



Reflecting on Space

A Conversation with

Sharon
Louden

BY ELAINE A. KING

VINSON VALEGA

In-progress, experimental work at Sharpe-Walentas Studio Program, Brooklyn, NY. Aluminum, steel screws, and colored fringe, dimensions variable.



Windows, 2015–17. Aluminum, monofilament, glue, and steel screws, installation view.

Sharon Louden is best known for room-size, site-specific installations constructed from thousands of small components. She uses a variety of media, including painting, drawing, sculpture, and animation, aiming to capture movement and light. Within these works, industrial materials (her favorite is aluminum) are transformed into something more closely resembling forms in nature, even the human body. She calls her abstract creations “anthropomorphic individuals,” acknowledging the human-like aspects that result from minimal lines, textures, and gestures.

The editor of *Living and Sustaining a Creative Life: Essays by 40 Working Artists* and *The Artist as Culture Producer: Living and Sustaining a Creative Life*, Louden wears many hats—artist, advocate, and educator (she has taught for more than 25 years). Though she started her artistic career as a painter at Yale, over time, she became bored with the limitations of canvas: “I wanted to paint the inside of figures and dissect them. I would think of them as architecture.”

Elaine A. King: *Often when your name comes up, people think of your books, panels, and advocacy efforts, but let’s begin with the artist. When did you decide to become an artist?*

Sharon Louden: I never decided. It has been a part of me since I was a young child. I loved drawing, and I found it to be a way of speaking freely about anything—art gave me a voice.

EAK: *What is your favorite part of the artistic process?*

SL: I’m open to surprises when I am working on a project—be that a drawing, an installation, or the collaborations for my books. In my installations, I love it when I discover something with a material that I hadn’t previously.

EAK: *How have you supported yourself as an artist?*

SL: I’ve done a vast range of things. I’ve shined shoes,

worked as a bartender, an educator, collaborator, and I’ve embraced working with a team of people.

EAK: *How do you manage everything and still sustain your art career and life?*

SL: It takes a community of people for both physical and emotional support. Additionally, 80 percent of the opportunities that I’ve had in my professional life have come from starting relationships through “cold calls” or approaches without referrals to create my own community over time. Since my work takes place both in the studio and on site, a large part of what sustains me is working with different people and developing relationships with them.

EAK: *How did your shift from painting to installation come about?*

SL: The mediums I choose assist my vision, but they don’t define me as an artist. The shift came when I began seeing my gestures as being three-dimensional. Over time, through the use of different sculptural media as drawings in space, my work became larger and larger, establishing installations of inclusion.

CHRISTOPHER GALLO PHOTOGRAPHY

EAK: *You employ an abstract language in both your drawings and installations. How do you move from idea to realization?*

SL: I consider my work drawing in space, and I attempt to create environments of both inclusion and interactivity. It was always natural for me to have a physical engagement with materials that assist in expanding space—for the past 15 years, one of the most important has been highly reflective aluminum. I create sites based on multiple gestures and my selected materials. There isn’t a single method—it is an intuitive process.

EAK: *How does a site influence you?*

SL: The work is always a response to the architecture and how I can see interactivity so I can get lost in a space or so it creates paths for others to feel an expansion of space.

EAK: *You’ve used aluminum since 2004, when you made Merge for the Munson-Williams-Proctor Arts Institute. You’re still using it, for instance with Windows (2015, Tweed Museum of Art), which melded sculpture, painting, music, and theatrical lighting. Does concept precede material for you?*

SL: I definitely have a love affair with aluminum because it gives the illusion of expanding space, is highly malleable, forgiving, and beautiful. Despite how corny it might be, I embrace beauty and its aesthetic strength. I generally have a gut sense of what I think I want to do. This has changed over time, though. As a younger artist, I spent much more time planning, but now it’s all intuitive. I feel it through working in dialogue with the space and observing how people live in/interact with that space.

EAK: *What about the reflective and distortive properties of aluminum?*

SL: Those characteristics allow others in the space to become part of the work, creating an inherent connectivity within the piece and to each other.

EAK: *Is there connectivity from one project to another?*

SL: Absolutely. A type of linearity pervades the process as I connect elements from one project to another. With *Merge*, *Windows*, *Community*, and *Untitled*, I included components from past installations. The same is happening in the piece that I am currently

TOP: CHRISTOPHER GALLO PHOTOGRAPHY / BOTTOM: WEISMAN ART MUSEUM



Above: *Windows*, 2015–17. Aluminum, monofilament, glue, and steel screws, installation view. Below: *Merge*, 2011–12. Aluminum, steel screws, and hot glue, installation spans over 3,000 sq. ft.



experimenting with in my studio. It is a continuous building process that constantly evolves, blending deliberate arrangement with intuition.

