



Your Artist Statement: Explaining the Unexplainable

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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:

- * Artists are artists, not writers, so think seriously about hiring a professional writer or editor, preferably one with an art background, to help you convey what you want your statement to convey in language that ordinary everyday people can understand.
- * 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.
- * Avoid comparative or evaluative comments that have been made about your art by third parties such as gallery owners, critics, collectors, or curators. These belong in your curriculum vitae. In your statement, they're name-dropping; in your curriculum vitae, they're testimonials.
- * 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.
- * Avoid obscure references to music, art, literature, history, or anything else that requires detailed explanation or gobs of previous knowledge. 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, do 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, 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.

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 get it, that 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. If you need help, find someone who writes or edits and have them fix the problem. Many times, a little rearranging is all that's necessary to make your statement a clean clear read.

No matter how good your statement is, know up front that most people will read it and move on; only a few will want to know more, fewer yet will want to know everything, and fewer yet will ultimately progress to the point where they actually buy something. That's simply the nature of art and personal taste. Having said that, never underestimate the power of an effective statement to intensify, enhance and advance how people experience your art.

Writing Your Artist Statement, By Ariane Goodwin, Ed.D.

An artist statement is an essential part of a good portfolio. Gallery owners respect the professionalism of a good statement. A good statement allows people who love your work to find out more about you, offers your audience more ways to connect with you, and increases their appreciation and perceived value of your work. Equally important, an artist statement gives you the opportunity to see what you do through the eyes of language, to validate your creations from a new perspective. However, artists attempting to write their statements are faced with the daunting problem of coherently organizing all those words!

Words are a completely different experience from the tactile world of art making. Paper and paint inhabit the world of our senses, while words remain the detached curios of our minds. Once in a while, when the two worlds connect and words entice our senses, we love it.

So what stops us from using words to describe our art, the same words that have been with us since we could walk? Why are we so suspicious of language, one of our fundamental connections to being human?

The answer, in part, relates to a fatal combination of art critics and education. Art critics use language as scepters of judgment; if their words determine our self-worth, then by all means, kill the messenger. Formal education uses language as a means of control; we are taught when, where and how we can or cannot use which words, and, consequently, we grow to mistrust our relationship to language. The mistrust smolders underground, mostly unnoticed, until our words are thrust into containers, like the artist statement. Suddenly, words make us visible targets for judgment and criticism.

An opportunity to write an artist statement often causes us to second guess every idea we ever had about our work. We convince ourselves that we have nothing to say, or certainly nothing to say of value. Our first instinct is to either turn off the light and head out of the studio or pump ourselves up to overwrite. But running away confirms our fears that there must be something to run away from. And pumping up encourages us to use flimsy or pretentious words to smooth over our mistrust of language. This, in turn, fuels our perception that language cannot adequately describe our art.

Luckily, you have an alternative to giving up on your statement before you start. Instead, pretend that

you have a lot to say that is neither self-important nor trivial, but is rather relevant, revealing, and wonderful. Imagine that all of your objections to writing have been overcome and you are simply going to write whatever you believe to be true, at the moment, about your work. The good news is that by letting yourself go, you can discover and create a working artist statement.

There is an unselfconscious language about your work which you use all the time. Every time you talk or think about your work, you experience a relationship between words and your art. The trick is to learn how to catch yourself doing this, and then faithfully write it down.

A Few Tips For Getting Started:

Treat your artist statement with the same care that you treat your art. It's all about you.

Use a notebook that is lovely or practical and keep it with you at all times-- in the studio, in the car, beside your bed.

Find and use a writing pen or pencil that flows smoothly across the surface.

Take a few weeks to jot down any fleeting thoughts that come to you about your work. Give yourself permission to gather. Selecting and sorting can come later when you have enough in your basket.

Make specific times and dates with yourself to transform your notes and write your statement. Respect these times. Do not tolerate interruptions.

Prepare your internal space. Close your eyes and conjure up your worst critic. In your mind's eye, lead this person out of the room. Give them another task, besides breathing over your shoulder, say, climbing a tree, or skipping stones, or going to the local library. Tell your critic not to come back until you are ready. Critics are terrified of being abandoned, that's why they are so tenacious, so reassure yours that there will be a place set just for them at the editing and revision table. Critics are also stubborn. You may have to do this more than once.

Write more than one statement. Like different works of art, an artist statement also thrives on change and rising out of "the moment." What suits this month's work may not work for next month's work.

Give yourself permission to make mistakes. Let yourself write badly. Crumple up lots of paper balls and throw them in a corner. That's the beginner's way. Then, when your statement comes out great, which it eventually will, you will know the difference.

Ariane Goodwin, Ed.D. is an Artist Career Coach and writer. Her website is www.Artist-Statement.com

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Keep Your Artist Statement Short and Clear

Q: I give a resume, several photographs and an artist's statement to anyone who asks about my art. Several collectors have told me that my statement is a little hard to understand and that maybe I should simplify it a bit. My response is that it accurately represents what I do and, although I never say this, the ones who make these comments don't usually know that much about art. Any suggestions?

A: Clarify your statement. Anyone who asks about your art is a potential buyer and when they ask, you should do everything in your power to answer their questions. The fact that some collectors have difficulty understanding you could very well mean that a lot more have similar experiences, but just don't say anything. After all, most people keep contrary opinions to themselves.

Think of collectors who comment as trying to help you rather than as not knowing enough about art. Many artists spend so much time around other artists and art people that they're often out of touch with what average buyers do or do not know. Artist statements that are peppered with art jargon or artspeak may sound great and make perfect sense to insiders, but mean little or nothing to everyone else. If you get too complicated for average buyers to understand, you can end up losing sales.

