

“A must read for artists.”

–David Ross,
former director

Whitney Museum of American Art
and current chair,
MFA Art Practice program,
School of Visual Arts

*A POST-PANDEMIC
GUIDE FOR ARTISTS*

Making It in the Art World

Strategies for
Exhibitions and Funding

**BRAINARD
CAREY**

Director of Praxis Center
for Aesthetics

SECOND EDITION

Making It in the Art World

REVISED SECOND EDITION

Strategies for
Exhibitions and Funding

A POST-PANDEMIC GUIDE FOR ARTISTS

BRAINARD CAREY



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The Artist's Statement and the Critic

CHAPTER FIVE

What I will tell you about an artist's statement will be different from what you will read in other books on the topic. New York art critic Jerry Saltz has a Facebook page, and one day he told all the artists that he would edit their statements on Facebook or give commentary. He got tons of replies and, for the most part, was very critical and even began cursing at artists and calling them mediocre! As a critic, he can often be mean and hurt people, but at the same time, the ones who are not getting hurt find that attractive. I mention this because I think it sheds some light on critics and how they will view your artist's statement and respond to it.

When I was in the Whitney Biennial exhibition, I was thrilled to find that Arthur Danto wrote about my work in *The Nation* and, in general, said wonderful things about the show. Danto was one of the most powerful art critics in the world. He has written many books on art, theory, and art history and is a profound thinker that many in the art world reference. I asked the curator at the Whitney why there were so many terribly angry reviews of the show in general, but Danto loved it. She said that Arthur Danto was very powerful and could write what he liked because he has nothing to prove. Isn't that an interesting thought? Perhaps the reason that some critics as well as artists can be so negative and even downright mean is to boost their own status because, in general, that impresses people. Kind of like the bully in the schoolyard—that is, if he isn't beating you up, you are lucky to consider him a possible friend. That is also an abusive relationship, so I am suggesting caution when dealing with critics and taking their advice. The reason to talk about that before I discuss how to

make a good artist's statement is that you should be interested in what others say about their work, be curious, be open, be aware that all the artists that have ever written statements are writing something very personal, and it should be handled gently, as this is all personal indeed.

Critics like Jerry Saltz are after power and will demean others to get it, while the best writers who have that power already can be more sensitive and generous in their approach.

OWNING A GALLERY

I owned a gallery for nine years, and in that time, I received hundreds of artist's statements. What I noticed were two things. Sometimes, many times in fact, if I liked the artist's work and then read the statement, I often changed my mind and didn't like what the artist was saying and, in turn, didn't like the work even though I had liked it initially. That is how powerful a good or bad artist's statement can be. Think again about the dating comparison. Let's say someone is interested in you and wants to date you, and he sends his picture. At first you think he is handsome and has a kind face. He describes himself as playful and intelligent, so you decide to write back. Then he sends you another letter with his personal statement or a little more about himself. Now he tells you more about how wonderful he is and all the sports he is involved in, how many awards he has won, where he has lived, why his marriage didn't work out, and his two kids, etc. Perhaps you will change your mind now, thinking this guy seems full of himself, and what do you care what awards he has won or about his ex-wife and his kids? Or perhaps you will feel differently, but the point is that when we present ourselves or our artwork, what we say about it carries incredible importance, because no matter what people think initially, they will reevaluate what they feel after you have explained or talked about your intentions.

THE TITLE OF AN ARTWORK

Words are amazing and powerful, and they can change the meaning of what we are seeing. Consider the now-infamous photograph by Andres

Serrano titled *Piss Christ*, in which a crucifix is floating in the artist's urine. When you look at the image itself, it is beautiful, a rosy color pervades, and we see a crucifix slightly out of focus looking romantic and, quite honestly, like a very Christian picture, a believer's picture. In fact, Andres Serrano is a Christian and a believer. It could hang on an altar and would seem appropriate. The only thing that made it controversial was what the artist said about it in the title. The artist stated in the title card on the wall that the image was taken of the crucifix in a jar of the artist's urine. Can you imagine looking at the image and thinking or feeling that it is beautiful and then hearing that it is actually in urine? The artist's statement has not only changed the way you see the picture, it also caused a huge controversy that made him world famous! What I find even more amusing is that we do not actually know if it was in fact in urine. It doesn't look like urine, and there is no proof that it is urine; it is simply what the artist said in his statement. That statement changed the entire meaning of the work.

