

GETTING YOUR SH*T TOGETHER

The Ultimate Business Manual For Every Practicing Artist

2nd Edition

By Karen Atkinson & GYST-Ink



Making life better for artists.

GETTING YOUR SH*T TOGETHER: THE ULTIMATE BUSINESS MANUAL FOR EVERY PRACTICING ARTIST

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Getting Your Sh*t Together

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GYST makes software for artists available for Mac and PC. Try it for free by visiting the GYST website at www.gyst-ink.com/buy, or email us at info@gyst-ink.com

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This book is dedicated to artists everywhere.

THANK YOU

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THANK YOU

THANK YOU

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The Getting Your Sh*t Together (GYST), pronounced “gist”, manual comes from years of experience teaching at the college level, as well as working with artists as a nonprofit director, a curator, editor, and public artist. Having these diverse experiences in the art world gave me insight into a lot of things artists are rarely taught, but need to know.

When I completed graduate school in the early 80’s, there was little support for emerging artists, women, people of color, and those making public and more conceptually-based work, but in the last 30- plus years, the art world has changed drastically. Students are now grabbed out of school before they graduate in order to begin working with a gallery. Graduate students often have shows outside of school. Collectors are concentrating on emerging artists because their work is inexpensive and easy to purchase. Artists who have just graduated rarely have time to develop their creative work, let alone to develop professional practices as an artist. Today, artists of all kinds need to be less naive about how the art world works in order to avoid being railroaded into doing things they don’t want to do, and, of course, getting screwed by unscrupulous people in power.

While founding and running Side Street Projects, an artist-led organization, I developed ways to educate artists for successful careers, whether they are independently producing artists or aspiring gallery stars. I began formally teaching these workshops and classes both at CalArts and throughout Los Angeles, and soon I was presenting the material around the country. Teaching this class “out in the world” has been a great experience, and quite different than teaching it at the university level, where the range in age can be as great as the range in the kinds of artists who take the class.

After many years of teaching and sharing my syllabus with countless institutions and teachers, I created software for visual artists to keep track of everything in their art lives. Much of the information written for the software is included in this artist manual, which has been created in response to repeated requests for this valuable information to be compiled into a readily-available, user-friendly form.

The GYST goal? Awareness, knowledge and tools for practical application so that artists can act on their own behalf (without paying good money for someone else to do it for them), and be a vital part of their own careers. I want artists to understand how things work so they can educate their dealers and other arts administrators.

GYST’s mission is to make life better for artists, and this manual is one of the key ways we support that mission.

If you have further questions, don’t hesitate to contact me at info@gyst-ink.com. I look forward to any feedback you have regarding this publication, as well as any suggestions or additions you may have. Otherwise, good luck and never quit.

- Karen Atkinson
- Founder, GYST Ink (Getting Your Sh*t Together)

Every artist's situation is different. Schools vary widely as to what you may have been exposed to or taught. Nonprofit organizations, too, range from the conservative to the conceptual and address a wide range of ages and issues.

This manual is divided into versatile modules that can be used in the order that you feel best serves you. You don't need to use every module. Some of these ideas are for beginning artists, or for those who have little or no experience talking about their work. Other modules are more appropriate for mature artists. For example, your practice/institution/situation may already include a lot of time talking about and critiquing work, so you won't necessarily need to schedule time to present your work to your class/friends as part of the Presenting Yourself module.

You can use this manual by itself or in conjunction with the GYST software, which has a large database of files, including an artwork inventory, a place for your artist statements, résumés, exhibition forms, etc. For more information see our website at www.gyst-ink.com, or email info@gyst-ink.com. A demo version of the software is available online, and you can try it FREE for 30 days before purchasing it.

Since not everyone is alone in this artist journey, it is highly recommended that you actively engage your artist peers to discuss those things with which you may not be familiar, like legal issues, accounting, or curating. Different perspectives and experiences can be very valuable to hear. Participating in a visiting lecture or other workshops for artists could be invaluable. Other voices are always a good idea, as artists like to hear from a variety of people. The most important thing to remember is to invest in yourself as an artist.

