

The Information that I Sought Out: A Genre Study of the Artist Statement

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Kayla Scott has created a genre study of the artist statement by approaching it as something that changes with the needs of society. From manifesto to artist statement to a genre with conflicting views and uses, this article moves through the artist statement using books, interviews, surveys, and looking at the work of professional artists.

Introduction

The further along one moves with their education the more clear it becomes that no two disciplines are entirely independent. Academic subjects interact, mingle, and sometimes work hand in hand as one looks deeper. For example, subjects such as math and science are separated in primary school, however, it is true that some understanding of math is necessary to truly understand science (i.e. chemistry and physics require mathematical calculations). On the surface we may see the differences and perhaps some similarities between disciplines, art and literature for example, are somewhat similar due to their ability to express. However, a closer look reveals that these two disciplines have even more in common and more dependence on each other than meets the eye.

In its own right, art is a language of sorts, it is used to communicate and transfer ideas and messages between artist and viewer. There comes a point when not every person understands this “language,” and in these cases, an artist is put in a situation where they must attempt to change visual

communication into verbal and/or written communication in the form of an artist statement.¹

The artist statement is becoming an essential piece of writing within the artistic sphere. The idea that “art speaks for itself,” which used to be a consensus, is now threatened with the need for communication between artist and viewer (Detterer 1999, 13). Many instructors teaching higher level art still believe that the art should speak for itself and that the artwork is of upmost importance, not the writing.² In some cases this is true, particularly when the message portrayed in a work of art is either completely “in your face” and the message is obvious, or the message is surface level and not meant to raise any level of higher thinking.³ However, if one is to truly understand an artist’s work from the artist’s perspective, a greater need for communication is needed (in the form of writing or speech).

The Artist Statement: Changing With the Needs of Society

Looking back at fads in art history, in my research I learned that a rise in publicity began in the twentieth century with the introduction of manifestos and a decline in private letters and journals, which previously had been the only type of writing based upon art. New forms of art like Futurism and Dadaism strove to create a correlation between art and everyday life; this along with an increase in production of conceptual art created a greater need for communication between artist and viewer. Previous to these movements, art had a very specific place and a specific job. From what I gathered, generally art was created for a religious purpose: to portray some message (e.g. do not sin or you will go to hell and here is a picture of hell). Obviously art has changed and evolved creating a broader audience and an increase in conceptual ideas represented in art. When the message was not as clear as in previous artwork and the audience became a wider public, some saw a need for communication becoming more essential to truly understanding the artist’s goals or the artwork itself.⁴

This need for communication gave rise to the use of manifestos⁵ and statements. This type of writing can aid in the process of tracking the

¹In this article, the term artist statement refers to writing that accompanies artwork; this term may be used more loosely when being applied to other types of writing that accompanies artwork such as supportive statements.

²This consensus is found within comments from instructors collected in a survey regarding writing of artist statements within arts programs by W.F. Garrett-Petts and Rachel Nash.

³It should be mentioned that this is not always true; the intention of this statement is that when the message is simple, art can very clearly speak for itself without any form of writing (an artist statement) to accompany it.

⁴This is especially true in cases of more radical artwork like the Futurists and Dadaists; these artists were creating abstract works entirely new for the time as well as entering urinals into art exhibitions and calling it “art.”

⁵A manifesto is a statement by a single artist or a group of artists who set out to change the status quo. Their attempt to change the world, or at least the preconceived conventions of art, is laid out in a piece of literature typically performed in a theatrical way or printed on the front page of a newspaper.

trajectory of the artist statement. The genre of the artist statement is fluid and ever-changing to meet the needs of society; as a result, the trajectory is ongoing. The purpose of manifestos and statements is to make transparent the creation of art as a deliberate and thought out process. Artists also wanted the viewers to understand why they were creating the type of art they were, especially when the art seemed as if it was not entirely art. Deriving from the manifesto, the artist statement and its ancestor have similarities as previously noted. Both types of writing are public and aimed toward providing clarity to a body of artwork.

Methodology

I want to know everything about the artist statement, I want to understand the why's and what's of the artist statement. To do this I needed to understand the cultural context, and I also needed to understand this genre as something that changes in time due to the needs of society. In addition to the history, I wanted to know about its presence and usage today, and I wanted to understand what people think of it now.

