

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Louise Steinman: In Her Own Words

Adam Leipzig · Sunday, December 16th, 2018

Since her abrupt firing on August 27, former ALOUD director Louise Steinman has mostly been quiet. She declined to comment for the media, and did not seek press attention. Meantime, the Library Foundation issued a series of statements and hired a new director of public programs.

Cultural Weekly has [covered the ALOUD controversy extensively](#); I reported the story in-depth, did an interview with Foundation president Ken Brecher, and we published statements from the Library Foundation and the Ad Hoc Committee, which was formed in reaction to the firing of Steinman and ALOUD associate director Maureen Moore.

On December 14, the Library Foundation included this statement in its member newsletter: “Thank you for joining us for the fall season of ALOUD. We will be dark for the winter season. The Library Foundation is taking time to re-envision its public program offerings. We are experimenting, asking questions, and trying new things. New announcements will be coming soon.”

Steinman has now decided to share her observations. In this interview, Steinman discusses some of the highlights of 25 years of ALOUD programming, her views on LA’s cultural landscape, and the specifics of how she was fired.

Adam Leipzig: First, how are you doing?

Louise Steinman: I got away this fall on an arts residency at the Ucross Foundation, which was really great, getting away from this situation: to be with very loving, creative artists, and to be in nature, which is really restorative. I did a lot of visual work, a lot of drawing and collage, and I’m working on a number of essays. I’m certainly better than I was three months ago, but it’s a process that’s going to take awhile.

AL: You’re a fixture of Los Angeles’ cultural landscape. How do you perceive it today?

LS: There are an endless number of paths to discover in LA’s cultural community and fusions to be met. It’s strong; it’s certainly struggling for space and affordability so that artists can afford to live in LA. In terms of the literary community, to which I can speak the most from my experience over the years, it’s a very generous community to each other. There’s a feeling of caring, of going to hear each other’s work. It’s not just all about what contracts you’ve got or how big was your advance, but people talk about each other’s work.

In the aftermath of what happened with ALOUD I felt a real circle of concern and support. It's been really extraordinary. I've never experienced anything like this, truly a sense of people feeling themselves as a community, and saying what their values are in terms of knowing how important the library is to them, how important it is to have the space in the heart of the city that is safe and open for everyone.

AL: Were you surprised by the level of support?

LS: Yes. I could never have dreamed that it would take on a life of its own like that.

AL: In the course of doing ALOUD, did you find a shift in authors or publishers? Because the publishing industry has gone through a massive transformation over the past twenty-five years.

LS: Those relationships are really built on trust. I think what people found very special about ALOUD was that we curated the event for the authors as well as for the audience, you know? I remember taking Verlyn Klinkenborg to walk on the LA River; he didn't know the LA River existed. Or walking with Orhan Pamuk through the streets of downtown LA. LA became a kind of a character for these authors if they were here long enough to make that happen. Also, over the years the ALOUD audience's sense of itself matured, as did kinds of questions they would ask. There was a kind of bar that was set. People had a very strong and stimulating experience coming to the LA Public Library, and seeing LA through the eyes of that place, that institution, and the people surrounding it.

AL: Are there some ALOUD moments that really stand out to you?

LS: I'll mention four.

Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela was the only psychologist on South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. She had a book about forgiveness, about going to visit someone who had been the architect of horrible atrocities, and this dialogue that they had. I interviewed her, and after we spoke a woman stood up in the audience said, "I'm a white Afrikaner, I grew up in South Africa, I profited from this regime, what can I do?" Pumla literally came down off the stage and embraced her in front of everyone. It was this moment where she wasn't just talking about reconciliation, she was living it.

The last program that Maureen and I were able to attend before we were fired, although we'd programmed the entire fall season, was the Mandela prison letter reading in July. His granddaughter Swati was one of the readers. There was a moment when she had said, "I'm not sure I can get through these letters." She got choked up, and Sahm Venter, who was the editor just picked up where Swati left off. I felt, That's what it means to have someone's back, literally.

Then there was Justice Stephen Breyer. We presented him at The Wallis, which was fantastic, but we also presented him for free in the auditorium downtown. I remember walking down from Ken's office with him and him meeting this wonderful custodian there. We said, "Are there any questions you want to ask Justice Breyer?" He said, "Yeah, why is Justice not blind? You know, why is it different for you than it is for me, an African-American?" And Justice Breyer really stopped and talked with him about the jury system and how fallible it is, even though it's the best system we've come up with.

And of course, Visualizing Language: Oaxaca in LA, being able to work two years on that program with our amazing consultant Xóchitl Flores-Marcial, and Maureen, and our colleagues, and invite a community saying, “We want you here, we will do programs in your own indigenous language, Xapotec, so that you feel welcome here.” At the closing Xóchitl came up to me with some people in that community and she said, “This project really changed us, because first of all there were the murals, and because we saw ourselves here, we were invited in.” This was the Sunday before Maureen and I were fired. We were celebrating the conclusion of that project. We were all there in the Rotunda and it was very joyous. And then it was the next day we were fired. Why would you fire people at the conclusion of this project that made us all so proud, made the Library Foundation proud?

