Connection Is Key
Conversation explores artists as assets

By Jocelyn Murphy
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Artist and educator Sharon Louden (pictured) will lead a discussion Jan. 25 at 21c Museum in Bentonville centered around her new book. Contributing artist Julie Blackmon will join her for the conversation.

What does it take to maintain a creative life? There are so many facets that affect and inspire and drive and strengthen an arts community and those working within it. Artist and educator Sharon Louden's book "The Artist as Culture Producer: Living and Sustaining a Creative Life" comprises personal essays of 40 different visual artists exploring what it's like to be an artist today and the ways in which they contribute beyond a creative economy.

"The big core of how artists give so much to culture and to the well-being of others is that we can think about things differently; we can actually get outside of ourselves, which is such a great talent and need in any industry that enables people to move forward," Louden shares. On Jan. 25, Louden will be joined by Julie Blackmon, a contributing artist from the book, to lead a conversation about subjects raised in the text before engaging the audience in a question-and-answer session. Louden herself is also there to connect with guests -- in each city she directly asks about the individual desires and needs of that community's artists and environment.

"[Artists] are people who are energized," she goes on. "We are not starving. We are not dependent on systems. ... And this is an opportunity to be able to learn who we are and how we can come together to further the growth of individuals in our society."

The event is the seventh and final of Louden's tour to each of the 21c Museum locations.

"The timing for this event couldn't be better," adds 21c chief curator Alice Gray Stites, who has accompanied Louden to many of the talks. "In Louisville, [Ky.], we had a long discussion about the value of MFA programs, of education in the arts. In Nashville, the conversation was a lot around how do we attract more people who are writing about art. Each conversation becomes very reflective of how different these communities are, but they've been really inspiring."

"The Artist as Culture Producer" is Louden's second book in her "Living and Sustaining a Creative Life" trilogy. The series provides
a platform for artists to share more about their lives than the work they create, and invites the public to more fully understand not only artists' capacity in society, but who they are as people. The event is intended for the public and is not exclusive to "creatives" -- when artists and the public connect, it can only strengthen and enrich the community as a whole, Louden assures.

"Artists can start things from nothing. Artists always bounce back from failure like no other person in any field," she says. "How do we persevere as self-employed individuals ... not being dependent on one source in particular to thrive? These are all road maps that many, many people could take great interest in to apply to their own [lives]."

"Sharon's passion and enthusiasm for strengthening artist communities is really genuine and profound. She believes very much in the value of generosity and of sharing opportunities as an artist," Stites enthuses. "That's a really admirable model and one that falls in line very much with the mission and values of 21c -- to support artists, to help nurture the vitality of the artistic community [and] to bring people together around those issues."

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