

**Janet Koplos**  
**Truth-Telling**

**Sharon Loudén, ed. *Living and Sustaining a Creative Life: Essays by 40 Working Artists*. Chicago: Intellect/University of Chicago Press, 2013. 219 pp., 40 color ill. \$35.50 paper**

This book is extraordinary in two ways. Not, as you might expect of a book reviewed in *Art Journal*, for its research, scholarly tone, or philosophical development. One marvel is simply the fact that Sharon Loudén has initiated a public discussion of how an artist can persist. It's an essential question in a field that no one chooses for its assurance of financial rewards. In many ways, Loudén's book helps us to answer the question, "How does an artist make a living today?"

The second wonder is that Loudén, a master publicist, has opened up a national conversation, by initiating a forty-five-city book tour with a discussion panel, often including one of the essayists from the book, at each site. These events have drawn substantial crowds and are evidence of Loudén's extensive art-world network. The panels—I've attended two—proved to be lively, conversational, and revealing; audience response is robust because the subject has such relevance to artists' lives. Loudén, a skilled moderator, is always at ease and disarming; even as she tracks a plethora of detailed information about a particular artist, she never loses sight of her larger purpose.

For Loudén, the value of the book is to show that artists turn obstacles into inspiration; that money is not the only measure of artistic success; and that great pain and great art don't have to go together. She is also able to touch on awkward topics such as education debt and community vs. competition. All these ideas and more come through in the essays, which she supplements with a statement by the Whitney curator Carter Foster, an interview with the gallerists Edward Winkelman and Bill Carroll, and two interviews of artists unable (for unspecified reasons) to contribute an essay.

Still, the very structure of the book has drawbacks. It would be stronger and more pointed if Loudén had written a fuller introduction, incorporating what she relies on Foster, Winkelman, and Carroll to say, that "seriousness of purpose" is the most

important artistic quality (Foster, 13), or that it's not true that one must have a gallery to "enter into the dialog" (Carroll, 205). In her chat with the gallerists, which serves as a conclusion, Loudén remarks that "in virtually all of the essays in the book, you'll see that these artists do a tremendous amount on their own, with or without a dealer" (213), and that "this book shows that artists are self-sustaining" (214). Thus it seems that she could have written the conclusion herself instead of relying on her interlocutors' authority—although they, like most of the artists featured in the volume, are not the glamour names but the bedrock of the field.

Loudén makes it immediately clear that her selection of contributors is based on people she knows, people she could trust to be honest about a sometimes sensitive topic (assuming that money is the bottom line). She has received some criticism for this (see for example Tamsin Doherty, "Art Books: *Living and Sustaining a Creative Life*," *Brooklyn Rail*, September 4, 2014), but I don't have any reason to think that the results would be notably different with a different group of artists. Many of the comments here match my own experience of what artists say in private conversations. The difference is only that these artists have been willing to speak for the record.

It's apparent that Loudén has made some effort to get geographical and generational variety. There is no indication of race. I'm surprised at the percentage of female artists with children presented here; I would have thought they were a rarer breed. While a few contributors are just a few years out of graduate school, most are older, so that they can justifiably say something about sustaining a creative life.

But perhaps because she is working with friends, or perhaps because she is foremost an artist herself rather than a wordsmith, Loudén seems to have accepted at face value what her contributors were willing to offer in essays that are often uneven in quality. On my first reading of the book, I was annoyed at times by essays that seemed indirect or cursory. A second reading shifted my thinking; each essay revealed something distinctive about the situation of the artist, and the differences in the presentations speak to Loudén's ability to retain the individual's rhetorical character. Still, this is probably not a book you would read straight through;

rather, one might treat it as an opportunity to immerse oneself in a series of overheard conversations.

The title of the book is broad enough to encompass contributions that say nothing about money; how specific each essay is about a menu of topics varies widely. "Sustaining a creative life" could refer to many things—community, mentors, source of inspiration, and other aspects of persevering as an artist—all of which were touched on by some contributors. Loudén's preface promises general approaches and specific solutions, but I suspect that the reader will be more interested in the subjective quality of the accounts by these artists. Because these are individual essays rather than interviews, there is no follow-up, no way to ask for elaboration or to address a related topic. Loudén pursues just such thoughtful shaping in her panels on the book tour, but the absence of a firmer editorial hand in the book strikes me as a journalistic weakness. It is only lightly copyedited, with misspellings and continuity errors that tend to distract the reader. This is not uncommon in book publishing today, but unfortunate anyway.