A ONE-LINE STATEMENT

As I mentioned earlier, Marlene Dumas said, "I paint because I am a dirty woman."

As the artist's statement of an extremely well-known painter, hers is one you should pay attention to. It is brief, perhaps too brief, but it is also extremely successful because probably after reading this once, you will remember it and maybe even tell someone else. She is a painter who could have easily talked about how she uses the figure as a means to critique contemporary ideas of racial, sexual, and social identity, but she doesn't, and it is to her credit. What she has written is engaging, humorous, and sexy. We smile or laugh when we hear this, and it feels bold and aggressive as well. Of course she could write more about her work, but for the purposes of most artists' statements in applications, websites, and even exhibits, this works. Of course if she wants to explain more, or if she has a catalog coming out, more could be written about her work from different perspectives, like a historical, political, or philosophical context, but that is not necessary, initially.

Most artists struggle so much with their statement, and here is a way to be brief, not prosaic and dense, but simple, accessible, and engaging. The most important thing as with any text is to be engaging. When you begin an article in the newspaper, the first line has to grab you and make you want to read the rest. The same rules follow with an artist's statement. Some people advise that you hire a professional writer, but I think it isn't necessary in most cases. Just write. Write something that someone without an art background might understand.

ARTIST'S STATEMENTS FOR GRANTS AND AWARDS

Here is another way of approaching the statement. These two artists won a New York Foundation of the Arts grant, and I have never forgotten their statement. I came upon this when I was reading about the grant recipients, and they used the artist's statement to say a bit about what they had done. But first, let me explain how a jury for a grant usually works. As they look through hundreds, perhaps more, of applications, this is how it is presented. Usually in a fairly dark room, or from a computer screen, just before they see your images, they read your statement. So that means your statement should stand on its own, so that after it is read, the jury is thinking, "I can't wait to see this!" That is the feeling you want to create, not confusion or anything that lacks clarity.

Let's look at the statement by Suzzy and Maggie Roche, two singers who were trying to get a grant for a sound-experiment project.

Our new compositions were inspired by two tape recorded conversations. We studied the rhythms and tones of the two women and translated their vocal patterns and personal expression into a musical piece. We abandoned any preconceived notion of structure in order to follow the natural curve of their stories. After twenty years of writing songs, we have become increasingly interested in the way people speak, and intrigued by the idea that human voices are always singing.

Isn't that beautiful? If I were in the jury, I would be excited to hear what they were doing, and I would want to give them a grant if it were even slightly interesting; do you know why? Because even though I have no idea what their work sounds like, their approach is very poetic, and the last line is particularly beautiful. Their idea that human voices are always singing is absolutely beautiful. I want to believe that very much. It is affirming of life and art, and no matter what they do, I would want them to be able to continue their experiments. Wouldn't you? Also, note the length of their statement; it is quite short and to the point. This type of artist's statement is less a summing-up of all their art and more specific to one project, articulating their approach. This is a method to keep in mind because instead of writing something long and partially biographical, it gets right to the heart of the matter without overexplaining things or becoming dull.

THE TRAUMATIC STORY AS ARTIST'S STATEMENT

Another type of artist's statement is the biographical one that often includes a traumatic experience in the artist's life. The reasons this one can be very effective are several. Unlike Marlene Dumas's and the Roach sisters', this one tells the story of a very personal and traumatic experience that helps the audience to understand the artist's work.

