

## Things to Consider When Writing About Your Work

Think about your reader.

If you're writing for everyone, you're writing for no one. What are you assuming about your reader? I like to assume that my reader is smart, engaged, and interested, but not entirely "inside." I imagine a good friend who is not an artist, but she goes to art events and is into art. She likes thinking about art and will talk about it intelligently if I engage her. She is cool but not aloof. We'll watch *Real Housewives of Beverly Hills* after we go to the openings.

Think about your tone.

The neutral-affect academic ART tone that many people automatically try to adopt might not be right for you. Should you match the tone of your writing to the tone of your work? Is your work elegiac? Aggressive? Tender? Could your writing achieve the same tonal quality?

Start with a bang! Do not start your statement with the word *I*. In fact, use the word *I* as infrequently as possible. Do not say "My work is about..." or "I am interested in..." or "My work is inspired by..."

Don't tell us what we already know about the world. What do only you understand or know or believe? What new ways of thinking does your work elicit? What new world do you create? What about your work is specifically yours?

Give us very little *what*, maybe some *how*, lots of *why*.

- + Do not spend too many words describing your work's formal qualities (an engaged and interested reader will see it for herself).
- + If your processes and methods are important, unique, strategic, packed with meaning - then by all means, talk about them. Don't tell us that painting is pulling a paint-loaded brush across a canvas. Do tell us that you use frottage techniques because rubbing is an essential aspect of your life and work.
- + To the extent that they are present, the *what* and *how* should point the reader toward the *why*. Definitely describe your intent, unpack your brain. Luxuriate in the *why*.

Avoid "international art english" - write like a real human person.

- + don't make up new nouns (visual becomes *visuality*, global becomes *globality*)
- + make sure your verbs are accurate (is the work really doing what you say it's doing? Really?)
- + avoid arty cliches - interrogate, discursive, ontology, encode, subvert, imbricate. Use the language you actually use when you talk to your friends about what you do.
- + adverbial phrases like "radically questions" and "emphatically supports" will quickly bog down your sentences
- + bring people in, don't shut them out
- + above all else, be clear and precise - edit ruthlessly toward this end

Be honest. Be sincere. Be assertive.

- + don't say "I hope to" or "my goal is to" - honestly evaluate what your work is doing and stake a claim
- + don't use the passive voice

- + it is ok not to know

If you make your art in the first person, also write about it in the first person, unless specifically asked to do otherwise.

### Exercises to Jumpstart Your Writing

1. Every time you go to your studio, spend five minutes when you start working and when you finish working looking at and writing about what you see. Don't edit or reread this writing, just let it flow and then put it away. After a week or two, read everything you've written and write again about patterns you notice, or intentions that connect your observations. What keeps coming up? Also notice what you're not saying. Keep doing this.

2. In light of your understanding of your work right now,

list:

20 adjectives that you want other people to use to describe your work

10 adjectives that you do not want other people to use to describe your work

the best things anyone has said about your work

the worst things anyone has said about your work

5 artists who are your mothers and fathers

1 artist whose work you hate

10 non-artist muses, objects of influence, juicy places

the most beautiful thing you can imagine in your studio

the most terrible thing you can imagine in your studio

answer:

Who is your art for?

Why do you make your work?

What is the ideal response to your work?

What's the best art you've ever made or done? Why?

What's the best art you've ever seen with your own eyes? Why?

Art is best when it \_\_\_\_\_.

Art is worst when it \_\_\_\_\_.

What about your work is better left unsaid? What about your work are you having trouble saying, though you know you should?

3. Write your statement as a few of the following:

diagram, joke or limerick, grocery list, poem, letter to your parent, love letter, fan letter, ransom note, eulogy, screenplay, instruction manual, song lyric (choose an appropriate genre), manifesto, recipe, syllabus, diary entry, confession, score, gameplan, script

What did that do to your tone? To your assumptions about your reader, or your work? Did you like that?

4. Write your statement in one sentence. What is essential?

5. Ask someone else to write your statement for you, maybe a child or your mortgage broker.

Remember that this is all subject to change, always, because you are subject to change and (if you're doing it right) your work will evolve. Revise your statements often. Keep old copies, but don't hold yourself to them. What you knew for certain then is hopefully wrong now.