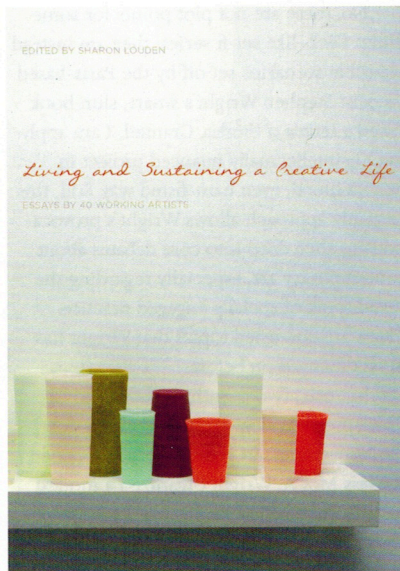
Nonetheless, there are examples throughout the book of well-organized, confident statements, like Adrienne Outlaw's account of how a series of post-BFA jobs took her from a public-relations job for the Art Institute of Chicago to creating a position of television arts reporter and then moving to NPR, before leaving journalism to concentrate on her art. And then, post-MFA, while she was pregnant and home with small children, Outlaw's projects developed into arts organizing; she realized that the parts of her career, each occurring adventitiously, amounted to a contribution to the new field of socially engaged art. Beth Lipman calls her much briefer contribution to the book a description of her life at the moment. It relates her success at making a living from her art. Her husband is her business and studio manager, so the whole family (including children) is dependent on her creativity and sales.

Lipman presents a model, an ideal, but not a strategy. Brian Novatny's essay, on the other hand, is all about strategies pursued at various stages of his career, starting with the goal of generating enough work to enable him to exhibit at commercial galleries. One gallery relationship gave him the security

(and maybe the platform) to establish relationships with galleries elsewhere. When he wanted to make a change in his work, the galleries were not supportive, so he found one interested in this new artistic direction. Not every artist has such clear-eyed objectives or is so level-headed when it comes to methodically building a career, but Novatny's account certainly suggests how to weigh the constraining or liberating aspects of a day job, for example. Kate Shepherd, on the other hand, defines "supporting her practice" in terms of a huge range of people who help or stimulate her, from a long-time studio assistant who remembers details, to an architect who helped her with perspective drawing, to a super's helper who mops her studio floors.

A number of contributors are teachers (the notion that academia is the Medici of our time is not a new one). But more often than not, the plot is one of grasping creative opportunities spontaneously. There are many examples of art-school networking, and cooperative spouses seem disproportionately represented. As a specific tip, Erik Hanson's selling older works at low prices to get out of debt suggests an early version of crowdsourcing. George Stoll elaborates on organizing a work week and negotiating the details of a show. He and others speak of keeping overhead low to survive the slow times. Jennifer Dalton's strategy was to have a low-level day job mastered to the degree that it was easy and didn't suck up all her time and energy. Learning to use time efficiently comes up again and again, both for accommodating marriage and parenthood and for balancing regular employment against studio time. Fear of failure and crying jags are confessed to, but there's also humor: Julie Heffernan writes, "I'm also always aware that painting sales could dry up tomorrow if the economy really tanked or all the hedge fund guys were sent to hell in the Rapture; so, as the child of Depression-era parents, I keep my day job even after all these years" (91). One artist describes her life as shaking out those who can't tolerate her determination to be in the studio, while Justin Quinn says that "sustaining a creative life means that life has to be nourished first" (100). So, there are many answers. As Karin Davie puts it in her essay, she has "benefited from not thinking that there's a prescriptive way to live one's life as an artist. Like everything else, it's about one's own invention" (104).

Louden's editorial commitment to geographic distribution of contributors makes it possible to argue that an artist does not have to be in New York to have a successful career (Louden herself has recently relocated to Minneapolis). But there are also contributors who would do anything to be in New York.



Michael Waugh is one: his tale of having to conceal his art aspirations behind an English degree and trying to develop his art in provincial isolation is an exemplary illustration of how unstoppable the drive to make art can be. He forced himself to practice other skills—public speaking, teaching, committee work—and he used all of them after he got a toehold in New York. Multiple jobs, volunteering, networking, deferring school loan payments, doing without a studio space—no price was too high for the community, the crits, and the opportunities he could find in the big city. His essay spills it all out and—maybe no surprise since he was, remember, an English major—it is structurally one of the best pieces of writing in the book.

Jennifer Dalton (another lively writer) recalls feeling "an almost personal betrayal at the realization that artists I had already perceived as incredibly, unattainably successful still had to find another way to pay the bills" (75). As a whole, that's what this book is about. Loudon says that in this project she was looking for the "truth of day-to-day living" (11). Whatever my cavils about the details of the book, it is undeniable that

Louden makes an important contribution to the discussion of how art is made now by the vast majority of artists at work. The book is a reality check prompting us to recall that invention doesn't happen without determination. As these artists' testimonies so vividly show, history, theory, and criticism are activities dependent ultimately on the hard-won production of art.

Janet Koplos was a staff editor at *Art in America* magazine for eighteen years and remains a contributing editor to the magazine. She is the author of *Contemporary Japanese Sculpture* (Abbeville Press, 1990) and coauthor of *Makers: A History of American Studio Craft* (University of North Carolina Press, 2010), and has written for newspapers and magazines in the United States, Japan, and Europe, as well as contributing to many exhibition catalogues. She is the recipient of a 2015 Art Writer's Grant from Creative Capital/Warhol Foundation to research a book on the *New Art Examiner*, a Chicago-based alternative art magazine (1973–2002). She has taught at Parsons: The New School for Design and Pratt Institute in New York City, University of the Arts in Philadelphia, and the Rhode Island School of Design in Providence.