

Audience Engagement. Building bridges for ephemeral encounters and long-lasting memories

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Abstract

In 2025 New Performance Turku created a pilot to develop a more organic link with local communities, the Audience Ambassador Program. The pilot ran for four months and involved an open call, training a team of ambassadors, supporting pedagogical experimentation, and bringing ideas to life during the 2025 performance Biennale week. The pilot reimagined how local audiences who do not belong to the art field could engage and actively participate in a performance event and connect with this very experimental form of art. Our proposal was to create the figure of the audience ambassador (a translator role moving between art and society) and to design a training and production scheme to put it to practice. This document, prepared by NPT Curator of Audience Engagement, includes an overview of the aims of the pilot, pedagogical approach, components of the implementation, feedback collected from different professionals and agents involved, and the challenges and discoveries of the pilot.

We hope this novel approach to audience engagement will be useful to our local and international partner organizations, and to anyone interested in the promotion of a closer and richer relationship between art and its publics. The document is part of a larger [online publication](#) featuring stories by the ambassadors themselves about their work with local communities and reflections on the learning process.

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1. Objectives

Deeply rooted in the city of Turku, its people, and its communities, the New Performance Turku Biennale (NPT) has been promoting the visibility and development of performance and Live Art in Finland for more than a decade. The work has created a thriving scene that activates discussions and experimentation, and is supported by collaborations with varied local venues and art institutions. In the process, NPT has progressively gained visibility as an international event and has more recently sought to expand the audiences it reaches beyond the specialized art public. In 2025 a pilot was created, the Audience Ambassador Program, with the support of the Arts Promotion Centre Finland (Taiteen edistämiskeskus) to develop of a more organic link with local communities. The pilot involved training a team, pedagogical experimentation, and rethinking how audiences are regarded in the production process of the performance Biennale event itself.

This document presents the aims of the pilot, pedagogical approach, components of the implementation, feedback collected, and the challenges and discoveries of the first pilot. The document is part of an online publication featuring the stories written by the ambassadors about their work with local communities and reflections on the learning process. We hope that this document, alongside the stories that bring the richness and challenges of the experiences of the pilot to light, will provide tools for future developments and creative initiatives dedicated to supporting audiences in contemporary art events and venues in Finland and beyond.

The **New Performance Turku (NPT) Biennale** is a unique performance art biennale that presents contemporary artistic currents to both local and international audiences. The biennale continues the ambitious work of the New Performance Turku Festival (2012–2021) in developing performance art productions and works. Its activities include artist residencies and large-scale collaborations with local communities and organizations. NPT aims to further integrate the principles of social, ecological, and economic sustainability into its operations. It focuses on inviting high-profile artists to Turku and fostering connections between artists, local and international communities, and diverse audiences.

For the 2025 edition of the Biennale, we put together a novel audience program creatively exploring tools to facilitate people's engagement with performance art. The aim was to get the

broader public to learn about this experimental art form but also be more comfortable talking and sharing about their experiences with it. We offered a training program in the spring 2025 for a selected group of art enthusiasts that became NPT Audience Ambassadors. The group developed their own activities under themes of their choice, received tutoring, and implemented their proposals with varied communities in connection to the NPT Biennale performance week in September 2025.

The program responded also to concrete needs. As many middle and small art events and institutions today, performance festivals like NPT need to build and strengthen their connections with different communities and social groups. They have the challenge of promoting engagement of broader society with diverse and non-mainstream art forms and practices. In many cases, the local audiences of varied generations have little awareness of the existence, richness, and cultural appeal of these contemporary art forms. On the other hand, institutions are increasingly aware of the limited employment opportunities for practitioners and professionals within the art sector, and of the need to strengthen, diversify, validate, and recognize their creative input and varied supporting roles and labor in the field.

The ambassador program had five core aims:

- Increase the accessibility of contemporary art practices in Turku to larger society by building new connections with diverse social groups in the short and long term.
- Activate the local arts and cultural scene and promote inclusion in art spaces by facilitating encounters between local communities and art practitioners.
- Build a training program for art enthusiasts and active residents of Turku who are members of local communities and wish to develop facilitation skills and engage with local art organizations.
- Create a platform to nurture innovative ideas for reaching and working with audiences in the New Performance Biennale and test them in practice.
- Provide certification of training that can support and qualify practitioners' engagement work with different local venues and events in the long term.

2. The 2025 Ambassador Pilot

The Audience Ambassadors Program was designed as a first pilot to respond to all these aims in the context of the performance Biennale in Turku and test a pedagogical approach in practice. It aspired to provide valuable pedagogical and practical insights to develop a broader audience ambassador concept in the future in collaboration with Turku City and several local and international partner organizations. This report is the first outcome of the process and an instrument we want to share to nurture this long-term dialogue.

The 2025 Audience Ambassador program had two distinct components essential to fulfill its mission: an intensive training program for facilitators in the spring (36 hours), and a local implementation of the engagement approach with the New Performance Turku Biennale in September 2025. Both components were designed and led by María Villa Largacha, NPT Curator of Audience Engagement, a contemporary art curator and education researcher with experience

in both Finland and Latin America, specializing in developing audience engagement and with a background working with participatory methods and critical museum practices. The approach to local publics, and the two components (training and implementation) was informed by her experiences working with varied audiences, artforms, art educators, and public venues, and a critical view of the relationship between art producers, narratives, and consumers. In such view, engagement with communities needs to stop relying on impersonal communication or mass marketing between the institution and its potential new audiences. Instead, the program is inspired in a conception of contemporary art circulation that focuses on its creative appropriation by the public; it works to foster a true dialogue across different visions of aesthetic experience and of the world. This approach stresses three ingredients as crucial:

