

PREFACE

From an extensive book tour for my first publication, *Living and Sustaining a Creative Life: Essays by 40 Working Artists*, I learned that visual artists are still widely misunderstood. The old perception remains that artists toil in obscurity, struggling in their studios to heroically reveal the fruit of their labor after much suffering. This traditional viewpoint is still held by the general public, arts enthusiasts, arts professionals, and even fellow artists (both young and old). Over time, I became convinced that this out-of-date characterization—coupled with the stubborn, tired cliché of the starving artist lacking in both personal hygiene and socially acceptable behavior—continues to undermine the true value of the visual arts in our communities. It is time to finally retire the myth of the “Artist Hero” and start embracing the message of the Artist as Culture Producer.

One can easily argue that every artist creates culture simply by making work and sharing it publicly. Although there are plenty of terrific artists who confine art making to their studios, they are not the focus of this book. Instead, I am broadening what it means to produce culture today. For me, the Artist as Culture Producer is someone who reaches outside of the studio to extend creative energies and pursuits into his or her community. It is more than traditional community building, though, since these artists make work and are not, by definition, social workers. They inject creative culture into the cracks of society, where they alter the direction of small towns and large cities, corporate

environments and political campaigns, educational institutions and not-for-profit organizations, and within the art world itself. They are on the front lines but hidden in plain sight, informing, educating, inspiring, challenging conventional wisdom, and helping us with their creativity to solve problems and contribute to the well-being of others. Most importantly, these artists exude a spirit of generosity, which was a prerequisite to being included in this book.

The 40 artists that comprise this collection of essays share their exceptional stories, affirming that visual artists of the 21st century are not limited to what many consider traditional art making, but instead oftentimes choose to extend outward in a wide variety of collaborative ways. For instance, Wendy Red Star, raised on the Apsáalooke (Crow) reservation in south-central Montana, has helped re-energize Native culture and imagery in contemporary art dialogue through her work, which is both delightful and humorous, yet serious and profound. Lenka Clayton has led a colorful life, picking up and moving to a city in which she had never before lived. There, she started a free residency for mothers, entitled “Artist Residency in Motherhood.” Brothers Billy and Steven Dufala are Philadelphia residents who started a not-for-profit organization located in a demolition waste recycling facility (Recycled Artist in Residency) that challenges traditional notions of how and where we interact with the arts. Andrea Zittel tracks her long running A-Z enterprise, from inception to its current iteration, called A-Z West, located in the California desert. Throughout her career she has focused on building environments that involve community and exchange with other artists. Shinique Smith’s collaborative work in the film industry eventually led her back to her roots in the visual arts, where her openness and generosity created pathways for herself and other artists to thrive.

These essays also reinforce the reality that there is nothing romantic about the artist’s life. We are just normal, hardworking individuals who are devoted to making the most of our creativity during our short time on this planet. Although it might surprise some, artists are quite similar to the mechanic who services your car, the real estate agent who finds you a house, or the head of your bank down the street. We provide a service to society like every other profession, creating

economic value and contributing to the well-being of others on a daily basis. By simply being part of the conversation, our creativity yields freedom, independence, and high productivity. Through our individual efforts and inclination to collaborate, we are committed to sharing and contributing our talents and expression where it can do the most good.

There are 22 women and 18 male artist-contributors in the book. Thirty-six reside in the United States, two in the United Kingdom, one in the Philippines, and one in Australia. Two who appear in my first book — Austin Thomas and Sharon Butler — extend and elaborate on their stories from those previous essays. Many work under the proverbial radar, but all exhibit their work within the commercial art market. Most importantly, these artists are humble, generous, and mindful of others. They are naturally gifted teachers in one form or another. And all stretch their creative output beyond a singular practice, providing services and outreach to many different types of communities the world over.

Unlike my first book, I was not acquainted with many of these artists before I approached them about contributing to this collection. Through the editing process, which sometimes involved many drafts, lengthy conversations, and countless emails, I came to know them all much better. For that, I am grateful to now count them as part of my community. Through these transparent, first-hand accounts, I am confident that you will also feel the same warm and inspiring connection to these exceptional and generous artists.

Hrag Vartanian, Editor-in-Chief and Co-founder of *Hyperallergic*, provides a definitive and inspiring foreword, setting the tone for the essays to follow. Both through his own writing and his daily publication, he is a tireless advocate for artists around the globe. His efforts to show the true value of artists in society are unparalleled.

