

Artist Statements: A Quick Guide

Your artist statement is a written description of your work that gives your audience deeper insight into it. It may include your personal history, the symbolism you give your materials, or the issues you address; Your statement should include whatever is most important to you and your work.

Your artist statement supplements the visual information in your portfolio. Other uses include the following: helping dealers and other arts professionals talk about and sell your work; providing background information for writers of articles, reviews, and catalogues; functioning as the basis for cover letters and grant proposals.

What a Statement covers:

- Your work's purpose or philosophy
- Your methods and materials

Dos:

- Keep it short, coherent and clear - No more than 1 page, double spaced.
- Write in simple sentences using simple words
- Focus on topics not apparent from viewing your slides, such as symbols or metaphors, themes and issues underlying your work, materials, scale, etc.
- Proofread your statement for misspelled words, bad grammar, or confusing content.
- Rewrite your statement every time you complete a new body of work.

Don'ts:

- Imitate the theoretical or intellectualized style of writing used in critical art magazines.
- Try to impress the reader by your extensive knowledge of art criticism or art history. You want to impress them with your art.
- Never use weak phrases that reflect insecurities like "I am hoping to," "I am trying to," or "I would like to."

Source: NY Foundation for the Arts, by Matthew Deleget, NYFA Quarterly, Summer 1999

Developing Your Artists Statement

An artist statement is never finished for long. Like your resume, it will be revised frequently, as your work changes and as you find new ways of expressing what you are doing. So get good at writing them!

Three Types of Artists Statements

One-page:

- Artist statements are rarely longer than one page, double spaced. More information than that is usually not necessary and will probably not be read.
- It can address a large body of work, or work in different media all concerning the same ideas.
- This longer statement will accompany an exhibition or performance of your work.
- Can be included in a portfolio or grant application.
- Used as a reference for: promoting, describing, selling, writing about your work by gallerists, curators, publicists, critics, journalists etc.

One or two paragraph statement:

- No longer than half a page.
- Addresses the most pertinent information about the work, a particular series or media.
- Can be incorporated into the heading of a slide description sheet, which accompanies a portfolio, grant application, etc.
- Can be the lead-in to a longer *project* description.

25 word statement:

- This statement contains the central idea of your work to catch the reader/listeners' attention.
- Can be inserted into correspondence: cover letters, letters of intent, artist biography.
- Memorize it. Be prepared to deliver it anytime. For example when asked "What do you do?" when meeting someone for the first time, at social occasions, openings, on the elevator. Think of it as a verbal business card.

A good artist statement supplements the visual information in a portfolio or an exhibition so that the reader/viewer can better understand it.

Compose your statement with a sympathetic friend in mind, one who is genuinely interested in your work and who wants understand it. To get started writing your statement, try describing one or two recent works. What do you want the reader to know about them?

Your statement should stand on its own. Your reader should be able to imagine what your work looks like-even if they haven't seen it. Make people want to see your work!

Some Do's and Don'ts:

- DO write a strong, compelling statement without art jargon.
- DO develop a strong first sentence. Explain clearly and precisely why you make art, what it means to you and what materials you use. Tell a story about something that moved you into making a specific body of work. Draw the reader into your world.
- DO keep it as short as possible. No more than one typed page, double spaced, even less is better. It is an introduction and a supplement to the visual information, not your life story.
- DO focus on topics that may not be apparent from viewing your slides, such as, influences in your work: themes and issues. The techniques, materials used, or scale of the work can also be important information to include.
- DON'T imitate the writing often used in art magazines. Avoid artspeak and pretentious language. *If your statement is difficult to read, it will NOT be read.*
- DON'T try to impress the reader with your extensive knowledge of art criticism or vocabulary.
- DON'T announce what you are attempting to do, just clearly express what you have accomplished.

Source: Adapted from Jackie Battenfield's, "Artist in the Marketplace Program, The Bronx Museum of the Arts, 2003

Samples of Successful & Not So Successful Artist Statements:

Example #1: less successful

T.S. Eliot spoke of how the present shapes the past as much as the past affects the present. These paintings aspire to blur the distinction between the two and enter into a free-flowing dialogue between my present and my past. They ask fundamental questions as to the nature of time, the nature of change, and the meaning of invention. The ambition, which inspires their making, is to step outside of the linear, chronological unfolding of events and celebrate the eternal present that is the time art shapes.