If you are not familiar with the work of Joseph Beuys, he was a German sculptor who was born in 1921 and died in 1986. Some of his more well-known works consisted of a chair with animal fat on it as well as felt. He used felt in many forms—as a suit, and piled up in layers—and for most, it was very abstract and not easy to understand.

The story he wrote is another type of artist's statement, which I have reproduced below. It is about a traumatic event in his life during World War II.

Had it not been for the Tartars I would not be alive today. They were the nomads of the Crimea, in what was then no man's land between the Russian and German fronts, and favored neither side. I had already struck up a good relationship with them, and

often wandered off to sit with them. “*Du nix njemcky*,” they would say, “*du Tartar*,” and try to persuade me to join their clan. Their nomadic ways attracted me of course, although by that time their movements had been restricted. Yet it was they who discovered me in the snow after the crash, when the German search parties had given up. I was still unconscious then and only came round completely after twelve days or so, and by then I was back in a German field hospital. So the memories I have of that time are images that penetrated my consciousness. The last thing I remember was that it was too late to jump, too late for the parachutes to open. That must have been a couple of seconds before hitting the ground. Luckily I was not strapped in—I always preferred free movement to safety belts. . . . My friend was strapped in and he was atomized on impact—there was almost nothing to be found of him afterwards. But I must have shot through the windscreen as it flew back at the same speed as the plane hit the ground and that saved me, though I had bad skull and jaw injuries. Then the tail flipped over and I was completely buried in the snow. That’s how the Tartars found me days later. I remember voices saying “*Voda*” (Water), then the felt of their tents, and the dense pungent smell of cheese, fat, and milk. They covered my body in fat to help it regenerate warmth, and wrapped it in felt as an insulator to keep warmth in.