In order to find this out, I worked through multiple research methods including both primary and secondary research. While conducting my own writing research project on the genre of the artist statement, I started by asking faculty and students from the School of Art at Illinois State to complete a survey consisting of ten questions. Twenty full and complete responses were collected through this survey, providing me with the background information I needed to further understand what the working artists at Illinois State were thinking in relation to the artist statement. In addition, I conducted interviews with six individuals with varied educational levels and experience (subjects included undergraduates, graduate students, and professionals). These interviews consisted of five questions in order to go in depth into the process of creating as well as their view of the artist statement. These research steps provided me with more clarity and background in relation to the genre of the artist statement, but they also provided me with more questions and more avenues for exploration.

The Information that Already Existed in the World

I spent some time reading a few books about manifestos and artist statements, surfed the web a little, and I found that much of the research available on the artist statement reflects a “how to” type of writing instruction, complete with either a step-by-step process or suggestions on what to include when writing

an artist statement. Generally, from what I found in these instructions, the overall consensus is that when you are writing an artist statement you should be objective, receive help from peers, avoid bullshit and art speak (i.e., do not be verbose), keep your audience in mind, and remember to be sure that your artwork and your artist statement line up.

I think that the most likely explanation for the large quantity of articles and research related to the creation of the artist statement is the increase in necessity of this type of writing. In the modern era, writing about one's own artwork in the form of an artist statement is seen as essential to creating a relationship between the artist and viewer as well as practical means to apply for a grant, scholarship, or gallery show. Any type of application for an art scholarship or artist residency requires some form of artist statement for the application to be considered. In addition, a gallery will typically ask an artist whose work they are showing for their artist statement for promotional materials and a press release. From what I understand, the purpose of providing an artist statement in these different situations is for an artist to prove the art they are making is worthy of recognition.

W. F. Garrett-Petts, a researcher in the field of interarts practices, describes the artist statement as “part opportunity and part obligation” (Inside TRU, 2005). In essence, what he is saying is that the artist statement is not only an obligation as an artist, but also an opportunity; an opportunity to justify, legitimize, provide clarity, prove worthiness, or whatever else the artist would like to give insight to. The question now lies with which “part” of this is more important and who is it that shares that belief?

As mentioned earlier, a range of people, typically an older generation, believe that “art speaks for itself.” In this regard, the artist statement is either completely unnecessary or at least understood to be on the “part obligation” side of Garrett-Petts’ belief. However, some instructors at the college level believe writing artist statements is important for self-reflection and discovery. For example, Brenda Pelkey says that artists have a responsibility not “to be dumb [or dumbfounded]” in front of their own creations (Garrett-Petts, 2011).

Why the Artist Statement Differs from Other Genres

I believe that the artist statement differs from some other genres because the parameters are flexible and the perfect model is nonexistent. There is no set in stone formula, there is no word limit—there is only a sort of wishy-washy “this is how this should look, kinda.” The purpose of an artist statement is to provide understanding, but how to do that is left up to the artist/writer. Some artists opt to use their statements to give a background story to the artwork, or

to explain what happened to make them create this type of work. Some artists choose to give insight into the process of creating the art. Others choose to use their artist statements to communicate their intentions (i.e., what they want their viewers to see) and perhaps their inspiration.

In my research I discovered that Jackson Pollock is an example of an artist who gives insight into the process rather than the content of his artwork. Jackson Pollock read his artist statement over the radio, stating: “I feel nearer, more a part of the painting [when it is on the floor] since this way I can walk around it.” He also mentioned that he uses tools like “sticks, trowels, knives, and dripping fluid paint” in order to create his paintings which have “a life of [their] own” (Namuth, 1951). In this instance the art is still completely independent in meaning, the viewer must still interpret the work fully on their own, but the process of creation is made much clearer by the words of Pollock himself.

When creating an artist statement there is a lot of decision making that an artist has to do. An artist must decide what their artwork needs in terms of an artist statement. The process of **representation** of the artist statement, or the things we do and think in order to produce an artist statement, first and foremost includes the artwork itself. The artwork is the basis for creating this genre. Questions that might be considered include: What kind of information does the viewer need in addition to the artwork? And, how much of the information is already in the art?

