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This Is Why The World Needs Artists

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Jane Claire Hervey, WOMEN@FORBES
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These days, carving out a career in a creative industry requires both an artistic perspective, technical skill and an entrepreneurial spirit. Statistically speaking, more and more of us are becoming freelancers (some studies even predict [freelancers will become the majority of our workforce in a decade](#)). That means we're cobbling together a living from different clients, projects and revenue streams. That means we're managing our own time, selling products, soliciting services and doing all we can to pay the bills.

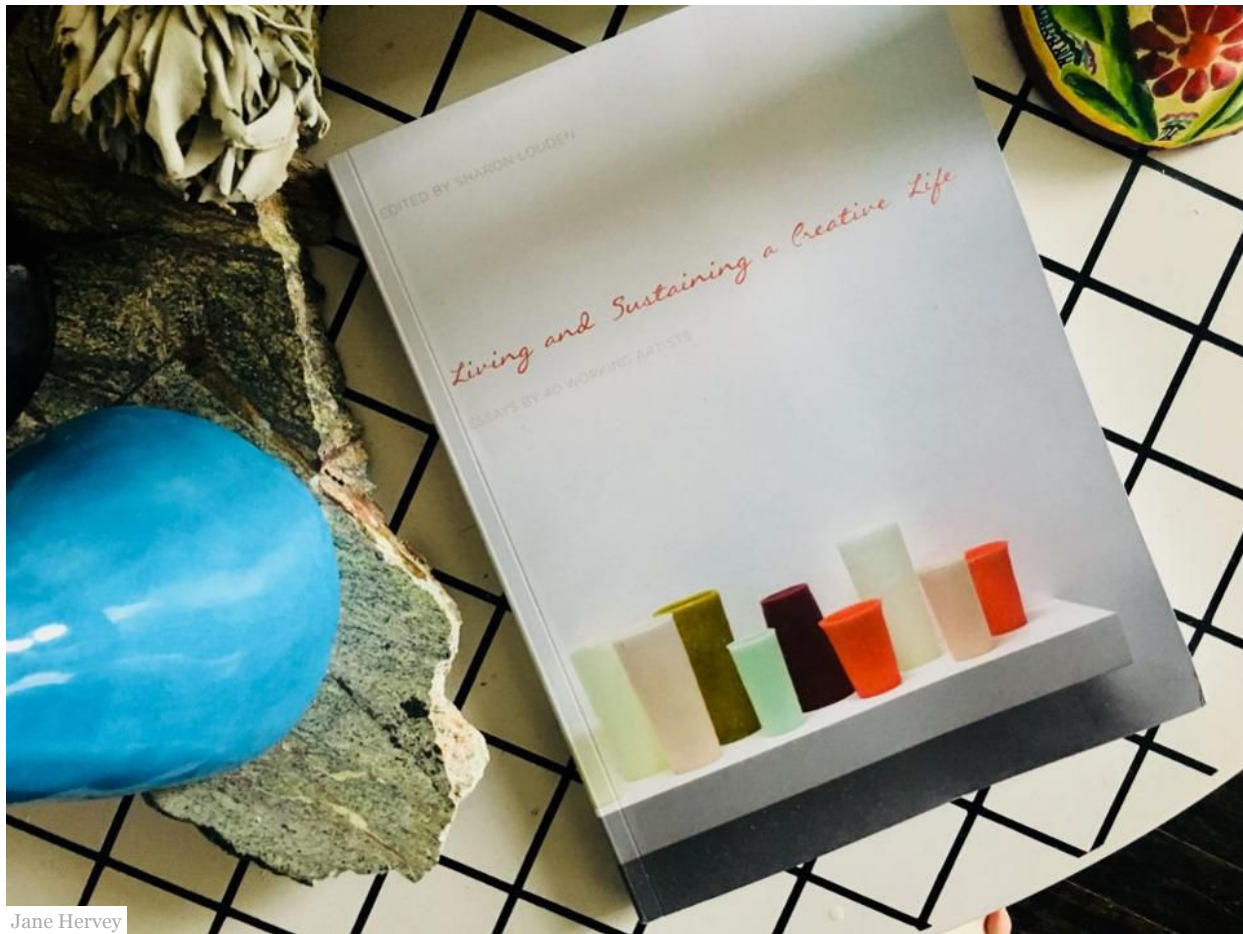
But what does this changing landscape mean for the creative world? What does it mean for an industry when pathways to economic stability and successful careers aren't clear? The answers are muddy and vary across professions. (If you've been keeping up with this column at all, you know what I mean.)

So, this week, I'm deep-diving into creative sustainability within the art world through the eyes of Sharon Loudon. Loudon is an artist, author and arts advocate, and I recently had the pleasure

of working with her during the Austin stop of her book tour for "Artist as Culture Producer: Living and Sustaining a Creative Life." As part of a larger body of work, "Artist as Culture Producer" [explores the different ways modern-day artists make ends meet](#). In the book, Loudén shares essays by 40 creative professionals, each diligently producing personal and community-oriented work. From the development of creative communities in the desert to creating artist residencies that are particularly conducive for motherhood, every artist's story is a testament to resilience and a demonstration of the resourcefulness required to navigate the industry today.