—Joseph Beuys

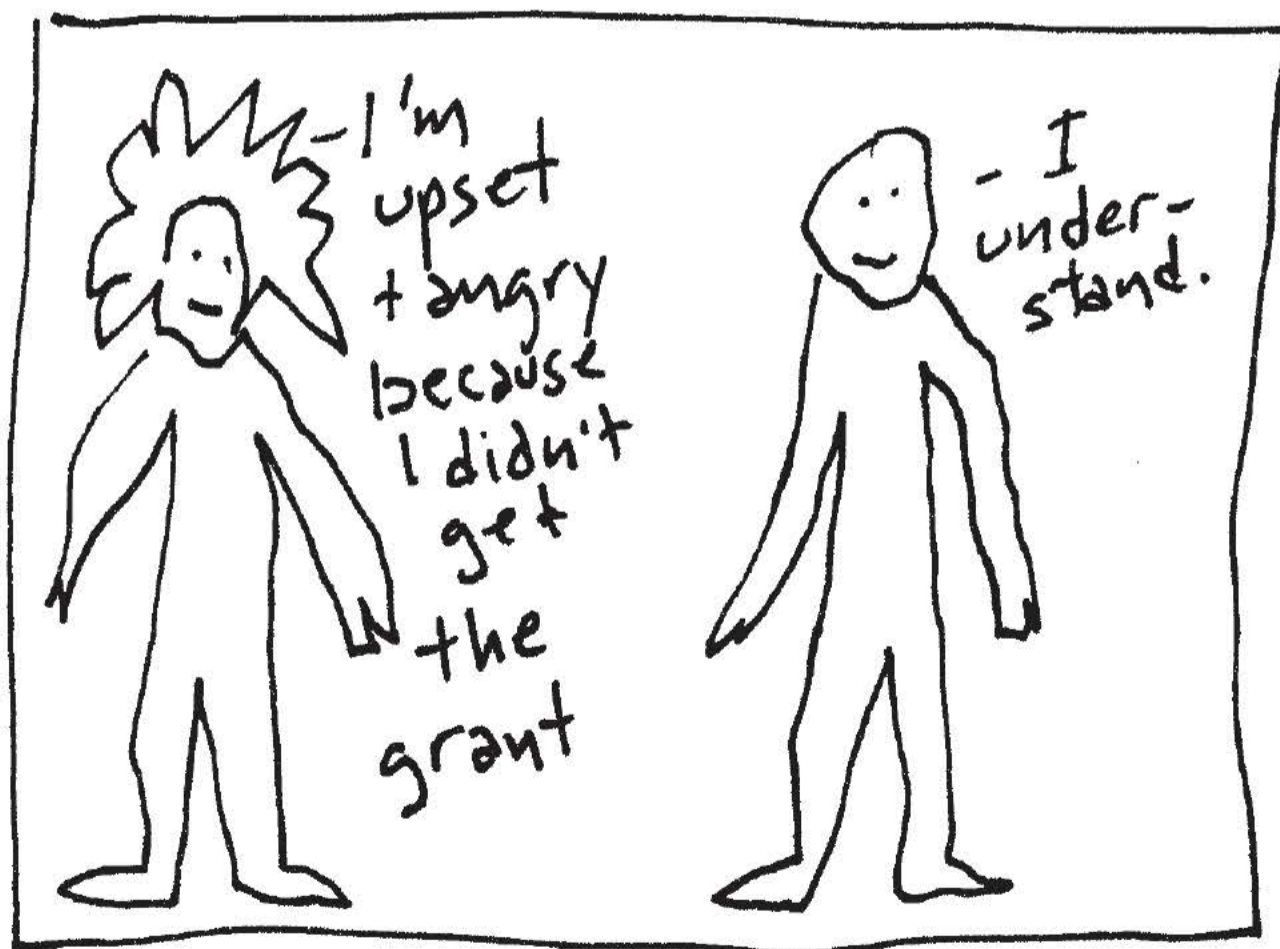
THE STORY: WHERE FACT MIXES WITH FICTION

That is a gripping story from the first sentence; it draws you in and hints at the life-and-death situation we are about to read, to the dramatic ending with a last line that speaks to his materials. However, after reading this story, you can then look at his work, his use of felt as well as animal fat, and it takes on a new meaning. In fact, it tells a story; it is not abstract, but rather illustrative of why he uses those materials! Now the abstract work seems filled with life and death and the struggle to survive. You have

a clear insight into his work, and looking at it reminds you of his story. He also wrote a résumé that was highly unusual. Instead of listing exhibitions, he started with his birth, calling it “Kleve exhibition of a wound drawn together with an adhesive bandage.” He went on to create a résumé that was in itself a work of art, or at least a work of nonfiction artfully done! Let’s go back to his statement and look more closely at what he has done here. At the very least, he has told a compelling story. When I lecture and talk about his statement, I often read this story aloud to the audience, and I almost always get audible gasps when I read the part about his plane crashing and the copilot dying on impact. Again, like a good novel, this text brings in the reader and leaves them affected by the words in a powerful way.

FACT-FINDING

However, parts of this story were probably made up. Apparently, research shows there were no Tartars in that area at that time. And furthermore, eyewitnesses say the pilot died shortly afterward, and Beuys was conscious



and was taken to a hospital to recover for three weeks. Beuys was making his own myth about himself, and you can just as easily adopt this strategy even if you do not want to be a major figure in the art world as he was. Does that mean that you should make up a story about yourself? Possibly, but embellishment isn't out of the question, and this is straightforward myth-making and self-aggrandizement at that.

The point I am making with this example is that your statement can also begin to create a myth about yourself—that is, a fictional story that is mixed with the truth. If this appeals to you, then use it and experiment, and if it doesn't, use one of the other methods. The point of an artist's statement is simply to get the attention of the person you are showing work to or the institution that you are applying to for a grant, or for your average juried show. No matter which it is, it is important to make yourself stand out and look different from others who are competing with you in 250 words or less.

