

What and who is it for?

Many Anchorage artists write statements for their exhibitions about their work, media, exhibit thesis, or themselves. Larger galleries and museums usually provide a brochure or catalog which includes an artist's statement. Despite the widespread acceptance of artists statements, they vary greatly in style, content, effectiveness, and presentation, particularly for solo exhibitions in alternative spaces.

The statement primarily tends to be an overview of the exhibition's art works rather than a statement of the artist's broader work history or philosophy.

More importantly, the artist's statement is for the viewer, not the artist. That an artist would care whether a viewer clearly understood her/his intent is inconsequential or abhorrent in some contemporary art theories. But an artist's statement is not part of the art work; it exists only to provide information.

The statement is for the viewer.

"I think that most viewers pay little attention to statements," said Don Decker, one of the owners of Stonington Gallery. "I think that some are sincere, [but] some artists come across as arrogant, as saying that if the viewers don't understand, then something's wrong with the viewer. But whose fault is it really?"

Exhibitions are so diverse: interactive, installed, indoor, outdoor, multimedia, minimal, and so on. Not all exhibitions need an artist's statement. A visual artist who finds labels other than *untitled* or *recent works* may not want to write a statement. This leaves the interested viewer, however, lacking what *they* would consider pleasurable information to know, such as 1) whether the works are related in intent, 2) whether this is a "newly discovered" artist, or 3) special information about the media.

Profundity can be a crutch.

"A lot of times I laugh because some artist's statements try too hard to be profound," said Decker. The worse reason to write a statement is to justify any de-

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Sink Your Teeth into Art

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The Artist's Statement

All the ones I've read
needed improvement.
Why do we keep writing
these things?

by Wanda Seamster

ficient results in the work. This can produce statements that actually *are* more profound than the work itself; I have cringed when rereading of my own statements because of this.

Self-evaluation is the payoff.

Writing a statement will assist the artist to evaluate whether s/he reached self-imposed goals for the exhibition. It can lead to wonderfully productive self-criticism, even if the artist decides not to use the final statement at the exhibition. It is a valuable exercise for the artist to attempt to restate the intent and aesthetic considerations of an exhibition in what may be an unfamiliar medium: writing.

A better statement should leave some things unsaid.

An artist's statement can limit the experience of the viewer if it defines the content and the intent of the exhibition in terms that are too narrow to allow multiple interpretations.

Anthony Torres (*Artweek* 8/95) reviewed Jim Campbell and Marie Navarre's *Unforeseeable Memories*,

Capp Street Project, San Francisco. Torres' initial response to most elements in the exhibition was positive until he read what the artists wrote.

Before reading the statement: "I was struck initially by the calm. The comment on history seemed unified, embodied by the combined elements of light, sound and video...."

After reading the artists' statement: "...my response shifted in a reaction to their statement.... [Now] the juxtaposition of raw materials began to seem rather trite and obvious...."

A Chihuly exhibition of glass offered a similar experience to me. I felt I was very happy to be in a marine chasm looking up at exotic life forms. But when I read the statement in the brochure, I was disappointed to find floral imagery instead.

Writing well is hard.

Writing clearly about art is made more difficult when the extent of the viewers' knowledge about art is variable. Decker says that artists "tend to write statements for a generic audience that may not exist." Suzanne Lacy, Dean of Fine Arts, California College of Arts and Crafts, states, "You reach people who are not versed in ideas of contemporary art by basing your approach on subject." Applying this idea to writing a statement means clearly identifying the subject of the exhibition using a vocabulary that neither alienates the viewer nor condescends to the more astute viewer. The best way to improve your statement is to assign sufficient time to draft, rewrite, edit, rewrite, final edit, and final-final edit, all the while getting feedback from others. If you are very lucky, you have friends who are writers or editors.

Creating a Better Statement

Chopping and Customizing

An artist writing a statement needs to plan enough time to define its purpose and content and to produce the best statement s/he can. Besides an overview of the exhibition, a statement may give other information such as:

- How the exhibition relates to the artist's entire body of work;
- Credit to sources of inspiration and assistance;
- Biographical information that relates to the exhibition; or
- A brief synopsis of experience.

If all these possible contents of an artist's statement were to appear together, the statement would probably be too lengthy. Artists can start by omitting needless categories of information.

- Unless the exhibition contains biographical elements important for the viewer's understanding, avoid personal asides or anecdotes.
- Avoid using your exhibit as an opportunity to explain your art theories or, worse, argue your art theories.
- Americans identify ourselves by our work. If you include previous experience, limit it to important exhibitions and honors only within the last five years in a succinct paragraph. Do not post your resume. Academic degrees are often mentioned, but *self-taught* is a nebulous term and should be avoided.
- The statement is not a catalog of the exhibition. Avoid discussing individual art works.
- In alternative spaces, post the price list separately in a less conspicuous location. In galleries, give it to the owners, and let them include it in labeling.

Spontaneity Not the Same as Ingenuity

All drafts need editing. Check for clarity; ask at least two people whose experiences with art differ to read your statement and tell you what it means to them. For grammar and usage, high school English books are fast and efficient references. Write with more nouns and verbs than with adjectives and adverbs. Check the spelling of each draft.

Be prepared to edit and redraft at least four or five times. (*Vizual Dog* is proofed by persons with writing experience, yet the final editor always finds a host of errors.) If you have different fonts available, change the font each time you print or type a redraft; a different look to the statement will often make small errors more obvious.