The Information that I Sought Out

The results of my own research are giving me a clearer image of what people in the field, students and professionals, feel about the artist statement. By focusing my efforts on artists at Illinois State University, I have found that the art program here is one of the more writing intensive art programs with a major emphasis on supportive statements within both the Bachelor of Fine Arts and Master of Fine Arts degree programs. For example, Jo Hart, a graduate student in the Ceramics Program whom I interviewed, mentioned that she had been out of academia for a while before beginning her Master’s degree. From day one at Illinois State the professors started talking about artist statements which was challenging for her, considering she had not created an artist statement prior to this.

I also discovered that undergraduate students recognize the importance of artist statements, however, their writing is still developing. Marisa Boyd, an undergraduate painting student whom I also interviewed, mentioned that she found it difficult to write an artist statement her freshman year. Her artwork consisted of mostly fundamental classes where her artwork did not match up with a conceptual basis. The realization that an artist statement

was important was there, however, the content needed to create one was missing. Marisa explained that she found herself beginning a genre study of her own; it can be found that many young artists engage in genre study without the terminology. Learning how to write an artist statement, for most, seems to begin with simply looking at the types of writing already out there. Galleries, artist websites, professors, all serve as resources for finding genre examples and for developing an understanding of this type of writing. Now a sophomore, Marisa says that she is more in tune with what she believes should be in an artist statement. For her it is about communicating her intention, to create a psychological space, and leaving out the unnecessary, such as evoking emotion and process, which to her seems vague and unimportant.

Through my survey I found that many artists do not believe all artwork needs an artist statement. There seems to be a differentiation in regards to artist statements and representational or more abstract artwork (i.e. the more abstract work may be in more need of an artist statement). I also found that many respondents leaned toward answering “it depends.” As in, it depends on the intentions of the artist, it depends on the content, and it depends on the situation whether or not an artist statement is needed.

Andrew Bybee, an undergraduate painting and graphic design major, mentioned in our interview that he feels our educational system forces students to believe an artist statement is always necessary. In actuality, he believes that it is really about what the art needs. He says, “the artwork already has a little bit of a literary companion with the title, and in most cases, that is sufficient” (personal communication, May 3, 2015).

How Artists are Using the Artist Statement as a Tool

When researching and thinking about artist statements in the context of academia, it became clear that the artist statement can be used as an educational tool. The undergraduate students that I interviewed expressed uneasiness with the amount of emphasis put on artist statements. However, they also understood the importance of learning how to write one and the value of practicing writing one. Being given an assignment to write an artist statement forces the artist to take a step back and look at the art being made. They are put in a situation where they must make sure the art and the writing line up and tell a similar story. Dillon Welch, a graduate printmaking student whom I interviewed, acknowledged that writing is a part of her process. She takes a step back and looks at her artwork, then writes about it, and at some point her writing may get ahead of her artwork and so it creates a sort of leapfrog effect where she is constantly caught between the two.

In the context of the larger art world, the artist statement is used as a tool for interpretation. The artist statement acts like the title, a supplement of information. Albion Stafford, assistant professor of ceramics and interviewee, says the “artist statement is a tool for seeing art; it is just as useful as a screwdriver to the person putting in a screw, but when the screwdriver is not being used it is simply in the way. The artist statement should not supplement interpretation, or provide all the answers; it is simply an aid in educating the viewer on how the artwork fits into the larger schema” (Personal communication, February 25, 2015).

Reception in this Genre

In order for this tool to work properly, the way an artist statement is written and the time at which viewers read them is an important factor in this genre. Considering the **representation**, **distribution**, and **reception** of an artist statement will help us discover different ways to create and use this tool. The artist statement is created from the artwork (representation), but the artist statement affects the way viewers interpret the artwork (reception) in the end. The distribution of the artist statement may have an effect on the way the artwork is received. The artist has no control over what the viewer will do, in what order, and what exactly they will read.

The following are two examples I have provided to make this discussion of the interaction of art and artist statements and reception more clear. Take a moment to read the artist statements and then look at the images (in the order they are shown to you), taking into consideration the effects this interaction might have on your reception of the art itself. I have also included questions after each example to help you consider how your reception is affected by the distribution.

Example One: The Artist Statement as the Driving Force

Julia Galloway is a utilitarian potter and professor; the statement below is from her own writing about the artwork that follows. After reading the artist statement, consider your own thoughts on the writing, your picture of what the work might look like, and what expectations you have.