## **Some Artists' Writings to Consider**

### **Louise Bourgeois, 1954**

An artist's words are always to be taken cautiously. The finished work is often a stranger to, and sometimes very much at odds with what the artist felt, or wished to express when he began. At best the artist does what he can rather than what he wants to do. After the battle is over and the damage faced up to, the result may be surprisingly dull—but sometimes it is surprisingly interesting. The mountain brought forth a mouse, but the bee will create a miracle of beauty and order. Asked to enlighten us on their creative process, both would be embarrassed, and probably uninterested. The artist who discusses the so-called meaning of his work is usually describing a literary side-issue. The core of his original impulse is to be found, if at all, in the work itself.

Just the same, the artist must say what he feels:

My work grows from the duel between the isolated individual and the shared awareness of the group. At first I made single figures without any freedom at all: blind houses without any openings, any relation to the outside world. Later, tiny windows started to appear. And then I began to develop an interest in the relationship between two figures. The figures of this phase are turned in on themselves, but they try to be together even though they may not succeed in reaching each other.

Gradually the relations between the figures I made became freer and more subtle, and now I see my works as groups of objects relating to each other. Although ultimately each can and does stand alone, the figures can be grouped in various ways and fashions, and each time the tension of their relations makes for a different formal arrangement. For this reason the figures are placed in the ground the way people would place themselves in the street to talk to each other. And this is why they grow from a single point—a minimum base of immobility which suggests an always possible change.

In my most recent work these relations become clearer and more intimate. Now the single work has its own complex of parts, each of which is similar, yet different from the others. But there is still the feeling with which I began—the drama of one among many.

The look of my figures is abstract, and to the spectator they may not appear to be figures at all. They are the expression, in abstract terms, of emotions and states of awareness. Eighteenth-century painters made “conversation pieces”; my sculptures might be called “confrontation pieces.”

### **Richard Tuttle, 1972**

Just as we have no concern for other people, we have no concern for ourselves. We have a common concern for infinity which we can only think of as indefinite, real, and in, absolute. To believe, as we do, that heaven exists for the chosen is a denial of everything and anything rational in the—small letter—universe. Therefore, I would say, that our denial of any principle less than equal to denial of reality is in itself greater than equal to that denial. Absolute positivism suffers from Utopian ideals, and there is not and never has been a reality greater than the excruciation of its absolute realization. If this be the case, we are left with nothing other than this impulse to impede ourselves. In other words, to go on. That is justification enough and motivation enough to causally/casually inflict our will upon others for brief periods, which I gather is the express purpose of my invitation to participate in documenta.

I hardly understand anything, much less anything important, but my inclination must, or seems to, have some significance in the world in which I am living. There is seldom any excuse as good as the excuse to be, and the fact that anyone (anyone else) can be motivated in that same direction comes as somewhat of a surprise. That this surprise quality is not only valuable to me but is also an exercise in the “art of living” causes me to wonder whether the mind’s viewpoint has anything to do with what is, after all, the exact viewpoint of its observation, or whether, in fact, that what we judge worth looking at is, in fact, even in our mind’s eye (there). It is however an estimatable fact that an artwork exists in its own reality and in that exists a certain cause and effect pattern which has baffled the ancients as well as myself. To make something which looks like itself is, therefore, the problem, the solution. To make something which is its own unraveling, its own justification, is something like the dream. There is no paradox, for that is only a separation from reality. We have no mind, only its dream of being, a dream of substance, when there is none.

Work is justification for the excuse.

### **Claes Oldenburg, 1961**

I am for an art that is political-erotic-mystical, that does something other than sit on its ass in a museum.

I am for an art that grows up not knowing it is art at all, an art given the chance of having a starting point of zero.

I am for an art that embroils itself with the everyday crap and still comes out on top.

I am for an art that imitates the human, that is comic, if necessary, or violent, or whatever is necessary.

I am for all art that takes its form from the lines of life itself, that twists and extends and accumulates and spits and drips, and is heavy and coarse and blunt and sweet and stupid as life itself.

I am for an artist who vanishes, turning up in a white cap painting signs or hallways.

I am for art that comes out of a chimney like black hair and scatters in the sky.

I am for art that spills out of an old man’s purse when he is bounced off a passing fender.

I am for the art out of a doggie’s mouth, falling five stories from the roof.

I am for the art that a kid licks, after peeling away the wrapper.

I am for an art that joggles like everyone’s knees, when the bus traverses an excavation.