1

Objectives

Introduce yourself to a variety of career options available for artists that are in alignment with your particular practice and your unique life choices and circumstances.

Become aware of a set of tools and resources to enable you to take a DIY approach.

Prepare yourself for issues that may come up as you develop your practice, and learn the business skills necessary to have a productive career.

Goals

To create an understanding that artists are responsible for their own careers and choices.

To understand the basic tools and resources an artist needs to maintain his or her practice.

To impart the importance of conducting yourself as an artist in all social and professional situations.

To provide clear and accurate information, develop research skills, and create a life plan for the future.

To come away with valuable skills and a portfolio which can be used to begin or further your art career.

To expand the perception of the “art world universe” in order to understand the opportunities and choices that determine the track of your life and career.

Things To Do

1. Write down a few words about the kind of work you make.
2. Write down a few questions you want to know the answer to, and write down the answers as they come to you in this manual.
3. Generate a list of the myths and your fears of the art world.
4. Fill out the GYST survey.
5. Keep a journal to track your thoughts as you build your practice.

2

Objectives

Assess your understanding of your own practice.

Give yourself an idea of the kinds of things you need to know as a working artist.

Give the yourself a way to evaluate what you have learned by taking the survey again at the end of the manual.

Things To Consider

It's so hard to measure success in the art world. For some artists success is a solo show at the Met, for others it's just making a living off of one's work. No matter what your long-term goals are, you might want to start thinking about your practice as a barometer for success. Throughout your art career you should amass a set of indispensable skills. This survey will help you see how much you have learned and key you into what you need to improve upon. This is a good tool for self evaluation and an introduction to what artists need to know. Be brutally honest with yourself.

If you use the GYST software, this survey can be completed within the software, and can be taken multiple times. The software will automatically archive old surveys add up your scores.

1. The Usual Sh*t

YOUR NAME:

Date you took this survey:

What kind of art do you make?

Occupation / Day Job:

Education Level:

I have been a practicing artist for _____ years.

2. Introspective Sh*t

On a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being "I really got my sh*t together," and 1 being "I don't got my sh*t together at ALL," please rate how well you think you've got your sh*t together

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 NA

3. The Sh*t You Need to Figure Out

On a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being "Dude, I got that sh*t ALL figured out," and 1 being "Duh, what?," please rate your level of expertise on the following topics.

Finding an appropriate space to produce your work

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 NA

Creating an effective artist's résumé

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 NA

Writing a compelling artist's statement

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 NA

Writing a grant

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 NA

Applying for funding from governmental agencies
(city, county, state, & national)

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 NA

Applying for funding from corporations

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 NA

Applying for funding from private foundations

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 NA

Approaching individual donors for project support

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 NA

Collaborating with non profits to secure project funding
(fiscal sponsor)

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 NA

Writing an project proposal

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 NA

Creating a detailed project budget

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 NA

Writing cover letters, "thank you" letters, & other forms of
business correspondence

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 NA

Finding an exhibition/project venue

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 NA

Approaching small venues with your project proposal

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 NA

Approaching large venues with your project proposal

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 NA

Producing independent projects at alternative
or artist run spaces

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 NA

Submitting your work to exhibitions/group shows

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 NA

Responding to general “requests for proposals” and/or “requests for qualifications”

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 NA

Submitting your work to festivals

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 NA

Etiquette and tactics for business meetings

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 NA

Organizing and facilitating effective meetings

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 NA

Developing an Exhibition or Performance checklist

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 NA

Knowing the expectations of exhibition/performance venues

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 NA

Managing your time and meeting deadlines

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 NA

Strategies for effective “networking”

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 NA

Creating and maintaining effective mailing lists

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 NA

The basics of contracts and negotiation

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 NA

Writing press releases and promoting your work/project

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 NA

Archiving/documenting your work

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 NA

Now that you have taken the survey, what kinds of things do you notice? Did you discover anything about yourself?

