



Writing an Artist's Statement

by Ariane Goodwin (as printed in Ceramics Monthly May 1998)

Working on an artist's statement can be deeply trying, so much so that even the most responsible, professional artist never even begins the process. The statement lingers, in an unformed lump, on an invisible shelf of "marketing shoulds."

There are several reasons for this, the most daunting of which is the writing itself. Sure, you know an artist's statement is a good marketing tool. You know that people who love your work want to know more about you. You know that offering your audience more ways to connect with you increases their delight in what you do, and the perceived value of your work. But, you protest, there are all those words.

Right you are. An artist's statement is all about words, which are a completely different language than wedging and shaping, glazing and firing. Clay is in the world of our senses; while words are the landmarks of our mind, once removed from sight and touch.

Sometimes, when the world of words captures our world of senses, we feel a delight in the connection. After all, we have lived longer with words than we have with clay in our hands. Think about it: what is more organic to humans than language? Our first intentional sounds proclaim us as individuals even before our first baby steps. So why is it that as adults, who have found a place in the world with what pleases us most (clay), one of the fundamental connections to that deep pleasure (our words) eludes us as soon as the idea of writing an artist's statement pops up?

I imagine that a combination of art critics and formal education has something to do with this. One promotes language, in service to noble judgments (the emotional emphasis here is on "judgments"), and the other unwittingly teaches us to mistrust words. In school, someone else told us when, where and how we could, or could not, use which words to communicate in writing. This mistrust smolders, mostly unnoticed, until our words are thrust into a context where they can be judged (criticized) by others, as in an artist's statement.

Often, when we sit down to write a statement, every thought we ever had about our work vanishes. We are convinced that we have nothing to say about our own work, or certainly nothing of value. Sometimes, we toss our unformed thoughts into a mental scrap bucket, turn out the light, and head out of the studio. Or we fake it, ending up with insubstantial or overblown words masquerading as us.

There is an alternative response. Begin with the thought that you have a lot to say that is neither self-important nor trivial, but relevant, revealing and wonderful. Because, the good news is: you can use your own words. There is an unself-conscious language that you use all the time when thinking or talking about your work. The trick is to learn how to catch yourself doing it, then faithfully write it down.

Why bother? An artist's statement builds a compelling bridge between you and your audience. For the buying public, the artist's statement provides a better understanding of the work and more reasons to take your pots home. For you, the statement gives you one more way to validate what you do.

Working with clay and writing an artist's statement are kindred activities. In both cases, you need raw materials, a commitment to set aside sufficient time, patience with yourself and a willingness to practice. You did not learn to throw or handbuild in one sitting; nor will you learn to write an artist's statement in one sitting. But when that first statement sits gleaming in your hand, the satisfaction will be the same.



Getting Started

To begin, gather the necessary raw materials:

1. A spiral notebook (if you like lined paper), or a folder (if you like unlined typing paper), or a beautifully bound leather journal encrusted with jewels; they all work equally well.
2. A favorite writing implement (pen, pencil, magic marker or keyboard), one that lets your hand, and thus words, flow across the page.
3. A timer (for two- and three-minute writing exercises).
4. Uninterrupted time (two hours is good).

Warming Up

Timed writing exercises are wonderful for warming up. Writing fast eliminates cautious thought (a creativity killer), reduces internal censorship and trims away excess, pushing us to center on what is essential. Treat it like a game, where you are trying to beat the clock. The great thing about writing is that, like claywork, you can scrap (crumple up the paper or hit the delete key) awkward first efforts and start again. Nothing is lost, and your writing "muscle" grows stronger with each mistake.

- Set your timer for three minutes.
- Then, without thinking about spelling, grammar, punctuation or your Aunt Martha, tell a friend about your work. Work as quickly as is comfortable.
- When the timer goes off, stop. You probably will not be able to resist reading what you wrote, but absolutely do not erase, edit or do anything else to change it.
- Put it in the back of your writing folder; or if you are using a journal, turn the page and fasten it with a paper clip; or if using a word processor, save the file. What is important here is that you wrote, not what you wrote.

Silencing the Inner Critic

Before you begin writing in earnest, there is one critical detail to attend to. Just as you want clay to be free of imperfections, you want the process of writing your artist's statement to be free of your inner critic, who is as potentially damaging to your work as any trapped air.

- Close your eyes and imagine your internal critic. Who appears on the scene when you have to write? For me, it is my eighth-grade English teacher, with her rigid back and her rigid relationship to language. Sentence diagrams lorded over her narrow kingdom. Words that flowed like liquid silk over my tongue, expired daily on her blackboard.
- Still with eyes closed, bring this internal critic of yours into full view. Firmly, authoritatively, but respectfully, give your internal critic its marching orders. Carefully explain—ignore sputtering and interruptions—that you are going to work on writing and that, as much as you will need your critic's help later on for revisions, right now the critic must find something else to do.
- Escort your critic outside the room; leave her/him in the hall with crayons or clay, or climbing a tree, whatever (but be specific). Come back into the room and open your eyes.