I am for art that is smoked like a cigarette, smells like a pair of shoes.

I am for art that flaps like a flag, or helps blow noses like a handkerchief.

I am for art that is put on and taken off like pants, which develops holes like socks, which is eaten like a piece of pie, or abandoned with great contempt like a piece of shit.

I am for art covered with bandages. I am for art that limps and rolls and runs and jumps.

I am for art that comes in a can or washes up on the shore.

I am for art that coils and grunts like a wrestler. I am for art that sheds hair.

I am for art you can sit on. I am for art you can pick your nose with or stub your toes on.

I am for art from a pocket, from deep channels of the ear, from the edge of a knife, from the corners of the mouth, stuck in the eye or worn on the wrist.

I am for art under the skirts, and the art of pinching cockroaches.

I am for the art of conversation between the sidewalk and a blind man's metal stick.

I am for the art that grows in a pot, that comes down out of the skies at night, like lightning, that hides in the clouds and growls. I am for art that is flipped on and off with a switch.

I am for art that unfolds like a map, that you can squeeze, like your sweetie's arm, or kiss like a pet dog. Which expands and squeaks like an accordion, which you can spill your dinner on like an old tablecloth.

I am for an art that you can hammer with, stitch with, sew with, paste with, file with.

I am for an art that tells you the time of day, or where such and such a street is.

I am for an art that helps old ladies across the street.

I am for the art of the washing machine. I am for the art of a government check. I am for the art of last war's raincoat.

I am for the art that comes up in fogs from sewer holes in winter. I am for the art that splits when you step on a frozen puddle. I am for the worm's art inside the apple. I am for the art of sweat that develops between crossed legs.

I am for the art of neck hair and caked teacups, for the art between the tines of restaurant forks, for the odor of boiling dishwater.

I am for the art of sailing on Sunday, and the art of red-and-white gasoline pumps.

I am for the art of bright blue factory columns and blinking biscuit signs.

I am for the art of cheap plaster and enamel. I am for the art of worn marble and smashed slate. I am for the art of rolling cobblestones and sliding sand. I am for the art of slag and black coal. I am for the art of dead birds.

I am for the art of scratching in the asphalt, daubing at the walls. I am for the art of bending and kicking metal and breaking glass, and pulling at things to make them fall down.

I am for the art of punching and skinned knees and sat-on bananas. I am for the art of kids' smells.

I am for the art of mama-babble.

I am for the art of bar-babble, tooth-picking, beer-drinking, egg-salting, in-sulting. I am for the art of falling off a barstool.

I am for the art of underwear and the art of taxicabs. I am for the art of ice-cream cones dropped on concrete. I am for the majestic art of dog turds, rising like cathedrals.

I am for the blinking arts, lighting up the night. I am for art falling, splashing, wiggling, jumping, going on and off.

I am for the art of fat truck tires and black eyes.

I am for Kool art, 7UP art, Pepsi art, Sunshine art, 39 cents art, 15 cents art, Vatronol art, Dro-bomb

art, Vam art, Menthol art, L&M art, Ex-lax art, Venida art, Heaven Hill art, Pamryl art, San-o-med art, Rx art, 9.99 art, Now art, New art, How art, Fire Sale art, Last Chance art, Only art, Diamond art, Tomorrow art, Franks art, Ducks art, Meat-o-rama art.

I am for the art of bread wet by rain. I am for the rat's dance between floors. I am for the art of flies walking on a slick pear in the electric light. I am for the art of soggy onions and firm green shoots. I am for the art of clicking among the nuts when the roaches come and go. I am for the brown sad art of rotting apples.

I am for the art of meows and clatter of cats and for the art of their dumb electric eyes.

I am for the white art of refrigerators and their muscular openings and closings.

I am for the art of rust and mold. I am for the art of hearts, funeral hearts or sweetheart hearts, full of nougat. I am for the art of worn meat hooks and singing barrels of red, white, blue, and yellow meat.

I am for the art of things lost or thrown away, coming home from school. I am for the art of cock-and-ball trees and flying cows and the noise of rectangles and squares. I am for the art of crayons and weak, gray pencil lead, and grainy wash and sticky oil paint, and the art of windshield wipers and the art of the finger on a cold window, on dusty steel or in the bubbles on the sides of a bathtub.