Let people enjoy your art, draw their own conclusions, and learn about it comfortably. Keep your statement and other introductory materials clear and to the point. You want to hold readers' attention without being intimidating. The longer they spend looking at your art, and the better they understand your statement, the greater your chances of making sales.

If you decide to rework or simplify your current statement, ask collectors where they get confused and how they think you can better explain yourself. You don't have to do every single thing everyone says, but if you ask enough people, the types of changes you need to make will become clear. Pay special attention those few brave folks who come forward and voluntarily share their feelings with you. They probably have the most well thought out suggestions of anyone.

Several additional pointers:

- * Be brief. Two or three paragraphs of no more than three sentences each is a good length for an introductory statement.
- * Tell why you create your art and what it means to you.
- * Appeal to the emotions. Convey feeling about your art.
- * Avoid complex explanations, obscure references, and artspeak.
- * Try not to categorize your work or compare yourself to others.
- * Use language that everyone can understand.

Sample Artist Statement

The following artist statement examples are provided as samples you can emulate. Don't copy them, but use them as inspiration to sculpt your own statement using ideas and words.

Jonathan H. Dough - Artist Statement

My artwork takes a critical view of social, political and cultural issues. In my work, I deconstruct the American dream, fairy tales, nursery rhymes, and lullabies that are part of our childhood and adult culture. Having engaged subjects as diverse as the civil rights movement, southern rock music and modernist architecture, my work reproduces familiar visual signs, arranging them into new conceptually layered pieces.

Often times these themes are combined into installations that feature mundane domestic objects painted blue, juxtaposed with whimsical objects, and often embellished with stenciled text. The color blue establishes a dream-like surreal quality, suggests notions of calmness and safety, and formally unifies the disparate objects in each installation. The texts provide clues to content and interpretation.

While I use a variety of materials and processes in each project my methodology is consistent. Although there may not always be material similarities between the different projects they are linked by recurring formal concerns and through the subject matter. The subject matter of each body of work determines the materials and the forms of the work.

Each project often consists of multiple works, often in a range of different media, grouped around specific themes and meanings. During research and production new areas of interest arise and lead to the next body of work.

Millie Wilson - Artist Statement

I think of my installations as unfinished inventories of fragments: objects, drawings, paintings, photographs, and other inventions. They are improvisational sites in which the constructed and the ready-made are used to question our making of the world through language and knowledge. My arrangements are schematic, inviting the viewer to move into a space of speculation. I rely on our desires for beauty, poetics and seduction.

The work thus far has used the frame of the museum to propose a secret history of modernity, and in the process, point to stereotypes of difference, which are hidden in plain sight. I have found the histories of surrealism and minimalism to be useful in the rearranging of received ideas. The objects I make are placed in the canon of modernist art, in hopes of making visible what is overlooked in the historicizing of the artist. This project has always been grounded in pleasure and aesthetics.

Molly Gordon - Artist Statement

Knitting is my key to the secret garden, my way down the rabbit hole, my looking glass.

Hand knitting started it. From the beginning the process of transforming string into cloth has struck me as magical. And, over the years, that magical process has had its way with me, leading me from hobby to art. Knitting fills me with a sense of accomplishment and integrity, and has proven a most amenable vehicle for translating inner vision to outer reality.

I knit from the inside out. Though I work quite deliberately, consciously employing both traditional and innovative techniques, my unconscious is the undisputed project manager.

The concrete, repetitive nature of this work frees my imagination and provides many opportunities for happy accident and grace to influence the finished product.

Recently I discovered some childhood drawings: simple, crayoned patchworks that resonate deeply with my fiber work. Inspired and invigorated by a renewed sense of continuity, and awed by the mystery of how creation occurs, I am now knitting richly varied fabrics exploring many patterns, textures and colors. Once knit, the fabrics are pieced to form an always new patchwork from which I make my garments and accessories.

Martin Langford - Artist Statement

I don't set out to produce art about one subject or another. I'm never without a sketchbook to hand so I am constantly drawing and sometimes the drawings are left in the sketchbook and other times they develop into more in-depth ideas and detailed images.

I didn't set out to be an environmental artist or to create artwork relating to social commentary but as my portfolio developed and people started to review my work, the descriptions started to emerge and I began to notice a pattern I hadn't intended but am now please with.

My work tends to focus on the environment, the evolution of man and his material wealth, the

development of bigger and bigger cities, more and more people, cars and industry on the planet and the consequences this has on nature. Some reviews have labeled my work as 'black humour' but I always try to depict a positive message too - the persistence of nature in recapturing what once belonged to the earth.

At school, the only class I really paid any attention in was art. I simply wasn't interested in anything else and I think my obsession with depicting the monotony of the work place and work force started there...

Some of my subject matter is about people's daily routines and a comment on human nature. And since I've always been a fan of mafia films - a new strand of work seems to have emerged depicting a very 'human' and 'school playground' side to mob life.

None of it was intentional - it all developed and evolved over time. People always ask for my artist statement so I needed to do one but I've never liked to explain a certain piece of work - if you've made a picture and that's how you wanted it to be - hopefully it can speak for itself and whatever it says to the viewer - it's the right message because there isn't a wrong and a right message. Each person takes something a little different from the same picture and I'm happy with that.

Influences

My influences are first and foremost everything I see, feel and experience, but I've always loved comic books particularly work by Harvey Pekar and Robert Crumb. I love architecture particularly Art Deco. The artists I most admire are John Martin, a mezzotint artist from the 1800's, Winsor McCay a cartoonist and animator who created Little Nemo, Escher and Lyonel Feininger creator of Kinder Kids. I grew up watching films such as Metropolis, Flash Gordon, Star Wars and Brazil.

We hope this helps you.
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