- **Create meaning together.** We acknowledge the importance of providing information and varied tools for audiences to approach the artworks. Information is vital for understanding for example the basic grammar of visual or performative strategies that artist work with but the public might not consider as “art” in traditional terms. However, we also propose to create meaning together, in a dialogue where knowledge travels both ways. Our approach takes distance from traditional art promotion ideas focused solely on what the artist or the curator intends (art literacy). It rejects the assumption that audiences are ignorant and need to acquire all the complex theoretical apparatus of “art talk” to be able to have a meaningful experience with art or appreciate it. The program is successful when anyone in the public can feel welcome to events and art presentations regardless of their knowledge of specialized art discourses, and can connect them with their own artistic thinking, critical approach to reality, or creativity.
- **Deep and meaningful encounters.** Looks critically at the cultural industry: takes a step away from the drive to increase art consumption and ticket sales as main goals. Such logic often relays on large spectacles, volume of attendees, and inevitably fast-paced and shallow experiences. In contrast, the spirit of audience engagement of this program proposes a *slow-food* perspective: we look for means to make the experience a nurturing meeting or dialogue between people and art. The approach aims for deep and meaningful journeys as the audience encounters art forms, artists, and art perspectives; and we take all the time, material, space, flexibility, and investment needed for that to happen.
- **Puts the human component at the centre.** Both in the support and empowerment of the facilitators of engagement (the ambassadors) and in fostering a real encounter between these facilitators and the audiences they work with, people are at the heart of the project. When museum guides mechanically speak following scripts of the curators, or try to implement pedagogical materials or activities designed by someone else, the work may seem to be streamlined and simplified; but in truth these tools are often dysfunctional, and the human encounter suffers as well. People at both ends of the exchange (‘guide’ and visitor) risk to feel their interaction is an empty protocol: feigning expertise and feigning interest or comprehension. Instead, we propose facilitators to build *dialogues they are passionate about*, choosing the artworks, topics, local audiences and means for the engagement that they consider would best suit a meaningful

encounter. This requires actual creative work on their part and mentorship. It makes them the leaders of the experience and fairly compensates their labour. Every word and every activity proposed is fully owned by the facilitator, and the audience can be embraced by that same enthusiasm and curiosity.

The program proposes these features as the only conditions that will enable sustained participation in the art scene of people who do not belong already to the art field. The gap between a very specialized art field (focused on elite consumption) and society has been historically huge, and it is not one that can be easily bridged by giving in to the consumption logic of mass events and entertainment. If art institutions are interested in embracing larger society in the long term, they need to move away from traditional engagement tools (heavy media advertisement, developing generic didactic materials, etc.). Instead, a real connection must be forged with local groups. They need to make long term investments training and supporting professionals, and the process (and progress) might be slow. This is why the program was built around the figure of the ambassador as someone who is able to move between two very different worlds, who translates across worldviews and sensitivities: bringing communities into contact with art, and offering unexpected ideas for the community to reflect and create with. Experiences like the ones shared by the Ambassadors in the online publication make evident that such relationship is rich in possibilities, very nurturing to all the parties involved (including the artists) and ultimately worth pursuing.

3. The Training - Pedagogical Approach

The pilot project was designed to involve a diverse group of participants including art enthusiasts, artists, educators, and any active residents of Turku who are members of local communities (no age limits, professional skills or art experience required) and wished to engage with local art organizations and artistic activities. The group of 16 people was selected through an open call requiring a simple motivation letter and committing to receive the 36-hour training in English. Upon completion, participants submitted audience engagement projects, received a certification, and 12 of the projects were selected for possible implementation. In the end, 8 people were available and hired as Audience Ambassadors for the 2025 NPT Biennale. They received further tutoring, as well as support from the production staff for logistics during the outreach of their groups and for the implementation.

It is important to bear in mind that this was a pilot of small scale and it operated with a very tight timeline (see fig 1.). The Biennale happens the first week of September, shortly after the summer break, but the program is published only in May, when the training took place, with very basic information about the artworks. The summer vacation spans two full months in between (June-July) where little or no progress can be done institutionally. Whatever activities are prepared to work in relation to the performances rely on a very broad connection to the artists portfolios and the information provided at that stage, and can be tested only very quickly before the Biennale.

We worked to ensure the best preparation possible in the short time available (one month), and three professionals were involved: the Curator of Audience Engagement, a Local Logistic Producer, and one producer. The ambassadors were hired for the work done during the month prior and during the Biennale week. We provided meals and snacks during the May weekend modules and made it out number one priority to offer the students a space for meaningful interaction. We also stressed this training program was something they could use and appropriate for their professional development and community or educational projects more broadly. At the same time, they had the prospect of completing the modules and building a proposal to get hired for the Biennale if they wished to get involved after the summer and apply the learning to practice.

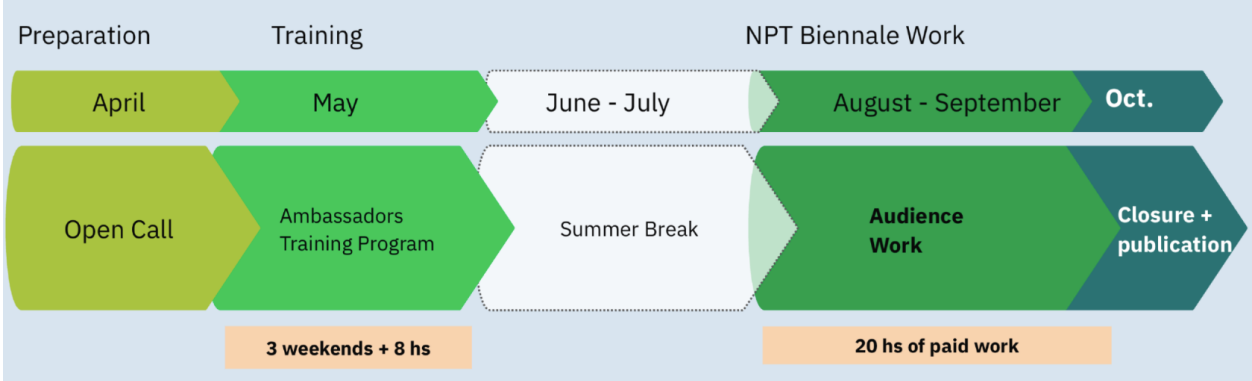


Figure 1.

The crucial profile to select the ambassadors was not then familiarity with the art form, but familiarity with the local context and connections with communities, as well as their desire to explore artistic ideas and motivation to work with people. The call highlighted as well NPT’s aim to support professional and personal development through the training. It was a successful call because it offered education and included a paid job prospect. Instead of treating them as interns or free labour, as many institutions do with guides, we wanted to highlight the value we place on the know-how involved and the crucial creative and human role ambassadors play in making the art experience accessible and meaningful for new local publics.

- **The ambassador team.** The open call gathered a very diverse group of 16 Turku residents with professional backgrounds in the culture sector, non-formal education, and leadership roles in community organizations. They were also an intergenerational group: with a few young artists, 30 to 40 year-olds, and several people well into their 60s. Four of them were immigrants. The wide range of professional and cultural perspectives they brought in supported a very rich discussions around how art moves people and broadens perspectives, and helped them reflect on how to promote opportunities for intercultural inclusion. Over the time spent together, the group developed good personal connections and became itself a great motivating force for the project.

- **Training modules.** The pilot training was given in three intensive weekends. The content and methods used in the training modules aimed to provide the students with the essential tools to develop and lead engagement projects, and act as bridges between art and local audiences of their choice. Through it, they had the opportunity to immerse themselves in the world of performance art, connect with the local art scene and its practitioners, and develop skills in facilitating meaningful interactions through art. Last but not least, the training was meant as a platform where they could assemble a group for creative exchange and peer support that may outlive the implementation. The content of the training was organized in 3 modules:
 - Module 1. Introduction of the training program, presentation of the New Performance Turku Biennale program in full (artists and basic information of their proposals), and activities to get to know each other.
 - Module 2. Diving deep into performance art forms and history. Due to the time constraints and the non-academic approach to engagement itself, we prioritized storytelling, visual and video examples (students were not required to read textbook materials) to build a more intuitive connection with performance practices. Direct performative and embodied experimentation and discussion by the students was essential to unpack the art form or the grammar of the art: how to work with action, time, materiality, objects, interaction, improvisation, scores, ritual, movement, participation, etc.
 - Module 3. An immersion in pedagogical reflections on what is performance art and how to create meaningful audience engagement with it. And a workshop to slowly guide students in their choice of topics, audiences, and performances for the ideation of personal engagement proposals.

- **Local art venue visits:** simultaneously, the program planned 8 visits to art venues in the city, coordinated by the Local Logistic professional, Jenny Maria Laitila, with experience in audience work in theater. This coordinator was fluent in Finnish and supported the logistics of the Ambassador program in the city (booking rooms, communication with partner organizations for the visits, managing access of reserved spaces, supporting the use of equipment and preparing materials). The venue visits were spread across weekdays in the evenings in May, and Ambassadors choose 4 of the venues based on their time availability and interests. This way, they were exposed to very different art forms, local cultural spaces (some of them included in the NPT program), and types of audiences.

The venues included 8 of the 14 local art organizations and venues that NPT collaborates with: Aurinkobaletti, Tehdas Theatre, Kutomo/Ehkä, Titanik gallery, Turku City Theatre, Turku Art Museum, Art House Turku (WAM), and Aura of Puppets.



Figure 2.

During the visits (2 hours each) they received the basic audience experience, but the Curator of Audience Engagement made sure as well that they would get an insider presentation of how each of these partner venues currently works with audiences. Institutions were asked in advance to share information about the challenges they encounter, and what works best for them. It was an opportunity for the professionals of each institution to meet the ambassadors personally, build a connection with them, and visibilize and reflect on their own pedagogical practices and public programs.

These training modules proposed for the pilot respond to several needs and constraints proper of a festival event that presents new works, and works that are by nature *ephemeral*. Contemporary art performances are by definition unexpected, open-ended, even to the artists themselves; and in the case of NPT, the art events are developed in the months preceding the Biennale. This poses a challenge for audience engagement work that art galleries and theatres

do not normally have because they know in advance all the details and final form of the artworks presented.

On the other hand, performance art works with very particular strategies known to the insiders and experts, but little understood by the broad public (which often has very limited exposure to it, or only knows very controversial works that might have made the news in the past decades for their harsh or daring aesthetics). Even for many people who regularly attend music, dance, theatre and visual art events, “performance art” does not tell much. But we cannot expect to pack what a professional artist learns in four years, or a lifetime (and all the complicated terms of art history and theory) into our exchange with the audience. If anything, art discourses are likely to make people withdraw and shy away from conversation, not get involved. So how can we work with new audiences?

The Audience Ambassador method of engagement proposed in the modules brought the general vision of audience engagement mentioned above to practical application. It translated the ideas into tools for the concrete encounter between facilitator and their groups:

- **Engaging the whole being, not just the intellect:** Engagement needs to be supported on a rich experience, not solely on providing information. As educational research and museum studies have shown for decades, people engage and learn in very personal ways when relating with artworks, events and information more generally. Therefore, a good engagement strategy needs to have different entry points and use varied modes of attention at different moments, including the verbal, but also the sensorial, problem solving, and interaction (see fig. 3). The more the merrier. That way facilitators can be flexible and responsive to their groups and to unpredictable performances.
- **The focus is the audience:** The aim of audience engagement is not to praise the artworks. And the question of matching the art to personal taste is a complicated trap. Instead of liking or disliking, discussing if something is art or not, the focus is to find out *what the experience of the artwork suggests*, the memories it triggers, the issues it is trying to address. That allows to explore what the work gives to members of the audience (and the world) personally and collectively. In fact, an unconvincing or questionable work can be the beginning of very interesting discussion about life, art, and what matters to people, and a provocation for their own creative explorations. Audience engagement is designed therefore to open pockets of creative, low-threshold, and critical responses to the artworks.
- **Discovering together:** We prepare well (with information and with well-thought and tested creative activities) and we enter a collective process with the audience. In it, we prioritize what builds an interesting dialogue between the specific artworks and audience members we encounter. Just like a musician that is ready to do a master improvisation and enjoys the thrill of discovering what resonates with their audience. We are ready for happy accidents to surprise us. If something doesn't work we are interested to understand why; the learning happens regardless.

What is engagement? How does it happen? These are questions that have long been studied by social sciences, psychology, education, and cultural industries. For this program, we presented a summary of these different approaches, understandings of cultural experience, and theories of learning that are important to take the guiding ideas mentioned here to practice (figs. 3 and 4). These approaches helped ambassadors reflect on the type of experience they could propose to the audience, and to be aware of the different tools available to open a space of collective reflection and experimentation with their groups.

