

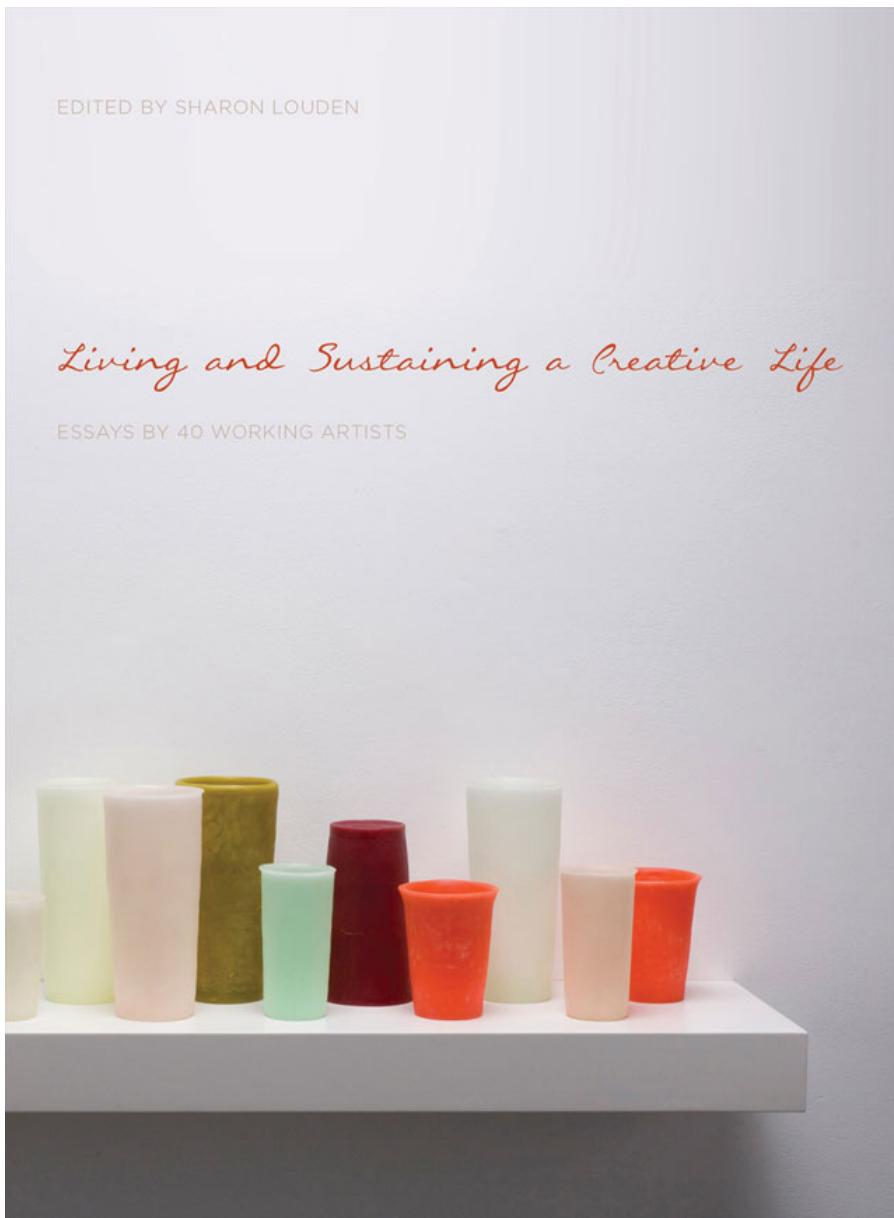
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How Do Working Artists Live?

by [Carren Jao](#) on November 18, 2013



Anyone who's chosen to live a creative lifestyle — not just artists — knows what it means to worry. Rather than gun for the safety of a monthly paycheck, most of us (this writer included) have to find a way to put food on the table, without sacrificing our proverbial souls.

It's dodgy terrain to traverse. I often find myself wondering how others manage it. For those similarly curious, artist [Sharon Louden](#), a frequent professional practice lecturer at the New York Academy of Art, has come up with [*Living and Sustaining a Creative Life: Essays by 40 Working Artists*](#), a strikingly frank book that removes the veil of mysticism surrounding the artistic life.

Within its pages, 40 artists at various stages of their practices give a straightforward accounting of the path that led them to where they are. And their stories provide a few gems for other creatives tackling similar issues.

