Book Review: The Artist as Culture Producer

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We all know the trope of the starving artist. It romanticizes the struggling genius who toils endlessly and wildly abuses substances. But in the political territory of the past decade and a half, artists have galvanized their identities as something more holistic. In tandem with the rise of social practice, the identity and function of the artist has sprung away from the picture of indulgent narcissist to community minded caretaker. Sharon Louden’s latest book *The Artist as Culture Producer* (part of the series “Living and Sustaining a Creative Life”) addresses this shift with 40 narratives from artists such as Andrea Zittel, William Powhida, Alec Soth, and Steve Lambert on their career trajectories and how they made their way in the world.

Though their personal histories are written in plain, unassuming language that doesn’t generate a page-turner, they are humble, level voices who acknowledge the instability of their lifestyle while telling stories of how they support their own work and that of their fellow artists. What emerges is a picture of collaboration and camaraderie that eschews competition between artists. As Stephanie Syjuco explains how she makes her applications for grants available online (including her winning Guggenheim proposal from 2014): “I’d rather foster a sense of cooperative knowledge-sharing as opposed to competition.” All the while, she is demystifying a process that often seems abstract or obscure. Many of the contributors address their crucial moments and breakthroughs that came about from the way they participate as ‘citizens’ in the art world. Citizen might seem like a plebian term for an art world that is generally keyed in on an endgame of celebrity, glamour, and the wealthy elite, but through these narratives Louden attempts to
correct the course of what an artist can be, and how they contribute to society at large.

These artists exemplify grit and hustle, all the while creating networks of support for fellow artists. Take Lenka Clayton, who started “An Artist Residency in Motherhood,” a framework that exists as an online tool kit that anyone can access; it outlines how to embrace the constrictions of parenting while maintaining an art practice. Every artist in this book is doggedly championing other artists, and creating opportunities to explore their own art-making outside the studio. Nearly all of their trajectories include starting a project space, gallery, residency, or salon; working at an arts nonprofit; building a dedicated history of teaching, or some combination of the above. Take Chloe Bass who sidestepped from theater to visual arts while volunteering for Arts in Bushwick (organizer of Bushwick Open Studios, which “imagined artists not just as creative people, but as good neighbors”) in its nascent stages, and now has a robust conceptual art practice. Or take Cara Ober, a painter and art critic who started a “community art blog in 2007 as a side project” that blossomed into Bmore Art, a rich print and online publication. This current image of the artist is to always be supporting others while maintaining (or taking breaks for) their own practice.

In their essays these artists take the long view, and we see just how hard it can be to let go of a nonprofit space, or blog that was started to highlight underrepresented artists. The reader grasps that while each effort starts as something close to the artist’s heart, goodbyes can be necessary and nothing is forever. The gist is that if all
the projects we started lasted forever, we couldn’t expand our practices in the necessary way.

The emphasis on artistic citizenship is often scarce at institutions of higher education, and this book may be the answer for understanding that there’s no direct route to guaranteed success in the art world. Louden has picked artists from the obvious U.S. cities that have a density of museums and galleries, but she’s also careful to show us those who have made their life in places like Detroit, Baltimore, San Francisco, and Oregon. Artists need not always be at the center of the art universe to forge a sustainable creative practice. While the measures of what it means to be a successful artist might differ radically for each of the artists included in Louden’s book, they are all decentralizing the image of success — away from the mainstream picture of going to the most reputable MFA programs, being represented by a mega-gallery, living in an art hub like New York or Los Angeles or London, and living on sales of works to major collections and museums. The book posits that networking and strategizing for success don’t always carry the same longterm power that sincere relationships do, and the collective narrative that emerges is one of how these artists’ plans diverged in the face of feeling the need to respond to their peers and surrounding community.

These artists are turning away from the definition of value that the art market paints, to look instead at how and where they want to create value. Deana Haggag, the former director of The Contemporary in Baltimore, stresses that measuring the impact that the arts have on communities enters realms that are hard to quantify,
but that artists are creating worlds that are wholly free, where community support reigns over the dollar, and that learning to value one’s own contribution is essential.


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also by Ayden LeRoux:

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