Evaluation: This statement, although poetic does not really address any specific aspects of the body of work. The reader is given very little information. Try to avoid using words like "aspire" along with "hope" "attempt". They are weak and may reflect insecure feelings on your part. Try to use more active and strong phrases. Notice how much more active and stronger the phrase is without the word "aspire": "*These paintings blur the distinction between...* "

Example #2: less successful

"The body, however, consists of an indefinite multiplicity of parts and arbitrary manifestations which are subjected to movement and divided into substances, moments, and details."

- Marsilio Ficino from *About Love or Platon's Feast*

The works deal with a fragmentary corporeality which seeks its stimulation in the natural sciences, such as botany and neurology. The drawings construct and illustrate an intellectual model of deconstruction of corporeality and the search for unity. The central question here is the sense of time. Do different time levels exist parallel to each other? Does the unity of the individual exist in time, which is characterized by acceleration, rotation, and speed? The drawings reflect an internal world view which revolves around fragment, unity, and rupture. The simple pencil drawings are made on former construction plans, on the reverse sides are old sketches of pattern designs. The structure of the folds and the paper collage further emphasizes this vision.

Evaluation: This statement doesn't service the visual work either. It is full of important sounding words, but what do they mean? What is an "*intellectual model of deconstruction of corporeality?*" It is a statement that is difficult to read, so it won't get read. It has not provided much help in allowing the viewer to have a fuller understanding of the art. Prefacing the artist statement with this quote further obscures the artist's intentions without providing any real information.

Example #3: successful

I began using a typewriter for its obvious function - to record my thoughts and ideas. Communicating is a crucial yet constant struggle for me. The more I typed, the more the letters and words on the pages began to take on a new function, a new language. My discovery of this new language created with my typewriter and paper was one made up of patterns and grids formed by punctuation marks: commas, colons, apostrophes, and brackets. It was as if the typewriter was experiencing a breakdown, and this breakdown was my breakthrough. I had discovered a new way to communicate. There is an endless source of information that can be created through a limited use of materials: paper and a typewriter. I became, and am still, intrigued by this process.

Evaluation: This is a good statement. It is precisely written and fun to read. The sentences are strong and simple. It answers the kinds of questions that arise when viewing the work, in this case, how are these marks being made and why while providing supportive information about the artist's process and thinking.

Getting Started Writing An Artist Statement

BRAINSTORM: 10 MINUTE WRITING EXERCISES

1. Describe your work: Describe one work of yours that is currently in your studio. Do it quickly. Don't worry about grammar, jargon, or finding the right word. There is no format to this, no structure. Just get down on paper everything that comes to mind about the piece.

Some questions to get you started:

- What does it look like? (size, colors, shapes, textures, light, objects, relationships, etc.) Make your description visual.
- What inspired the piece? Where does the work come from in *you*?
- Talk about the work from a conceptual, thematic, and/or emotional point of view.
- Is there a central or guiding image or idea?
- What are its different elements and how do they affect each other or interact?
- What kind of materials did you use/are you using to create the work? Why?
- What was the process of development for the work?
- How does the work use space and relate to the surrounding space? What would be the ideal space in which to exhibit or present this work?
- How does this work fit into the overall flow of your development as an artist?
- Where does it fit into or relate to your awareness of other contemporary work?

Source: Based on The Field: "20 Questions to Get You Writing." The Field is a New York City-based dance service organization.

2. Identify yourself: Use these questions to articulate who you are as an artist, what is special about you, and where you fit into the big picture.

- What words would you use to describe your work as an artist?
- What sources guide or influence your work? Physical, intellectual, emotional, conceptual?
- What materials do you enjoy working with? Hate? Why? What would you be interested in exploring that you haven't tried yet?
- Whose work or what work do you admire? Why?
- What work/styles/modes do you dislike? Hate? Wish to challenge? Why?
- Who do you compare yourself to? What kind of comparisons do you draw?
- Who do you think your work is for? Who you would like to reach with it or who you would most want to see it?
- What critics do you read? Why?
- What else do you read, see, listen to, and follow outside your discipline? Poetry? Philosophy? Science? History? Politics? Film? Music?
- How would you describe your background, and how has it influenced you? Where do you come from? Community, geography, ethnicity, family, peers, mentors?

3. Describe your studio: Write a one-page description of your studio or workspace. Do it quickly, and don't worry about grammar or the right word. There is no format to this, no structure...paragraph, notes, or even a list format is fine.

