Writing in Art: Introduction

The artist chooses what to make and chooses to make art rather than to make a text, for example, or sometimes chooses to make a text but to make it differently than if they were to make it as a philosophical text. But having made that choice it doesn’t mean that they . . . are incapable of choosing the alternative. –Robert Storr

In Art, unlike many other academic disciplines, writing is not the primary mode of communication. Images, objects, and other alternative materials are. But, while artists may not be expected to publish journal articles or present conference papers, they often need to discuss their own work and the work of other artists. Becoming an articulate and effective writer can only benefit your art-making practice. It can help you invite others into conversation about your own work, engage critical discourse about art history and theory, or comment on trends in contemporary art.

In the MFA program at Claremont Graduate University, you will likely encounter three different modes of writing: analytical papers on art and art theory, exhibition or funding proposals, and artist statements. Of these three, the artist statement is by far the most important and the most challenging.

Writing an Artist Statement

MFA students at CGU complete two artist statements. In the third semester, they write a five page statement, also known as the Advancement Paper, to be read by their MFA committee members prior to their candidacy reviews. In the fourth semester, they write a shorter, one-page statement to accompany their MFA exhibitions and final reviews.

The main goal of writing an artist statement is to discuss your understanding of your process, ideas, and field. The statement also gives you an opportunity to define the critical conversation you want to engage through your art.

Statement writing can be a painstaking process. It involves using written language to express visual ideas and it often requires you to discuss aspects of your practice with which you are still grappling. It’s also a process with no undisputed rules. There are plenty of helpful guidelines, however, and this resource gives an overview of those guidelines.

Getting Started

In the early phases of the writing process, it’s a good idea to be as honest with yourself as possible and take stock of what you know about your art, your process and your ideas.

Consider asking yourself these questions:

What am I doing?
How am I doing it?
Why am I doing it?
What influences me most?
How does my art relate to the art of my contemporaries?
What do I want other people to understand about my art?

Am I unwilling to discuss any aspects of my work? If so, why?

Freewriting and mind-mapping, two of the most prevalent brainstorming strategies, can help you work through your ideas. Freewriting is exactly what it sounds like: you let yourself write, pouring out as many ideas as you can. You might consider giving yourself a time-limit—15 minutes to let loose about why you paint in monochrome, for example—or making the process more active by writing on large sheets of butcher paper or incorporating drawings.

The second strategy, mind-mapping, can help you trace the relationships between different ideas. Mind-mappers usually use blank, unlined paper and start by writing a main idea in the paper’s center. Then, using arrows or dotted line, they connect that main idea to other relevant ideas. For instance, you could write the answer to “What am I doing?” in the middle of the page and then use arrows to show how it connects to the “how” and “why” of your making and thinking process.

No matter which strategy you use to help yourself begin writing, remember that the thinking-through process can take a long time, maybe even a few months. Don’t procrastinate, but don’t rush yourself either.

Key Elements

In general, an artist statement should address what you make, how you make it, why you make it and your understanding of your work’s meaning.

What

I said before that I wish I’d never said anything about “The Pharmaceutical Paintings” and I still wish I hadn’t. They are what they are, perfectly dumb paintings which feel absolutely right. – Damien Hirst

How you describe what you do is pivotal to your statement, but your description doesn’t have to be drawn out. Give your readers a clear idea of what your artistic project really includes. Simple assertions like Damien Hirst’s claim to make “perfectly dumb paintings” can be more than enough, as long as they support your description of how and why you make what you make.

Examples:

“I am making an Enlightenment Capsule for the audience to meditate inside — virtual reality in which people can experience ancient ideas from the East . . . . But I’m not interested in using ancient things; rather I want to connect [audiences] with contemporary life through the technology we have now.” - Mariko Mori

“I paint figments with varied levels of connection to reality. Within that parameter I am probing relationships between connection and separation, similarity and difference, image and self.” – Rachel Warkentin, CGU ’09
How

Method is, it seems to me, a natural growth out of a need and from a need the modern artist has found new ways of expressing the world about him. –Jackson Pollock

Your statement should definitely address method, since it is what fills the gap between your ideas and your product. How do you work and what materials do you use? If you paint on the floor because it’s more conducive to accidents and your work explores chance, you should say so. Or if you often cover already black surfaces with charcoal because you’re interested in redundancy, mention that too. You could also describe how you went about making specific works, especially works that are going to be central to your MFA show.

