

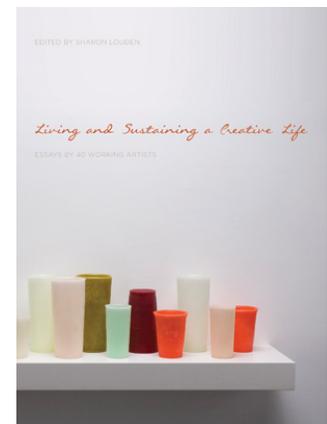
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Why Are You In This?: A Kind of Book Review of Sharon Louden's Living and Sustaining a Creative Life

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The life of an artist isn't for the faint of heart.

That's the bottom line of [Sharon Louden's](#) curated collection of essays, "[Living and Sustaining a Creative Life \(Intellect, 2013\)](#)," in which 40 working artists share the reality of their daily lives. Louden's collection offers valuable lessons on striking a balance between the need to make money and the need to make art; for if making art is the primary concern, making money becomes a means to an end – not the end itself. Nevertheless, fairy tales of an artistic life unencumbered by material practicalities are dismantled in this book. Living and sustaining a creative life isn't easy; rather, it is something an artist fights for, relentlessly, rejecting societal narratives that insist their way is impossible.



Though written about the unique experience of fine artists, "Living and Sustaining A Creative Life" is worth the read by anyone seeking to build a life of artistic intention without ignoring the need for monetary sustenance. Some lessons applicable to artists and changemakers of all types include:

Lesson #1: Seek new models of living.

"There are as many ways to be an artist as there are artists." ~ Austin Thomas in "Living and Sustaining a Creative Life"

The days of artists being supported by wealthy benefactors are long gone – if they ever existed. Working artists of today have to create new models of living, which include juggling multiple jobs, choosing to live outside of major cities in order to afford the cost of living or bartering for studio space and time. While their lives might be a far cry from their art school visions, the essayists in Louden's book seek new models of living as an artist in order to stay on the path of their creative calling. Taking adjunct teaching positions brings with it the advantage of a steady income and time to create. Gallery work affords opportunities to make contacts. Finding solace working in Birmingham instead of New York provides an opportunity to connect to alternative spaces and sources of income within the art world.

Takeaway: Affording a creative life might not be idyllic, but, with some ingenuity, it *can* be everything you need it to be.

Lesson #2: Master Time

“I’ve pretty much stopped procrastinating; I just don’t have the time.” ~ Ellen Harvey in “Living and Sustaining a Creative Life”

Multiple artists in Loudén’s collection explain the mastery of time as central to their ability to live and sustain a creative life. Motivation kicks in to handle periphery tasks as efficiently as possible so the creative process can last as long as the art requires. For some, this means hiring assistants to take care of administrative tasks, working close to home to decrease commuting, balancing family life strategically or simply becoming more efficient and effective with their own time. Through the voices of the artists in Loudén’s collection, time emerges as sacred, the very facilitator of creation. As they describe it, ensuring nothing stands in between art and time becomes the foundation of success.

Takeaway: Get other things done as efficiently as possible so you and creativity have quality time together.

Lesson #3: Creative living takes intention.

“I’ve also 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 intention.” ~Karin Davie in “Living and Sustaining a Creative Life”

As stated in her introduction, Loudén curates this essay collection, in part, to “...attack the old myth of the ‘poor, struggling artist’ for whom great pain is a requisite for great art.” Though Loudén seeks to reject the myth of the struggling artist, the book reveals an important truth: Sustaining a creative life isn’t easy; it requires adaptability and innovation – true entrepreneurship – in order to survive the highs and lows of productivity and artistic salability. Most importantly, approaching this life requires that the artist knows what she is in it for, or what he intends to achieve. Knowing this helps determine the lengths to which one will fight to maintain the creative life.

Takeaway: Know why you’re in this and structure your life to facilitate your intended outcome. And don’t worry about directly mimicking others, because their intentions could be very different from your own.

Though the life of an artist isn’t for the faint of heart, it is entirely possible. The 40 artists featured in Loudén’s collection prove that point. While navigating a treacherous terrain, in some cases for decades, they have lived to tell the story and continue their creative journey.