- What does it look like? Size, colors, shapes, textures, objects, relationships, light? Make it visual.
- What identifies it as uniquely yours, or distinct from some other studio?
- How do you relate to it? Order, arrangements, processes, methods, equipment, materials? Habits?
- What are you working on? What kind of work do you have in it at present?

4. Describe your process: Write a one-page description of the process you use to create your work. Do it quickly, and don't worry about grammar or finding the right word. There is no format to this, no structure. Just get down on paper every single thing you can remember about how your work is created. Think in concrete terms: influences; physical qualities; and emotion.

- What materials, elements, surfaces, processes, methods, equipment do you use? Why?
- Where does your inspiration come from?
- Where does the impetus for a piece come from in you, personally speaking?
- What concerns guide you in the execution? Are they visual? physical/sensory/sensual? thematic? emotional?
- What moves you to work?
- What is your favorite part of the process?

Putting it all Together: DON'T PANIC! If writing is torture, GET SOME HELP!

- Tongue tied? Invite a friend to the studio to discuss your work. Tape-record the conversation and listen to it later. You can also take notes, but often the best phrases get lost in the heat of the moment. Make a note of what kind of questions come up during these sessions. Is there a pattern? If there is, use it in your statement.
- Have several friends who know your work -- especially non-artists -- read your artist statement and respond. They may have good points to add. They may catch phrases that don't seem to make sense. Your non-artist friends will be best at helping you catch the jargon and 'artspeak' which you may want to rewrite.
- Ask a professional writer to proofread your written materials to check for errors. Ask someone merciless to help you delete repetitive or extraneous phrases and straighten out long sentences.

REMEMBER: Keep your statement coherent and to the point to retain reader interest!

Artist Statement exercises adapted from Virginia Commonwealth University Senior Seminar materials, and NYFA's Full Time Artist MFA Curriculum, 2003.

Tips on Writing a Bio

- Your 'bio' is a short biography that tells-who you are and what you do. It is basically your resume in paragraph form. Your bio will also give a little bit of history and background as relevant: where you are from, what your education and/or training has been, where your work has been presented, and what awards and honors you have received.
- A bio will usually be necessary in any publication, print or online, that accompanies your work. Bios appear on artists' websites, in artists' catalogues for exhibitions, in programs for performances, and in press packets.
- Write in the third person; you will refer to yourself by your full name. Rather than speaking as 'I' you will write about yourself as he or she.
- Bios should be short, less than a page, but you will probably need more than one: a very short one -- 2 or 3 sentences, and a longer one - 1 or 2 paragraphs.
- You may need different bios for different professional activities. A choreographer who teaches dance in public schools and plays drums in a rock band might need three different bios. Each will mention something about your other profession!
- You will need to revise and update your bio once or twice a year!

Sample of LONG Bio:

Amy Barkow was born in Great Falls, Montana. After completing her MFA from Hunter College in 2002, she had her first solo exhibition at New Jersey City University. She has worked in New York City as an architectural photographer since 2000, an occupation that has influenced her photography and sculpture.

Her work has been exhibited worldwide. She has received support from the Santa Fe Art Institute, Times Square Business Improvement District/Times Square Alliance, The Artists' Museum in Lodz, American Institute of Architects and the Golden Seed International Art Residency, Mt. Abu India. She has been a visiting critic at SUNY New Paltz, New Jersey City University, and the Montana State University School of Architecture, and worked as an art educator for the Joan Mitchell Foundation.

She is presently completing a series of photographs combining portraits with commercial logos for Branded and on Display, a traveling group exhibition opening at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. She lives and works in New York City.

Sample of SHORT Bio:

Amy Barkow was born in Great Falls, Montana. Her work as an architectural photographer influences her photography and sculpture. She has exhibited her work worldwide, and has received support from the Santa Fe Art Institute, Times Square Business Improvement District/Times Square Alliance, American Institute of Architects, among other institutions. Her work is visible at www.barkowphoto.com.

WORKSHEET to get you started writing a Bio:

Name:

Current Activity/Profession:

Place/Country Of Origin:

Training/Schooling (including informal training from apprenticeship, family instruction or self-taught):

Other Experiences That Led You To Your Current Profession (Was there A moment when you discovered or realized you were an artist?):

Exhibits/Performances/Publications:

Awards/Grants/Fellowships/Residencies:

Other Activities/Employment:

Place of Residence: