The Artist’s Statement

“In our culture there is a job for art, because we can’t experience reality anywhere else.”
-Richard Tuttle

Though it can be a challenge, writing artist’s statements can be an extremely useful way to think through and communicate the work you do. Below we will look at a few reasons to write such a text, and a few thought-provoking questions we hope will help you generate ideas.

Audience and Purpose

There are four different general audiences you’ll likely be thinking of when writing an artist’s statement. Each has implications for the purpose and content of your text:

You
The purpose of writing for yourself is to clarify and refine your private studio process, and in turn to strengthen the work itself. This is the kind of statement you may or may not share with others but which helps you build confidence in your work and in the conversations you have about it.

Other Artists, Critics, etc.
You might write for other producers of art and culture in order to engage these colleagues in ongoing thinking and discourse regarding what it is to make art. This can be an exciting way to extend and develop the social and intellectual aspect of your studio practice and argue for new ways of framing, thinking, and doing “art.” This kind of text might be less to do with specific works and more to do with conceptual ideals or principles you aim to uphold.

Visitors at an Exhibition
Often you will want to provide exhibition visitors with information or ideas that support or accompany your work. This may be to communicate the work’s origins or motivation, peculiarities of the material or process, or simply to carry on a conversation about related ideas. Because it can directly influence the way people interpret specific works, artists have to think hard about what kind and what amount of information is best to share in statements like these.

Extended Audiences
To communicate something useful about your work to a public who is encountering it in a catalog, grant application, competition, etc. In this case your task is to support the documentation of your work and communicate what your work is, how it does what it does, and perhaps why it is interesting. When writing for grants and competitions specifically, the artist might be interested in demonstrating that the work is unique, well made, in need of funding, and so on.
Content

In any of the cases above there are almost endless possibilities for discussion. It’s up to you to decide just what handful of things would be best in each context. If you are working on an artist’s statement for an assignment, perhaps your instructor has already asked you to consider certain specifics. In addition, we offer several themes to consider below:

- **Material / medium:** What is the work made of? Paint, metal, glass, dust, sugar, air, words, concepts? What is unique, interesting, or challenging about this material or medium? Where does it come from? How does it change over time? What is the cultural or historical context for this material?

- **Process:** What are you doing when you make the work? Imagining, conceiving, researching, measuring, molding, folding, building, combining, scratching, dousing…?

- **Form:** What does it look like? What is its scale? How is it built? How is it held together?

- **Content:** Is there a story in the work? An argument? A message? A representation? Is it more complicated than that? Is it ambiguous, without a single meaning?

- **Effect:** What is the work doing? What are some verbs associated with it? Does it stand, jump, teeter, fall, float, rest, recede, remove, return, emerge, aggress…?

- **Spectator response:** How do people talk about it? What kinds of words do they associate with it? What kind of physical relationship exists between viewers and the work?

- **Art History:** What artwork of the past does this relate to? Does it explicitly refer to previous artists or cultural figures? Does it adopt a particular aesthetic language or use a particular technique? Why?

- **Cultural Context:** How are we to contextualize the work in culture? What histories, customs, economies, spiritualities, movements, attitudes etc. does this work connect to?

- **Opposites:** In what ways does the work resist, contradict, refuse, avoid, exclude? What is its opposite? What do you absolutely not want the work to be?

Ethos

The ethos of a piece of writing is its character, its voice. Your character could be confident, arrogant, self-deprecating, dreamy, evasive, ironic, confused, poetic, philosophical, and the list goes on. The important thing to recognize is the great diversity of ways to write about, around, of, through, for, and alongside your work ... and finding ways that sit comfortably for your practice and purpose.