Artistic Statement

**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](http://www.cgu.edu/pages/7483.asp#_edn1)

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](http://www.cgu.edu/pages/7483.asp#_edn2)

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](http://www.cgu.edu/pages/7483.asp#_edn3)

“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](http://www.cgu.edu/pages/7483.asp#_edn4), 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](http://www.cgu.edu/pages/7483.asp#_edn5)

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](http://www.cgu.edu/pages/7483.asp#_edn6)

*“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](http://www.cgu.edu/pages/7483.asp#_edn7)

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](http://www.cgu.edu/pages/7483.asp#_edn8)

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](http://www.cgu.edu/pages/7483.asp#_edn9)

“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](http://www.cgu.edu/pages/7483.asp#_edn10)

“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](http://www.cgu.edu/pages/7483.asp#_ednref11)

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](http://www.cgu.edu/pages/7483.asp#_edn12)

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

-[Barabara Bloom](http://www.cgu.edu/pages/7483.asp#_edn13)

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 the individual.” -Rachel Warkentin, CGU ‘09

“[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](http://www.cgu.edu/pages/7483.asp#_edn14)

“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,](http://www.cgu.edu/pages/7483.asp#_edn15) 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](http://www.cgu.edu/pages/7483.asp#_edn16)

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](http://www.cgu.edu/pages/7483.asp#_edn17)

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](http://www.cgu.edu/pages/7483.asp#_edn18)

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](http://www.cgu.edu/pages/7483.asp#_edn19)

“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”](http://www.cgu.edu/pages/7483.asp#_edn20)

“I made the first ‘Blumen’ picture after looking at [Robert Mapplethorpe](http://artforum.com/search/search=%22Robert%20Mapplethorpe%22)’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](http://www.cgu.edu/pages/7483.asp#_edn21)

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](http://www.cgu.edu/pages/7483.asp#_edn22)

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 ideas.
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

Personal statement for acting students

*In an essay of 500 to 700 words, state your purpose for undertaking graduate study in your chosen field. Include your academic objective, research interests, and career plans. Also discuss your related qualifications, including collegiate, professional, and community activities, and any other substantial accomplishments not already indicated on the application form.*  
  
I enjoy performing arts because within it's scope is the capacity to be a mirror for human society and the converse. That wide range of possibility leaves a smorgasbord of opportunity for one who wishes to create. As an Acting MFA Candidate at (institution) I plan to hone and build upon my current skill sets and add the necessary tools and organization to be a successful performance artist.   
  
I fell in love with theatre during my undergraduate days at (institution), now I wish to explore the craft in a structured academic environment. The first year courses at (institution) offer the foundational footing necessary to ground me as an artist. Observing other actors and collaborating with them in plays has always been an education in itself for me. I am excited about the synergy that will be garnered by being around serious like minded students for three years. (institution) had no theatre major at the time of my attendance. I took the electives offered and participated in the plays but was left wanting more. Since the committed students were few and far between it allotted us the opportunity to wear several hats. In my four years there I was fortunate enough to be able to act, stage manage, be a prop mistress, assistant direct, build and strike sets. It was quite an experience and allowed me to have a true appreciation for all the cogs that make the theatrical wheel turn. I had quite a relationship with performance as a whole. The Fine Arts wing was my home as I was a member of the Concert Choir, Concert Band, and Marching Band. In 2001 I was able to travel with our choir, under the tutelage of (Teacher), to Innsbruck, Austria. We performed Mozart's Requiem and "American Songs" at the Innsbruck International Choral Festival.  
  
I have deep interests in the works that speak to the marginalized of the world. I enjoy the works of August Wilson and Augusto Boal. The ideas that theatre can be interactive, used as a tool to enlighten, and be an agent of change appeals to me. I am drawn to (institution)assertion that Theatre is an important social construct and therefore the artist has an ethical responsibility to what they produce and how they portray it. In my search for suitable monologues I have found it difficult to find material that speaks to me. I will welcome the study of contemporary playwrights to widen my scope. I would be ecstatic to work with any of the impressive faculty at (institution) including (Teachers). As a history major I am very attracted to details. I enjoy researching time periods, wardrobe, political slant, and economics. I want to delve into exploring everything possible to help me with characterization.   
  
I plan to obtain my equity card and work in professional theatres. I am partial to the (geographical) area for the way it has nurtured my interest. Various classes with resident actors and volunteer opportunities that result in shared knowledge have been priceless. I would be honored to reciprocate and maintain the environment that pushed me towards my dreams. I am open to the various avenues of work available such as commercials, voiceover, theatre, television and film. It is encouraging to see that a portion of (institution) third year focuses on theatre as a business. I am not naïve enough to believe that this will be an easy task but I believe I have what it takes. Since graduating from college I have advanced my career and raised a family all while continuing to follow my theatrical aspirations.   
  