MORE ON THE CRITIC

As I said earlier, the New York art critic Jerry Saltz has a Facebook page, and at one point, he offered to edit people's writing if they posted their artist's statements. On his page, he said an artist's statement should be . . .

[written] in plain language. Keep it short, simple, to the point. Use your own syntax; write the way you speak. No platitudes! With giant abstractions (“nature,” “beauty,” “ambiguity”) say what you're doing with these big things. Or **AVOID** . . . them. Don't be afraid to be funny/weird, your stupid self! A glimpse of real self is powerful.

He is affirming much of what we are saying here, that you need to be straightforward to a large extent, and that you need to be clear. But what he is not saying is that you can also break the rules, as Beuys did, and make a story up that is compelling, edgy, and effective.

EDITORIAL HELP

I am not saying you should not seek the help of an editor. An editor can be very helpful indeed! All writers use editors, and even a friend who is a good writer can be of assistance.

After you finish your statement, show it to someone who will give you their honest opinion. Show it to someone who knows nothing about the arts and show it to a child and examine the responses you get. The statement should be understood easily by almost everyone. If it is difficult to understand, then something is wrong and should be adjusted. Ideally, it should also be very exciting or engaging so that it is memorable and makes one want to see the work.



WRITING YOUR STATEMENT

WORKBOOK SECTION 6

This is the fun part. Write your artist's statement!

Have fun with this and remember it could be short like Marlene Dumas's "I paint because I am a dirty woman," or mix fact with fiction like Joseph Beuys's did.

You can also write something sincere and real. But do not write something boring and all about the history of art or why you make art. If you can't think of anything interesting and engaging, write an incredible-sounding story that is at least fun to read!

The longest it should be is 250 words, and ideally, make it much shorter—like the length of a tweet.

It is OK to be quirky, strange, or neurotic here. The main idea is to write something interesting that people will not forget and that gives insight into who you are and what message you are conveying with your work.

Write it down here or use a separate page.

Optional: read it to a friend or post it on Facebook and ask people what they think.

A general rule of thumb is to keep it at 250 words or less, though these samples often break that rule; the shorter it is, the more likely it will be read at all.

Here are a few samples to get you going:

This one is by the artist Monika Bravo.

Lured from early age by philosophical questions, my work is influenced by Jungian psychology, Zen and Daoist practices. I offer a large body of work that ranges from moving images, photo objects to video interactive installations. Along with industrial materials, sound and technology I create objects/environments that allude to recognizable landscapes thus examining the notion of space/time. The viewer is induced to connect by exploring, interacting and at times by focusing on an object-place-scene for a duration of time in a manner that is both meditative and

investigative. These environments are short of a scripted storyline; in contrast I am interested in providing the viewer with the necessary elements and conditions for the production of a personal and intimate narrative. It is an art of seduction, illusion, and introspection, where subject and representation exchange and engage in conditions that can allow the mind to convey from one reality to the next without the limit of boundaries.

Something very different by Laura Owens. This statement is from a major New York gallery in a press release, but it breaks form for a press release. Notice how informal it is, but somehow interesting because it is so personal and sincere. I think this is too long for almost any purpose, but nevertheless it pulls you in, it tells you something.

To whom it may concern,

For this new body of work, I decided to move back to Ohio. I recently renovated my parents' garage and have been working in this new and also very old context. I grew up here and hadn't been back for any length of time since I was a teenager. It's been interesting. Election season, and Ohio suddenly feels like the center of the world. . . . I thought I had escaped, not so!

I was really disappointed to find out the Cleveland Art Museum would not be open until next year! They have traveling blockbuster shows in one part of the museum; but it is really nothing compared to the quantity and quality of their permanent collection. I made a concerted effort to try to find the location of the grocery store owned by my great grandparents, who were Bohemian and lived in Newburgh Heights, or Little Bohemia. I haven't found it (yet); but I did find the Bohemian National Hall and Cultural Museum.

