

Trends in Creative Work with Audience in Iceland

I am going to briefly analyze two major Icelandic art events and the ways and methods they have used on their way to audience development. These are the *Reykjavík Arts Festival* and the *Reykjavík Dance Festival*.

Reykjavík Arts Festival, established in 1970, is a biennial multidisciplinary festival with a particular focus on new commissions and the creative intersection of different art disciplines. To the widest possible audience, it brings exhibitions and performances of contemporary and classical works and presents them in major cultural venues and unconventional locations that can be found throughout the city.

The artistic director of the festival is Vigdís Jakobsdóttir who took over the organization in 2016 and ran her first festival in 2018. Her taking over the organization brought an important strategic change to the event: audience development was not to be included as a mere add-on feature of the festival, but rather as its core. As stated in the strategy: "Arts and culture are not to be reserved for the privileged few but are a right for all". By keeping this core focus throughout the decision-making process, it was possible to expand the festival's audience and make art more inclusive and accessible.

Reykjavík Dance Festival was founded in 2002 and its central activity has always been the international festival which currently takes place every year in November. Since 2014 however, RDF has extended its activities – now, it carries on diverse national and international initiatives throughout the whole year and in different forms, such as mini-festivals, workshops and residencies. The festival is directed by the couple Pétur Ármannsson and Brogan Davison who took charge in 2021. For *Reykjavík Dance Festival*, audience development for the audience development's sake is not a goal on its own but rather a byproduct of its proper mission to challenge traditional practices and beliefs observed within contemporary dance and performing arts.

Dating back to the beginnings of ballet, artistic dance has historically belonged to the white, well-educated, able-bodied individuals. The mission of *Reykjavík Dance Festival* is to challenge these cultural norms by offering space to more diverse artists and audiences. It is the festival's belief that beforethinking about reaching out to new audiences, it is necessary to start at the artwork itself, otherwise the audience will experience a cultural mismatch.

In their programming, both festivals focus on broadening their audiences by offering an inclusive and diverse program and by closely collaborating with different organizations that support inclusion and diversity and sharing their resources and knowledge. That often includes delegating the curatorial power to diverse social groups that might have been left out of the conversation.

Reykjavík Arts Festival has also moved parts of the festival activities away from the city center (where most activities originally took place) into the suburbs and the municipalities across the

local countryside, encouraging the residents in those areas to participate as either artists or audiences.

According to both festival directors, though it is important to democratize art and give the curatorial power to those missing from the stage, it is equally important to keep the quality of the artwork high by having professional artists at the helm, leading the way. Giving the curatorial power away does not necessarily mean the stage is open to everyone. Art festivals need to remain critical about the quality of what they present to the public.

As an example, *Reykjavik Arts Festival* collaborated with asylum seekers in connection with the art installation *Street View (Reassembled)* by the Finnish sculptor Anssi Pulkkinen. The art installation consisted of the ruins of houses transported from Syria to Europe via sea. From the concrete fragments, Pulkkinen created an installation located on a truck platform that had the appearance of a caravan or a motor home. House ruins are a complex symbol of the loss of home. The installation of Pulkkinen was placed in front of the *Nordic Centre* in Reykjavik and to give the artwork a more complex context, *Reykjavik Arts Festival* collaborated with asylum seekers in Iceland. In a conversation with asylum seekers, it became clear that food and eating habits were the anchor that connected people. So the festival decided to give the curatorial power to the asylum seekers who cooked their favorite dishes, played their favorite music, and taught dances from their culture. The festivities curated gave the installation a more profound context and presented a contrast to the serious conversation about homelessness and war. In exchange, the asylum seekers were included in the festival and gained a voice in the Icelandic society.

As another example, the *Reykjavik Arts Festival* presented the participatory work of the choreographer Asrun Magnúsdóttir in collaboration with a local suburb arts festival happening in one of the suburbs of Reykjavik. The diverse group of residents of a big apartment block in a suburb of Reykjavik invited the audience to visit their homes, allowing guests to wander from apartment to apartment and take part in all sorts of festivities with a variety of hosts. Each host curated their particular party, using music as a starting point. Neighbors came together and people who might not often meet in their day-to-day life celebrated both their community and each other. Guests were dancing with residents, listening to their stories and learning about their everyday lives.

Similarly, *Reykjavik Dance Festival* has also collaborated with diverse social groups. In its 2021 edition, the festival commissioned work in collaboration with Art Without Borders, an annual festival held in Iceland, showcasing all forms of art by disabled artists and supporting collaboration between diverse artists. Their project *Stefnumót – A Date*, was a collaborative project where three duets of disabled and non-disabled stage artists worked together on a new performance.

Reykjavik Dance Festival's mission has been seeking to question and challenge who the festival is for, who it is made by, who gets to speak through it, and on whose terms. In 2019, the project *Teenagers in Reykjavik* raised these questions as part of a conversation with young people but also created a platform for them to curate, collaborate and perform for local and international artists, to present their work, and, of course, to attend the festival as part of its audience.

And, finally, a bit about covid. In spring 2020, amid the preparations for *Reykjavik Arts Festival*, we were hit with covid restrictions, and the festival was in danger. The festival director and her team had to respond quickly, as it was obvious that the program would not play out as planned. Instead of canceling the event, the organizers decided to extend the festival for over a year (instead of the weeks originally planned in June). One project created as a response to covid was *ArtGifts*. *ArtGifts* is a project based on the Finnish model, originally carried out as part of the *Helsinki Festival* in August 2020. *ArtGifts* first took place in Reykjavík at the beginning of November 2020 and was repeated throughout the country the weekend of 19th - 20th of December 2020.

A specially designed website was created so the public could order an *ArtGift* for a loved one free of charge. Each *ArtGift* was about a five-to-ten-minute performance of music, dance, or poetry readings by nationally known artists, that took place at or near the recipient's home. The artists performed outdoors, in stairwells, garages, or elsewhere where adequate distance was attainable. Overall, there were 890 gifts received with over 30 artists participating and social media coverage that exceeded all expectations. A super successful project that might continue into the future.

To conclude, both festivals focus on seeking out those missing from the table: immigrants, children, people with disabilities, and people from multicultural backgrounds, underrepresented in the culture and arts. Thus by delegating the curatorial power to new diverse groups, they have gained new audiences, and the festivals have become more inclusive and diverse.

One thing both festivals have in common is the lack of baseline statistics to measure the progress of the audience development. Current ticket sale data does not give a clear picture of the average ticket buyer, and the cost of creating a baseline and continuous measurement of data is high. Thank you.