Still life / Talking

In this exhibition there are two bodies of work; both are rooted in ideas of communication. Still life depicts communication between and about objects, and talking represents communication of letters, words, and binary code.

Still life: Similar to traditional still life paintings, the objects drawn on the surface of the pottery have a relationship with each

other and have specific meaning. Included are items such as an abundance of shiny apples in a basket or two birds squawking at each other in conversation. In these compositions one object leads you to the next, along the walls of the cups down to the bottom, and across to the other side of the cup.

Talking: In the surface decoration on these pots, I am using the alphabet and digital code to represent communication. I am interested in how the letters or numbers come to meet each other across the form, ride up or fall down the sides of the pot, ordered or jumbled, they mirror daily conversations.

Handmade pottery is naturally rich in ideas, metaphor and utility; it seeps into our houses, our kitchens, our rituals and enriches our lives. Through use and decorating the fill our living spaces with character and elegance. For me, pottery is joyous, a reflection of our reality, our fantasy and ourselves; objects of desire and daily life (Galloway, 2014).



Figure 1: This image is part of a copyrighted webpage by artist Julia Galloway. The link to the page can be found in the works cited section.

Questions to Consider Regarding Example One

1. While looking at this work, the two cups above (see Figure 1), consider how the information you were presented with affected the way you interpreted the work. Did the work meet your expectations after reading the writing?
2. Reflect on what happens when you read what the artist is thinking before you even see the work. What happens when you see that work? Does your mind trail off? Or are you focused on seeing what the artist sees?

Example Two: The Artist Statement as a Supplement of Necessary Information

Jeremy Brooks is a ceramic artist as well as educator; the following image (see Figure 2 below) is a snapshot from a performance-based artwork. Consider your own thoughts on the actions of the man, the image, the object in his hand, and the clothing he is wearing. Consider your own thoughts on the subject matter as well as questions for clarification.



Figure 2: This image is part of a copyrighted website by artist Jeremy R. Brooks. The link to the page can be found in the works cited section.

Title: “Controlled Substances”

Description: “Performance based object (cast medicinal clay equivalent to a single dose of medicine in the form of green ware). (This work is a functional /edible object that may be ingested to relieve stomach distress)” (Brooks, 2003).

Questions to Consider Regarding Example Two

1. What does your mind do with only the information provided, a picture and a description? Did you find yourself confused and ultimately uninterested? Or did the lack of information make you more curious? Were you able to make assumptions without supplemental information?

The following paragraph is a writing accompaniment to example two. In this scenario, the image has been laid out first, forcing you to draw conclusions from only the image and title. Clarification in the form of an artist statement is provided only after an initial read, and you may be persuaded to look back at the image after reading the statement to reconsider your own assumptions.

“Material Studies”

Description: “Clay is a material that is more often than not considered sordid or dirty, however applications in the fields of medicine and cosmetology create a complicated, but heightened awareness of clay as a component. It also reveals a duality that exists between itself, the attributes of cleanness, and its unsanitary counterpart. I am drawn to the inherent physicality of clay and the conflicted duality that would mutually consider it to be both sordid yet sanitary” (Brooks, 2003).

The Overall Consensus about Artist Statements

What I found through my research is that the general consensus of those interviewed and surveyed in the art community at Illinois State is that the viewer should first look at the artwork, then read the artist statement, and then go back and look at the artwork again. This allows for the viewer to make decisions about the artwork on their own, take in the title and the formal qualities without the weight of the artist statement. When the viewer is ready, they will receive some insight into the artwork through the artist statement. It is then that the viewer should take a second look at the artwork with a new outlook.

Of course, an artist is not in full control of this. No one is in full control of the reception of a genre. The artist statement is just one example of a genre that proves how important reception can be.

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Kayla Scott completed the 2014–2015 Grassroots Writing Research Fellowship by pursuing a genre study essential to her intended field. Scott's desire to investigate the academic art world has sparked an interest in writing research and interdisciplinary studies. She is currently finishing her last year at Illinois State as both a BFA and Art Education major and has plans to work in museum education. When she is not writing or in the studio, Scott is working as the Art Teacher Assistant at Metcalf and hanging artwork at University Galleries or giving a good attempt at organizing art teachers as the President of National Art Education Association.