You don’t, however, need to go into arduous detail about each aspect of your process. Just give a glimpse into the more unusual or important aspects.

Examples:

“I usually don’t plan things in advance; I just let it happen—sometimes waiting, sometimes wandering around until the right moment arrives. It arrives when I feel the energy, accumulated from that precise time and place, in my body. Then I immediately start a performance. It is a temporary mobile temple that I establish.” –Kimsooja

“Promenade was totally driven by the context. The internal relationships of measurement and placement related to the central axis of the site. The placement of the rectangular plates followed a strict logic in that the plates tilted away and towards the center line in an asymmetrical counterpoint. However, the perception of the sculpture contradicts the logic of its relation to the site. As you walk inbetween the plates you see fragments, you see the work in part, you cannot grasp the whole.” –Richard Serra

Why

When you ask [Jasper] Johns why he did this or that in a painting, he answers so as to clear himself of responsibility. –Leo Steinberg

In explaining the “why” behind your work, you are essentially defining a discourse for yourself.

Some artists, like Jasper Johns, notoriously avoid discussing the content of their work, instead focusing on physical, compositional and material choices. While Johns gets away with this sort of evasiveness, someone like Marina Abramovic, who’s had orgasms during public performances, has to be more open about her work’s psychological and personal motivations.

Strategize carefully in this section of your paper and self edit. If you want your work to be discussed in terms of feminism, for example, broach feminist issues. But if, while you have been influenced by feminist artists, feminism isn’t crucial to your work’s meaning, leave it out.

Examples:
“When I made the piece Red Goya, a diptych where two prints from the same negative are juxtaposed in 40×30 and 24×20 formats, I wanted to force an engagement with the question of the viewer’s taste, to examine the power of the physical manifestation of the image to alter its impression on a person. Does the bigger print have more authority because of its relationship to a body viewing it in a space, as something you can’t take in with one glance? Something that envelops you? Or is the smaller print more powerful with its higher resolution? More jewel-like in its intensity of color? More precious in its scale?” – Eileen Quinlan

“My new work deals with emptying my body: ‘Boat emptying, stream entering.’ This means that you have to empty the body/boat to the point where you can really be connected with the fields of energy around you. I think that men and women in our Western culture are completely disconnected from that energy, and in my new work I want to make this connection possible.” – Marina Abramovic

“I use my own constructed image as a vehicle for questioning ideas about the role of tradition, the nature of family, monogamy, polygamy, relationships between men and women, between women and their children, and between women and other women—underscoring the critical problems and the possible resolves. In one way or another, my work endlessly explodes the limits of tradition.” – Carrie Mae Weems

Meaning

I think it would be disastrous if you could say what the message of Hamlet was . . . . everyone is going to come away with something different depending on if they've just left their lovers or if they've just had a child or if they've just been fired.

- Beth Henley

I don't tell people what things mean, but I describe the way they occur, in order to stir people's curiosity.

- Barbara Bloom

Your artist's statement doesn't need to dictate your work’s meaning, but it should show that you’ve carefully considered meaning.

Beth Henley may be right about good art having endless potential messages. Still, an artist can say quite a bit without squelching that potential. Even with a work as layered as Hamlet, Shakespeare could have said something like, “I wanted to explore that great gulf between self and circumstances. So I placed a character with personal demons inside a dysfunctional social structure.” He didn’t say this, of course, but if he had, he would have provided a framework for understanding Hamlet while still leaving room for interpretation. On the other hand, if Shakespeare had said, “Anyone who sees Hamlet should leave the theater with an acute awareness of how society shapes identity,” he’d have closed the door on the play’s meaning. And he would have been asking for a fight from anyone who disagreed.