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3

Objectives

Compare conceptions and realities, understanding of who has power and who does not, and how artists are perceived. Think about and evaluate these options and brainstorm possibilities within them.

Think about and evaluate how your participation in this arena can affect positive change. Understand what choices you have and your decision-making process.

Things to Do

1. Grab a piece of paper and a writing utensil. Draw a diagram of the “Art World” based on your perceptions of how it is constructed. For example, you may have a circle with you in the center, and stemming from it are galleries, art dealers or collectors, and stemming from there may be museums, festivals, non profits, public art, etc.
2. Brainstorm myths and beliefs of the art world and whether they are “true” or not. This may work best when you can discuss them with a group of your peers. Everyone has a different perception and this could help you see where you fit on this issue.
3. What kinds of information would help clarify these assumptions? What is the difference between the “Art World” and the art market?
4. Think about and write down the perceptions of you, the artist. Both within the “Art World” and outside of it, such as personal traits, work ethic, un/sociability, or un/reliability.
5. Choose three myths or beliefs about the “Art World” you have written down and answer the following questions:
 - How did I form this idea?
 - How firmly do I believe it?
 - Why do I maintain this idea?
 - What would make me change my belief?
 - Which of these beliefs inspire the strongest emotions?
 - If I don’t like this idea, can it be changed?

Some Common Myths (to get started):

- The myth of the starving artist.
- There is a grant for everything.
- I have to live in New York City.
- I need a gallery.
- My gallery or dealer will take care of me.
- There is an “art mafia.”
- When I make it big, my troubles will be over.
- Artists cannot make a living selling their work.
- Art is not my job, my job is _____.
- Artists can’t write.
- Artists are not good at math, bookkeeping, or business skills.
- An artist should be able to get grants to survive.
- Artists should live a nomadic lifestyle.
- It is impossible to have kids and be a good artist.
- Those who can, do, those who can’t, teach.
- If you are talented, you will be recognized.
- Art is not a business.
- Taking care of business will undermine my art.
- Selling my work, is “selling out.”

Other Questions For Individual Evaluation:

1. Do you have an artist statement?
2. Do you have an artist statement that you like?
3. Do you have a résumé or CV?
4. Do you have an up-to-date portfolio of your work?
5. Have you applied for a grant? Have you received one?
6. Are you interested in gallery representation?
7. Do you have a website?
8. Do you understand how to do your taxes?
9. Have you sold any of your artwork?
10. Have you ever approached an institution to show or sell your work?
11. Have you ever signed a contract in relation to your artwork?
12. Have you ever copyrighted any of your work?
13. Do you know how to price your artwork?
14. Have you ever been commissioned to do an artwork?
15. Where do you make your work?

This questionnaire will help you determine who you are as an artist, and how you fit into the big picture. These questions will help you identify who you are and how you might contribute to the field of art. Feel free to ask yourself and answer more questions than are provided here.

Your Artistic Identity

1. What words would you use to describe your work as an artist?
2. What sources are you aware of that guide or influence your work? Include physical, intellectual, emotional, conceptual, relational, etc.
3. What materials do you enjoy working with? What do you hate to work with and why? What materials do you want to try working with in the future?
4. Whose work do you admire (contemporary as well as historical)? Why?
5. Whose work do you dislike and why?
6. Who do you compare yourself to? What kind of comparisons do you draw?

Your Relationship to the “Marketplace” or Gallery System

1. If you had a choice, whose career would you emulate?
2. Where or in what kind of context would you most like to exhibit your work?
3. Do you have a sense of who your audience is and who you would like to see your work?
4. What critics do you read? Do you relate to them?

The World At Large

1. What kinds of things do you read outside of your discipline?
2. Where do you come from? Community, geography, ethnicity, economic background, family structure, peers, mentors, antagonists?

3. How would you describe your background, and how has it influenced you?

Your Skills and Work-Related Values & Preferences

1. What skills (including skills outside of your art practice) do you have? What do you value most? What do you most enjoy doing?
2. What sort of tasks do you find difficult or unpleasant to do? Is it because you don't know how to go about it?
3. What kind of work environment do you prefer? Under what circumstances are you most productive?