Enjoy the peace and calm, but be watchful. Your job is to remain alert and catch your critic sneaking back to whisper that you are not good enough, or smart enough, or honorable enough to do this good work. Periodically, you may have to escort your critic back outside. This is a new relationship, and no self-respecting critic easily gives up ruling the throne of judgments.

This exercise is good for any time you set about writing anything. It only takes a minute or two to establish these internal boundaries and effectively rein in the judgmental part of yourself. It is also fun to see how this benefits other areas of our lives.

Reservations/Motivations

The next two exercises continue clearing away the obstacles to hearing our own language:

- Set the timer for two minutes.
- Write down every reason why you cannot, should not or will not write a statement. Mince no words; forget about complete sentences. Just fume and fuss! Here's where you get to meet the Doubt Dragons face to face; when exposed on paper, their potency dissipates.
- After two minutes, stop.



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Now that you have all your reservations listed, move on to motivations:

- Set the timer for two minutes.
- Quickly, write down every reason you can, should and will write an artist's statement. Be as fanciful and playful as you wish. Here, you have the opportunity to engage large visions, and affirm why you are doing this, sending a powerful message of intent to your best ally, your sub/super-consciousness.
- After two minutes, stop.

Again, put these exercises away. You have done what you needed to do. In the beginning, process is everything and the product (the artist's statement) is still just a glimmer in your mind's eye.

The Product

Your ability to write an artist's statement will improve with practice. Just as your work grows and changes, so will your artist's statement.

An artist's statement is not a résumé, a historical summary of your work, a critique or a list of accomplishments. An artist's statement is a celebration of your work, a reflection on your work, a personal revelation about your work, a psychological bridge between you and your audience, and an effective marketing tool.

To write an artist's statement, you will need to tap into the natural language of your mind, for you and only you can tell what and how and why you do the work you do.

One way to capture these words about your work is to overcome any self-consciousness that pops up when you try to write about yourself. Timed writing exercises are perfect for this. At the same time, they should give you an abundance of fresh words from which to choose for your statement.

The following exercises are designed to engage the imagination, putting the focus on playfulness and your creative spirit. Do them one at a time, over a few days, or all at once. By casting a large net, you could come up with a record catch, but be grateful for any keepers.

Statement Writing Exercise 1

- With eyes closed, imagine you are in your studio and suddenly one of your pieces starts to talk to you.
- Set the timer for three minutes.
- Write down everything the piece says, no matter how absurd; just keep your hand moving across the page. Allow yourself to be awkward. It's the beginner's way. Tell yourself that you are free to write absolute junk!

Statement Writing Exercise 2

- Close your eyes and imagine that someone from your childhood, whom you have not seen for a long time, comes into your studio while you are working.
- Set the timer for three minutes.
- What do you want to tell this person about your work? Write like one possessed. So much to tell; so little time.

Statement Writing Exercise 3

- With eyes closed, imagine a piece of your work has come to life in the studio. What does it do?
- Set the timer for two minutes.
- Write for the child in you, the one who loves adventures and magic.

Catching the Abundance

An artist's statement is a lifelong process, evolving alongside your work. It will grow and change, becoming a significant contribution to the totality of your artistic story. The important thing is to keep casting your net. Let your wild child create your own zany timed writing exercises on a weekly basis.

Tote around a small, spiral notebook in which you can jot down any phrase that comes to you in a



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conversation, a dream or daydream, in the car, in the studio, in the shower, anywhere inspiration strikes.

Include personal comments in your technical notebook. What were you thinking as you applied that last glaze, or centered that large platter, or unloaded the kiln at dawn?

Enlist a friend to talk with you about what you do and why; take notes or record the conversation. Often we say the perfect thing to someone else. Be ready to catch your words before they vanish downstream.

Pluck out quotes, of your own, that appear in any articles written about your work. The following quotes came from *Ceramics Monthly* (May 1998). If I was either of these artists, I would send out every one of my pieces accompanied by these compelling words. See if you agree:

I know that truly good pots owe more to the generosity and spirit with which they are made. Imparting this spirit in pots is infinitely more difficult than simply making well-crafted pots. It requires focus tempered with an affection for what I am making.—Cary Hulin

Clay takes you back to the source.—Dennis Smith

Nothing should block us from writing about our work, being clear about what makes it unique. With a little exercise and occasional note taking, an artist's statement should easily take shape.

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