The rule of thumb? Share your insights into meaning but leave readers and viewers free to engage your work on their own terms.

Examples:

“My recent work pits the expression of identity against the loss of individuality. I am interested in the way becoming part of a group establishes identity in a general way, but also takes the emphasis away from
“[T]he work invites confusion on several levels, and that ‘meaning’ is generated in the process of ‘sorting things out.’ On the most obvious level, we all expect photographs to be pictures of something. We assume that the photographer observed a place, a person, an event in the world and wanted to record it. . . . The problem with my work is that these images are really not of anything in that sense, they register only that which is incidental.” - Uta Barth

“I want to make work that operates on the line between success and failure, the same line I see when I think about modernism and postmodernism. I am in the position of believing in optimism and progress, while at the same time completely realizing how wrong, absurd, and romantic those beliefs are. I want to reach for the stars by being shot out of a cannon, yet I know the cannon could potentially burn me, or if that doesn't, the stars would.” - Jacob Butts, CGU ’09

Structure

I always tell my students, “Never forget you’re writing words! You know, word one, word two, word three, word four. The words have to be organized. Nothing else does.” – Dave Hickey

How you structure your statement determines how your ideas are perceived, so some careful planning is in order. You could go right down the list, explaining what you do, how you do it, why you do it, and how you view your work in relationship to contemporary art at large. Or you could reverse this how-what-why structure, starting with the larger reasoning behind your work and narrowing your way down to what you actually make. You could also opt for a creative approach and write in free verse or tell a story. But if you do choose to deviate from a conventional structure, know that, as with art-making, breaking the rules is ultimately harder than keeping them.

Brainstorming can be as helpful in the structuring stage as in the idea gathering phase. If you’re a detail-oriented person, consider outlining your first draft by bullet-pointing what each paragraph should address. This will give you a point of attack and a sense of direction. Or you might want to do more mind-mapping at this stage and diagram the relationships between your ideas. No matter how well you plan your statement’s structure, however, you’ll probably have to reorganize later on, so keep an open mind.

Style

This is the problem of the writer who sets out deliberately to garnish his prose. You lose whatever it is that makes you unique. The reader will usually notice if you are putting on airs. He wants the person who is talking to him to sound genuine. Therefore a fundamental rule is: be yourself. - William Zinsser

CGU is an academic institution and your statement is an academic project, so feel free to write in an academic voice. It’s often the most effective option. On the other hand, the MFA program exists to help artists define a discourse for themselves and, if a scholarly voice doesn’t resonate with your vision as an artist, you can certainly opt for something more conversational, experimental or narrative-driven. But, as with structure, the more you deviate from a standard voice, the more strategic you have to be in order to effectively communicate with your audience.
No matter which voice you choose to write in, these rules tend to apply:

1. Make logical transitions between paragraphs
2. Omit unnecessary words (Zinsser has a diatribe against clutter that should help you with this one—his book *On Writing Well* is required reading for everyone in CGU’s Writing Seminar).
3. Avoid needlessly complex language.
4. Don’t sacrifice clarity for the sake of artistry. Your first responsibility is to communicate effectively and stylistic flourishes or esoteric passages that cloud your paper’s meaning will not do you any good.

Theory and History

Felix Gonzalez-Torres, who I know read theory carefully, nonetheless made a point of saying that it was not to be read in a kind of rigorous, academic way, but to help unblock thoughts and open up questions. —Robert Storr

Many artists fear they won’t be taken seriously if they do not situate themselves within a historical or theoretical context when discussing their work. While your statement should certainly show how your work responds and relates to either history or contemporary culture, you do not need to prove your art historical literacy through citations. Your literacy will show in the clarity and intelligence of your writing.

