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How to Write an Artist's Statement

"Artists can no more speak about their work than plants can speak about horticulture."

- Jean Cocteau

"Writing about music is like dancing about architecture." - Elvis Costello

"One does not have to fully understand art to be enjoy and be moved by it." – Robert Motherwell

"I want my work to speak for itself. If I wanted to say things in writing I would have become a writer. I'm an artist because I want to say things visually." - Anonymous

As artists/craftspeople you will often be asked to provide an artist's statement. It's standard practice for most show entries and grant applications, and is expected by curators, dealers, and collectors. Your artwork must speak for itself visually and experientially to earn validity as a work of art/craft, but that in no way diminishes the value and importance of a well-written artist's statement. Such a statement can significantly enhance the experience of viewing, owning, and/or using your work. You have invested skill and labor in creating your artwork and should be proud of the product. It only makes sense to do whatever possible to enhance the viewer/user's understanding and appreciation of your work. Writing an artist's statement also helps you to clarify in your own mind what you are doing and why you are doing it.

As indicated by the above quotes, a remarkable amount of misunderstanding and hype surround the concept of an artist's statement. A common myth is that it must sound intellectual and erudite, elevated above common everyday speech. That's appropriate only if a particular artist naturally communicates that way, if the content of the work requires it, and if the intended audience will understand it. Even when a statement is written in an intellectual and erudite fashion, there's little room for "artspeak." This concept is also broadly misunderstood, and in a classic case of anti-intellectualism in the arts, an artist who writes fluently in the language of art historians and critics risks being accused of artspeak. Artspeak is very different from intelligent art writing, and involves the use of fashionable jargon that deliberately conceals and confuses truth and useful information, usually in an attempt to veil a lack of substance and significance in the artwork itself. Even if your art specifically addresses popular fashion and jargon, an artist's statement can still use the terminology clearly and intelligently.

Why is it that artists/craftspeople are so often hesitant to write about themselves and their work? Artists make art because they prefer communicating visually or have something to say that can only be said visually, and writing about it can be a challenge. Most of us communicate with words primarily in speaking rather than writing, and we generally speak easily and intuitively without having to consciously "compose" what we say. Sitting down to write, we start thinking of composition, sentence structure, and grammar, second-guessing ourselves, often becoming overly self-conscious about our choice of words.

To some people, it seems pretentious or self-important to write about one's self or one's work as an artist. If that's true, get over it. You can be proud, confident, and outspoken about your work without being cocky and arrogant. When you show your work in a gallery or other exhibition/sales venue and an interested viewer asks you about technique or your sources of inspiration, it lends greater validity to your efforts. In a gallery or craft show setting, most artists are pleased to talk about their work and answer questions. Aside from the challenges mentioned above, why should it be different in a written statement? An artist's statement provides answers to some of the viewer/user's common questions. As emerging artists/craftspeople, you must believe in yourself and your work. An effective and honest artist's statement is good evidence of your confidence and commitment.

Non-artists often do not understand artists. That's part of the reason we write artist's statements. But artists often do not understand themselves. For many of us, our sources of inspiration and the reasons we make art remain something of a mystery. You don't have to understand those things to make good art, and in fact the mystery of artistic creativity is often a very important part of how artists work. If this is true about the way you work, then that's what you write about – working from intuition and subconscious drive without questioning the reasons. Don't feel compelled to reveal things that are best kept a mystery.

Explain your work, but don't over-explain it. You are under no obligation to fully explain concept and meaning, other than general discussions of your sources of information and the subjects you address. Avoid explanation that unnecessarily defines or directs the viewer's experience and interpretation, as explained below. In other words, don't explain your work to the point where you leave no room for individual interpretation. Talk about the concepts and ideas that drive you or are addressed in the work, but try to avoid definitively stating what it IS about.

General Guidelines for All Artist's Statements

- **Write in the first person**, using the present tense except where the past tense is required.
- **Write in your own words**. Don't try to reinvent yourself as the artist you want to be. Keep it honest - a true reflection of who you really are as a person and an artist.
- **Always keep it under one page**, and preferable just a few paragraphs. Err on the side of short rather than long, but don't make it so short as to seem flippant and shallow.
- **An artist's statement should always be printed on plain paper** with no decorative borders, images, "script" fonts, or other aesthetic design elements. Don't make it compete with the artwork.
- **An artist's statement is usually more about the artist than the artwork**, and addresses the artist's reasons and context for artistic creation.
- **Use the dictionary and thesaurus**. Don't use a word unless you are sure of its meaning in the particular context, and don't ever use a complicated word when a simpler one will suffice.
- **Consider the quality of prose in your writing**. Don't let that interfere with meaning, but try to write with a cadence and tone appropriate to your work.

- **Remember that most people have short attention spans.** Don't drown the reader in detail. Make your statement only as long and complex as it needs to be, but at the same time, don't simplify the substance out of it. As in design, an excess of complexity can be chaotic and confusing, while oversimplification can seem boring and vacuous. Consider what the viewer will think if you don't have much to say about your own work.