EAK: *What is integral to your work, and how would you define it?*

SL: For me, it is the interaction with the site and the ability to alter a space as well as to add something to the place. I cannot classify my work. I prefer to remain undefined. I don’t think any artist wants to be put in a box, and I certainly don’t.

EAK: *What challenges do you face in making and exhibiting your work, and how has it changed over time?*

SL: The challenge for me is my body. As I am getting older, it requires more endurance to produce large-scale installations. I believe that has to be a factor; it’s a fact of life for artists who produce dimensional work. The best part about that is I have opened my practice to working with more people, which continues and expands my collaborative approach. Even



Top and detail: *Community*, 2013. Aluminum and steel screws, approx. 10 x 22 x 22 ft.

so, the installations have become more complex and larger. I've become less self-conscious about my work, which allows me to be freer and more experimental.

EAK: *Do you engage in research before starting a project?*

SL: I always make an effort to know an individual site, and I strive to visit at least a few times to become familiar with a space and its structural configuration. In addition, I also write and make small drawings as a part of the process. However, there is nothing romantic about anything I do in my work. It's simply a response to the space. I want to interrupt it.

EAK: *The new studio work features vivid colors and shapes reminiscent of bright streamers. What role do these colors play, and how do they function with the aluminum?*

SL: The fringe color comes from a nostalgic look at my childhood years in the 1970s, when I felt innocence and celebration. It is a way of capturing and expressing a playful dialogue in contrast to the formality of the aluminum.

EAK: *How did the books begin?*

SL: I moderated a panel at the College Art Association's annual conference in New York, in 2011. You never know who is in the audience—my future publisher attended that discussion and approached me to produce a book. I decided to compile anthologies addressing how individual artists sustain their creative lives.

EAK: *How did you select the 40 artists to contribute essays?*

SL: It is important for me to bring out diverse voices that are not familiar to the general public. My main criteria for choosing artists for the books, or collaborators for anything I do, are that they are generous and open to providing opportunities to other artists.

EAK: *What are your objectives for the books, and what do you mean by "sustaining a creative life?"*

SL: My goal is for artists to share their stories of how they live their creative lives, thus breaking the stereotype of who a contemporary artist is today. Through these essays, different approaches and models are shared. The testimonies act as catalysts to promote dialogue while also creating community. For example, at these events, we have rigorous conversations, and through these discussions, new opportunities arise for artists participating in the "town-hall" gatherings. By "creative life," I want artists to speak freely, be understood and respected, and be more integral to society.

EAK: *Has the process of editing the books and doing the book tours with various artists influenced your own practice?*

SL: I continue to make work in different places and am never beholden to the restrictions of a single studio. For me, there are many different forms of art-making—some are done alone, while others are done with people. When I experience new places, engaging with various people on the tours, it feeds my practice and makes it more varied.

EAK: *Did you make any early career mistakes?*

SL: Yes, absolutely. For too long, I cared too much about what other people thought instead of trusting myself. There is no single way of being an artist. I shouldn't have been distracted by the notion of what is "successful" to another person and just had confidence in myself. However, this realization comes with time and age. I'm much happier now than when I was younger because I don't care as much about things that I now know are unnecessary.

EAK: *Are there any artists or people who have particularly influenced you?*

SL: Many people in my books, including Hrag Vartanian, Sharon Butler, Deana

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Haggag, Courtney Fink, Austin Thomas, and Edgar Arceneaux, continue to inform and inspire me.

EAK: *Are you working on any new projects?*

SL: Yes. I am working on a commissioned site-specific installation for fall 2018. I am also allowing myself to fail in my work, experimenting in a residency at the Sharpe-Walentas Studio.

EAK: *What role do you feel an artist plays in this age of social media, rampant technology, and entertainment?*

SL: Artists have always been innovators capable of bouncing back from disappointments and failures. We continue to be practitioners of free speech and set an example: we are not afraid to speak our minds. Artists have always been engaged with various technologies throughout time—we adapt to things easily. We lead the way by developing new ideas that can be shared for the betterment of society. I am extremely grateful to be an artist and constantly recognize my privilege as part of a larger community that allows me to thrive and be myself. That is a gift.

Elaine A. King is a freelance art critic and curator living in Bethesda, MD.

TOP: CHRISTOPHER GALLO PHOTOGRAPHY / BOTTOM: VINSON VALEGA

Above and detail: *Untitled*, 2017. Aluminum, steel cable, steel screws, and eyebolts, 18.5 x 19 x 42 ft. Below: In-progress, experimental work at Sharpe-Walentas Studio Program, Brooklyn, NY.