Cite material you actually want to discuss in relation to your work. If your work probes the voyeuristic nature of images, for example, don’t cite Laura Mulvey just to show that you know she wrote about your subject matter. But do cite her if her ideas about the gaze have directly influenced your ideas. The same guideline applies to mentioning other artists; while you have undoubtedly been inspired by a rich array of historical and contemporary figures, only cite those who have directly influenced what you make. If your committee members, peers, or viewers want to know more about how you see yourself in relation to historical ideas, artists or movements, they can always ask.

Examples:

“[Hans] Holbein brought an enormous amount of dignity to his work (along with rich color and saturation). There was an equality to his paintings—they weren’t demigod portraits, they were just incredibly detailed and real. When I saw that, I realized that I wanted to mirror his work with members of my own community. It seemed like a good conversation to have, especially in relationship to the s/m community, which was thought of—and still is thought of, to an extent—as predatory or perverted.”—Catherine Opie

“We don’t only refer to the partition of territories, we also think of the impossibility of being politically on one side rather than another at this terrible stage of the conflict. Sentimentally, one can’t help choosing a side—this is obvious—but politically, one has to refuse a binary partition and seek brighter criteria for the interpretation of facts. Hannah Arendt once wrote that she didn’t love ‘any people or collective—neither the German people, nor the French, nor the American, nor the working class, or anything of that sort. I indeed love only my friends and the only kind of love I know of and believe in is the love of persons’ Friends, of course, can be on both sides.” —Claire Fontaine, discussing their 2008 project “Diviser la division”

“I made the first ‘Blumen’ picture after looking at Robert Mapplethorpe’s *Pictures* book. I was struck by
how much freedom Mapplethorpe was able to extract from his model's restraint—that in tying up and
cropping his models, he appears to be able to work with people as forms. I never thought about my
flowers as related to his (which I saw as annoyingly erotic); I thought of them in relationship to bondage. I
wanted to make the flowers more aggressive and ironic and less docile and sensual.” - Collier Schorr

Writing and Revising

A clear sentence is no accident. Very few sentences come out right the first time, or even the
third time. Remember this as a consolation in moments of despair. If you find that writing is hard,
it’s because it is hard. It’s one of the hardest things that people do.

-William Zinsser

Fortunately, CGU’s Writing Seminar gives you months to write, edit and revise. Unfortunately, no matter
how much time you have, it never seems to be enough. The best strategy for moving through the writing
process is simply to make yourself write often and routinely and to give yourself time to seek feedback
and make revisions. Writing and revising should be difficult and time consuming—that’s the nature of the
beast, and there are no tricks for side-stepping the challenges. But here are some pointers that can help
you manage the revising process:

1. Take frequent breaks and let your edits incubate. When you return with fresh eyes, you may have
new insight into what you have written.
2. Make the process more tactile and interactive by highlighting and writing on a hardcopy of your
paper, reverse outlining on a white board, or reading your paper aloud into a tape recorder.
3. Freely cut sentences, paragraphs or whole sections, though it’s a good idea to paste what you
delete into another document, just in case (novelist Elmore Leonard says he tries to leave out the
parts people skip, and, while it takes real skill to achieve, that’s a good goal for any writer).
4. Move sections around. Sometimes a simple rearrangement can clarify id
5. Have a trusted peer, advisor, or someone at the Writing Center read multiple drafts of your paper.
6. Ask for feedback not only on your writing but also on how your writing relates to your art.

Samples

Four former MFA students have given us permission to post their statements and images of their
final shows below. These samples represent a range of approaches, from straightforward and
academic to experimental.

Jacob Butts, '09
Kimberly Kolba, '07
Chelsea Hertford Taylor, '09
Catherine Wagley, 09


Rachel Warkentin, MFA Final Statement, Claremont Graduate University, 2009.


Jacob Butts, MFA Final Statement, Claremont Graduate University, 2009.

Dave Hickey, Interview with Sheila Heti, ” The Believer, Vol. 5, No. 9, Nov. 2007, 9 Nov. 2009,


Claire Fontaine, Interview with Anthony Huberman, Bomb Magazine, Issue 105, Fall 2008.


Zinsser 12.