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How to write an artist's statement

Surely, 'How to write an artist's statement' is an oxymoron. The artist's statement is billed as unfettered self-expression, as resistant to formulae as art itself. Some—penned by the likes of Adrian Piper or Robert Smithson—endure among the most exhilarating contemporary art-writings ever, bar none. And yet, searching the phrase '**My art explores...**' will return literally millions of Google hits. Tongue-tied artists can access an online 'instant artist statement' generator, which will produce a 'unique' paragraph of sadly recognizable art-filler, along the lines of:

My work explores the relationship between {gender politics; military-industrial complex; universality of myth/the body} and {copycat violence; postmodern discourse; unwanted gifts; skateboard ethics}. With influences as diverse as {Derrida; Caravaggio; Kierkegaard} and {Miles Davis; Buckminster Fuller; John Lennon}, new {variations; combinations; synergies} are {synthesized; generated; distilled} from both {orderly and random dialogues; explicit and implicit layers; mundane and transcendent dialogues}.¹²¹

My assumption is that you, in contrast, would like to **set aside such templates and produce an inspiring text**, which

- + **attracts interest in your work**—from gallerists, collectors, awarding bodies, admissions officers, university boards; other artists, and more;
- + **reflects your art** and true interests believably back to you;
- + **assists you in your thinking** as you continue making art;

- + **will not make you cringe** and twitch to read it, but sounds like an accurate picture of what you do.

In the pursuit of producing a worthwhile artist's statement, let's examine the hazards of the job. If you can dodge the perils listed below, and apply a few tips from Section Two ('The Practice—How to write about contemporary art', pages TK-TK), your statement will be off to a flying start.

> *The ten most common pitfalls (and how to avoid them)*

1 They all sound alike

Before setting off on '*My art explores...*', take inventory of the countless other options available (or invent your own). **You might begin by reading notable artist's statements—not to copy, or become intimidated, but to identify a tone or slant which appeals.** Have a look at Stiles and Selz's *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings* (2012),¹²² which is pretty comprehensive; or the many artists' website examples. Notice how no two are alike. Smithson's inspirational writings are almost diaristic: about his travels; visionary thoughts of what art could be; and imaginary remaking of the universe, for example. Some are conversational; others almost manifesto-like; others academic. The extracts given in this Section deliberately differ from each other, to show myriad options.

2 They are boring

Usually, the boredom factor is in exact proportion to the degree of imprecision; **smart detail will make your statement stand out and hold interest.** Be specific; your statement should be uniquely applicable to your artwork alone. Avoid overused art metaphors; re-read about concrete nouns and adjectives, and creating images through words (see 'Practical "how-to"s', page TK). Specificity is the distinction between '*I think artists should help the world*' and a statement like Bruce Nauman's (overleaf).

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‘The true artist helps the world by revealing mystic truths.’

BRUCE NAUMAN¹²³

3 They sound phoney

Inexperienced artists can mistakenly believe that their job is to second-guess what readers want to hear. Remember—especially if you’re writing for a gallerist, academic, admissions-officer, fund-operator, collector, or curator—**your reader may have seen hundreds of these**. They have an in-built radar to detect false notes just as they are keenly able to spot an original. Usually, your readers are looking for what *honestly motivates you and keeps you going*.

The words should ring true to you; if when re-reading you think ‘that should fly’ rather than ‘that’s exactly what I’m thinking’, something has gone awry. Readers want to hear the voice of a real person behind the work, and get a sense of what makes this work alive and singular, rather than just defensible.

4 They have nothing to say

Some artists work intuitively, and worry that fixing their thoughts in ink on paper might kill them. Many memorable artists’ statements boil down to tracking the artist’s decisions, such as Marcel Broodthaers’s often quoted statement from 1964, explaining his decision, aged 40, to improvise artistic success.¹²⁴ **Which decision** (whether hard-won, accidental, or bearing unanticipated results) **produced the most meaningful outcome**, for you?

In this example from the journal of Anne Truitt (1929–2004), the late American sculptor gave this anecdotal explanation behind her choice of material:

[...] I thought of making bare, unpainted wooden sculptures for the outdoors. On the National Cathedral grounds in Washington there is a carved wooden bench honed to honey color by weather. It stands under a tree, and so could be a sculpture; this was my thought last spring when I ran my fingers over the pure, bare surface of the bench. I have been thinking about Japanese wood and the heavenly order of humble materials.

I come to the point of using steel, and simply cannot. It’s like the marriage proposal of a perfectly eligible man who just isn’t loveable [1]. It is wood I love.