AL: What’s your answer to that question?

LS: You would have to ask Ken [Brecher].

AL: In my interview with him, Ken said that for “four and a half years” he had been trying to get the program to be more diverse, to have programs on weekends, not just weekdays, and to be more expansive to include more of Los Angeles, and he just kept getting push-back.... You’re shaking your head.

LS: We even made a timeline of all the ways in which we tried to answer the things that he was asking for, because we really wanted to do it together. I don’t know how you can get more diverse than the Visualizing Language project, which had 73 programs all over the city, in fifteen neighborhood branch libraries, in different languages. It seems like that was a pretty good example what happened on weekends.

And in terms of big off-sites, you’re dealing with authors’ availabilities. We’re not paying booking agent fees, that’s not the model that we use. So, yeah, it was great that we could have Patti Smith at the Orpheum, but that’s like putting a thread through the eye of a very fine needle: is the theatre available, is the author available? We were always trying to figure out what Ken wanted and answer it in the most forward way that we could, and present ideas. He didn’t receive them. He rebuffed them.

AL: When I did my interview at the Library Foundation, I was told that there were fifty empty seats per ALOUD event. I questioned that, because it doesn’t square with the information the Foundation had previously released in its reports.

LS: We actually have stats on that. One of ALOUD’s highest on-site average program attendance was from the years ’17 to ’18; it was a 190 per program, which was an increase of ten percent from the year prior. The Foundation also brought in a consultant, Pat Dandonoli, and her comments on ALOUD were positive.

AL: I read Dandonoli’s report, which to me read as more big-picture strategy and recommendations for an ongoing focusing and planning process.

LS: Yes, although she never attended a single ALOUD program. But she did say, “ALoud has carried the burden of having to be too much for too many.” So, let ALOUD be ALOUD. If you want to have a series that’s another kind of series, that’s fine. Bottom line, change is fine, and Ken certainly has the right to go in his direction if he sees it as a direction that only he can fulfill.

In your [November 21st interview](#), when you asked Ken Brecher to comment on the corporatist way that we were fired, he responded, “I’m not going to comment on this, I can’t comment on this. I have tremendous respect for them...”

I would like to emphasize that you don’t get to use the word “respect” when you treat people the way that Maureen and I were treated. There was no element of respect in it.

AL: Ken Brecher told me that what was reported in the press about how you were fired was not accurate.

LS: What did he say?

AL: He would not discuss it, but said the reports were not accurate.

LS: I was escorted out by a security officer. I was fired without warning. I was told to leave. It was effective immediately. They asked me for my badge and they asked me to leave. That’s what happened.

It was a day when we were supposed to save time to go up to the President’s office to find out what our salary would be for the year. Maureen’s appointment was at 4:00 pm, and apparently he sent everybody home, because there was no one else in the office; it was as if we’d done something horrible. She didn’t come back down, which I thought was odd, but I didn’t really think about it. I mean, I had no thought that that was going to happen.

AL: What time was your appointment?

LS: I think it was around 5:00. Three people came in my office, Ken, Rebecca [Sheehy, the Foundation’s VP], and a corporate lawyer who was on the board. They read a prepared statement.

AL: Ken said both to me and to Downtown News that ALOUD was “losing money.” I am curious about that, because the Foundation is a non-profit, and ALOUD did not charge for tickets, so what does “losing money” mean?

LS: Over the eight years that Ken was there, there was never a strategic plan to fund ALOUD. It was a free program. If you’re going to have a free program it has to be endowed or it has to be funded some other way.

If it was time to change and move to a completely different model, with ticketed programs, well... but I thought we had a commitment to free programs of a certain calibre for the public. Also, Maureen and I offered to help fund-raise. We’re good ambassadors for ALOUD. We suggested finding an underwriter for the podcast, or the livestream. That was absolutely not accepted. Maybe they wanted it to run out, you know?

Also, off-sites are not always a way to make money. It’s great if you break even, but you have to set a pretty high-ticket price in order to make money. Maureen was always trying to find that sweet spot, so we could welcome people in and they would feel that it was affordable. And for many years really the only directive we would get from Ken was that he wanted us to do more off-sites on the Westside because that’s where our donors were, it’s where people with money were. That’s not talking about diversity.

AL: Twenty-five years ago, when you started at the Library Foundation, one of your first programs was called THE BIG QUESTIONS. What are your big questions today?

LS: How are we going to pull together to preserve our democracy and use our combined ingenuity to come up with solutions? We really have to have a dedication to telling the truth and being able to recognize that a fact is a fact; we're in really grave trouble if we can't come to common terms about those basic things. ALOUD tried to give people a place to practice disagreeing in a way that we are still talking to each other. We need to keep practicing because it's a fragile thing, this democracy.

AL: Turning the page. I think that there are thousands of people who look forward to whatever is next from you.

LS: I get glimmers of real excitement about what I will do next. Ask me in six months, I'm looking forward to it too.

Photo: Louise Steinman in the Los Angeles Arts District. Photo by Adam Leipzig

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