

## Your Artist Statement: Explaining the Unexplainable

**Q:** Why do I have to write an artist statement? It's stupid. If I wanted to write to express myself I would have been a writer. The whole idea of my art is to say things visually. Why can't people just look at my art and take away whatever experiences they will?

**A:** Artist statements are not stupid; they're more like essential. And you don't have to be a writer to write one. And people already look at your art and take away whatever experiences they will. Your artist statement is about facts, a basic introduction to your art; it's not instructions on what to experience, what to think, how to feel, how to act, or where to stand, and if it is, you'd better do a rewrite. On this planet, people communicate with words, and your artist statement introduces and communicates the language component of your art. People who come into contact with your art and want to know more will have questions. When you're there, they ask you and you answer. When you're not there, your artist statement answers for you. Or when you're there, but you don't feel like answering questions, or you're too busy to answer questions, or someone's too embarrassed to ask you questions, or you're too embarrassed to answer questions, then your pal, your artist statement, does the job for you. So let's get busy and write the damn thing...

Just about all artists want as many people as possible to appreciate their art. A good artist statement works towards this end, and the most important ingredient of a good statement is its language. **WRITE YOUR STATEMENT IN LANGUAGE THAT ANYONE CAN UNDERSTAND**, not language that you understand, not language that you and your friends understand, not language that you learn in art school, but everyday language that you use with everyday people to accomplish everyday things. An effective statement reaches out and welcomes people to your art, no matter how little or how much they know about art to begin with; it never excludes. Rest assured that those who read your statement and want to know more will christen you with ample opportunities to get technical, metaphysical, philosophical, personal, emotional, moralistic, socially relevant, historical, environmentally responsible, political, autobiographical, anecdotal, or twisty with jargon-- **LATER, NOT NOW**.

Like an introduction to a book, your statement presents the fundamental underpinnings of your art; write it for people who like what they see and want to know more, not those who already know you and everything your art is about. In three to five paragraphs of three to five sentences each, provide basic information like **WHY YOU MAKE YOUR ART, WHAT IT SIGNIFIES, HOW YOU MAKE IT, WHAT IT'S MADE OUT OF**, and perhaps briefly, **WHAT IT MEANS TO YOU**. Don't bog readers down, but rather entice them to want to know more. As with any good first impression, your statement should hook and invite further inquiry, like a really good story is about to unfold. Give too little, not too much.

People have short attention spans. When you overload readers with details, you risk drowning them in minutia, and discouraging those who might otherwise persevere if you keep it simple. Address and answer commonly asked questions about your art. Save the complicated stuff for those who progress to the next level. Don't worry about having to satisfy your dedicated fans. You won't bore them and you won't lose them; they already love you. And if they have questions, they know how to get them answered. Remember-- your statement is about broadening your audience, not keeping it static. You'll have plenty of time to give your most recent converts the grand tour-- **LATER, NOT NOW**-- you have to convert them first.

Plus this... your statement is about you, so personalize it. Write it in the first person, not like you're talking about yourself in the abstract. Infuse it with your unique perspective. Whenever possible, make it conversational, like you're speaking directly to readers (Note: A good editor can work wonders here). The more complicated, theoretical, arcane, inscrutable, bloated, pompous, elitist, egotistical, bombastic, arrogant or impersonal your statement, the more trouble people will have trying to hack through it and connecting with you and your art on meaningful levels. Few readers want to burn calories trying to decipher complexities; they burn 'em all day long. For now, they just want to see your art, take it easy, have fun and enjoy themselves.

Additional considerations:

- \* Make "I" statements rather than "you" statements. Talk about what your art does for you, not what it's supposed to do for the viewers. This doesn't mean you start every sentence with "I," but rather that you respect people's autonomy and allow them to respond to your art however they wish.
  - \* At all times, give readers the option to agree or disagree with you. Never pressure them or dictate outcomes.
  - \* Connect what your art expresses with the medium that you're expressing it in. For example, if your art is about world peace, and it consists of twigs protruding from pieces of clay, explain the connection. Arbitrarily stating that twig/clay protrusions represent world peace leaves people wondering. If of course, the object of your art or your statement is to leave people wondering, then that's OK. In art everything is OK, but in order to succeed as an artist, someone beside yourself generally has to get the point of what you're doing.
  - \* Be specific, not vague. For example, if your art is "inspired by assessments of the fundamentals of the natural world," tell which fundamentals you're assessing and how they inspire you.
  - \* Tell the story about what led up to your art ONLY if it's short, compelling, and really really relevant. People are generally not interested in progressions of antecedent events. Something leads up to everything; we all know that.
  - \* Avoid comparing yourself to other artists. If other artists influence you, fine, but don't say, "Like Picasso, I do this" or "Like Judd, I do that." Instead, say something like "Picasso's Blue and Rose paintings influence how I use yellow." Better yet, leave other artists out of your statement altogether. Let the critics decide who you're like. Plus you don't want to invite comparisons between yourself and the greatest artists who've ever lived. We all know who the victor's gonna be there.
  - \* Don't instruct people on how to see, feel, behave, respond, or otherwise relate to your art. Nobody likes being told what to do. Instead of saying "You will experience angst when you see my art," say "This art expresses my angst" or "I express my angst through my art." Or see a therapist and work it all out.
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### statement examples

<http://www.tomikojonesphoto.com/index.html>

<http://stuartjgibson.us/news.html>

<http://www.stacyreneemorrison.com/>

<http://www.sarahfaust.com>

### another approach

Your artist's statement can be a moving testament to your creativity and integrity. The expression of this commitment will vary, but the effectiveness of your artist's statement stems from the authority with which you write it.

Our words "author" and "authority" come from the Latin root "augere," which means "to increase, to create, to promote." This implies that the notions of creation and promotion are compatible! The more I muse on the meaning of working from my authority, of being the author of my work and of my conduct, the more I understand that authentic communication about my work is a powerful tool for creative growth as well as for business success.

The exercises in this section will get you centered and in touch with your own authority. When I write promotional materials for artists (or any kind of business) I always have the principal people involved do these exercises first. I use the words and phrases they generate to compose compelling artist's statements on their behalf. This way their creative authority is incorporated in the finished product.

Think of your artist's statement as a nourishing stew. The rich flavors and inviting aroma will feed your spirit and summon wonderful people to your table. You'll want to make sure your stew is made from the

freshest, finest ingredients and that it has been simmered and seasoned with care. Do this, and you will be proud to share your creative vision – your authority – with others.

## WRITING YOUR ARTIST'S STATEMENT

You'll need pencil and paper, a dictionary, and a thesaurus.

### STEP ONE: Assemble the Ingredients.

1. Take five minutes and think about why you do what you do. How did you get into this work? How do you feel when work is going well? What are your favorite things about your work? Jot down short phrases that capture your thoughts. Don't worry about making sense or connections. The more you stir up at this point, the richer the stew.
2. Make a list of words and phrases that communicate your feelings about your work and your values. Include words you like, words that make you feel good, words that communicate your values or fascinations. Be loose. Be happy. Be real. Think of these as potential seasonings for your stew. You don't have to choose which ones to use just yet, so get them all out of the cupboard.
3. Answer these questions as simply as you can. Your answers are the meat and potatoes of your stew. Let them be raw and uncut for now.
  - a. What is your favorite tool? Why?
  - b. What is your favorite material? Why?
  - c. What do you like best about what you do?
  - d. What do you mean when you say that a piece has turned out really well?
  - e. What patterns emerge in your work? Is there a pattern in the way you select materials? In the way you use color, texture or light?
  - f. What do you do differently from the way you were taught? Why?
  - g. What is your favorite color? List three qualities of the color. Consider that these qualities apply to your work.
4. Look at your word list. Add new words suggested by your answers to the questions above.
5. Choose two key words from your word list. They can be related or entirely different. Look them up in a dictionary. Read all the definitions listed for your words. Copy the definitions, thinking about what notions they have in common. Look your words up in a Thesaurus. Read the entries related to your words. Are there any new words that should be added to your word list?
6. Write five sentences that tell the truth about your connection to your work. If you are stuck, start by filling in the blanks below.

When I work with \_\_\_\_\_ I am reminded that \_\_\_\_\_.

