

Artist Statements: The Basics

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What is an Artist Statement?

An artist statement is a general introduction of your work as a professional artist. The purpose of an artist statement is to summarize your work, either in general or for specific pieces. It is an opportunity to tell the audience about the meaning behind the work, the materials used, and the issues addressed by your work. You are not telling the viewer how to react or what to think about your work. It is a basic introduction to why you do what you do. It is the what, how, and why of your work, from your own perspective. Generally, it is written in the first person and can be anywhere from a paragraph to a few pages.

Who Needs an Artist Statement? Why?

An artist statement lets you convey the reasoning behind your work-- why you chose a particular subject matter, why you work in a certain medium or genre, etc. A well-written statement shows the relationship of you to your artwork, and helps create a connection with the viewer that will make your work (and your name) more memorable.

Artist statements can:

- ◆ Clarify your own ideas about your work.
- ◆ Describe your work, in your own words.
- ◆ Prepare you to talk about your work in both formal and informal settings.
- ◆ Be a base for a proposal for an exhibition or project.
- ◆ Help when responding to calls for submission of artwork.
- ◆ Be a base for press releases when promoting gallery shows, publications, fashion events, and art exhibitions.
- ◆ Fill a requirement for scholarships, grants/funding, teaching positions, or admission to school.
- ◆ Help in admittance to artists retreats, conferences, or artist in residency positions.
- ◆ Be a good source of info for art reviewers, journalists, reporters, and other interested parties.
- ◆ Introduce your work to the buying public.
- ◆ Be utilized as text to set up your online portfolio or website.

Any professional artist that wishes to gain funding opportunities, attend professional events, show their work in highly competitive markets, or work in academia should write an artist statement and keep it current. You can change your artist statement as often as you like, catering it to the work, the location of the exhibition, or the foundation offering funds.

Artist Statement Content

The artist's statement can be a moving testament to your creativity and integrity. It should be about you, not about the viewer. It should explain what you think about your work, not about how the viewer should interpret it. It should be for a wide range of people. The artist is neither speaking down to someone who is uneducated with fine art, nor talking up to the audience to impress them.

The artist should explain why they create art--their motivation, subject matter, or inspiration. In addition, they could discuss any artistic or personal influences. The statement should explain to the reader how the art is made. This can be a short sentence or two about the artistic process, describing any special techniques used in producing this art. This should not get technical or provide a systematic guide on how to create art. If there are any unusual materials used, that can be mentioned too.

Overall, this is a personal statement of the meaning of the art for the artist. This may be the most difficult thing for the artist to write about, as it will reveal something personal. Remember that attention spans are quite short--if the statement is too long, too complicated, or poorly written people will not read it. Avoid complicated words when possible.

Content Tips

- ◆ Read your statement aloud. Listen to the way the sounds and rhythms seem to invite pauses. Notice places where you would like the sound or rhythm to be different. 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 are not 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.
- ◆ Save all the notes and drafts that you have made. You may need them in the future.
- ◆ Revise your artist's statement to reflect changes in your work. If you tackle new subjects, update your statement to reflect your growth. Keep the artist statement up to date.
- ◆ Most artists only have one statement that they update every few months or as their work changes. You might have multiple bodies of work that require different statements, especially if you work in different mediums.
- ◆ Be specific. For example, if your art is "inspired by assessments of the fundamentals of the natural world," tell which fundamentals you are assessing and how they inspire you.
- ◆ 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 do not, or you have to explain yourself, do a rewrite and eliminate the confusion.

- ◆ Proofread your statement for grammar, spelling, clarity, and interest. Find someone who writes or edits if you need help.
- ◆ Keep your statement on topic and to the point.
- ◆ Use common, everyday language. If you must use technical terms, make sure you explain them.
- ◆ Write in the first person perspective
- ◆ No longer than necessary, single-spaced, using 10 to 12 point type.
- ◆ Your artist statement is a personal creed. Strive for authenticity.
- ◆ Never underestimate the power of an effective statement to intensify, enhance, and advance how people experience your art.

