Janet Koplos
Truth-Telling

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 Louden 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, Louden's book helps us to answer the question, "How does an artist make a living today?"

The second wonder is that Louden, 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 Louden'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. Louden, 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 Louden, 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 Louden 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, Louden 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.

Louden 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 Louden 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, Louden 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 Louden'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. Louden'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 they are individual essays rather than interviews, there is no follow-up, no way to ask for elaboration or to address a related topic. Louden 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
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 foothold 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 critics, 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 lovely 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” (73). As a whole, that’s what this book is about. Louden 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...