Subjects Most Often Addressed in an Artist's Statement

- **The materials and the specialized processes and techniques used in the work.** Avoid unnecessary use of technological jargon, but do include it when it is relevant, with proper explanation of meaning. Don't go into too much detail, but be specific. Especially in craft, the love of materials and process is often a key motivation for the artist, and viewers/users are often fascinated by this information.
- **Why you make art/craft,** possibly including specific and pertinent aspects of your background that caused you to become an artist/craftsperson.
- **Why this kind of work is important to you.** Why this medium? Why this style?
- **Your influences or sources of inspiration,** possibly including a bit of family history, a defining personal experience, a psychological or emotional state, a historical or cultural situation, a particular place or environment, individual or groups of historical or contemporary artists/craftspeople, a particular movement, concept, or direction in art/craft/design, a particular style of form or surface design, a specific traditional process or technique, or a particular functional use, such as pots for the table, garden sculpture, or decorative vases.

Subjects that Can Be Addressed in an Artist's Statement

- **Discussion of specific content and meaning.** Explain the specific concept or meaning of your work only if you insist on it being unmistakable. In some cases, such an explanation will not diminish the viewer's appreciation and may well enhance it, especially in fine craft. For example, if you make tableware designed with utility and ergonomics as primary considerations, it would be appropriate to make that very clear, perhaps by saying "Upon seeing my pots, I want the viewer to clearly understand how they work and to anticipate their use." On the other hand, if you make work with complex concept and/or narrative, revealing exactly what you want the viewer to "get" from the work pretty much curtails individual interpretation and denies much potential experiential impact. Don't underestimate the viewer's ability to come up with an interpretation more powerful and personal than your own. Don't deny them that possibility unless the act of communicating specific content and meaning is a higher priority than maximizing the viewer's experiential response to your work.
- **Discussion of very personal and/or intimate experiences or circumstances** can be included if they really drive your work, but must be addressed carefully. Otherwise you risk alienating the viewer with "too much information" before they have a chance to take your work seriously.
- **Quotes from artists or writers that are pertinent and offer clarity or insight** can be included as long as they are not directly about you or your work. From a marketing point of view, appropriate quotes often carry special cachet.

Subjects That Do Not Belong in an Artist's Statement

- **Itemization of honors or awards** - these belong in a resume. Don't try to impress people - it will have the opposite effect.
- **Education or professional experience** - same as above, unless they are specific to particular narrative content and direction in your work.
- **Self-review or critique of your work, or declarations of your level of expertise or experience.** These always come across as self-absorbed and arrogant. Don't put yourself on a pedestal, and don't compare your work to that of other artist's/craftspeople.
- **Language that implies how the viewer should respond to your work.** That leaves no option but to either agree with you or dismiss your work.
- **Marketing or pricing information.**
- **Quotes/testimonials from other people about you and/or your work.** Unless specific to a particular narrative, they come across as pretentious name-dropping, and/or they make you seem desperate for approval.

How to Go About Writing an Artist's Statement

- **Start keeping lists of specialized words, phrases, quotes, and sentences** that connect with or describe your work, including anything referring to concept, content, process, technique, materials, inspirations, influences, etc. Trust your intuition – write down whatever comes to mind, even if your rational mind questions it. Try to let this be a very loose stream-of-consciousness process. Any time you are unsure of a word, look it up in the dictionary. Consult the thesaurus and add other appropriate words you find. Once you have accumulated a big collection, start categorizing them. Through this process, out of disorder will come order, and out of chaos will come clarity.
- **List sources and inspirations.** Think of everything that catalyzes creativity or provides content/concept for your work – every source of information or sensory input that inspires and steers your work. What makes you want to create the work you are doing? What pulls you into the studio? Experiment with simple sentences explaining your sources and inspirations.
- **All work has meaning** (narrative content). For your own clarity, write simple sentences that explain what your work means, literally and figuratively, and what message or content you want to viewer to get from your work. This probably will not end up in your statement, but the act of writing about it can be very useful personally, and will help to define what you do want to include.
- **List the important materials, processes, and techniques used in your work.** Create simple sentences explaining their use as pertaining to your work. Don't discuss the ones that are obvious or irrelevant. Focus on ones that are innovative or especially interesting.
- **Start stringing words and sentences together in coherent, organized paragraphs,** and whenever appropriate, include the specialized words, phrases, and sentences you have collected as long as they enhance reading and clarify understanding.
- **As a general organizational guide, start with a brief overall description of what you do** – the type, form, media, and size of your work. In the next paragraph, talk about key sources of inspiration and the reasons why you make art/craft. Next, in generalized terms, you may wish to say a bit about content and meaning – what you are trying to communicate through your

work, but remember the caveat above – don't fully explain this unless you want it unmistakable. Finally – the nuts and bolts – a brief description of material, process, and technique.

- ***As your statement takes shape, have other people read it and evaluate it for clarity and meaning.*** Include non-artists and people unfamiliar with your work. If multiple readers ask for clarification on some aspect of the statement, it obviously needs work. When people who know you read the statement, ask if it sounds like you. Remember, it must be written in your own voice.
- ***Update your statement frequently,*** so that it remains current with your work.