Things to Avoid

- ◆ Arrogance and pomposity (how great or relevant you are)
- ◆ Grandiose expressions
- ◆ Clichés
- ◆ Overuse of technical terms and jargon
- ◆ Long explanations or discourses on techniques and materials
- ◆ Poems or prosy writing
- ◆ Childhood or family stories, unless they are very relevant to your work
- ◆ Bragging about awards and honors
- ◆ Marketing speak
- ◆ Using “I” and “me” overly throughout the statement.
- ◆ Saying “I want to...” or “I am trying to...” Be precise.
- ◆ Fancy fonts
- ◆ Design layouts
- ◆ Specialized paper or card stock
- ◆ Creating a biography. Do not get that mixed in with the artist statement.
- ◆ Wordiness. Be concise.
- ◆ Cheesy gimmicks
- ◆ Misspellings
- ◆ Grammar mistakes
- ◆ Obscure references to music, art, literature, history, film, or anything else
- ◆ Tense changes. Write in present tense.
- ◆ Outdated or irrelevant information
- ◆ Vagueness

Building an Artist Statement

1. Brainstorming and Raw Materials

Answer as simply as you can. No editing—just write or record what comes to mind.

- ◆ To start, look back at all the work you have produced in the past few years; identify what themes or ideas are repeated over and over in your work. What things have family, friends, fellow artists, and faculty mentioned about ideas or themes they see in your work? Finding repeated concepts is a good indicator of what is important to you and what you are trying to explore through your art.
- ◆ Why did you choose your particular subject matter or imagery? You can mention influences (artistic or otherwise), inspirations, and past experiences that led you to your subject.
- ◆ Think about what new ideas are represented in your current work as well. What is different about your newest work from your older work? How have you grown and matured as a result of exploring certain themes in your work?
- ◆ Most viewers will want to know something about your materials or your process, especially if they are unusual. It's not necessary to write a step-by-step guide to the watercolor process, or list every chemical that you used to process your photographs. You might just mention that you use watercolors and that you were drawn to them for their unpredictable nature and their transparency. Or you could briefly describe the process used to create cyanotypes and what made you love it.
- ◆ Take a few minutes and think about why you create. How did you get into your work? How do you start? What do you want your audience to experience?
- ◆ Do your ideals impact the type of work you create? If so, how and why?
- ◆ Is your work focused on social or moral ideas? Is the work political, spiritual, environmental, sustainable, psychological, gendered, erotic, ethnic, race or culturally specific?
- ◆ 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 that connection.
- ◆ How is audience related to your work? Who do you have in mind for this work?
- ◆ 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.
- ◆ Choose two key words from your list. Look them up in a dictionary. Read the definitions, and copy them, thinking about what 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 list?

2. Specific Questions to Answer

- ◆ Why do you create?
- ◆ What do you like best about what you do?
- ◆ What are your favorite things about your work?
- ◆ Why have you created this work? What is its history?
- ◆ What is your favorite genre or medium? Why?
- ◆ Do you ever play with other genres or mediums? Which ones and why?

- ◆ Do you like to begin your work from a grand idea? From a small detail? From a character or person? From a specific place? Why? How does this impact the work process?
- ◆ What do you do differently from the way you were taught? Why?
- ◆ What inspires you?
- ◆ What patterns emerge from your work?
- ◆ What do you mean when you say that a project or a piece has turned out really well?
- ◆ What is your overall vision? What are you trying to say in the work?
- ◆ How does your current work relate to your previous work?
- ◆ What influences your work?
- ◆ What is your inspiration?
- ◆ How does this work fit into a series or larger body of work?
- ◆ What patterns emerge in your work?
- ◆ How you make decisions in the course of your work?
- ◆ How does your work grow out of prior work or life experiences?
- ◆ What are you exploring, attempting, challenging by doing this work?
- ◆ What is your favorite work tool? Why?
- ◆ What is your favorite material? Why?
- ◆ How and why do you select materials, techniques, themes?
- ◆ Is there a pattern in the way you select materials? In the way you use color, texture or light?

3. Creating the First Draft

- ◆ Write at least five sentences about your relationship to your work using as fodder the answers you established in the above exercises. Now start fleshing these out into a draft statement.
- ◆ Begin with an overview paragraph that makes a clear and concise statement about your work, and support that statement with your reasoning. This paragraph should be broad in scope.
- ◆ Next, go into detail about how the issues or ideas mentioned in your opening paragraph are presented in your work (offer a specific example) and why you use the materials and tools that you do.
- ◆ Point out themes in your work or discuss experiences that have influenced your work.