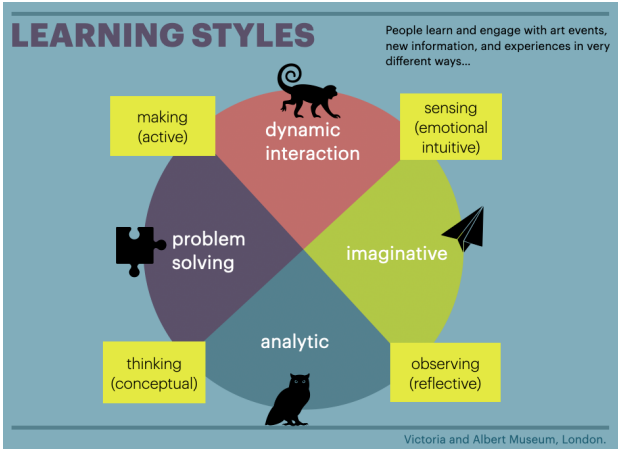


Figure 3.

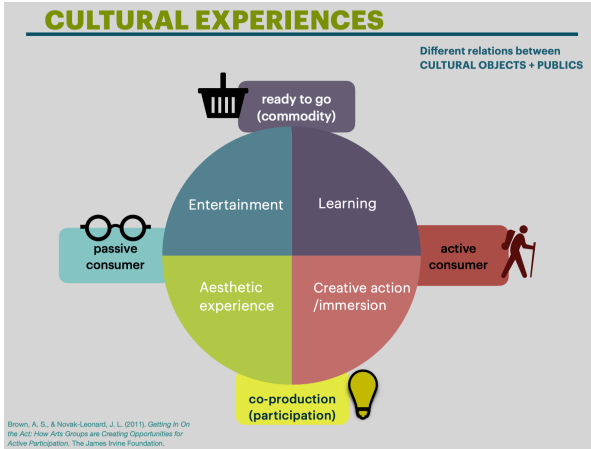


Figure 4.

The basic rationale of the approach was to go beyond fast consumption of the art event and open up time for personal and collective reflection, and space for real participation. Audience engagement is not primarily about advertisement or lecturing, but about storytelling and taking the time to unpack the mystery each of the works presented might hold, to explore personal connections with it. Engagement is based on creating real and open-ended dialogues with the community and the artworks. It is a two-way bridge where art event must find who the public is, and the public must move out of the comfort zone of consumers giving “likes”, and get involved.

Engagement proposals. Ambassadors were oriented to create activities and guiding questions that would help them unpack NPT performances with their groups as they happened (based on the topics of the works, the target communities, and the ambassador interests). They were also expected to explore different forms of perception, expression and interaction, inspired in the activities given in the modules. Finally, knowing some of them had limited experience facilitating or teaching, we focussed on facilitation exercises. That way, the group reflected on the skills of a facilitator, how to work with questions that support dialogue, and how to create a balanced flow that doesn't overwhelm people but incorporates breathers and keeps them interested.

The emphasis for the design of the engagement proposals was creating a good thematic flow that would connect several performances of the program meaningfully, and would have all these components working well. We aimed to tune them to concrete potential target groups: children, teenagers, retired adults, family groups, specialized or academic audience, hobby groups, minority communities, neighborhood associations, student collectives, school groups, etc. The proposals were outlined in English for team discussion and feedback (English is also the working language of NPT as international event). However, all information of the NPT program and the pilot was given in Finnish and Swedish as well in online press, and ambassadors were free to work in the language of their choice based on their communities: most of them worked in Finnish, one in English, and another in French.

At the end of the training modules, students were given over a week to submit their written proposals. Certification of the training was provided to everyone completing 80% of attendance and submitting a proposal. NPT team received 14 proposals that were considered from many angles for implementation: the appeal of the topic proposed; a good fit between performances, topics and potential groups; feasibility and material needs. Considerations on ethical and social dynamics required by the activities designed were also important: ensuring that the topics and performances chosen were amenable to people not acquainted with the medium and generally age appropriate; creating low-threshold activities about also ones promoting safe spaces for participants of different groups. The Curator of Audience Engagement provided detailed pedagogical feedback to all of them, and NPT staff accepted 12 proposals to move on to the next phase. This last feedback round was an important ingredient for the learning process itself, and in the case of ambassadors that could not continue to the next phase, it allowed them still to get insights on their proposals and encouragement to continue developing them in different contexts. Due to different personal circumstances of the students (time availability one of them), only 8 of the proposals were finally implemented in the fall.

In sum, with the approach adopted to engagement there were no one-size-fit-all formulas or pre-defined pedagogical materials. It led to very customized activities, fully situated in context and responsive to groups. In the process of experimentation and dialogue we had, and the feedback loops between peers and with the Curator of audience engagement, the ambassadors also were able to test in practice how concrete strategies drive conversation or creativity with people in varied directions, how to work with simple materials, and how to unpack what is happening in the performances themselves collectively. We rehearsed together how to creating a safe zone for exploration, disagreement, storytelling and imagining.

In the long term the training also allowed ambassadors to apply these same tools to other contexts and artworks and engage with different communities meaningfully. Art institutions can be working with very different art forms, but regardless of those, true engagement is the result of building an actual relationship where the institution is both learning about social groups and their sensitivities, getting close to them, opening space for experimentation for educators and for the audience, and able as well to teach these potential new communities how to approach contemporary art forms it works with.

4. Audience Work in the New Performance Biennale

At the end of the summer, contracts were drafted and a team of 8 ambassadors was incorporated to the NPT Biennale staff, and production meetings were organized to understand the operation of the Biennale, locations and logistics more clearly. Introducing the proposals to the general program meant that production had to accommodate the audience groups alongside other practical needs, for example, reserving parallel spaces to host short workshops, or booking advanced tickets, and buying materials and snacks for the activities. Each ambassador was tasked to bring two audience groups (5 to 10 people) with them to the Biennale and attend several performances with them.