Source Text 50 ANNE TRUITT, ‘Daybook: The Journal of an Artist, 1974–79’, in *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists’ Writings*, 2012

This statement may seem corny to some, but that final paragraph (see ‘Similes and metaphor’, page TK) about the Mr Right who just turns you off [1] really gets across how Truitt just couldn’t help it: metal left her cold; gorgeous wood set her pulse racing. And it sure beats: *My art explores the beauty of wood and simple Japanese forms, and examines how wood—my favourite material—absorbs the elements*.

5 They read OK, but don’t actually get at the core of the art

Beware of digressive information about cultural context (‘*Women make up 49 % of the workforce but constitute 59% of the low-wage workforce*’); these statistics may have spawned your thinking, but ultimately made little impact on the resulting art. Rather than recount *all* your starting points—some of which may have borne little fruit—trace back to find the

real shifts, even slighter ones. **Which moments changed everything? What were you really excited about as you worked? Edit out the rest.** A good *but very brief* story—if 100% pertinent, and easily told—may be useful here. Sometimes an inspirational quote or statistic can stand outside the body of the text.

6 They are indecipherable

Re-read the section about *not* layering abstractions, and explaining at least in brief *what the art is* before extracting its possible meanings (see ‘Practical “How to”s’, especially points 1–3, page TK). Remember that terms such as *ontology*, *epistemology* and *metaphysics* carry specific technical meaning; use sparingly, and only if essential. **Bringing your ideas round to the media you’ve chosen is a must.** Ground your reader in media or images they can see, in the accompanying work or photograph. You might try techniques suggested elsewhere in this book, such as **identifying a key theme, idea or principle that holds your art together** (see ‘How to write a short descriptive text’, page TK). What really gives you satisfaction in your work—the materials? The technology? The process of making, or hunting for sources? The human relationships that build? Start there.

7 They’re too long

Artists’ statements can vary in length from a Tweet to a full-length dissertation. Find the right length for you, but generally, the shorter the better (about 200 words). Some formats—admissions applications; grant proposals; gallery submissions—stipulate a word count. **If you are uncertain where to edit, usually chop the preamble.** Let your text start only when you really get going.

8 They fail to communicate what the reader wants to know

You might **tailor a basic statement to suit different purposes**: don’t change your art-making, just shift the text’s cut or emphasis. A short catalogue introduction is usually an unregulated open space; a funding application may need to fulfill special criteria, so **read the fine print**. For

gallery submissions, for example, you may need to explain why your art suits the space, perhaps how you envision your work might be installed (with some flexibility, if possible). You may include technical or budget info regarding the feasibility of your show, at least to convince that you are aware of practicalities.

9 They sound megalomaniacal

Avoid sentences that begin, ‘*Like Matisse, I ...*’. Any influences or parallels should be named with razor-sharp precision, and explained. Injecting other people’s praise (‘*My work has been described as magical*’) is unadvisable; outside endorsements are usually irrelevant. An excellent, brief phrase by someone else about your art which *helped you understand it better* might be a worthwhile addition, but remember: **the crux of this exercise is your ability to articulate what you do**. Telling your reader what to think is another no-no; avoid sentences that begin with ‘*You will feel...*’ or ‘*The viewer reacts by...*’. That does not mean to start every sentence with ‘I’, but keep the focus on what *you* do and think, not dictating the reader’s response.

Jennifer Angus explains how her artistic interests intertwine with her personal life:

In my work I combine photography with textiles. I have always been drawn toward patterned surfaces, and particularly textiles in which pattern is inherent. Initially, it was simply visual pleasure that entranced me; years later, through study, I am impressed and fascinated by the language of pattern. It can identify a people, a region from which they come, as well as a person’s age, profession and social status within a society. Using both patterns occurring in nature and from existing textiles, I create a language that informs the photographed subjects which are juxtaposed with backgrounds of pattern.

The photography is my own, with the exception of obvious historical sources. I have traveled extensively in Northern Thailand, the home of my husband's family. He is of the Karen hilltribe who reside along the Thai/Burmese (now Myanmar) border. My work features the people of this tribe and their neighbours primarily. I am interested in the idea of 'The Other', whether it is my husband within my culture or myself within his.

Source Text 51 JENNIFER ANGUS, 'Artist Statement', *The Centre for Contemporary Canadian Art* website, n.d.

You may not see your art and life as being as enmeshed as they are for this artist, but Angus believably communicates her fields of interest, how these relate to her materials and life circumstances, and what continues to motivate her.

10 Artists communicate better in images than in words

Fortunately, the caricature of the artist as divinely inspired but monosyllabic, awaiting the critic/spokesperson to apply fancy words to the art, has gone the way of the smock and the beret. Dan Graham, Mary Kelly, Jimmie Durham: we can all think of notable exceptions, visual artists also blessed with splendid writing talent.