As far as the work goes, in some ways it's all over the place. In other ways, it's getting more unified. . . . For instance, recently I have been paying a particular amount of attention to the edges of the canvas. Trying to get it to recede just a touch within the canvas through the way it

is primed and also delineating other rectangular shapes within the canvas to make additional edges. So it gives me more chances to cross the edges because in some cases there are two or three manufactured edges as well as the actual edge. I think this allows for more ways to talk about the space in the painting and three-dimensional space or actual space. Just saw a picture of Lichtenstein's Perfect/Imperfect paintings and this really resonated with me, his use of edges, although his seem more intentionally humorous.

In general I think the way I am working in many of the paintings comes out of a long term relationship I have in looking at Matisse . . . and more recently, the Matisses I saw at the Barnes collection a number of years ago—their surfaces, the drawing and the space, the triptych and the way the canvases relate . . . etc. In many ways I have been consciously trying to do this since around 2003; but I think it's only now I am really "getting it" in any real way.

I also had been a real nut for Marie Laurencin when I was in college. I just bought a catalog of hers. In many ways her paintings always fuzz out around the edges or create a lot of inner edges that are fuzzy and shifting. Sort of the opposite of Matisse in terms of structure, but similar in some ways to what I am thinking about.

So anyway with the idea of edges . . .

I also wanted to play around with the edges of the gallery. Where the work is in the gallery, thinking about the different spaces. Waking up some spaces, putting other spaces to sleep. This will be determined by the installation, and so it's sort of a whole lot of b.s. to tell you how it's working in a press release . . .

Also with the edges of the show . . . hoping to leave up some of Jenny's work . . . bring in some of Rob's . . . sort of to soften the edges of the show (in terms of time) . . . To not erase and break completely, but to get more close to what I see as reality . . . not cut nice and clean, but quite messy and gray.

So in this way I continue on with some sort of oblique collaborations. Edgar Bryan was asked to make the ad . . . recalling his years as an Air Force graphic designer. Also, I will be continuing the Faith/Failure continuum. A piece originated by Mungo Thomson, then remade by Florian Maier-Aichen, and then by Karl Haendel . . . I hope to take the piece out of the world of black and white . . . into the world of color, out of the world of paper, into the world of linen; and for the first time the piece will be made by a woman. Other collaborations will be included, some more obvious and some less obvious . . . but this is just to point out that the edges of my authorship are messy.

Go Bucks!

Laura Owens

This is from Amy Yao, and is more enigmatic, but that too is engaging, almost poetic:

What does it mean? Color use in the man-made environment, workplace, industry, hospitals etc. What is it they represent? He said: "Color is like politics." These religions—everyone has their own physiological, visual psycho-diagnostic testing, art nightmare. I, however, try to undergo ergonomic, neuropsychological, marketing, philosophy (and psychosomatic aspects of ornithology)—in short, the universe! Famed Faber Birren during the 2nd World War was able to reduce the accident rate in American factories for the guests! While the men went to war, women went to work.

This statement is from Lizzie Wright:

I am from southern Louisiana where there is a rare folk culture, which is thriving, but caught between a culture of sameness on one end and the fast approaching Gulf of Mexico on the other. It's a region where global problems of cultural homogenization and environmental destruction are particularly concentrated and magnified. There is an impermanence and sense of play there that makes Louisiana's culture so tragic and beautiful. I am

interested in the circle of life, illustrated there so poignantly. Experiencing natural disasters has lent my work an awareness of time, an urgency. I am interested in leisure time and the outdoors, in being adaptive, and in making do.

