Sharon Louden Q&A



SHARON LOUDEN is an artist and editor of the Living and Sustaining a Creative Life book series. A visionary leader, she acts as a catalyst by creating opportunities for artists and fostering connections across diverse sectors, viewing all her efforts as part of a single creative practice under the umbrella of a working artist.

What inspired you to write *Last Artist Standing*, and how does it build on your previous publications like *Living and Sustaining a Creative Life*?

Last Artist Standing was inspired by the artists I encountered while leading professional development workshops for Creative Capital – most of whom were over 50. At the same time, during my tenure as artistic director at Chautauqua Visual Arts, I noticed that artists under 30 shared many of the same concerns as older artists, especially around sustaining a creative life in today's world. This book builds on my previous publications by continuing to challenge the myths surrounding artists' livelihoods – particularly the illusion that consistent gallery sales are a reliable path to stability. Many artists – despite their deep contributions to the well-being of others – lack basic securities like health care, retirement benefits or financial safety nets. *Last Artist Standing* seeks to amplify those truths and advocate for new models of support and recognition across generations. It also underscores the urgent need to reintegrate the arts into K–12 public education and to expand higher education curricula to include contemporary models for sustaining a creative life.

What does the title *Last Artist Standing* signify to you personally and professionally?

Last Artist Standing to me means that success is defined by longevity. What's truly extraordinary is that the artists over 50 – especially those in their 70s and beyond – who continue to sustain creative lives, both mentally and physically. My friend and mentor Ruby Lerner and I often talk about the myth that artists 'never retire'. But the reality is, while our incredible drive and certainly our ideas may not fade, our bodies eventually demand care and recognition.

The book discusses sustainability in the arts. How do you define what it means for an artist to 'sustain' a creative life today?

'Sustaining' a creative life can mean many things – but at its core, it's about continuing to express our truths with consistency and integrity. To do that, artists need support on multiple levels: financial, emotional and physical. Sustainability isn't just about income – it's about having the stability and space to keep making work over time. Artists are far more than just makers – we are not laborers fulfilling tasks. We lead with ideas. And the ability to fully realize and share those ideas requires sustained investment in our lives, our practices, and our communities. Science has proven that the arts are beneficial for the well-being of others and yet artists are the ones who are not able to consistently sustain their lives.

Were there any unexpected insights or stories that emerged during the making of the book?

Absolutely. Some of the stories that emerged were so powerful and unexpected that they stopped my editing process. The emotional weight of what was shared – experiences of resilience, loss, and unyielding persistence – was at times overwhelming. There were moments when I had to pause editing just to fully process what I was reading. It was a reminder of the depth of courage so many artists carry in their lives and practices. There are many adjectives that come to mind when thinking about these artists: resilience, strength, courage, vulnerability, talent, persistence, survival, beauty and more.

How did you select the artists and voices featured in this book?

I selected the artists featured in *Last Artist Standing* in a variety of ways – through extensive research, an open call, trusted recommendations and by staying open and engaged with artists' work across the country. I paid close attention during my travels, visited exhibitions and listened deeply to conversations within different communities. Each inclusion was intentional, shaped by a desire to reflect a wide range of perspectives, experiences and creative practices.

How do you see the role of the artist evolving in response to social, political, and economic challenges?

I see society becoming increasingly reliant on artists. The recent dismantling of institutions like the NEA and the rollback of DEI initiatives reflect a devaluation of cultural investment and equity in the US. I believe conditions may deteriorate so much that our presence and voices become not just valuable, but vital. Artists have long served as the conscience of society – defenders of free expression, often in intangible but deeply meaningful, resonant ways. Under oppressive regimes and in moments of social and political upheaval, artists have been leaned on to articulate what others cannot. That role is only becoming more urgent. Our work is not a luxury – it is a necessity in preserving our health, democracy, humanity and truth.

What are the most pressing barriers artists face today that *Last Artist Standing* tries to address?

Last Artist Standing addresses some of the most pressing barriers artists face today: consistent financial stability, access to healthcare, retirement planning, affordable housing and recognition. In short, the basic human needs that are too often out of reach for those dedicating their lives to creative work.

How important is community and collaboration in the lives of the artists featured in your book?

Community and collaboration are the cornerstones of survival for many artists all over the world and it is shown here in this book through the essays by these artists. Across all disciplines and sectors, artists often choose their support systems – friends, colleagues and even chosen family – who become essential to both their creative process and their own well-being. These relationships not only foster collaboration but also provide critical encouragement – especially during times of doubt or isolation. For many artists, community is a part of sustaining their whole lives, not just their practices. Because the value of the arts remains unsupported in many ways, our community is essential now more than ever.

Did any particular stories about artist resilience or mutual support resonate deeply with you?

Every story resonated with me in its own way. I truly can't single out just one artist, because each brought a unique perspective – and the distinct differences between the artists' stories was one of my core goals for *Last Artist Standing*. The range of experiences and forms of resilience across the book is what makes it so meaningful to me.

What impact do you hope *Last Artist Standing* will have on its readers, particularly emerging artists?

I believe *Last Artist Standing* will have a lasting impact. As with my previous books, it offers a range of real-life pathways artists have taken to sustain their lives and practices. For emerging artists, these stories can be both affirming and instructive – resonating with their present realities while also preparing them for the long term. The book fills in what is often missing in formal education: honest, grounded examples of who artists are today and how they truly live.



If you could give one piece of advice to a young artist just beginning their journey, what would it be?

If I could offer one piece of advice to a young artist, it would be this: the 'art world' you often hear about is just one of many – and it may or may not align with your values or your creativity. That's not a bad thing; rather, it's an opportunity. You have the power to position yourself in multiple ways. There's no such thing as a 'day job' in the traditional sense, because as artists, we carry our ideas with us wherever we go. You can shape a sustainable life through a variety of income sources, as long as you remain rooted in who you are and what you truly need and want. That self-understanding will guide you to your community – and your community is your true currency. It's essential.

Last Artist Standing Living and Sustaining a Creative Life over 50
edited by Sharon Louden