August: Outreach and preparation

For a full month Ambassadors started doing the outreach process to find and confirm their audience groups. NPT production team entered to support them in this process and support with press to reach audiences when ambassadors were not already connected to them. We had stressed the importance of having a connection with communities or building it throughout the summer, but progress in many of the projects was very slow because they required institutional mediation and institutions were closed for the season. And in some cases, the members of many communities were still away during August.

One month soon proved to be a very short time for this work. ambassadors invested several hours sending emails, calling institutions, and advertising their ideas in different online channels, but the response was rather disappointing. In the case of ambassadors who worked with acquaintances and communities they were already part of the results were much better and the preparation process smoother.

On the other hand, the ambassadors were tutored in on one-on one meetings to check many pedagogical aspects of the proposals, as well as many practical issues with the support of producers and the Local Logistic Producer. We organized also full-day teaser sessions to test and give feedback pedagogical ideas, facilitation styles, and activities. These proved to be very enriching, fun and empowering for the ambassadors individually and as a team. We also followed up on the outreach process of each of them, guiding them on how to draft invitations. We suggested to frame these invitations as *a journey of collective discovery with art where performances were an important part, but not the ultimate goal*. Several ambassadors were quite proactive and generous supporting each other in this process, leading those with e.g. better digital skills to support those who had limited knowledge of the tools and platforms.

September: Biennale Week

The international New Performance Turku Biennale took place in Turku from 2–7 September 2025, presenting works by 25 artists. The Biennale's theme, *On the Threshold*, reflected on transformation, embodiment and survival in a world shaped by ecological grief, social crises, and shifting identities. This edition of NPT was an exercise in understanding the time we live in

—a moment of unprecedented transition that is at once disorienting, uncertain, and full of possibility. Stepping into this transitional space, the artists shared their ways of navigating a changing reality through contemporary rituals. They presented actions that examined the tensions of our time and opened unexpected connections to help us make sense of where we are today. The performances invited people to face the multiple crises we are not just witnessing but inherently part of —and to pause, participate, and open space for reflection. How do we care for ourselves and each other as power structures shift? Can history offer direction? And how can society respond to profound and inevitable change?

In this context, audience ambassadors were introduced publicly in the general program in the opening as a novel initiative and vital part of NPT investment in a deeper long-term connection with the city. Within the general theme, *On the threshold*, the ambassadors represented the threshold between performance art and society —a space of surprise, discussion and enjoyment. But also a team willing to investigate what experimental and unusual art proposals can give to everyone in society, regardless of background or profession; invested in learning what varied local communities have to say about art, and creating tools to facilitate resonance and participation. Finally, we stressed they have a vital role particularly today, when the art sector needs society to be fully aware of its value and protect its existence.

The Biennale's program was structured around five thematic clusters: *Ecological Threshold*, *Social Justice and Power*, *Shifting Identities and Transformed Bodies*, *Technology and Speculative Futures*, and *Contemporary Rituals*. The fully-packed program of performances spread through 11 different locations around Turku's centre and Aura river. In parallel, the program of ambassador activities unfolded with their groups with the support of the NPT staff.

Several elements need to be highlighted about the implementation:

- **A support structure.** Ambassadors effectively worked as a team throughout the week, sharing information about their activities and sometimes joining each other's work. We made sure they had a home base space with a working area and a kitchen located right in the centre (the Mielenterveysyhdistys ITU space, an organization dedicated to supporting mental health). There materials and the snacks for their participants would be picked up there or ready for them to host the groups. We also booked spaces where they could comfortably spend time with before or after watching the performances, in the same venues, to develop activities. Ambassadors were welcome to attend all the events and gatherings of the Biennale. As the stories wrote by them in the online publication attest, all these preparations allowed for the process of meeting the groups to flow organically and for newcomers to feel warmly welcomed into a local artistic community. They also had the permanent support presence either of the Curator of Audience Engagement or the Local Logistic Producer while they facilitated.
- **Visibility and recognition.** As part of the general programming, the Biennale hosted a dedicated event, the *Coffee and Cakes with Ambassadors* at Bar Ö, where each of them gave a short presentation of their proposals and experiences for the professional guests

of NPT (including curators, artists, and cultural managers of varied festivals around the globe). This was an important moment to make the audience engagement staff appropriately visible and recognized in their role and the important value created through their initiative. They were also invited to the closure of the Biennale in Ruisalo island, to enjoy sauna, swimming, drinks and food with NPT staff, connecting further with the international group of artists and professionals. In sum, we made sure that the ambassadors were included in the most important events that enable artistic exchange and entering the extended network and the temporal community that NPT nurtures in each edition.

- **Storytelling the impact.** The impact of a pilot such as this is not adequately shown by numbers. Rather than aiming to bring large groups of audience. Our stakes lay in a deeper experiment: changing the way we relate to audiences; discovering if we could open real connections with complete strangers to these art forms. This is why the evaluation of the impact focusses on writing stories of what happened and what happened with each group. The impact is qualitative. We also wanted ambassadors to be vocal about the shortcomings of the process, and to make sense of the overall experience as a collective learning experience. The stories received feedback and editorial support from the Curator of Audience Engagement, this time to encourage a rich reflective process (instead of producing dry and impersonal institutional reports). Publishing them is a way to make visible the creative work, investment, and resilience of the ambassadors, and to give inspirational examples of the concrete yet simple strategies that can render beautiful results with groups.

