



## Artists hang up the hero costume

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Instead of seeing themselves as an inspired genius, a working artist needs to be a pragmatic Culture Producer integrating art with society.

'We don't need another hero...we are looking for something we can rely on,' sang Tina Turner in a 1985 song.

American artist, educator and author Sharon Louden believes the idea of the artist as hero is an outdated stereotype that needs to be retired.

Instead, she believes, we need to don on the costume of "Culture Producer", a more integrated and community-minded way of thinking about what artists do. Artists need to create their own opportunities, advocate for it and communicate its worth to potential audiences.

'The perception of the "Artist Hero" doesn't exist anymore. Artists are integral in our society as normal working people, filling out creative economies all over the world. They are running non-profits, consulting on development projects with local governments, teaching in our schools, and lending their talents to many other sectors of society.'

Louden has interviewed 40 artists internationally to try to get to the root of the funding-career-lifestyle equation, and has come up with some new models for our new world.

Unlike the stereotypical art hero who is isolated in the bubble of creation, the Culture Producer works both in the art world and public-facing areas of audience awareness and communication.

'The way we communicate is essential to thriving and surviving... It is very different than when Van Gogh was alive. It is not about moving away from the studio, it is just more integrated and this social interaction thing is part of it,' she said.

Sustainability is not simply about making money, she said. 'If you want to make money you need to just go and get a job,' Rather, artists need to find a way of integrating their work into a viable lifestyle.

In the current economy, Louden describes artists as being 'on the front lines but in hidden in plain sight', inherently engaged in a political and social struggle...

'I don't think an artist has to be an activist. Aesthetic choices are political too. I think that every artist making art is political - period - because they are expressing themselves, especially in the US, Israel, Australia and other countries where there is some conservative oppression happening and freedom of speech is often challenged,' she said.

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## ARTISTS NEED TO BE MORE VISIBLE

In April Louden heads to Sydney where she will meet Lebanese-born Australian artist Khaled Sabsabi for the first time in person, one of the contributors to her latest publication. The trip is part of a conversation tour with critic and Editor-in-Chief of the New York-based blog and Podcast, Hyperallergic, Hrag Vartanian taking in Sydney, Brisbane, Toowoomba and Hobart.

Louden felt a need to come to Australia as news of the drastic limitations forced on the art community through funding cuts had reached her in New York. 'For me it was really important to connect that story to a global community,' she said.

One of those that suffered in the cuts was Raygun Projects in Toowoomba, which lost 100% of its funding.

'I believe in artists creating opportunities. Raygun is one of the few projects that brings international artists in to Australia, and is artist run,' she said.

'It distresses me Australia doesn't have enough philanthropy and also that artists don't have enough models to live independently of the market. The market is only one part of the ecosystem, as is the gallery.'

'A big part of this tour is validation, and we have to create these sources of validation and stop putting people on pedestals. Artists sometimes inflate who we talk to – like a critic or a curator - and they lose their own power. I don't think that artists realize what their assets are,' said Louden.

For Sabsabi, who is based in Western Sydney, that connection between making his art and communicating it is instinctive.

'The social platform has always been my natural habitat. What keeps me motivated is a deep commitment to voices being heard to raise awareness of the often unappreciated and undervalued worth of cultural expressions and creative freedoms.'



Sharon Louden and Hrag Vartanian in conversation (Minnesota Museum of American Art in St. Paul).  
Photo: Vinson Valega

Louden believes that in the art world we are still caught up in traditional role-playing, and until those divisions dissolve, the permissions allowed of artists will always be held within a minority power set.

'If I am in my studio and my dealer calls me, it doesn't mean I have to stop everything and put on a suit, metaphorically, to talk to them – think of that visual. Do we have to be a different person? I am not someone

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locked in the dungeon who only comes out for exhibitions. I make my work on the road, on site, through my books, by talking to people – a Culture Producer today constantly redefines who we are as artists.'

The central question behind Loudén's new book is how can artists extend their practices outside of their studios and contribute to creative economies and create change in their communities. She believes that just as important as the dollars and cents is the impact you create around you.

'I don't like to use the word "practice", for an artist it is their whole life, so models of sustainability really start with the artist working out some goals, and asking what will contribute to the growth of their work?'

Louden believes the answers start with the artist by recalibrating how they think of themselves instead of relying on others as agents or enablers.

Or to go back to Tina Turner's lyrics: 'Can't make the same mistakes this time ... Looking for something we can rely on; There's got to be something better out there.'

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