Terminology needs support from definitive or connotative phrases. Such phrases can aid the uninformed viewer, and should not be edited out. (For example, *similar to*

the mental illness portrayed often in Brute Art is a lot clearer than *reflected in Brute Art*.

Edit for brevity as well as clarity, spelling, and grammar. Be aware of inconsistent spacing and punctuation. There are many style manuals, books with rules on writing. For example, a news reporter uses a different style manual than an academician. The real key, however, is consistency—in spacing, grammar, and punctuation—within each statement you write. Your next statement can even differ in style, as long as it is consistent within itself.

A long statement can impede the viewer. If your statement is more than 120 words, consider another edit.

More to Consider

If your statement differs significantly from the intent of your exhibition proposal or thesis, accept the fact that the exhibition has changed from the original concept. As work evolves, many changes are for the better. Do not use the statement to add profound meaning to your art work or to excuse deficiencies or changes.

Built for Comfort

Even when well-written, some statements are physically uncomfortable to read. Viewers who are forced to squint at small type or try to read overly stylized type may skip the statement altogether.

Typeset or copier-enlarge the final statement to at least 14-point type. Avoid decorative fonts for the body of the text; they increase reading time. Vertical white paper, 8 1/2 inches x 11 inches, is not an unbreakable rule.

Learn from Others

When you read someone else's statement that you think is exceptional, ask for a copy. Keep it as a sample to peruse prior to writing your own statements.

Don't Say That!

This exhibition is about....	Think about it.
What I've tried to show is....	It goes without saying....
This artist has attempted to....	Integral Visual Merit
I am also interested in....	The best work I've everdone....
If there is a theme it is....	Are important because....
The title refers to....	Look Again!
I feel strongly about....	I'm not sure what....
Self-taught....	Hope the viewer agrees that....
In the medium and style of....	All are for sale.

What I Said What I Meant to Say.... Critique/ Wanda Seamster

These exhibition statements are from solo exhibitions in 1995 in Anchorage, but reflect strengths and weaknesses in statements written today. The statement, not the exhibit, is critiqued.

“Wordplay” Brian Hutton

Cyrano’s Cafe & Bookstore, Winter 1995
200 words. Typewritten, 8 1/2" x 11" white paper

Hutton gave a lot of information in few words: a credit to an inspiring friend, identifying an overriding theme in his work, an invitation to viewers to rearrange the art, and an anecdote on the responsibility of artists make art publicly. Lacking was information about the artist, merely mentioned as “B. Hutton” without any background.

The exhibition was informal and interactive; Hutton’s style of writing repeated that informality, but was unfortunately folksy with a sprinkling of “ain’t” and some clichés (“I’ll buy that, bigtime”). He stated, “If there’s been any recurring theme...” when there is no question about Hutton’s continuing interest in “the accessibility of the creative process.”

Hutton used caps, an unusual abundance of ellipses, and boldface as graphic elements to almost sketch his statement.

“Commuter Vehicle” Karen Schwenkmeyer

International Gallery of Contemporary Art, June 1995
130 words. Typeset, 8 1/2" x 11" white paper

This was a wonderfully brief statement without any adamant approach by the artist. It accompanied photographs of Schwenkmeyer’s car, maps of commuting routes of her family members, and a small journal. “I examine the history or ‘auto-biography’ of my 1972 Volkswagen bug as a way of exploring my family’s work history and intergenerational values. . . I take on the role of cultural observer mapping routes, examining visual details of my car for clues as artifacts of this history,” stated the artist, leaving the results of that exploration to be interpreted by the viewer.

The content of the statement, however, differed from the content of the exhibition. The car was not portrayed as a family member, but was, instead, dissected by detailed photography. The transition between home site and work site, the mindless autopilot, and the effect of repetitious driving on generations were topics mentioned in the statement, but not addressed in the art work. No information was given about the artist, who is from California and is not well known in Alaska.

“Porn Studies 1973-1993” Steve Heibel

Gallery of Contemporary Photography, Spring 1995
750 words. Typewritten, 8 1/2" x 11" white paper

The statement successfully treated the exhibition as a single entity, and did not focus on any individual works. Heibel clearly expressed his opinions about pornography (“force of persuasion...closely linked to cultural pathology”) to support his collages containing old pornographic publications. He successfully compared the used materials common to the collage medium to the dated appearance of the subject matter.

What followed was a lengthy discourse of art theory that, in tone and length, lectured the viewer. Heibel attempted to connect “corporations indulging their barbaric vanities,” the bourgeoisie, “- textbook barbarians,” wealthy burghers, and the French Revolution with sixteen famous artists who figured into the artistic lineage of his own work. “Porn Studies” was said to be part of the struggle against a plot of “trivialization.” “Look again to the collages,” charged Heibel. “We’re not done putting moustaches on the Mona Lisa yet!” The length and the availability of copies to viewers suggested that Heibel used the exhibit to expound broader theories.

“Inspiration” Lana Elton

Kaladi's Upstairs Gallery, August 1995
100 words. Typeset and oversized with color added.

In less than 50 words, Elton described why she chose to make masks and how they universally symbolized the major choices in life that people make for themselves. Even in this incredibly succinct statement, the last sentence, “I hope they speak for themselves,” was unnecessary. The statement also included her academic background in the arts and some biographical points of inspiration which edged toward cuteness (making mud pies as a child). Graphically, the statement contained a color photograph of the artist, and a design that used large, easily read type. Whether the graphics were too fussy for an artist’s statement can be debated; the effect of this straightforward statement was that the viewer knew the artist and why she made masks.