

Writing Your Artist Statement

An artist statement is not a personal critique of your work. Neither is it a resume, a list of accomplishments, nor a historical summary of what you've done. An artist statement is your reflection about your work, a distilled essence of what you do. It is a celebration of your art, a personal revelation, a psychological bridge between you and your audience. Understanding and naming what we do through language is not to have the beauty or mystery dismantled; though, as artists, we often fear this. Language gives us the sense of irrevocably fixing something in time and space. Think of an artist statement as an act of self-definition, bound only in the moment that you, the artist, chooses. When you give the world your art, people become connected to you. An artist statement is another kind of connection, which adds dimensionality to the art you so willingly give to the world. If done authentically and skillfully, this increases people's engagement with what you do and the perceived value of your work.

Creativity and Authority

There are no prescribed formulas for writing your artist statement. Just as each artist will have his or her own personal aesthetic approach to creating a work of art, each artist should find his/her own voice in order to express verbally what the artwork is all about. 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. The 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 work together. The more I think about the meaning of working from my authority, of being the author of my work, the more I understand that authentic communication about my work is a powerful tool for creative growth as well as for creative success.

Harvesting Ideas

Some artists have found it valuable to check diary or journal entries for concepts and phrases to incorporate in their statements. If writing is difficult for you, it sometimes helps to jot down all the ideas that pop into your head as you begin writing; it may be easier to organize many ideas later. Carry a small notebook with you, so you can jot down ideas when they come to you.

Write your artist Statement using language the average Joe,
non-art person can understand!

When writing do not use language that only 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 still want to know more will approach you with ample opportunities to get technical, metaphysical, philosophical, personal, emotional, moralistic, socially relevant, historical, environmentally responsible, political, autobiographical, anecdotal, or twisty with jargon.

Your statement is about you, so personalize it. Infuse it with your unique perspective and your own voice. Whenever possible, make it conversational, like you're talking to readers. The more complex, theoretical, intangible, or impersonal your statement, the more trouble people have trying to get through it and connecting with your art on meaningful levels. Few readers want to burn energy trying to decipher abstractions; they burn energy all day long. For now, they just want to see your art, take it easy, and enjoy themselves.

General Tips

- * Make "I" statements, rather than "you" statements. Talk about what your art does for you, not what it's supposed to do for the readers. This doesn't mean that you start every sentence with "I," but rather that you respect people's autonomy and allow them to respond to your art as 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 O.K. In art, everything is O.K., 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.
- * Avoid obscure references to music, art, literature, history, or anything else that requires detailed explanation. If you have to make such a reference, explain it fast so that people know what you're talking about. If you can't do it fast, don't use the reference, or use it later.
- * 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, It is O.K. to mention influences, but don't say, "Like Picasso, I do this" or "Like so and so, 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.

* 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."

*Keep reading and revising your statement until you hear a musical, simple, authentic voice that is making clear and honest statements about your work.

*Before you go public with your statement, get feedback. Show your art and statement to friends, friends' friends, and maybe even a stranger or two. Make sure they understand what you want them to understand. When they don't, or you have to explain yourself, do a rewrite and eliminate the confusion. Many times, a little rearranging is all that's necessary to make your statement a clean clear read.

Practicalities

I. ELEMENTS OF A STATEMENT

A. Why?

1. Discuss your outlook, i.e., your vision, insights, or philosophy.
2. Explain why you do what you do and what it is about.

B. What?

1. Medium (painting, prints, sculpture, etc.)
2. Style (be specific and descriptive - see terms on next page).

C. How?

1. Technique or method.
2. Relate technique and style to your medium.
3. Relate technique and style to your vision or philosophy.

II. CONSTRUCTION OF A STATEMENT

A. Honesty

1. Avoid being pompous.
2. Do not use grandiose and empty expressions, especially when discussing a philosophical point of view.

3. Make it singular, (using “I” statements,) not general; it should reflect you.

B. Clarity and Directness

1. Avoid being too technical or too simplified.
2. Avoid the use of jargon or cliché.

C. Length

1. One to two typewritten pages (approximately 250-300 words).
2. Eliminate unnecessary discussions and explanations.
3. Be concise and to the point!

D. Style

1. Try to capture your own speaking voice.
2. Avoid repetition of phrases.
3. Vary sentence structure and length. The length of the sentence should relate to the complexity of the idea.
4. Organization of detail is important. Significant ideas should be at the end of each sentence for emphasis.

E. Grammar and Spelling

1. Make sure to spell check the finished statement. This document reflects your reputation as an intellectual artist.
2. Have at least two other people proof the statement for grammatical coherency.
 - Why have you chosen to create this imagery?
 - What role does light, color, form, space, and/or motion play in your work?
 - What role does emotional, philosophical, social, or political content play?
 - How does your art relate to your life?
 - What does your art say about your ideals, about a perfect world, or a less than perfect world?
 - Do you have a favorite saying, poem or song that embodies your art making? How does this quotation echo your thoughts?
 - How do you feel when you are working at your art?

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 is grew out of prior work or life experiences. What are you exploring, attempting, challenging by doing this work.

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. Keep reading and revising your statement until you hear a musical, simple, authentic voice that is making clear and honest statements about your work.

Finally, 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.