5. Discoveries and Outcomes

What worked well

- **The open call.** The response to the open call was very good to find versatile, experienced and motivated professionals working in the vicinity of the arts in Turku, and with very varied profiles. The call circulated on NPT social media and was sent as well to local civil organizations. It had a good balance between offering training and a job opportunity, and it communicated the value of the work well, considering most people registering had little or no idea what performance art was when they signed up. The drop-out rate was the expected (due to the specificity of the work and people's job and personal situations changing over the summer). The size of the final group (8) was ideal for the pilot, which aimed originally for 10 people hired.
- **The pedagogical approach.** Judging from the proposals received and the stories written after implementation, it is evident that the ambassadors understood and appropriated the engagement method in very personal and interesting ways. The stories demonstrate what this method can create in practice and how deep and rewarding the

experience can be both for the facilitators and for their groups, despite the practical challenges that some of them had. Both the conversations and the creative moments with the groups, show the rich potential that lies in proposing activities to unpack the works and giving time and attention to members of the public to explore their thoughts and the art forms. Disagreement was used as a sign that we are onto something important, and being okay with it helped broaden people's perspectives on art, the world and themselves. Welcoming divergent points of view proved to be a place of productive and fun collective investigation for many of the groups. Or how the Local Logistic Producer put it *"audience ambassadors can break down hierarchies and prejudices and encourage everyone to expose themselves to art experiences that, at their best, can awaken, inspire, and change their own behavior in a more constructive way."*

- **The training modules.** Ambassadors had a remarkable learning curve, considering how many skills were required for the training and later for the proposals to work. Several of them showed an impressive sense of commitment to the project. They were resourceful practically, showed solidarity, and found themselves to be part of a group that saw and appreciated their human, intellectual, and artistic contributions. One of them, a senior citizen, said in her feedback: *"It had been interesting to use this much English. I never use my English, there's no opportunities but only when travelling in a country which own language I can't. And it's quite demanding —made me, my brain, so tired. But it has been surprise for me how friendly and nice everybody has been. My experience in theatre and dance is that there is a lot of not so nice things. I was a little bit afraid if and stressed about that beforehand. I feel now that I have got several new friends and I hope the connection will be kept. I don't know if I am accepted but I hope I am. NPT has been a wonderful experience for me. I am thankful I was part of it all."*
- **Team building and expanding networks.** Some of the ambassadors have continued meeting after the fall both socially and started collaborating professionally in 2026. To other ambassadors, immigrants recently coming to Turku, the program was also a way to get to know the city and the local art scene and expand their professional connections and possibilities. People from Turku, in turn, reconnected or found new local art and culture spaces they were surprised about and have continued to attend since.

One ambassador later said in the feedback: *"I would very much like to continue this work... Indeed, many of us have begun to open and push doors, to build a communication network with institutions to promote these actions. For my part, I have received positive feedback and most people have shown interest in these proposals. But these new actions require time and coordination in order to identify and understand each other's potentially different perspectives, find common ground, and build trust to jump in something new or unexpected."*

- **The venue visits.** Happening in parallel to the classroom work of the modules, these visits were an important anchor in the reality of audience work. Ambassadors praised how enjoyable it was to do these visits together, and said these allowed them to discover new spaces locally they didn't know existed. They also gained a strong sense of

the extent to which cultural spaces shape interaction, and how widely varied audiences approach venues and art forms in the city for different reasons and require different engagement strategies.

- **New audiences.** The ambassadors brought in two groups each, visiting several performances. Together, they contributed a total of 107 attendees who were entirely new to performance art in the city. Both very young (teenagers with limited exposure to contemporary dance, stage or experimental arts), senior citizens (who had not seen anything of the sort and were highly surprised by the works), and people from different walks of life. Some of them traveled long distances to meet in Turku and attend the event. Many declared they wanted to continue attending festivals like this in the future, and one of the groups in effect did that later, in Kuopio.
- **Empowerment and human connection:** When asked in an anonymous feedback form “What made this program memorable or a learning opportunity for you? Has NPT given you something valuable for your personal or professional development?” Some of them answered:

“The people!! But also the visits to different art organisations, learning something new about performance art, just a general all round amazing, fun, educational, enjoyable experience. It's been a great personal AND professional opportunity. A real highlight of 2025 for me”

Others highlight the impact of the program in their stories:

“My sister said that one of the best things about the day was to see me so dedicated and passionate about this performance art thing, and facilitating the workshops; how I and all the other ambassadors believed in what we were doing and were so enthusiastic about it, owning the material that we were delivering. I am sure this is due to the way in which María Villa had designed the audience ambassador approach so that it was not based on praising the performances art pieces per se. Instead, we were guided to design our activities and group calls according to our own interests and passions in relation to the NPT programme. ... Then both her and my mom said they really want to go to see more contemporary art in general, even if they felt it was “so weird... we are such normal people!” ... They went to see the Anti Festival in Kuopio the following week. And afterwards my sister was expressing how she felt they had been missing out on this scene. “Like, what the hell is going on?”

Challenges and limitations of the pilot

- **Outreach difficulties.** We had hoped and suggested ambassadors to reach to communities they knew closely, but several of them wanted to work with communities they were inspired by, and getting in touch with those communities and persuading them to come to the Biennale was not easy. We cautioned not to rely on internet posts for registrations, but reaching new people in person in August was as difficult as getting

them to sign up online. In the end, in many of the proposals it was personal connections that saved the day. When those connections showed up even if unsure about their attendance, they clicked with the activities and the performances and results were good. In hindsight, it seems clear we should have put more work time of the NPT staff to forge the bridges with communities and educational institutions earlier and directly, and lay the ground for a smoother approach by ambassadors later.

One of the ambassadors expressed this also: *“I think the production team could inform people about the workshops - and get the participants to the groups. That is the way to keep the info of different workshops equal and clear. I think that trying to find people — anyone, please, someone!— to workshops was such a different and really hard process, something far away from the workshop work itself”.*

That said, working through personal networks with local communities rather than institutional channels is actually central to the program's logic. The challenge is giving ambassadors enough time and support to activate them.

- **Institutional connections.** Partly due to the time of the year (August) and partly due to novelty of the idea, the responses of local organizations, schools and communities were slow or negative. This was very disappointing and discouraging for ambassadors, who generally had no experience in this type of outreach. Some of them were quite resourceful and assertive to get their proposals through. The basic lesson is the Ambassador Program needs to build and nurture these connections long in advance of the Biennale year to make the process smoother and build institutional trust in what is offered.
- **Timeline.** The availability of the funding and the Biennale schedule itself were too compressed. Future implementations will benefit from acquiring funding and starting training in the gap year, and preparing institutional connections with the directives of e.g. schools or community organizations way in advance. This will allow new ambassadors to make proposals within a partnership or collaborative framework where they are trusted, so their groups can be arranged more reliably and smoothly.
- **Time investment of ambassadors.** The estimation of time investment for the training should be adjusted. The pedagogical approach requires (and the ambassador students were eager to have) more hours of experimentation, rehearsal and collaborative activity design.
The estimation of time and payment for the Biennale work would be adequate if the right interinstitutional work is laid out in advance. They could also benefit from a module that helps them in the local outreach process to connect to new communities, which requires reaching communities in person (part of the approach insists that online adds have very little impact, but today people very easily default to these).
- **Logistics.** Logistics were demanding for the planning, especially considering the Biennale is spread out in the city and calculating time moving from one venue to another, plus arranging snacks and materials, was tricky sometimes. The process was smooth for most

ambassadors, but on the production side managing group activities in parallel to the packed programming was novel and, in some cases complex to plan.

