

TWO COATS OF PAINT

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Sharon Louden: Consultants, careers, and community

9:12 am by Sharon Butler



I frequently get pitches via email from art consultants who offer to help me (and I imagine many other artists) get exhibitions, grants, publicity, and so forth. I often wonder if their services are helpful, or whether the consultants are taking advantage of vulnerable under-recognized artists, so I contacted my friend and colleague Sharon Louden. Louden is a successful artist who offers professional development webinars through Creative Capital, and lectures frequently about sustaining a creative life. She agreed to answer a few questions.

[Image at top: Sharon Louden in her Minneapolis studio with Patrick Heide, an art dealer from London who visited Minneapolis to check out work for her upcoming show at Morgan Lehman in New York.]

Sharon Butler: Do you think art consultants who say they can help artists take their careers to the next level are legit?

Sharon Louden: I'm not an expert (but thanks for your faith in me). I'm first and foremost an artist. However, I love sharing and by doing so, unclogging the arteries of the art world by helping artists become independent and organize self-sustaining lives. I have done a lot of research for my books, including from my last book tour [Sharon edited *Living and Sustaining a Creative Life: Essays By 40 Working Artists* in 2013], within my community and beyond, and I

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have culled a lot of data and information. From that research and my projects with Creative Capital (a fantastic organization), I have gleaned that some professional practice programs are not as legitimate as others. Fundamentally, I believe in working for organizations that have a bigger mission than just making money. Although mentors should be paid, it's hard to know who can relay truth and relevant information without those associations.



Sharon Louden (center) leads a discussion at Burnet Art Gallery in Minneapolis.

SB: Should artists be paying “experts” to provide these services, or are the art consultants taking advantage of artists who may feel they haven’t gotten the recognition they deserve?

SL: Each artist has to decide for herself what is right for her, what information she wants to receive, hear, absorb and use. Because professional development is not provided in some institutions, I think it’s a resource that can be used well if it comes from the right places.

SB: In this age of multitasking, in which artists seem to have to do everything ourselves, it’s tempting, at least for some artists, to take advantage of the services provided. One pitch I got recently offered the following:

- introductions to galleries, curators, museums and other art professionals
- help securing secure solo and group exhibitions, representation, and sales
- exhibition management;
- PR and promotion
- grant writing

Do you think it would be worth hiring a professional to do these things? Or is it more cost effective to get an assistant—a young artist who you can pay by the hour to handle some of this stuff?

SL: Let me address one task at a time. Introductions and securing exhibitions: The problem with forced, paid introductions is that the artist may not really know the person they are working with and they are missing the joy of building that relationship, learning from that person, fostering a real exchange. In addition, the person who is being paid is determining the context for the work of the artist. I find that extremely problematic. Representation: It does not mean

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what it did in years past. Sure, someone can set up a meeting, but to get it to a healthy, good business partnership, personal interaction is required. You have to know the person you're working with. PR and promotion: it's always better for someone else to toot your horn. That said, I think it's awesome when artists share positive information about other artists. Grant writing: I serve on panels for grants and residencies. There have been times when I have recognized the artist's work but not the writing: it was clear the artist hired someone, which I found borderline cynical. There is something so resonant about matching the artist's voice to his work. At the end of the day, it benefits artists to make the effort. It's an opportunity to build and know your community. I don't believe shortcuts ever work well.



Twin Cities PBS taped Heide's visit for the TV series MN Original.

SB: If an artist decides to use an assistant, how should he/she select and manage that assistant?

SL: This is where community is essential. I believe vetting through community, asking questions as to what the assistant wants to get out of working for you, and getting a sense of his or her work ethic over time. Everybody's ambitions are different.

SB: I recently saw a free webinar offered on Facebook about building an art career. It promised to reveal all the secrets about succeeding in the art world. Do you have any thoughts on this type of presentation? How does the creator make any money if the webinar is free?

SL: I saw that, too, and I would say: just because you showed in the Whitney Biennial ten years ago doesn't mean you have all of the answers as to how to sustain a creative life. There is no one way of living as an artist. Each artist has to find his or her own way given the circumstances and relevant information. I am always suspicious of someone offering something for free. I am guessing there may have been an "up-sale" at the end of that free webinar. Just like anything else, I would recommend doing research to find out what measurable outcome has emerged from these course offerings.

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Sharon Louden is frequently in New York where she teaches at the New York Academy of Art.

SB: I find that more mature artists are the ones who are drawn to these pitches rather than younger artists who are just starting out. Why do you think that is?

SL: Because they have never received this information before. It has only been in the last few years, really, that information has been shared that can enable artists to sustain their lives differently than they originally thought. I also know that the myth of the “artist hero” still exists in the minds of some artists. But the hope is that they will realize that the gallery is now just one part of an ecosystem in the art world that contributes to the life of an artist, not a necessary condition of a fulfilling career.

SB: Do you have any advice for someone who wants to “move their career to the next level” without paying a consultant?

SL: Figure out what context you want for your work. Do the research as to what places and situations are likely to be conducive to it—what path will enable you to thrive as an artist. Think realistically and operate within the community: share, exchange, make opportunities, because more than ever, there are more resources available for artists to grow today than there have been ever before. Hrag Vartanian (Editor-in-Chief and Co-founder of Hyperallergic) coined the term “Cultural Reciprocity” to mean an exchange of culture among artists. I believe that kind of exchange is absolutely necessary to the growth of not only one’s work but also his or her career. When I asked Jonathan T.D. Neil (writer, editor, curator and Director of Sotheby’s Institute of Art, Los Angeles) what the key to success is for an artist today, he answered, “Traction.” That, too. Create your own.

SB: Are there any other questions you think I should ask you?

SL: Yes. “Do you have any more advice for Two Coats readers?” Well, I think they should always ask someone else, “What may I do for you today?” That question automatically opens a conversation, an opportunity, and a potential exchange. And fundamentally, it encourages generosity to yield more generosity, which is necessary in living and sustaining a creative life (and being a good person).

Thank you, Sharon!

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SB: No, Sharon, thank YOU.



Sharon Loudon, Windows #14, 2015, oil on Paper, 11 x 18 inches.

Projects:

Exhibition: "Sharon Loudon: Windows," Morgan Lehman Gallery, Chelsea, New York, NY. Opens September 8, 2016.

New book (forthcoming, March 2017): *The Artist as Culture Producer: Living and Sustaining a Creative Life*. Edited by Sharon Loudon / Published by Intellect Books (2017) / Distributed by University of Chicago Press / March 2 launch at the Strand.