the uncertainties of such a self-organised format and group? What are the requirements to be able to benefit from the promise of jointly leaving the comfort zone? Like many cultural and activist event formats, LUV has undergone a transition in the past years, entering a productive, and at times challenging, debate around accessibility and the reproduction of structural biases and discrimination, including in idealistic spaces like these. The process was strongly driven and supported by participants stepping up and communicating their accessibility needs* more openly. LUV has become more open to those with accessibility needs that were not previously covered by the infrastructure. People with disabilities are part of LUV, and accessibility must be organised collectively.

The first steps to making the lab more accessible and inclusive brought forth a code of conduct and a reader on accessibility and the specific barriers people face, both of which were published on the Labor mit Utopieverdacht webpage. In parallel,

we educated ourselves about structural racism, awareness concepts, and transformative justice. An awareness team was introduced in 2022: a group of dedicated participants acting as contact persons and mediators in case of transgressions, comparable to awareness teams at music festivals or activist camps.

After two iterations with an awareness team, we concluded that this was not a fitting approach for the LUV. The lab gathers a relatively small group of individuals in a somewhat closed setting compared to the greater anonymity of a music festival. In this setting, the awareness team unintentionally took on the role of a care team, feeling responsible for the well-being of all participants, never being able to stop reading the room for signs of discomfort. At the same time, participants increasingly projected their group care and awareness responsibilities onto the awareness team. This caused exhaustion in the awareness team, while not solving some of the main challenges of the self-organised programme event format: ongoing turnover, limited capacity for access needs, and the introduction of new participants to how these group dynamics work.

LUV is a space that inherently comes with a progressive claim and a certain awareness implied, or what might be called 'wokeness'. As LUV organisers and participants, we come with (and face) high expectations regarding consideration of others, inclusivity, and consensual decision-making. As such, awareness for access and care needs to be a mutual effort. They cannot be put solely on the shoulders of the organisers or an awareness team, nor does a complete individualisation and faith in someone's 'noble character' suffice. We resolved that the organisers need to assume accountability mainly in enabling framework conditions for mutual care and support and as an intervenor in the case of serious transgressions or assaults. Having a daily plenary meeting plays a key role in assuming responsibility as a group. However, the group size being too large to safely and tolerably resolve all kinds of issues and needs in a full plenary setting, we looked for a different model that would offer a structure to mediate both needs for care and conflict resolution between the individual and the group.

Our inspiration to start practicing webs of care came from Piepzna-Samarasinha's work on 'care webs' and the concept of action groups (or 'affiliation groups') in activist contexts, e.g. in actions of civil disobedience. What resonated with us in our format was the idea of adding an additional layer of connection to the relationships already existing in the group. We would create a support group that regularly checks in with each other, offering support in case of crisis, tensions, or conflicts, but also, perhaps more fundamentally, day-to-day accessibility [6]. The latter could for example entail repeating a conversation for a person who is hard of hearing when they cannot lipread in a dark room, or moving food from the dining room, which is noisy and not wheelchair accessible, to a space that is more accessible to all participants. Finally, the members of a web can also convey and mediate needs and tensions with other participants or the group, i.e. take the initiative to bring a topic into the plenary session.

Before the weaving of webs (group formation) on the first day of the one-week lab, the organising committee presented the concept of webs of care and our reasons for implementing such a structure. The method of 'living statistics' [7] was used to prepare for group formation: participants positioned themselves in the room in response to a series of questions, ranging from their diurnal habits (e.g. getting up early or sleeping late) to their expectations regarding mutual care-giving within their web of care. Under the first impressions created by the positioning exercises, groups were formed, either by spontaneous clustering or at random. We encouraged participants not to form a web with persons they were already close to, since the webs are thought of as an additional layer of connection on top of, and thereby across, pre-existing family bonds, relationships, and cliques. The process of forming webs is one of the more vulnerable moments of the week, since the occasion can trigger fears of rejection and being left out. To make it work, a sensitive and transparent framing regarding the concept and the vulnerability of the formation moment is key. We, as the organising team, have been finetuning how to best navigate this sensitive moment ever since we introduced the webs.

Subsequently, the members of the freshly formed webs were given time to get to know each other, exchange their expectations for the web over the course of the week, and to organise logistics (timing and frequency of meetings, etc.). There was also space to share needs and communicate these back to the plenary, for example regarding access and potentially challenging situations like allergies or navigating a self-organise space.

