

<http://www.run-riot.com/articles/blogs/lyn-gardner-talks-lois-keidan-20-years-live-art-development-agency#permalink>

LYN GARDNER TALKS TO LOIS KEIDAN ON 20 YEARS OF THE LIVE ART DEVELOPMENT AGENCY

[admin](#) on 04/03/19 with [comments](#)



Image: Lois with Bonzo - an image taken at an event Live Art Development Agency did in 2018 about animals and performance including a photo studio for interspecies portrait. Bonzo is Marcia Farquhar and Jem Finer's dog. Image credit: Alex Eisenberg.

You may not think that you have ever seen any Live Art, but you almost certainly have. It gets everywhere. Its influence is pervasive, not just on other artforms but on popular culture. It is Selina Thompson performing *Salt* at the Royal Court or *Race Cards* as part of In Between Time Festival. It is Forced Entertainment at Battersea Arts Centre and Brian Lobel at The Yard where the recent NOW19 festival embraced an exhilarating range of Live Art. It is Kim Noble at Soho Theatre, Duckie at the Barbican, the Royal Vauxhall Tavern and in a Church Hall in Hackney, and it is Cassils on fire on a stage at the National Theatre, the flaming images projected over and over on the side of the Royal Festival Hall.

Live Art has permeated the everyday and crept into some of our major institutions, and a great deal of that is due to the efforts of Lois Keidan who co-founded the Live Art Development Agency (LADA) which celebrates its 20th anniversary this year.

Under Keidan's steadfast and creative direction LADA has ensured that over the last two decades Live Art, which has often been ignored by the mainstream, has had the strongest possible advocacy. It has spread out its tentacles across the UK and into Europe and beyond.

It is perhaps no surprise that many who have worked at LADA have gone on to head up festivals themselves, including [Katy Baird](#) one of the people behind Steakhouse Live, a DIY platform for radical performance practices, Daniel Brine who is artistic director of the Norfolk and Norwich Festival, and [Aaron Wright](#) who runs Birmingham's vibrant Fierce Festival.

Keidan is one of the arts world's greatest enablers. One of those people who tend to go unsung but without whom others' glittering careers would falter. But she certainly didn't set out to work in the field of Live Art. She didn't even know what it was. Her career began at Theatre Workshop in Edinburgh, but it was a programme of work brought by Nikki Millican—who went on to be the director of the National Review of Live Art—to Edinburgh in 1985 that opened Keidan's eyes to the possibilities of Live Art by seeing work from Rose English and Man Act amongst others.

Before long she was working at the ICA with Michael Morris—who went on to run Artangel—before taking over the programming there herself. It was a golden age, and I know because I was there, and that was down to Keidan, a small, fierce, intellectually probing but always self-effacing presence.

In the late 80s and into the 90s, the ICA was one of the most exciting cultural spaces in London supporting a new generation of artists with a brilliantly curated programme of work that really encouraged audiences to engage with contemporary art and which had a thrilling roster of talks and discussions around it.

Then, the ICA's financial difficulties combined with the arrival of a new director meant it all went pear-shaped. The gains might all have been lost if it was not for the founding of LADA and Keidan's unflagging efforts to support Live Art where ever it is happening and in whatever form. One of the great things that Keidan and LADA have done is not just to support each new rising generation of artists but also through painstaking documentation and archiving to show them that they are part of a long, wild radical and all-embracing movement. It's crucial work because it means each successive generation doesn't have to keep inventing the wheel. Keidan and LADA deserve a medal.



Image: Dickie Beau, Me and This Machine. Image credit: Christa Holka, featured in LADA at 20 Postcards.

Lyn Gardner: What is Live Art and what makes it so distinctive?

Lois Keidan: Artist Marcia Farquhar once said that Live Art was a space for people who didn't know their place, and she's right, it is. It has evolved from performance art, experimental theatre and dance but is also in dialogue with all sorts of different disciplines. At the Live Art Development Agency, we often talk about Live Art as less about being an artform and more about being a way of thinking about art, an approach to art and one that sees and celebrates all kinds of difference.

Lyn: Lots of performance says it's live but it feels quite dead. What makes Live Art so live?

Lois: It's a space in which artists and audiences can take a risk together. In many art forms, the audience can be passive and secondary, but it is the 'liveness' of Live Art which puts the audience in a relationship with the artwork and the artist. When people see Live Art for the first time they often say I don't know what it is, but that they love it.

Lyn: Some people might think that Live Art is going to be difficult and it won't be for them. How do you respond to that?

Lois: It's a misconception, Live Art can be very accessible. There are so many artists making engaging and accessible work from Sibylle Peter's *PLAYING UP* for kids and adults, to Duckie's *Posh Club* working with older people. It spans the generations and one of the things Live Art is very effective at doing is working in the nooks and crannies and making the unseen visible and the unheard heard, especially children and old people who are so often not allowed any agency. There are no age limits with Live Art.



Image: Tiny Live Art Development Agency by Robert Daniels, featuring Bobby Baker.

Lyn: So, there's Live Art for children?

Lois: There is. Places such as Tate have realised that there is a big family audience for Live Art and that Live Art is a really effective way of getting parents and children thinking about, and actively exploring and playing with ideas of what art is and who it is for. Twenty years ago, that

would have been inconceivable.

Lyn: As you say, Live Art is at the heart of many institutions now. Tate has a dedicated space. Isn't there a danger that Live Art will grow toothless as a result?

Lois: Of course, there is a danger of being compromised and sanitised by being in an institution. But Live Art has lived for a very long time with a lack of mainstream critical coverage and little funding. It has carved out its own spaces and places. It is a space for those people—queer, female, black, trans, working class and disabled artists—who are often over-looked by the dominant culture. As Katherine Araniello, a wonderful performance artist who worked with Aron Williamson as *The Disabled Avant-Garde* and on her own as *SickBitchCrips* and who sadly died last week, always said, Live Art was the place where she could make art in the way she wanted to make it and could make it.

Lyn: So why do we need Live Art, right here and right now?

Lois: Because Live Art is always thinking. It is never just about the art, it's about everything that surrounds it and that is the whole world. It's been in the forefront of debates about trans identities, disability, race and social and environmental justice. Unlike other art forms, Live Art doesn't have a diversity problem because diversity comes from the practice itself. It is useful too. I remember back in the 1980s at the Edinburgh fringe taking my sister to see Complicite's second ever show *A Minute Too Late* a piece about death and it affected her work as a doctor.



Image: Harold Offeh and Manuel Vason, Double Exposures. Image credit: Manuel Vason, featured in LADA at 20 Postcards.

Lyn: That sounds quite serious. Can Live Art be fun?

Lois: It is. Try the work of artists such as [Richard Domenici](#), [Brian Lobel](#), [Stacy Makishi](#) and Kim Noble.

Lyn: How has technology changed Live Art?

Lois: In lots of ways. Artists are no longer so isolated, and it has allowed us to by-pass the gate-keepers of culture. It has made Live Art more visible and one of the things we have done at the Live Art Development Agency is to use technologies to create different histories and archives of work and artists that in the past were invisible because they had been resisted by traditional culture and whose work and influence might otherwise be lost.

Lyn: If Live Art is doing so well why is there still a need for LADA?

Lois: I've always said that the ultimate success story for us would be if we didn't need to exist. Maybe one day that will happen, and if it did I'd be delighted. But the job is not done yet. Gains are easily lost.

[Live Art Development Agency](#) | [Twitter](#) | [Facebook](#)



Image: GraceGraceGrace and Manuel Vason, new LADA Publication 2019.