- **Artistic surprises.** Activities and discussion topics were planned based on limited information available about each performance. Unexpected elements in the performances are always part of the experience of a performance festival and what makes it interesting for the audience, and are directly related to the high artistic freedom of performance and Live Art forms themselves. Proposals needed to account for that flexibility, but in some cases the surprises really changed the situation for the ambassador and they had to improvise on the go. As the stories attest, the ambassadors were actually quite good at adjusting, and overall, our priority with the audience was sustained: groups found their voice was heard, even when they were disconcerted by the artworks, and conversations drove unexpected personal reflections. A critical conversation was not just possible, but encouraged and fruitful.

Feedback

- **From the audience:** members of the audience groups spend several hours in the Biennale having joint activities and attending the works (in some cases full days), and interlocking moments of rest or walks, the ambassadors were able to keep them engaged and motivated. People expressed surprise and delight at being received and hosted in such a careful way. Even if the art was strange to many of them, shocking even, it was expressed over and over that these events were very interesting and gave them many things to think about. As the stories show, numerous memories, emotions and personal stories activated, and the ambassadors supported a collective reflection and sense of trust between strangers that is hard to come by. The space for dialogue was praised as a safe and engaging thing to be part of, which is particularly relevant within a rather quiet Finnish culture: people tend to not discuss works openly during events, let alone their personal views, and are generally shy to voice critical opinions.

The active engagement and attention given to them were crucial as well, as one ambassador said: *“People were most excited about doing something creative themselves and being open-minded about trying something new. People were most grateful for being cared for with food and good communication. I have observed that one person already started applying one of the communication techniques I used to engage with the group in their own work!”*.

- **From the artists and art professionals.** The pilot was welcomed with curiosity and appreciated as a daring proposal. People in the field recognized the importance of this initiative and the need for festivals to be proactive and more audience aware. They saw the importance of creating participatory strategies, hear back and learn from the public as a clear step into more sustainable artistic practices. Artists whose performances were chosen by ambassadors to work with were very interested in the group activities and

curious about the reception of the works. It suggested also possibilities of exchange that are very rare for them as creators.

- **From the ambassadors:** As evidenced in the results of the anonymous feedback form (see fig. 5) the content and methods of the training and local venue visits were highly appreciated. However, several ambassadors noted that the training should be much longer, allowing for a slower process to take information in, and more opportunities for experimentation. Some expressed it was cognitively demanding (due to the amount of information as well as working in English). Many praised the support received all throughout by their peers, the Curator of Audience Engagement, and the Local Logistic Producer of the visits.

The outreach process was perceived as stressful and too compressed by several of them, particularly those who were newcomers to Turku and did not have extensive communities to work with or many local acquaintances. The feedback evaluation given at the end, however, shows a clear overall satisfaction with the program: *“This programme provided me with a very useful theoretical introduction to building learning relationships. It opened up new perspectives and reminded me of good practices. It has provided me with new tools from the field of performance arts to promote creativity in art sensibilisation-‘educative’ programmes.”*

Another ambassador wrote in her story: *“Very diverse people were participating in the training, and I quickly saw that being open-minded was a common trait in the group. María Villa used innovative pedagogical approaches such as activating participation, learning by doing, and reflexivity. She guided us to develop thoughts, delivered rich information, and encouraged us to freely create our own space in the world of performance. Weekends flew one after the another, and in our last meeting we drafted our proposals. María took us step by step logically from zero to something holistic. Before I knew it, I had the concept of what I wanted to do, who was my audience, and to which performances I would like to connect my work.”*

The feedback form was also sent to certified ambassadors who were not able to take the job and implement their proposals for one reason or another. One of them, who showed up for the whole Biennale as audience member, said: *“Even if I didn’t quite perform, I found the training programme very interesting and useful, as well as entertaining. Not to mention the biennale week itself! 💋”*

Anonymous Feedback

At the end of the implementation, Ambassadors were asked to express their satisfaction with the different components of the pilot. The form was sent to the 14 students completing the training. We received 7 responses from the ones hired and 2 from those who only took the training. The form included short open-ended questions (some the answers have been incorporated above to this summary) as well as numerical evaluation.

We asked them to grade their satisfaction with the program on many fronts, in a scale **from 1** (lowest satisfaction/disagreement, **to 5** (highest satisfaction /full agreement):

- Training Program (3 weekend Modules with lectures and workshops)
- Art Venue visits in Turku (NPT partner institutions and their audience work)
- Pedagogical support received in the development of your strategy.
- Coordination and communication of practical matters by NPT staff was clear and opportune
- Production and logistic support received (for preparation in August and implementation in Biennale week)
- Personal experience doing the engagement with your groups (regardless of how many people you got)
- The NPT Biennale week experience itself (performances and hangouts)
- Team work, mutual support, and feeling included in NPT
- Do you feel your work and time investment were well compensated by NPT?
- Did valuable personal, professional, or social connections come out of the program?

The overall satisfaction was high across the different questions. Results were very similar in most aspects evaluated, so we present here only the average responses.