I begin a piece by \_\_\_\_\_.

I know a piece is done when \_\_\_\_\_.

When my work is going well, I am filled with a sense of \_\_\_\_\_.

When people see my work, I'd like them to \_\_\_\_\_.

### STEP TWO: Filling the Pot.

Write a three paragraph artist's statement. Keep your sentences authentic and direct. Use the present tense ("I am," not "I was," "I do," not "I did.") Be brave: say nice things about yourself. If you find that you falter, write three paragraphs about an artist whose work you admire. Then write about yourself as though you were an admiring colleague. As a rule, your artist's statement should be written in the first person. Refer to yourself with the pronouns "I, me, my." If this blocks you, write in the third person, then go back and change the pronouns as needed when you get to Step Four. Use the suggestions below to structure your statement. Write three to five sentences per paragraph.

**First paragraph.** Begin with a simple statement of why you do the work you do. Support that statement, telling the reader more about your goals and aspirations.

**Second paragraph.** Tell the reader how you make decisions in the course of your work. How and why do you select materials, techniques, themes? Keep it simple and tell the truth.

**Third paragraph.** Tell the reader a little more about your current work. How it grew out of prior work or life experiences. What are you exploring, attempting, challenging by doing this work.

### **STEP THREE: Simmering the Stew.**

Your artist's statement is a piece of very personal writing. Let it simmer overnight before your reread it. This incubation period will help give you the detachment necessary to polish the writing without violating your sense of integrity and safety. While your statement simmers, let your mind wander over the ingredients you assembled in Step One. Allow yourself to experience the truth of your creative experience. Marvel at the wealth of seasonings and abundance of vegetables you have at your disposal. Enjoy the realization that your work is grounded in real values and experience. If you think of things you might have left out of your statement, jot them down, but leave the statement alone.

### **STEP FOUR: Taste and Correct the Seasonings.**

Read your statement out loud. Listen to the way the sounds and rhythms seem to invite pauses. Notice places where you'd like the sound or rhythm to be different. Experiment with sounding out the beats of words that seem to be missing until they come to mind. Do this several times until you have a sense of the musical potential of your statement. As you read your statement, some phrases will ring true and others false. Think about the ones that aren't on the mark and find the true statement lurking behind the false one. You may find that the truth is a simpler statement than the one you made. Or your internal censors may have kept you from making a wholehearted statement of your truth lest it sound self-important. Risk puffing yourself up as long as your claims are in line with your goals and values. Keep reading and revising your statement until you hear a musical, simple, authentic voice that is making clear and honest statements about your work. Refer to your word list and other Step One exercises as needed. By now your taste buds are saturated. You need a second opinion. Choose a trusted friend or professional to read your statement. Make it clear that you are satisfied with the ingredients on the whole, but you'd like an opinion as to seasoning. In other words, you alone are the authority for what is true about your work, but you'd like feedback on clarity, tone, and such technical matters as spelling and punctuation. Once you've incorporated such suggestions as make sense to you, make a crisp, clear original of your artist's statement. Sign and date it. Make lots of copies, you will have lots of people to serve it to!

### **STEP FIVE: Summon the Guests.**

There's little point in concocting a fabulous stew if you don't invite anyone to dinner. Every time you use your artist's statement you extend your circle of influence and build new branches of the support network for making, showing and selling your work. Enclose a copy of your artist's statement whenever you send a press release, letter of interest to a gallery or store, or contact a collector. Send it to show promoters and curators. Enclose a copy with shipments of your work so it can be displayed wherever your work is exhibited. The rest of this manual will suggest many opportunities for using your artist's statement to express your truth and support your presentations.

### **STEP SIX: File Your Recipe!**

Save all the notes and drafts that you've made. You'll want to revise and update your artist's statement from time to time to reflect changes in your work.

Still, it is likely that many of the underlying expressions of your authority will remain the same. Having access to the "recipe" for your original statement will help you generate better revisions and will give you a sense of creative continuity. Whenever you need copy (for announcements, packaging, exhibit catalogues, etc.) return to your warm-up exercises. The words and phrases there will help you write openly and honestly about your work. And repeating the exercises will help you chart new creative territory.