For most webs of care, members agreed to meet for a check-in once a day. During the check-in, they shared what they had experienced since the last meeting, how they are doing, if they needed or wished for anything. Often, during the daily plenary meeting, representatives of webs would share observations or wishes that came up during the group check-in.

The structure of webs of care was generally well received by participants. By adding an additional layer of relationality, they partially help mitigate inequalities of social integration and pre-existing relationships, as well as take pressure off the plenary and whole-group dynamics, collectivising care and access to a certain degree. However, they do not go as far as resolving potential hazards in group dynamics. We are still learning how to better embed and support vulnerable processes such as group formation, comparison dynamics (i.e. wondering if others have a better or more supportive or fun web) and the
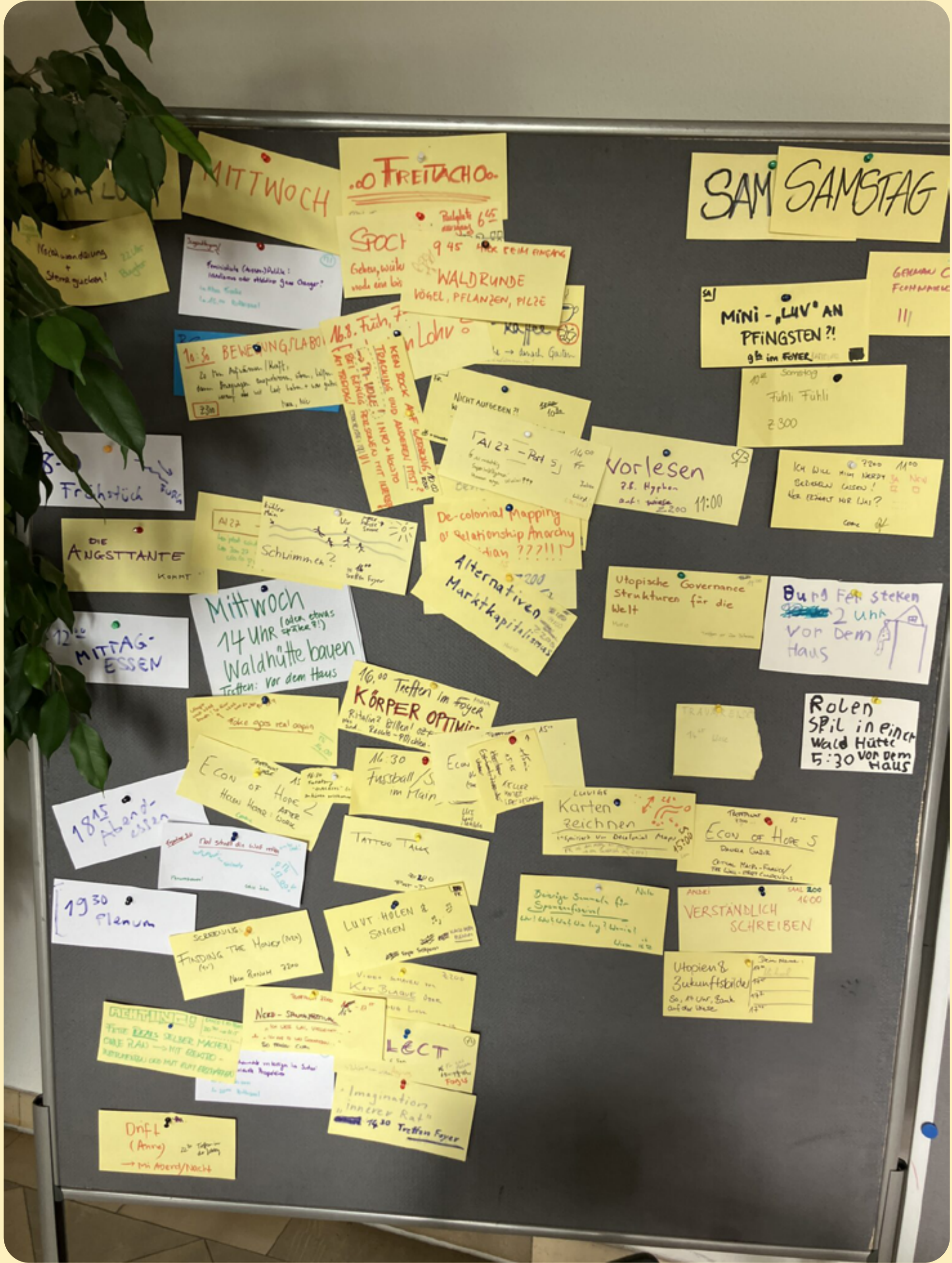
challenge of communicating the wish to leave or change a web without hurting the feelings of fellow members.