On top of practical career advice, the book also argues for the value an artist's place within our communities. The publication paints artists as producers of culture, creative problem-solvers and hope for a better world. After participating in a public dialogue about Loudén's work and reading the essays, I'd have to say I agree. If artists are at the forefront of community-building, critical thinking and cultural production, we could sure use a lot more.

To explore these sentiments, Loudén and I hopped on the phone to chat about the book's overarching mission and theme, as well as what it means to be an artist in the 21st Century. Read the full interview below.



Jane Hervey

"Living and Sustaining A Creative Life" edited by Sharon Loudon.

Jane Claire Hervey: Basic, simple question—who are you and what do you do?

Sharon Loudon: I'm an artist, an advocate for artists and editor of a series of books that hopefully empowers and informs who artists are today. The series so far includes "Living and Sustaining a Creative Life: Essays by 40 Working Artists," and "Artist as Culture Producer: Living and Sustaining a Creative Life."

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Hervey: Let's start with your latest book, which is part of a larger series. To provide a little context for this column, can you explain what led to the creation of this book and why you took on the project?

Louden: I was approached to write a book by my publisher but told them that I wasn't comfortable writing a book. I can't even write an artist statement, and so I decided when looking around at all of the books on the bookshelves right now for artists that there wasn't one that really shared how artists sustained their lives. So, I asked 40 people to start a conversation about how they sustain their lives, and then it just went out into the world and its now in its seventh printing. It continues to inform and inspire artists and it demonstrates what it's like to really be an artist today. I'm trying to show how artists have relevance and are agents of change. I want to demonstrate our value.

Hervey: Were you surprised by the interviews you gathered in the book?

Louden: I wasn't surprised. The responses to the book, though—both of them—have been very interesting. I'm more surprised at how traditional artists think of the art world, and I'm also saddened that the general public still thinks that artists are just like Vincent Van Gogh, but Van Gogh died in 1890. The mystique

of an artist still exists in people's minds. The mystique of the art world still exists in artists' minds, so, by revealing truth, I'm hoping that we can change those perceptions and therefore empower ourselves as artists and become more visible to the public.

Hervey: Does community and visibility devalue art—by dismantling the myths that are perceived to add value?

Louden: Absolutely not. I know this for a fact by visiting many, many cities on both tours and meeting thousands of people—most of who are artists. Artists need to share resources, opportunities and validation. More visibility means more value in this case. Artists have been stereotyped as being in a hole, in a cave, and that we never come out unless we have an exhibition and then we go back into our hole—I just don't believe in that anymore. I think that's just one part of the ecosystem. There's no such thing as an artist hero. We're integral to society and contribute to the creative economy. We contribute to the wellbeing of others. All of the essays in my second book address this so-called mystique about artists and art-making. I'm revealing these artists' stories, so I'm already debunking these myths. The second thing I would say is that by debunking these myths, none of these artists have lost any of their value. In most cases, they've increased. In this day and age, when truth is very important and precious (why truth-seeking is not just normal is ridiculous in and of itself), we as artists need more than ever to live in truth. We can create myths for ourselves if it's purposeful to the creative realm, but otherwise I don't see what the value of that is.



Haley Traynor

Sharon Loudén is an artist, author, and educator visiting Chico State to share her work and life story, on Monday, April 3, 2017 in Chico, Calif.

(Haley Traynor/Student Photographer)

Hervey: Do you believe there are misconceptions that keep the “starving artist” stereotype alive? If so, what are they?

Louden: Artists are still being held to one system. So when artists are held to one system, as in the gallery system as the only silo, then we’re held to an old standard. I think there are many different ways to sustain a creative life, and I think sometimes artists don’t know that they can create opportunities themselves.

Hervey: Not all entrepreneurs are artists, but all artists are entrepreneurs. Would you agree with that statement? Why or why not?

Louden: I think artists have an entrepreneurial spirit, but the

ultimate goal of entrepreneurship is to maximize profits—solely to profit—and we do a lot more than that. We have the spirit, and I do think that in large measure we are small businesses, but we're a lot more than that. We're just not held to our work being sold as a way to sustain our own lives. I believe that artists do a lot of different things to sustain their lives, but also, then it gets down to, "What is the definition of an artist?" There are a lot of artists who do installations, work with different media, so when you're thinking about someone that's creating work outside of the for-profit system, are they entrepreneurial? Sure. But just because someone sells their work does not mean they're an entrepreneur. But the spirit? Yeah. Artists can bounce back from failure like no one else can. We've been doing this for centuries. We can start an idea from nothing. We can look at things from many different views. And, sure, those things can yield to entrepreneurship, but it's not solely ever just for profit.

Hervey: You use the term "culture producer" throughout your books. How would you define that term and why do you use it?