This degree is integral to my development because it is not enough to just have natural talent if you want to sustain a career. I need to be shaped, molded, and have a point of reference that only intense training can bring. I am ready to put forth an unceasing effort because faith without works is dead. I know I can be great and have been waiting for the opportunity. Upon its arrival I want to make sure I have the stock and technique in which to deliver greatness. I am looking to this program to take my raw materials through the refinement stages and conclude in a polished product.

anuary, 2012  
In this essay I will discuss why I want to pursue a life in theatre, and why I believe xxxx is the best place for me to continue toward a lifetime of acting. In support of these points I make and will explicate the following declarations: Theatre makes me a better person. Due to its values and traditions, xxxx is the best place for me, and I will make a strong addition to the cast.   
Acting and participating in the pursuit of human expression and truth through the art of theatrical story-telling makes me a better person. Theatre challenges and stretches my identity, and forces me to reckon with the world issues of today. An initial an significant challenge in my pursuit of theatre was my decision to defy my father and study theatre as an undergrad. My identity shifted further consequent to participating in the plays Angels in America Parts I & II as Hannah Pitt, in which major themes include homosexuality, AIDS, religion in America, and I shared an on-stage kiss with a woman. Another challenging play was The Vagina Monologues, a show I later directed, which discusses sexuality and violence against women. In months of rehearsals I struggled to determine my personal stance on sexuality, Christianity (my personal faith), Biblical fallibility, and artistic expression. Retrospectively, I take encouragement and strength from all these experiences because each moments of struggle became moments of growth. Resultant to these times of interpersonal and metaphysical struggle, I am stronger and more confidant in who and what I am: an actor, a Christian, a feminist, and an LGBT ally.   
I want this trend of theatrical participation leading to personal growth will continue in my life, especially at a place like xxxxx, and perhaps more importantly, I believe it is worth continuance. By participating in theatrical story-telling, we participate in the sharing and influencing of perspectives, and gain insight into our fellow humans. We, as members of a production, receive the perspective of both the playwright and the characters, and perspectives of the company members interpreting these characters, all of which is passed on to the audience. The farther reaching implications exist if only in the daily effect we each have on one another. The more informed and passionate we are, the more likely we are to make an impact and effect positive change in our environment; simultaneously, we are less likely to view our neighbor through a prejudiced or biased lens and Other[1] him or her. It is this process and artistic/intellectual dialogue that I wish to contribute to every day for the rest of my life.   
I am prepared and excited for the rigorous course schedule having acted/directed two plays my senior year, one a full-scale production I also technically designed/produced, sang in an opera, participated in three music ensembles, two honor societies, and took 18 hours each semester.   
xxx's rigorous work schedule, high expectations, and its long tradition of producing contemporary scripts helps artists to analyze and form an opinion on contemporary issues and perspectives.   
Above all, I want to go to xxx so I can work with people who are drunk-passionate about theatre. I want to work in an ensemble of people for whom our shared creative endeavors are the most important things in our lives, who would rather be "here" than anywhere else in the world. I flourish in such environments, and my potential is tremendous.

Sprinting across the living room, all dressed up wearing my mother’s blazer and high heels, I grab pieces of scrap paper that I see, and a few crayons left on the table while casually hurrying for my afternoon teaching. Wobbling and nearly stumbling upon myself, I call for the attention of my relatives as I am about to take role for attendance. “Fanny Martinez, here. Victor Martinez? Absent… Alright class, please take a seat! We will begin soon.” Although my mother had a busy schedule and had many errands left unfinished, she took interest in my so-called “lessons” and waited patiently for me to start conducting. “Today we will learn about addition. Sounds good? Okay, let’s begin!”  
It is pretty obvious that at that point of my life I was acting like the typical child who always pretended to be someone or something such as a police officer or a firefighter, perhaps even a superhero! By all means, I had the intention to imitate the behavior and the instructional nature of a teacher and took it within myself. I had already decided what I wanted my future career to be at a young age, and still to this day have I felt committed to that decision. No, it is not only wanting to be a teacher, but becoming a leader.  
Since the start, I had always had a burning desire to be willing to lead others. I aim for the objective of becoming someone who sets the right motives for people to walk through, guiding them in the right direction. Someone who might even be able to impact a little portion of the population. One who will gladly assist to help increase the knowledge of the upcoming future generations.   
“The greatest leader is not necessarily the one who does the greatest things. He is the one that gets the people to do the greatest things.” –Ronald Regan. As a current Sunday school teacher at my church, alternating turns weekly, I happen to experience what it feels to take full on responsibility. With this opportunity, I can foresee an uprising generation of brilliant and effective individuals within these children. Yes, at times they can be a little boisterous, but beneath their childish exuberance there is developing men and women who will stand up and take great part in this community.   
Having leadership as a characteristic is not about being someone who surpasses others, or having titles. It is about going through a process of social influence, maximizing the efforts of others towards the achievement of a goal. It is what appeals to me the most.  
By attending FSU, not only will I practice and learn more of the concepts of being a leader, I will gain full access of finally having that recognition. With that, it will help mold me into the person I am longing to become: A future educator of America, and possibly of the world.