Elevate Use Case: Connecting Festival-Goers

Each year in early spring, Elevate Festival animates the city of Graz, Austria, with music, art, and discourse programmes taking place at a variety of locations across the city. The festival 'combines critical and political discourse with art, advanced music, and audiovisual experiments' [8]. Internet politics, democracy, and climate crisis are recurring themes throughout Elevate programme.

An enthusiastic festivalgoer since 2018, I have always enjoyed the mix of music, art and discourse. However, in 2024, I felt that, with the discourse programme mainly consisting of talks and panels lacked opportunities to meet and engage with fellow festivalgoers, who you only interacted with on the dance floor. When I approached the curators about this, I found a sympathetic ear and was invited to offer an interactive workshop. I had the task of acknowledging impending climate collapse, creating solidarity in line with the festival programme, combined with celebrating the festival as an occasion to meet and engage with others over days and nights to come.

The format was a two-hour workshop with approximately 20 participants on the first day of Elevate Festival 2025 [9]. The first part focused on the topic of climate collapse, with a combination of input and exchange between participants, answering questions like: How can we tackle the climate crisis and climate anxiety not just individually but collectively? What makes us more resilient both individually and as a community? Who needs

me in a state of emergency and who do I trust? Or how do we transform despair into collective action when the exception and 'never again' become the 'new normal'?

In the second part, we zoomed in from society to the microcosm of the festival at hand. First, the concept of webs of care was introduced, including sharing some of my experience with webs from Labor mit Utopieverdacht. It was also made clear at this moment that the groups formed in this context were not intended to replace the function of the festival's own awareness concept[1] in any way, but were rather intended as a curated opportunity to meet fellow festival goers and form an additional layer of relationships.

To form groups (or 'webs'), we again used the living statistics method: a coordinate system was defined in the room, and participants were invited to position themselves along the two orthogonal axes. On the first axis, participants positioned themselves in response to the question of whether they were more likely to attend discourse programmes during the day or to be found on the dancefloor at night. The second axis represented their desire and openness to meet and engage with new people over the course of the shared festival days. On the one end gathered people who were socially saturated or happy to navigate the festival solitarily (a legitimate position, and not uncommon for the electronic music scene). On the other end gathered those who were keen to make new acquaintances. The two lines allowed for a more nuanced positioning on a spectrum. Subsequently, groups of 4 to 5 formed between those standing close to each other in the coordinate system – persons with similar day-night rhythms and a desire to mingle or not.

The freshly formed groups were sent off to with a worksheet to go through together, guiding their conversation and jointly answering the questions. They made notes on the sheet, responding to the following prompts and questions:

↦ *All of us together have been to Elevate so many times (from 'never' to 'more than 40 times')*

↦ *Our recommendations for the Elevate Festival 2025*

↦ *What would be a nice question for someone to ask you when you meet them at the Elevate Festival (during the day/night)?*

Responses to the latter question written down on the groups' worksheets included:

↦ *Shall we sit in the sun?*

↦ *Would you like something to eat?*

↦ *What nice things happened to you today?*

↦ *What made you laugh today?*

↦ *How are you feeling right now, from rosy red to poo brown?*

↦ *What does dignity mean to you?*

The next question was '*Would we like to make an agreement or appointment for the Elevate Festival? (If yes, do you want to share what it is?)*'

With the following responses:

↦ *Check in when meeting by chance*

↦ *We are open to be approached by each other, forming an implicit web of care*

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1   Since 2024, the Elevate Festival has an awareness team for safety and support of the audience. It can be identified by pink strapped vests. The Awareness Team is available at events to help create a safe, inclusive space by addressing issues such as harassment, discrimination, and boundary violations, and it can be reached directly or anonymously. Awareness stalls have been positioned at the main music venues and a code of conduct communicated online and in print.

- *Staying flexible*
- *If we meet by chance, we ask each other the question [How we are feeling right now from rosy to shitty?]*

The last question, '*What would you prefer NOT to do for once?*', was an invitation for reflection. Responses included:

- *Self-judgement (about weirdness)*
- *Fear of missing out*
- *Overthinking*
- *Thought spirals*
- *Getting upset*
- *Having worries and fears*

The sheets with the group's responses were put up on the wall of the workshop room as an artefact, staying there for the remainder of the festival.

At the closing of the workshop, everyone came together one last time and participants were invited to share something they took from their exchange. The resonance was positive and most participants seemed to have a good time, socialising and exchanging in the groups.

