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Sharon Louden: Sustaining a Creative Life

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LC: Let's talk about your new book *Living and Sustaining a Creative Life: Essays by 40 Working Artists*. The contemporary artist is presented as financially struggling and juggling his/her time with innumerable diversified tasks. Even the most celebrated artists need to keep a keen awareness of the economy's ups and downs and be prepared for the lean times. Artists cannot entrust all their careers to the art dealers, but they must be proactive as well. How did you come up with such an interesting idea for your book?

SL: Twentytwo years ago, when I graduated from Yale University with a Master's in fine arts, I had a tremendous amount of debt over my head, because my parents were unable to pay for my education. I came to New York City with my friends to start a community. It was a big struggle: there was not a script for how an artist can go from graduate school to making a living; a lot of artists were not communicating their road maps; finally, there was a lot of underlying expectations that right after leaving graduate school, I would find instant gallery representation and be taken care of, so that I could just make my work. I believe that's still the case for many other students who leave a graduate program and then enter the real life without a community that can provide opportunities.

How did the book project come to life?

Two and a half years ago I was approached by Intellect Books with an invitation to write a book. I said to them that one subject I felt very passionate about was to connect professional artists with others who constantly ask this question: how does an artist make a living today? I proposed this idea and they accepted it. I will be dividing the profits from the book between all the contributors, a measure of community as well.

There are forty artist contributors, I would assume with different levels of acquaintance: how did you approach them for such a project?

The book answers the question on how artists sustain a creative life through example rather than advice: it is not about one artist telling another artist what to do, rather about one artist sharing what s/he does with another artist. Nineteen artists are from the New York City area, nineteen from the rest of the country, and two from Europe. When I involved these artists in the project, I knew each of them well enough: I felt that I could trust them, and I could see if they were telling the truth, since I could hear their voice in their writing; I also trusted that they would be generous with other people by sharing who they are and their great accomplishments. Each person is on a different level in the art world, as far as those standards by which artists are judged, whether by

success, or money, or gallery representations, or their own ambition. However, after reading these essays I felt that everybody is on the same page: whether they enjoy gallery representation or not, in order to sustain a creative life they still need to work a tremendous amount and do a multitude of things in addition to making the art themselves. I think that the readers will bring their own experiences and bias to this book; they will be able to assess what is success for them and how they want to use these road maps to move forward, and/or just simply enjoy reading a little bit about different artists and how they make their creative lives work.

The structure of your book sometimes changes between essay, paragraph, and interview formats. Can we talk about your editorial role in this project?

There was no given format. I asked the artists to send me essays in any length that they wished. If they were not speaking about something that I wanted them to talk about, I would get back to them and ask to talk a little bit more about something else, or to take out something. There was a tremendous amount of correspondence going on with each of the artists. The two artists I did interviews with, Thomas Kilpper and Will Cotton, insisted that they did not feel comfortable writing an essay on their lives. Since I wanted them in the book very much, I interviewed them.

What were the most challenging issues you had to face in this project?

At the beginning of the book, some people I invited to contribute gave me essays that I could not use. This was interesting, because they were people I thought I knew better. For me it was also a lesson in growing as a person and understanding who these people are and were to me. I think it's very hard for artists to look inward and think about themselves rather than their work, because they are the vehicle for their creativity. For them, to be so articulate and exposed is a tremendous challenge, and I applaud them for that. They are what make the book so special.

One of your most recent works is *Community*, 2013. My understanding is that you see some kind of fluidity in your many roles as artist, teacher, curator, editor. I was wondering if *Community* has been shaped in a way by the type of building community that you're doing with the book and the book tour, because you are really taking on an active role in building community among artists.

What "community" means for that group of works, recently on display at the Morgan Lehman Gallery in New York, is a connection between some of the flat shapes in my work - which are more about environment and architecture - with the gesture, the characters that I have been working with for many years in my language. I think there are a lot of parallels. I don't think

SHARON LOUDEN

SUSTAINING A CREATIVE LIFE

Interview by LEDA CEMPELLIN
Associate Professor of Art History at
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that anything in my life is segmented, neither in my studio practice working with different media, nor in the multitude of the activities I do simultaneously.

How will the conversation that began with this book go on?

I have a tour to bring this book to forty-five places so far. This book tour was officially launched and will continue through the spring of 2015. I want myself to serve as intermediary between the artists in the book and other artists or anyone who has an interest connecting with the creative people of this book. We also hope to have contributors in some of these sites, to physically connect with the readers. Additionally, people can email the artists, ask questions, and connect them through Twitter, Facebook, and their websites. I love the accessibility of these artists, as well as their generous contributions to this important project.

Sharon Louden *Living and Sustaining a Creative Life: Essays by 40 Working Artists* Bristol, UK and Chicago, US: published by Intellect Books and distributed by the University of Chicago Press, 2013