My work is both playful and dark. Coils of rope are decorative nautical arrangements and pools of blood or oil. Holes punctured in the work function as peep holes or children's games. I like to work with materials at hand: tin cans, food, scrap wood. I am drawn toward objects that can repeat to form patterns gesturing toward folk art and Minimalism. Recently I have become interested in cages and traps, after spending time crabbing down south. I admire the way crab traps rust over time, how they stack like bricks, and how birds pick them clean. When watching crabs in a trap, most of them are feasting on the bait, unaware of the danger they are in. Only the ones that have tried to get out realize that they have been blindsided. Cages can be protective too, like chain mail. I am interested in the ambiguity of appearances and the link between sinister and protective. We really never know what we are getting into until we are in it. In the sculpture, *It's a trap!*, the baguette is a phallic symbol that cracks jokes about the cliché of women trapping men. The baguette also suggests the romanticized life of the artist.

Problem Solved investigates a desire to appear official, representing a personal triumph over my failure to attach a potato to a poster in the fourth grade. At the time, the poster was the required vehicle for presenting information. Haunted by the memory of a potato lying on the ground beneath an empty poster before my presentation, the question, "Why didn't you think outside of the box/poster?" surfaced occasionally, but I suppressed it.

The Forest, The Forest, The Forest is composed of the first three pages of a Time-Life book. The pages carry the anxiety of a quickening culture. Rather than entering deep into the forest (or a book about the forest), we stand at its precipice, endlessly repeating while looking for the next big thing.

My favorite places to visit are national forests and parks, natural history museums, and cultural institutions. I feel that giant sequoias, mountains, marble statues, and pyramids are all in it for the long haul, making their mark, sharing with me a celebration of the wondrous and a collective fear of death and inconsequentiality. Marveling at their endurance is reassuring; however, the thought of spending so much time creating my own monument seems futile. The immediacy of my work shares in the experience of being here now, and all of the uncertainty and community that sentiment has to offer.

This is the artist's statement my wife and I used when we started to give out hugs and foot washings as art and called the project *The New Economy*. We made an analogy to software so we could avoid words like "love" and other clichés. It was brief:

Using the rhetoric of systems management, Praxis describes itself as a "software development team" that uses the bodies of Bajo and Carey as hosts with which to test their operating systems on others. By receiving the benefits of The New Economy project, participants become a part of Praxis's performance, and so choose to "download" the "shareware" created by Bajo and Carey, thereby integrating the altruistic spirit of Praxis into their own "systems." The wireless downloads are achieved through specific physical actions like washing feet and giving away hugs.

As you can see, there is clearly not a formula; the writing must simply be interesting and illuminating in some way, or you must read between the lines as in poetry.

Here are two more professional, brief statements by two major artists, both a bit wordy I think, but they work too:

SAM DURANT

My artwork takes a critical view of social, political and cultural issues. Often referencing American history, my work explores the varying relationships between popular culture

and fine art. Having engaged subjects as diverse as the civil rights movement, southern rock music and modernist architecture, my work reproduces familiar visual and aural signs, arranging them into new conceptually layered installations. While I use a variety of materials and processes in each project my methodology is consistent. Although there may not always be material similarities between the different projects they are linked by recurring formal concerns and through the subject matter. The subject matter of each body of work determines the materials and the forms of the work. Each project often consists of multiple works, often in a range of different media, grouped around specific themes and meanings. During research and production new areas of interest arise and lead to the next body of work.

MILLIE WILSON

I think of my installations as unfinished inventories of fragments: objects, drawings, paintings, photographs, and other inventions. They are improvisational sites in which the constructed and the readymade are used to question our making of the world through language and knowledge. My arrangements are schematic, inviting the viewer to move into a space of speculation. I rely on our desires for beauty, poetics and seduction.

The work thus far has used the frame of the museum to propose a secret history of modernity, and in the process, point to stereotypes of difference, which are hidden in plain sight. I have found the histories of surrealism and minimalism to be useful in the rearranging of received ideas. The objects I make are placed in the canon of modernist art, in hopes of making visible what is overlooked in the historicizing of the artist. This project has always been grounded in pleasure and aesthetics.

Feel free to be as creative as you want with this, because there are really no rules. However, try to stay away from writing about “why” you make art, and by default talk about your process and keep it at 250 words or less.