Perhaps you don't fall in that happy category, and writing is a struggle. Try writing out pages in longhand; from that flood of handwritten text extract and develop the moments that feel most promising. Usually you're writing for a curious, empathetic reader who's interested in your art and wants to know more. To help envision this, **imagine you're writing directly to the one person who understands your work best.** Keep the image of her or his encouraging face in your mind's eye as you write. If you prefer talking, try asking your art-loving friend to record an 'interview' with you, the transcript of which can provide the basis of a written statement.

> The unspoken eleventh pitfall

The statement's fine. It's the art I'm worried about. A great statement will not compensate for less-than-riveting art. Your statement should not be subtitled *Great Expectations*; nor should it upstage the art. Ensure the correlation between what others *see* in your art and what they *read* matches up. Write a great statement, then live up to it.

And finally, unless writing is central to your art-making, in general **spend heaps more time creating artwork than writing about it.**

> How to write about a single artwork

An artist's writings about a single artwork can give clues as to what prompted the work's making, as well as underlying themes or processes—and how these might have changed as the work took shape.

Artist and filmmaker Tacita Dean's paragraph below offers **an almost literary introduction** to her film installation about an abandoned (now demolished) 1970s Modernist structure in Berlin, *Palast*:

It is the building that always catches and holds the sun in the grey centre of the city: its **regime-orange reflective glass [1]** mirroring the setting sun perfectly, as it moves from panel to panel along **its chequered surface [1]**, drawing you in to notice it on your way up the Unter den Linden to Alexanderplatz. For a time, when Berlin was still new to me, it was just another abandoned building of the former East that **beguiled me despite its apparent ugliness [2]**, tricking and teasing the light and **flattering the sensible and solid nineteenth-century cathedral opposite with its reflections [1]**.

Only later did I learn that it was the Palast der Republik and former government building of the GDR, a contentious place that concealed its history in the opacity of its surface, but had now been run-down, stripped of its trimmings and was awaiting the verdict on its future [...]. [T]here are those who are fighting to keep the Palast standing who believe to level such a building is to level memory, and that a city needs to keep its scars [4] [...].

Source Text 52 TACITA DEAN, 'Palast, 2004', in *Tacita Dean*, 2006

Notice how some of the suggestions listed above are at work here. **Dean identifies precisely what she is visually intrigued by** in this very location [1]. She explains what triggered her curiosity, and how this led to her decision to film the Palast [2]. She articulates a principle at stake for her, which continues to hold her heartfelt interest [4]. Compare Dean's evocative statement with the flatness of 'My art explores the relationship of architecture to history, particularly in Berlin.' You may not possess Dean's literary flair, but you can fill in some detail.

In this example following, video artist Anri Sala concentrates on the **process behind his thinking** both before he started and while making a specific artwork. Here, the artist explains his initial decision [1], then describes his thoughts as he watched this idea follow its own course [2]. This style may be too descriptive or poetic for some, but Sala gets across his motivation when he set off on this process-based work, and, using most of the senses—the feel of the wet plastic; the (absent) smell of the night rain; the sound of the heavy raindrops and loud music competing with the fireworks; the image of a 'battled sky'—puts into words the impressions that the actual event triggered in him [2]. Detail makes all the difference between 'My art explores music, sound, and city life' and:

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Soon it will be New Year's Eve. Fireworks and the smell of expended explosives will take over the city. The green sky of the ending year will turn red as the new one approaches [...] **I asked a DJ friend to spend with me this moment of change between the years** [1]. He would play loud against the sky and I would help him. We took position on the roof of a building with an elevated vista and set up an improvised DJ unit under a large plastic sheet. It was raining very hard, but it didn't smell like rain. Official fireworks were quickly overshadowed by people's pyrotechnics. While the music reached a battled sky, **at times I believed that the fireworks were being hijacked and manoeuvred by the beat** [2].

Source Text 53 ANRI SALA, 'Notes for *Mixed Behaviour*', in *Anri Sala*, 2003

I think these evocative artist's notes **add something 'more and better'** (Schjeldahl, page TK) to this artwork—just as you want your statement to do.

> Final tips

Before sending your statement out, **get feedback** from a trustworthy reader—or two. In general, and especially if writing doesn't come naturally, **keep sentences short** and to the point. **An artist's statement is not a CV.** Do not list your education, exhibitions, press or awards, which go on a separate sheet. Sometimes artists include a photograph of themselves, maybe in the studio; personally, I find this a little tacky. Admissions offices and galleries accepting artist's submissions may post **guidelines or examples online**. Take these into account in your lightly adjusted statement. **Your words should change over time.** Ideally, writing is not just a chore, churned out to satisfy other people, but can help you track and develop your thinking.