Your Community Network

1. Who do you know? (Friends, family, fans, acquaintances, mentors, contacts, etc.)

2. Who supports you?

Your Financial Picture

1. What does it currently cost you to make your work? (Consider materials, travel, equipment, overhead, etc.)

3. Who do you need or want to get to know?

2. What must you have in order to live and take care of yourself? Weekly? Monthly? Are school loans a part of this picture?

4. Who do you want to recognize you for the work you do?

3. What, if anything, are you willing to do without?

5. What kind of living arrangement do you need to feel comfortable and supported in your life and work?

6. What kind of social contacts do you require? What kind of social interactions do you enjoy? Dislike? Handle well? Find difficult?

6. What accomplishments of yours make you feel the most pride? For each accomplishment what skills, relationships, and environments informed your experience?



4

Objectives

Clarify your goals as an artist, and determine how to get there.

Create a life mission statement.

Create short-term and long-term goals.

Understand the various career choices available, and expand your ideas of these options.

Things to Do

1. Think about and write down why planning and goal setting are important. Separate your short-term and long-term goals.
2. Use the planning sheets and fill out what you think you can handle. It can be overwhelming to a) be asked what you really want to do, and b) to commit to writing it down. Take your time and really think about it.
3. What do you think about the idea of a mission statement for your life? Try writing one. It doesn't matter how long it is. Make it a proclamation of what you are doing, will be doing, and will accomplish with your life. (Using "I will accomplish" is important, rather than "I hope to accomplish.")
4. Write your own obituary. You can be as creative as you want about how you die and when, and how long you live, but make sure the accomplishments are true to your desires. This is an exercise in visualizing a complete life, since it is hypothetically over, and doing this enables you to think about what it is you are accomplishing and where you are focusing your energy, in the here and now.
5. Fill out the goal tables. You can also do this within the GYST software, or print it out.

Why Plan?

*"A plan is nothing. Planning is everything."
- Dwight Eisenhower*

"Basically you could say that artists I have known who have had rewarding and successful careers are those who have been able to make very clear choices about their priorities and expectations. Once these priorities were selected, they wasted no emotion on the other things they gave up. I want to make it clear that when I refer to a successful artist I do not necessarily mean financially successful. To me a successful artist is one who continues to make art, and is not more than 50 percent bitter about the rest of life."

- Bruce Beasley

About Goal Setting

Whether you are planning ahead in order to make money or to have the career you want, setting realistic goals can get you organized, motivated, and on track. Writing down your short- and long-term goals makes your aspirations more concrete. A flexible plan of action can also help you deal with the challenges of the present and visualize what you want in the future. The use of the term "flexible" is important since circumstances change so fast, both for artists and the way the world works.

Goal setting keeps you motivated because when you accomplish a goal, even if it's starting your mailing list with just one contact, you can see progress and improvement. It's a good reminder about what priorities you have chosen, and gives you a good way to check back and see how you are doing. The key to setting goals is to be realistic, flexible, and diligent. It's helpful to remember that you won't get everything done in a day, a month, or maybe even a year. Planning does not have to be overwhelming. Start small and work up to the big stuff. Get organized first, and things will fall into place more easily.

Plan ahead. If you keep accurate records of your work, and have a list of all your past exhibitions, artist statements, résumés, and an inventory of where your work is and who has purchased it, when you have that retrospective or mid-career survey, you will know what you have made, when you made it and what you were thinking about while you were making it. The curators tasked with organizing and writing about your work will be thrilled because they will be more knowledgeable about your ideas, and finding old work from collec-

tors will be so much easier. Your estate will be much easier to manage, and less work will be lost if you keep track of your exhibitions, sales, and other placements along the way.