Painter [Julie Heffernan](#) talks about dealing with pregnancy at the same time as her budding artistic practice, as well as the role her previous "hack jobs" play in her current work. Sculptor [George Stoll](#) gives tips on setting gallery expectations as well as ironing out discounts for artworks sold at a show. Painter [Jay Davis](#) walks us through his various day jobs and their effect on his practice.

I spoke with Louden over the phone about what compelled her to create this book.

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Carren Jao: Why did you decide to edit this book of essays on the nitty-gritty of an artist's life?

Sharon Louden: When I got out of Yale, I had a huge amount of debt, and I just didn't know what other artists were doing or what to do to make a living. I've found my way since then,

Sharon Louden (courtesy the artist)

but I've always wanted to give back to the community, to be able to satisfy other artists' needs for that like I did years ago. Also, I think a lot of people want to know how an artist lives. It's just never really revealed that much. Artists' lives are incredibly organic and interesting, so I wanted to reveal that.

CJ: *How did you choose the artists included in the book?*

SL: I did not choose necessarily by their work. I chose them by their story, their geography, their gender, and where they were in their careers.

I have some emerging, established, and mid-career artists. There are 19 people who are from New York, 19 from the rest of the country, 2 people from Europe. There are 21 women and 19 men. The ages are anywhere from 30 to 66. I wanted a sprinkling of all that.

CJ: *Was there something else that convinced you to include specific artists?*

SL: I had to know people enough that they could trust me in the editing process and I can trust them. The way I edited this book was really going back and forth with the artist. I asked some of them, "Well, can you talk more about this, can you not talk about this?"

I really did not edit any of their flavor or their work. There are some essays that are more opaque than others. There are essays that start a conversation; some are very revealing. It's based on the personality and the life experience of the artist.

CJ: *Are there common threads that came up during the process?*

SL: Yes, I think one of the threads is that everybody's on the same page, no matter if you're very famous and well-established or someone not known as much. They have the same issues in how they engage their daily life.

CJ: *Like what?*

SL: Not to reveal too much ,but some issues are that artists have to do everything. The assumption is that if an artist is with a gallery, the gallery takes on everything for the artist. That's not true. No matter what level you're at, artists are doing multiple things to sustain their creative life.

A gallery isn't able to do everything. It's unfair for an artist to assume that, but I do think even the more established artist, they have to do other things and manage their day-to-day life on their own.

CJ: When you approached the different artists about writing these essays, what did you tell them you wanted to read on the page?

SL: I wanted everybody to be plain and to the point. I did not want any of the essays to give advice. I wanted just the pure facts of how these people lived as road maps.

There's no romance. I wanted a lot of truth in the book. That's what we never hear: how artists really do this. There's a lot of romanticism about how the artist can live. I wanted to break that. Books out there now can be instrumental, but I rarely see the minutiae.

CJ: Can you give us a picture of how the practicalities of your artistic life have played out?

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SL: I try to make my living in many, many ways. I also reach for help, too. I have a lot of people help me. My husband is my business project manager. I have other people I lean on for advice. I think it takes a village for an artist to really sustain their creative practice.

I organize and conduct the professional practice [lecture series](#) at the New York Academy of Art, where I teach how to make a living as an artist. I do different kinds of visiting artist programs. I'm going to Vanderbilt University next week to teach and do studio visits. I do all different things, which I love to do. I love meeting people, having different experiences and inevitably growing from those.

CJ: Apart from answering an artist's most practical questions on sustaining a creative life, what do you hope this book will do in the context of the larger artistic community?

SL: Starting with this book, I wanted to satisfy the needs of artists through other artists and create more of a community based on that.

CJ: Did seeing the essays bring up any issues that artists starting out should think about?

SL: It brings up issues of what ‘successful’ is. What do we deem to be successful for an artist? Is it where they show? How much money they make? How much exposure they have? Or is it how long they sustain that creative life? That’s going to be up to the reader to determine that.

For me, to be able to sustain a creative life should be rewarded. It’s just hard for an artist to be consistently creative and get their work out there. In the art world, we underestimate that. I’m hoping people will be impressed by that notion.

CJ: Is there a reaction you hope to get from people reading the book?

SL: Yes, I’d like them to think, ‘Wow, these guys are doing this, maybe I can do this!’ That’s what I was hoping for.

[Living and Sustaining a Creative Life: Essays by 40 Working Artists](#) is available from Amazon and other online booksellers. Louden will be touring the country to promote the book; information about events can be found [online](#).

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