Louden: All events on my tours are open to the public, and during my first tour, when I would introduce somebody as a culture producer, they would be like "Who is that? What is a culture producer?" But when I would introduce them as an artist, they would be like "Oh, god—another artist." So, that kind of response made me think. An artist is and has always been a producer of culture, so for the book itself, a culture producer is someone who not only has a leg in the art world but also creates bridges to the public.

Hervey: So, should we rebrand the word "artist" then, or begin using other terms?

Louden: I defend the title "artist," I really do. I think that people have to get to know who we are today. I don't want to do that work for them, though. I want them to understand who we are and what we have always been. By rebranding or eliminating the word "artist," you're erasing history. I don't want to erase history. I want to be able to frame it differently. Our history has to be decolonized, but it doesn't need to be thrown away.



Leslie Lozano

From left to right: Sharon Loudon, Jane Hervey (author of this article) and artist Lenka Clayton at The Refinery in Austin, Texas

Hervey: What do you want for the art community?

Louden: More opportunities for artists in society. I want artists to sustain their own lives. I want more access for artists in communities where there is a bubble of exclusion, like in New York. I don't want to dictate what that is going to look like for other artists—that could mean more exhibitions, more jobs, more public outreach, more visibility, more integration in education, in corporate environments, in the private sector, all of those things and more.

Hervey: What sort of misconceptions might serve as barriers to some of these wishes?

Louden: People see art as specialized and unreachable and undefinable. I think most people are more comfortable when they're in a box, but artists are never enclosed in a box, and so I think it's harder for people to grasp.

Hervey: What was your experience as an emerging artist, sustaining yourself?

Louden: I graduated with a lot of debt from college and I paid that debt off in ten years in different ways, and then I have just worked different ways to sustain my life—mostly a big patchwork. So, for me, it was a lot of different colors on a palette. I mean, you are a culture producer, and you are extremely creative, and you know as well as I do that as a creative person, we can think outside of the box and outside of many boxes. Artists—no matter what, even if they choose to work one or two jobs—are still artists. Just because someone chooses to have a job doesn't mean they're any less of an artist. That was another reason why I wanted to do these books, to show that artists sustain their lives in many ways by

many different choices and paths.

Hervey: Do you have any suggestions for emerging artists?

Louden: No one needs permission and yet everyone seeks it. Every artist should live how they want to live. Creativity and free expression is within all of us, and artists embody that. We don't need permission. To me, a "full-time artist" is someone who makes their work, thinks about their work and contributes to society in creative ways. It doesn't mean that a full-time artist doesn't do anything else. There are many artists who show their work and still maintain another job, and that fuels their work and that's a job that they choose. Sometimes, making a living doesn't correlate with being a professional artist.

Hervey: What are some general takeaways from the book series?

Louden: The book shows all the different ways artists sustain their lives. It shows the vast range of possibilities for other artists to replicate from, and it also shows how relevant we are. It shows who artists are today in these stories. It also shows, no matter how "famous" an artist is, they have the same issues as every other artist—no matter what. Money makes a big difference, right? But, they still have issues, because a lot of the time artists are not validated or accepted in our society as having importance. We've isolated ourselves all these years and it's time to not do that anymore.

Hervey: Do you think artists are better off working in communities?

Louden: I don't think the solo artist idea works very well anymore. I think it's a way of thinking, and I do think that that comes down to the myth part. What's the truth? And what's the myth? And what are you going to hold onto? I think you hold onto the truth.

Hervey: What resources for artists are currently under-utilized? Do you have any recommendations?

Louden: Partnerships with different organizations, whether that's a fiscal sponsorship or something else, public art, artists starting their own initiatives—their own collectives, spaces and residencies—creating their own opportunities. Artists should apply for things together and share resources.

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Hervey: What would you want the public to understand about artists today?

Louden: Not only do we contribute to the creative economy, but we really contribute to your wellbeing. How do we do that? We create environments not only for interaction, but environments for feeling free to express. By being artists, we give other people permission to be free and expressive. For someone who doesn't have an interest in this idea or who don't value artists, I would say they should look within themselves to see where their creativity and free expression is held so that they may be able to release it.

Hervey: Any additional thoughts?

Louden: Today is the best day to be an artist. Right now, there are so many opportunities for artists to thrive. There are also non-

profit organizations that are trying to give artists support to go out into the world and share their creativity. One website and resource that I would share is artiststhrive.org. Artists should also look into places like the Ford Foundation, the Joan Mitchell foundation, the Emily Hall Tremain Foundation. There are a lot of resources out there for an artist to be able to share their creativity and free expression. I would encourage artists to stop hesitating and go forward!

Hervey: What's coming up for you?

Louden: I'm really interested in advocacy for artists, as well as concentrating on building installations to create inclusive environments. I consider my advocacy just as important as my own work in my studio; it is all of my work. I have more stops to go on this tour (including four cities in Alaska!) and many projects coming up. The data that we receive from this tour will be put together in a creative way, so we can share it widely and in creative ways, such as an exhibition, publication and other forms. I'm excited and grateful for it all.

Interested in Hervey's work? Follow along on [Instagram](#) or check out her Texas-based nonprofit, [#bossbabesatx](#).