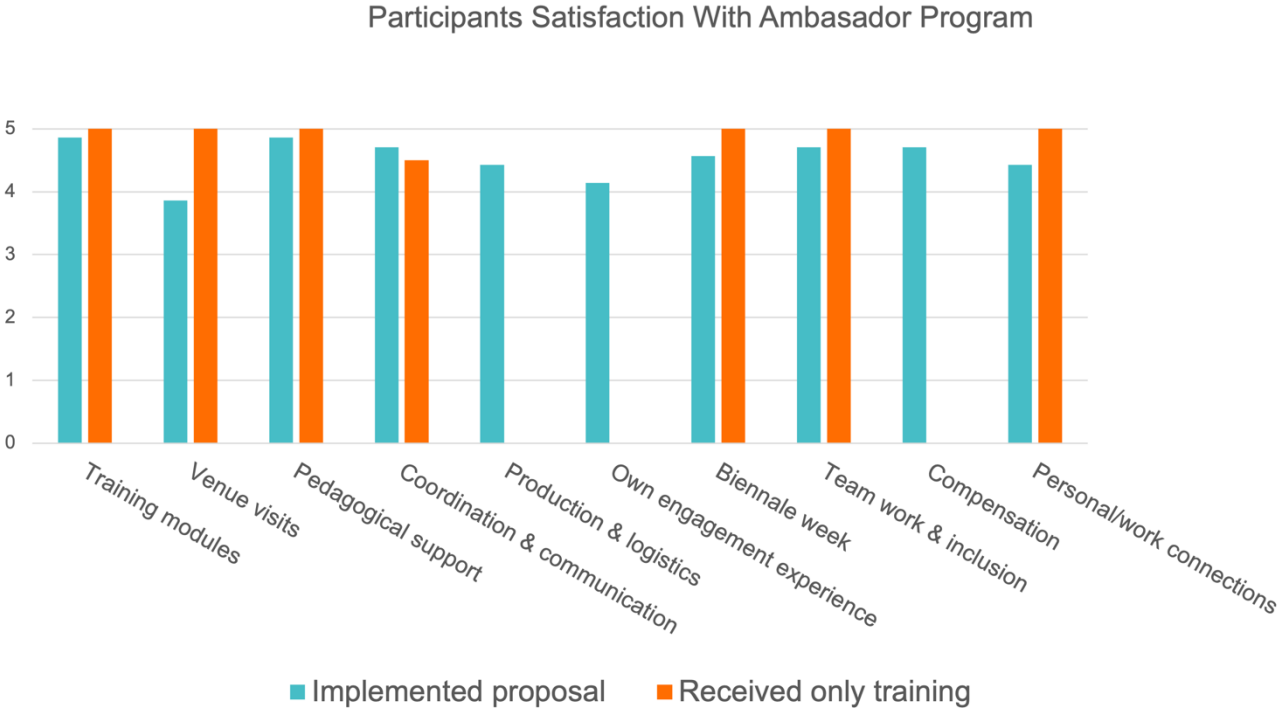


Figure 5.

Where the ambassadors were most critical was in their perception of production tasks; some explicitly noted the importance of NPT addressing production challenges for the group recruitment more directly. For two of them the training was demanding cognitively (the volume of information to parse through and having to work in English). Finally, for one ambassador the venue visits were not so interesting, and the actual work with performance art and the Biennale wasn't as enjoyable as they had imagined.

6. Conclusions

A pilot is a small-scale, time-limited test of a concept or intervention designed to assess feasibility, identify obstacles, and generate learning before committing to full implementation. Its purpose is not to succeed entirely but to produce evidence about what works, what does not, and what conditions need to be ensured for the full-scale version to function. A pilot is supposed to surface structural tensions and unexpected challenges.

This report on the different components and implementation of the 2025 Audience Ambassador Pilot shows that innovation in audience engagement work in experimental arts in general is not just possible but worth pursuing. The project takes a leap in audience development pedagogy away from usual marketing outreach and didacticism. Instead, it embraces facilitation-as-translation, multimodal engagement, and community embeddedness.

However, the project also reveals structural tensions that should be addressed in future iterations. Perhaps the most important tension is between institutional timelines and community relationship-building: deep community engagement requires building trust and happens through repeated interaction. In contrast, performance programming of new material follows the creative process timelines of individual art practitioners. On top of that, performance art is widely open-ended, particularly hard to package for consumption. The 2025 implementation makes clear that the preparation for this type of intervention with the audience requires more time and institutional cooperation to lower the threshold for participation.

The pedagogical approach stayed true to this artistic freedom and unpredictability and tried to work with it. We started by recognizing (and adequately compensating) the crucial creative role and labor of the ambassador in forging a relatively autonomous space between the artworks and the audience. The ambassador became the guarantor of that flexibility as performances unfolded in unexpected ways. As the stories make evident, this improvisational skill is not easy to embrace, but it has proved to be a gratifying experiment that empowered many of them.

Beyond the timeline challenges, a second tension occurs between scaling up and depth of the engagement. The Audience Ambassador Pilot put significant resources in supporting a relatively small group of audience. Yet its merit lies not in drawing numbers instantly up, but in what the pilot revealed about the engagement and the opening of curiosity that many members of the public experienced, which might have a ripple effect over several implementations. Making the audience experiences visible through the stories will also contribute to help new audiences

envision what an event like NPT can offer them beyond the patterns of more traditional cultural consumption.

As the stories in the publication show, engagement proposals can mobilize local connections and create spaces of encounter and reflection about the art events that are meaningful for audiences (traditional and new ones) by giving them visibility and listening to what they have to say. But it also opens up the repertoire of art experiences they might seek and resonate with in the future. To art practitioners, it provides a window on what the art experience does to people, how it communicates (or not!), beyond the strict art codes of the field, and how people may appropriate its content and respond creatively to it. To the art organization, the program shows how investing in a team and adequately supporting and compensating the labor of the audience workers can translate into built capacity for sustained work around art events, as well as into promising local collaborations between art workers.

The project's strength is not resolving these tensions but making them visible and workable. After this pilot implementation, we believe a well-supported ambassadors cohort model where local ambassadors could learn together over time, in tandem with varied art venues and art forms in the city, holds great potential to build long-term dialogues with communities.

Credits

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7. Useful References

Below is a list of academic references informing the present approach to audience engagement. It contains important authors and perspectives discussing critical practices in contemporary art circulation that the Curator of Audience Engagement has been working with and used to structure the training modules of the pilot. They might be used in future trainings of longer duration as reading material.

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