

## A Live Art Gala

If you are going to hold a fundraising gala, this is how to do it: four hours of singing, dancing, glittery, semi-naked, magical, moving, cross-dressing live art performed, auctioned and otherwise distributed around the Royal Vauxhall Tavern in south London. This was 'A Live Art Gala' (ALAG), a fundraising event held for the Live Art Development Agency (LADA) on 2<sup>nd</sup> October, to raise money for the organisation that supports, nurtures and experiments with Live Art across the UK and beyond.

As Lucy McCormick said, shimmying on stage in a backless PVC mini-dress that was part-homage to the artist Joshua Sofaer (who gives performance lectures in a bumless-suit), and part-Countdown hostess from an S&M universe: the night was like the Live Art Oscars. The great and the good of the Live Art world were out in force, eager to contribute to LADA's work and its future – whether through original artworks donated for auction, a performative take on security and toilet personnel, or the dizzying line up of live performances that played out like a greatest hits album of cabbage orgasms and gorilla suits.

Because this was A Live Art Gala, however, the not so great and the positively un-good were welcome too. As David Hoyle pointed out, LADA will take your call, " ... whether you're ethnic, gay, lesbian, or there's just something wrong with you." Wearing his sarcasm as effortlessly as his leopard print dress, with that statement our inimitable host reminded me of just how exhilarating it was to discover Live Art in the first place. Here was a part of culture that celebrates difference at the same time as community, humour at the same time as outrage, long term relationships at the same time as intellectual curiosity. Here was a culture that puts old, young, male, female or other bodies on stage to explore the empathic chemistry of simply being present in space together. Here was a culture that invites dissent, listens to it and turns the experience into something beautiful.

I could be talking about *Negrophilia!*, George Chakravarti's dance performance in which he transforms from an ape to a chorus girl, skewering the histories of racism, evolution and exhibitionism in one long, seductive move. I could be talking about *Hanky Panky*, Ursula Martinez's legendary and captivating strip-tease-conjuring-trick. Or I could be talking about French & Mottershead's *Microperformance*, a series of instruction cards given out to audience members to choreograph their interpersonal interactions. (My instructions at ALAG were to stroke someone's arm and tell them they had nice skin. 'Nice tits?' misheard the first two people I tried it on.)

Indeed, I could be talking about all or any of the experiences at ALAG -which included the private, the spectacular and the profound. If there was a theme that united the activities at this event, it was perhaps Marcia Farquhar's dictum to 'know your place.' "Not," she said sternly, with a flick of her peroxide fringe, as in "know your place" in the pecking order of society. But instead, know "your place" – understand your body. And with that, Marcia ducked under the table to take an 'intimate casting', promptly sold at auction by star auctioneer, Joshua Sofaer. Yes, in his bumless suit.

Live Art, as defined by Lois Keidan at LADA, does not conform to any form, function or mode of presentation. Instead, it is strategically interdisciplinary – a way of approaching the world with an open mind and attention to detail. Live Art is an attitude, rather than a product. And this is what underlies LADA's approach, too. Dominic Johnson, one of their board members, pointed out that much of the Agency's work happens behind the scenes. Just as important as events, publications and workshops, LADA's effects are felt in the form of advocacy, support and kindness. All of which

has a powerful impact on the rest of the sector. LADA's work not only supports artists and excites audiences; it also sets a high bar.

But perhaps you know all of this already. Perhaps you were one of the people there at ALAG, rubbing shoulders with other audience members to glimpse the stage – at once an actual stage, replete with glitzy lights and glamorous red curtains, and at the same time a symbolic gesture (inside a pub next to a railway bridge) towards the potential of the other worlds promised by performance.

Perhaps you are one of the people who, like me, has spent hours thumbing the archive of DVDs, books and videos in LADA's Study Room, or who has argued fiercely inside a reading group at the Agency's office, or has taken part in one of its DIY workshops - peer to peer professional development in which artists explore their practice in the context of collaboration. Perhaps you laughed a little bit too hard at the part in the performance by The Famous Lauren Barri Holstein and Martin O'Brien, when the angel of culture descended, naked, to impregnate the art world of the future, and the angel was wearing a face mask of Lois Keidan.

"It's like *This is Your Life* for everyone who walks through the door," said Hannah Crosson, as more and more artists, curators and producers greeted each other with a hug and a shriek. We were there because we know how important LADA is to the Live Art sector, and by extension to culture as a whole. The problem for the fundraising committee (ALAG was organised, voluntarily, by a group of high profile artists, curators and academics) is that we already support Live Art through our professional lives and our (relatively small) bank balances. Members of the audience dug deep at ALAG – the tombola sold out quickly, and the live auction leapt through the room – but we are not a wealthy demographic. We work in the publicly funded art world, where fees and salaries have not risen in over a decade. "Many artists don't have a pension," Sofaer said as he described items up for auction, "So consider one of these an investment in your future."