A great idea for keeping yourself on track and managing your goals effectively is to schedule a short business meeting with yourself once a week. Use this time to reflect on what you accomplished during the last week and what needs to get done this week, and then adjust your goals accordingly. Remember, the reason this manual is part of GETTING Your Sh*t Together, is because you never really GET Your Sh*t Together because an art practice is never really finished. You always have to keep updating your mailing list, archiving your work, applying for exhibitions, and revisiting your goals. Therefore, keep in mind that planning is a fluid process. Plans are made, and plans are changed. An effective plan is adaptable, shifting according to your good or bad fortune. So you didn't secure a solo show at The Guggenheim by your 30th birthday. No problem, just shift that goal to a few years in the future and be happy you've set up your website. The trick is to always keep working toward goals and to keep the larger picture in mind. An art practice goes through hills and valleys over the course of an artist's lifetime, so be prepared for a wonderful and challenging ride.

Goal Setting Exercises

These exercises are a great way to clarify your own goals and determine just how to get to where you want to go. Once your goals are set, you can then create an action plan. This is not just a plan for your art career, but for your life. Remember:

- There are no right or wrong answers.
- There is no "one way" to create an art career.
- You, and only you, can judge your own success.
- Knowing where you're going and how to get there is a key to success.

Questions to Consider When Setting Goals

Review your answers to the Self Assessment Questions to complete this section more easily.

1. What is your artistic practice?

- What words would you use to describe yourself as an artist? (not the artwork)

- What words would you use to describe your artwork?
- What influences can you discern?
- What materials do you favor?
- What materials do you avoid?
- What materials have you always wanted to try, yet have not?
- Whose work do you like? (art or otherwise)
- What kind of style would you say describes your work?
- What kind of artwork do you like?
- What kind of artwork do you dislike?

2. Where do you want your work to be seen or exhibited?

- Do you have someone whose career you would like to emulate?
- In what kind of space or context would you like to show your work?
- Who is your audience? For whom is the work intended?
- What critics do you read?
- What critics do you like?
- What critics do you dislike?
- What art publications do you read?
- What art publications do you like?
- What art publications do you dislike?

3. What other kinds of things do you enjoy that are not art related?

- What else do you read?
- What kinds of movies do you like?
- What kind of music do you like?
- Do you have hobbies or other pursuits?

- Where do you come from?
- Who is your community?
- How do you describe your background, and what has influenced you?
- If you could not be an artist, what profession would you choose?

4. What kind of skills and work values do you have?

- What skills do you have now?
- What skills would you like to have in the future?
- What skills do you like using the most?
- What kinds of tasks do you not like to do?
- What kind of work environment do you prefer?
- What kind of environment makes you the most productive?
- What kind of living arrangements do you need to feel comfortable?
- Do you need a workspace separate from your living space?
- What kind of social contacts do you require?
- What kinds of social activities do you favor?
- What kinds of social activities make you uncomfortable?
- What accomplishments are you the most proud of?
- What skills, relationships, or environments contributed to those experiences?

5. Your financial picture.

- What does it currently cost you to live the life you live?
- What does it cost to produce your work?
- Where does your money currently come from?
- Do you know your weekly or monthly expenses?

- Do you have school loans or debts to consider?
- What would you be willing to do without?
- For how long could you do without it?

6. Your community.

- Do you have people who can write you a letter of recommendation?
- Who would you like to know and why?
- Who do you want to have champion your art in the future?
- Who do you know that supports you personally, professionally, or financially? (This can be friends, teachers, mentors, family, fans, acquaintances, etc.)

Optional Assignment: A Hundred Questions

From Michael Gelb, *How to Think Like Leonardo da Vinci*. (NY: Delacorte Press, 1998., p. 59)

In your notebook or journal, make a list of one hundred questions that are important to you. Your list can include any kind of question as long as it's something you deem significant. List anything from "how can I save more money?" to "how can I have more fun?" to "what is the meaning and purpose of my existence?"

Do the entire list in one sitting. Write quickly; don't worry about spelling, grammar, or repeating the same question in different words (recurring questions will alert you to emerging themes). Why one hundred questions? The first twenty or so will be "off the top of your head." In the next thirty or forty, themes often begin to emerge. In the later part of the second half of the list you are likely to discover unexpected but profound material.