There was no evaluation of whether and to what degree the groups engaged again in the following days (and nights). In the larger and much more curated setting of the larger festival, the webs probably played a much less central role than they did at Labor mit Utopieverdacht.

I had also joined in the group work, temporarily switching to the role of a participant. My group agreed to check in about meeting again. I met some of my web members from time to time throughout the festival, exchanging a greeting, a smile, and sometimes checking in and having a brief conversation. While we had not quite become friends nor an affiliation group, we were no longer strangers.

Conclusion

The formation of social sub-units of roughly 4 to 6 individuals can serve a variety of purposes, especially as communities of care and allyship. Learning from vulnerable contexts such as underserved communities or political protest actions, webs of care can be introduced into different contexts. If woven with care, they offer a flexible, low-threshold way to add an extra layer of relationship among participants or visitors to an event. The level of commitment and integration can vary – from a non-committal, playful space to connect with fellow participants, to a central element of an event's awareness and care concept.

At LUV, I have experienced first-hand that cascading structures (e.g., plenary sessions combined with a web-of-care structure) help to lower the threshold that must be overcome to address difficulties (as expressed in the small group of the web), like receiving care and compassion if needed and collectively finding ways forward. This setting can enable the filtering and pre-structuring of needs and feedback to be brought to the plenary. If preferred, someone other than the person directly affected by an issue can take it up with the group or other persons involved.

In their book *Care Work*, Piepzna-Samarasinha provides examples of various care webs. Within and beyond the context of disability justice, the approach is adaptable to context, scale, intention, needs, and levels of intimacy versus anonymity within the group. Webs of care need to be intentionally tailored to the specific event or context, and to be open to being shaped and adapted by the persons involved. Webs can be initiated top-down or may emerge from participants themselves. Depending on the setting, not everyone present necessarily needs to get involved with the webs. As shown in the case of Elevate Festival 2025, the weaving of webs can be part of a workshop involving only a subgroup those taking part in the event and space, perhaps regrouping just those in search of connection. Where webs take on a more central role, as in the Labor mit Utopieverdacht case, to uphold safety and inclusion, organisers should invest additional care in group formation and dynamics, watching that that they are context-specific and tailored to the needs and culture of the group.

Both use cases introduced in this text were limited in duration (days to weeks), meaning that the approaches to forming communities of care are also finite. However, it is possible that, beyond the lab, participants will continue to draw on the knowledge they accumulated, weaving webs of care in their daily life. Unlike Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinh, I have so far not had any experience explicitly introducing webs of care to more long-term or more widely distributed settings. I am confident however that many more contexts could benefit from weaving their own versions of webs of care. I am curious to learn more the changes the concept might need to weave webs of care that can sustainably serve a community in a context that is not limited by time.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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CONTEXT

This text is one of the pilot studies of *Re-Imagine Europe: New Perspectives for Action*. In these contributions we explore and reflect on artistic practices and experimental approaches in the cultural field that can engage and activate audiences and communities to address ecological, social, and political challenges. The pilot studies provide an overview of practices of cultural organisations that can serve as models, recipes, or tools for transformation for current and future generations of cultural workers and artists.

Re-Imagine Europe: New Perspectives for Action (2023–2027) is a four-year transnational co-creation and circulation project of fourteen interdisciplinary art organisations across Europe. The project aims to equip and empower young Europeans through artistic practices to better withstand societal challenges triggered by rapid climate change.

The Re-Imagine Europe partnership is a collaboration of:

Paradiso (NL), Sonic Acts (NL), Elevate Festival (AT), INA grm (FR), A4 (SK), Borealis (NO), KONTEJNER (HR), BEK (NO), RUPERT (LT), Disruption Network Lab (DE), Semibreve (PT), Parco Arte Vivente (IT), Kontrapunkt (MK) and Radio Web MACBA (ES).

BIOGRAPHY

Samuel Eberenz (he or they) is the Science Poetry Editor at Consilience Journal and has been co-organizing Labor mit Utopieverdacht since 2015 – an open event format in constant struggle with the inaccessibility of utopia and reality alike. With a background in climate sciences, Sam has been working as a project manager for climate and energy at the Risk Dialogue Foundation in Zurich since 2021. He aims to facilitate dialogues on technological and societal change – always on the lookout for a good and just life within planetary boundaries. Recently, he has been unravelling the perceived antagonism between emphasising urgency to deal with climate collapse and emphasising agency and hope as the key components for effective climate communication.

ELEVATE

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