I am for the art of teddy bears and guns and decapitated rabbits, exploded umbrellas, raped beds, chairs with their brown bones broken, burning trees, firecracker ends, chicken bones, pigeon bones, and boxes with men sleeping in them.

I am for the art of slightly rotten funeral flowers, hung bloody rabbits and wrinkly yellow chickens, bass drums and tambourines, and plastic phonographs.

I am for the art of abandoned boxes, tied like pharaohs. I am for an art of water tanks and speeding clouds and flapping shades.

I am for US Government Inspected Art, Grade A art, Regular Price art, Yellow Ripe art, Extra Fancy art, Ready-to-Eat art, Best-for-Less art, Ready-to-Cook art, Fully Cleaned art, Spend Less art, Eat Better art, Ham art, pork art, chicken art, tomato art, banana art, apple art, turkey art, cake art, cookie art...

### **Guy Laramee, date unknown**

Cultures arise, become obsolete, and are replaced by new ones. With the vanishing of cultures, some people are displaced and destroyed. We are currently told that the paper book is bound to die. The library, as a place, is finished. One might say: so what? Do we really believe that "new technologies" will change anything concerning our existential dilemma, our human condition? And even if we could change the content of all the books on earth, would this change anything in relation to the domination of analytical knowledge over intuitive knowledge? What is it in ourselves that insists on grabbing, on casting the flow of experience into concepts ?

When I was younger, I was very upset with the ideologies of progress. I wanted to destroy them by showing that we are still primitives. I had the profound intuition that as a species, we had not evolved that much. Now I see that our belief in progress stems from our fascination with the content of consciousness. Despite appearances, our current obsession for changing the forms in which we access culture is but a manifestation of this fascination.

My work, in 3D as well as in painting, originates from the very idea that ultimate knowledge could very well be an erosion instead of an accumulation. The title of one of my pieces is " All Ideas Look

*Joel Parsons*

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Alike”. Contemporary art seems to have forgotten that there is an exterior to the intellect. I want to examine thinking, not only “What” we think, but “That” we think.

So I carve landscapes out of books and I paint Romantic landscapes. Mountains of disused knowledge return to what they really are: mountains. They erode a bit more and they become hills. Then they flatten and become fields where apparently nothing is happening. Piles of obsolete encyclopedias return to that which does not need to say anything, that which simply IS. Fogs and clouds erase everything we know, everything we think we are.

After 30 years of practice, the only thing I still wish my art to do is this: To project us into this thick Cloud of Unknowing.

### **Georges Braque, date unknown**

In art, progress does not consist in extension, but in the knowledge of limits.

Limitation of means determines style, engenders new form, and gives impulse to creation.

Limited means often constitute the charm and force of primitive painting. Extension, on the contrary, leads the arts to decadence.

New means, new subjects.

The subject is not the object, it is a new unity, a lyricism which grows completely from the means.

The painter thinks in terms of form and color.

The goal is not to be concerned with reconstituting an anecdotal fact, but with constituting a pictorial fact.

Painting is a method of representation.

One must not imitate what one wants to create.

One does not imitate appearances; the appearance is the result.

To be pure imitation, painting must forget appearance.

To work from nature is to improvise.

One must beware of an all-purpose formula that will serve to interpret the other arts as well as reality, and that instead of creating will only produce a style, or rather a stylization...

The senses deform, the mind forms. Work to perfect the mind.

There is no certitude but in what the mind conceives.

The painter who wished to make a circle would only draw a curve. Its appearance might satisfy him, but he would doubt it. The compass would give him certitude. The pasted [papiers collés] in my drawings also gave me a certitude.

Trompe l’oeil is due to an anecdotal chance which succeeds because of the simplicity of the facts.

The pasted papers, the faux bois— and other elements of a similar kind— which I used in some of my drawings, also succeed through the simplicity of the facts; this has caused them to be confused with trompe l’oeil, of which they are the exact opposite. They are also simple facts, but are created by the mind, and are one of the justifications for a new form in space.

Nobility grows out of contained emotion.

Emotion should not be rendered by an excited trembling; it can neither be added on nor be imitated. It is the seed, the work is the blossom.

I like the rule that corrects the emotion.

### **John McLaughlin, 1970**

My purpose is to achieve the totally abstract. I want to communicate only to the extent that the painting will serve to induce or intensify the viewer's natural desire for contemplation without the benefit of a guiding principle.