The three exceptional women who have contributed the concluding statements work on the frontline of the visual arts ecosystem. They are all committed to building bridges between artists and the public, helping to normalize the role of the arts in society. Deana Haggag, Director of The Contemporary, a nomadic museum in Baltimore, Maryland, understands what it takes for an artist to resist and defy chaos in her city. Courtney

Fink, Co-founder of Common Field, devotes her efforts all over the country to bringing experimental work to communities where it is most needed. And Chen Tamir, Curator at the Center for Contemporary Art in Tel Aviv, Israel, addresses the limitations in arts funding today as a form of censorship.

Following the model of my first book, I have chosen to preserve the voice of each contributor by allowing as little editing as possible. I want you to hear their unique voices in your head as you read these stories, each personality demarcated by his or her unique cadence, knowledge, humor, and experience. The length of each essay varies, which was intentional, since I knew that some of the contributors would simply start a conversation, while others would complete an entire story.

Austin Thomas and I often use a phrase to describe selfless artists as those who “plant seeds to grow trees.” We consider them “gardeners of creativity” who cultivate generosity by helping artists and other members of our community, thereby yielding more generosity. Visual culture is spread throughout society this way, and the greater good is better served. It is my hope that *The Artist as Culture Producer* will help disseminate, to both the general public and fellow artists alike, the important roles visual artists play in mainstream life. By their everyday actions, artists embrace creativity as a right and show us how freedom leads to a highly valued life.

FOREWORD

At the dawn of the High Renaissance, in 1480 to be exact, the wealthiest artist in Florence was Neri di Bicci, who didn't make his fortune from the altarpieces he's known for today, but from the sale of small tabernacles containing a "painted plaster sacred image (made with a mold), and in an 'antique style' wooden frame." The second richest artist in town was di Bicci's student, Andrea di Giusto Manzini. He's largely unknown today, but during his lifetime Manzini was also a "painter of plaster statues."¹ Artists, it appears, have always been creative at finding ways to sustain their creativity, and their artistic, personal, public, and financial lives have always been more complicated than they seem.

Only recently have we begun to talk about the economic and social realities of being an artist, long hidden under the myths of "genius" or "passion" that can marginalize the serious work of making art. Books like this one are helping those artists trying to shake free of the unrealistic fantasy created by a steady stream of inflated stories about the luxury art market and how it caters only to the richest 1%.

Though the new media spotlight on contemporary art has given the field renewed attention and glamor, there's another type of renaissance taking place in the art world around the evolving relationship of artists to society, and it's one that's largely overlooked. This new wave is being led by creative individuals

working to revitalize their communities, often redefining their roles, and challenging the boundaries of art today. Artists are our conscience; they are innovators, healers, chance-takers, and activists. Most importantly, they are a microcosm of society.

Artists excel at generating new models, and their resilience and popularity often come because they respond to the idea of culture as a lived, constantly evolving, and malleable thing that springs from the fount of everyday life. If contemporary art, particularly its newer forms—like performance, new media, street art—has blurred the boundaries of work and life, then all the systems that sustain this type of work are slowly catching up. The lives of artists tell us about our society, and how we do (or more shockingly don't) properly value those who help produce some of the most important aspects of our culture. They are stories we need to hear.

Some may be apprehensive about the idea of artists as cultural producers, but the evolving nature of artistic practice means we have to adapt our language to reflect a new reality. Artists can't be beholden to old stereotypes of inspired acts of creation—or even galleries and museums—to determine their path. They work in culture, but they're also plugged into larger networks of power, finance, identity, and information systems; they create the objects, generate the ideas, and produce the models that allow others to dream, feel, and ponder. Sometimes they reflect our world back at us, and the best of them do it with uncanny precision. Others imagine what we thought impossible and wait while everyone else catches up.

In my dream world, artists would be part of every aspect of our lives. They would help make hospitals more receptive and healing places; they would create street furniture that encourages contemplation and community, and they'd help local governments communicate more effectively with the public. I hope this book will help shatter the old stereotypes of artists as exotic and enigmatic creatures and, in their place, construct a new image using stories of individuals who sustain remarkable artistic lives while nurturing themselves with families, activism, volunteerism, small businesses, hobbies, and politics.

Sharon Loudon is one such remarkable individual, who has been a proponent of rethinking artists' roles in society and responding to their needs. When I first met her, I immediately recognized how much compassion she had for her fellow artists—their lives, work, and even their insecurities—but also how contagious her commitment and optimism can be.

How do we create art that challenges capitalism? How can we find new ways to give comfort to those confronted with violence? How do we shed light on those overlooked by society? Why do we make art in a culture that can be antagonistic towards it? Why even continue? The answer to these questions lies in the work of individuals who imagine the future before us, and we call them artists.

Hrag Vartanian
Editor-in-Chief and Co-founder, *Hyperallergic*

1. Guerzoni, Guido. *Apollo & Vulcan: The Art Markets in Italy 1400–1700* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2011), p. xxiii