Sofaer was right – the objects of Live Art do have a monetary value, sometimes an enormous one. Most notable in ALAG's auction was the original, signed mirror used by Marina Abramovic in her recent performance at the Serpentine Gallery. Beautifully presented and packaged, the mirror is unique as both an object and a trace of an event from a global art superstar.

But the currency of Live Art lies, most often, in the realm of experiences instead of objects. Even the value of Marina Abramovic's mirror stems from its relationship to *512 hours*, an extraordinary, durational residency in which the artist invited visitors to join her inside a gallery and carry out simple tasks, like staring at a wall or walking backwards. Other auction items at ALAG included 'taking time' with the writer and artist Tim Etchells, going to a spa with the artist Brian Lobel, and swimming the Thames with the artist Amy Sharrocks.

Unfortunately, you will not be able to rely on one of these experiences to subsidise your retirement. While an object can often be reproduced, loaned or otherwise shared, an experience has to be – quite obviously – experienced, in order for it to have meaning. This reduces both its transfer value and its capacity to generate a passive income. It's the reason that theatre actors earn less money than film stars, and it is also why Live Art has a problem financing itself within a market economy.

Of course, this is not really a problem for Live Art – more like a tactic. In the context of an overwhelmingly consumerist culture, paying attention to the passage of time, the relationships

between people and the possibility of change constitutes a gentle but insistent challenge to the status quo. This is what Hoyle was referring to when he sneered at the thought of a wealthy donor emptying his pockets into LADA's bank accounts. "Why would the rich want to pay for their own demise?"

ALAG was a response to the increasing pressure on Arts Council funded arts organisations to raise money through commercial and philanthropic means - or, as Hoyle pouted it through his sparkly lips, to turn ourselves into pimps and prostitutes in time for the next general election. As Hoyle suggests, the problem with commercial and philanthropic means is that they will, inevitably, support commercial and philanthropic ends. At best, this heralds an endless reproduction of the established order, with no room for dissent. At worst, it invites the amoral compass of corporate life to sear its brand onto the beating heart of culture.

In either case, it means side-lining the principles of presence, equality and experiment that made Anne Bean and Richard Wilson's chorus of noise, electricity and matter in *The place where the skin meets the air* such a visceral, unpredictable and transformative ten minutes of my life. (These ideas are also amongst the founding principles of the Arts Council England – an arts funding body that is unique in the world, being both at arms length from government and designed in the public interest.)

The Royal Vauxhall Tavern is more normally the home of *Duckie*, an Oliver-Award winning performance night run by Simon Casson (who was stage-managing ALAG). Amongst the supporters in the pub that evening were Professors, OBEs and internationally renowned artists. Live Art, in other words, is an important and influential art form. It is influential precisely because it roams the edge lands, the in-between spaces and the twilight zones. From here, Live Art and its strategies can reimagine culture and start to influence the wider world (at which point, inevitably, none of this is referred to as Live Art anymore, but as politics, society or, simply, life).

What I am trying to say is that there are some kinds of art that can slip smoothly into the hierarchy of philanthropy, but Live Art is not one of them. There are some kinds of art that produce and reproduce wealthy patrons, but Live Art is not one of them. And there are some kinds of art that are so ossified in the cultural mainstream that the pinch of commercialism will leave no bruise. But Live Art is not one of them. Live Art is a shape-shifter. Its power lies in the fact that it cannot be captured, copied or, indeed, poked for long enough for anyone to decide what it means. This is how we change the world. And this is what the similarly shape-shifting, responsive and maverick Live Art Development Agency makes possible.

Fun, brave and bristling with energy, ALAG was a joyous reminder of how important this work is, in the margins and beyond. It was also a reminder of how fragile the systems are that support LADA, of how money is linked to power, and that how you make money is political.

I am not quite as pessimistic as David Hoyle about the future of the Live Art Development Agency under commercial pressure. Firstly, I remember Susanna Hewlett's busty security guards roaming the RVT, and how Live Art makes me question the nature of identity. Secondly, I remember Ansuman Biswas magically summoning a flickering dancer to life with the power of his drumming, and how Live Art moves me beyond myself. Thirdly, I remember how the Live Art Development Agency supports artists, people and cultural practices that ask awkward questions from awkward

places. And I feel sure that before corporate or commercial models get a chance to change LADA, LADA and Live Art will change them first.

[Mary Paterson](#) is a writer and curator working across visual art, text and performance.