When you have finished, read through your list and highlight the themes that emerge. Consider emerging themes without judging them. Are most of your questions about relationships? What about business, fun, money, or the meaning of life?

Three-Month Goals

Fill out this form with short-term goals you would like to accomplish in three months. They don't all have to be art related. Be as detailed as possible. If your goal has too many steps, break it down and include the steps it takes to get there as a goal. Be very realistic. Now is the time to be honest about your goals and what you can achieve in three months.

X	GOALS
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LIFE PLANNING AND GOAL SETTING

Goal Suggestions

- Set up an artwork inventory
- Create my portfolio
- Create a brochure of work
- Put together proposal packets
- Get into grad school
- Meet X art critic
- Write thank you letter to X
- Create a website
- Get into a group exhibition
- Do a solo show
- Get a review of my show
- Get a teaching job
- Apply for a public art project
- Create a mailing list
- Create a mission statement
- Sell a work of art
- Read X book
- Schedule a studio visit
- Curate a show
- Apply to artist's residencies
- Visit the Venice Biennial
- Write a review
- Get an art dealer
- Earn \$50,000 or more a year
- Produce a catalog of my work
- Show in _____ (Europe, New York, Los Angeles, etc.)
- Make a living with my artwork
- Find a studio
- Do three performances this year
- Research artist funding
- Meet with a nonprofit for fiscal receivership
- Research materials for donation
- Paint the studio
- Order new lighting
- Get insurance
- Do two shows this year
- Hire an artist's assistant
- Hire a studio manager
- Apply for a business license
- Organize the office
- Get a museum show
- Make ____ pieces for a new series
- Fill out planning sheets
- Call my mother
- Apply for a DBA (Doing Business As) business name
- Get a professional photographer to document my work
- Collaborate with another artist or group of artists
- Attend an art conference
- Attend a workshop



5

Objectives

Clarify your goals as an artist, and determine how to get there.

Create a life mission statement.

Create short-term and long-term goals.

Understand the various career choices available, and expand your ideas of these options.

Things to Do

1. Think about and write down why planning and goal setting are important. Separate your short-term and long-term goals.
2. Use the planning sheets and fill out what you think you can handle. It can be overwhelming to a) be asked what you really want to do, and b) to commit to writing it down. Take your time and really think about it.
3. What do you think about the idea of a mission statement for your life? Try writing one. It doesn't matter how long it is.

Time Management

Time is an important resource, and you need to manage it wisely if you want to maximize your creativity and productivity. Below are some steps to take in order to evaluate how you spend your time, understand how long it takes you to do activities, and develop an overall picture of how you spend your time.

1. Every business or company that is successful has staff meetings. Since you are a business of one, you should schedule (and show up for!) a weekly staff meeting with yourself. Make lists of those items that are the most important to get done, and schedule what you think you can accomplish in one week. Prioritize those items.

At every staff meeting with yourself, go over your list and take what you did not accomplish this week and roll it over to the current week, perhaps making those items a priority. Be sure to schedule time for unexpected items and issues that may arise, as they always do.

2. A good way to figure out how you spend your time is to track it for two weeks. Evaluate how you spent your time and how you might do similar tasks together, instead of jumping from item to item. You might put everything you have to do outside your studio on one day, so you are not running around every day. You might decide that you would rather work at night, instead of during the day.

3. Evaluate how rewarding an activity may have been versus the time you spent doing it. How much did you accomplish and was it productive? Can you make any changes to make things go smoother? Did you under-schedule enough hours to complete the items required?

4. When are you most clear-headed in your workday? If you are a morning person, do difficult tasks early in the day. If you don't get started until later in the day, save these things for when you are the most apt to be at your best.

5. You may need to make a long-term schedule, such as set hours to work in your studio every Saturday, Tuesday, and Thursday nights. Maybe Wednesday nights are for doing all the arts business issues, such as updating your mailing list or sending out invoices, or doing the books. This way you won't be so behind should you need pertinent information for a grant or a project proposal.

6. You may need to schedule time to relax in addition to creative time. Being overworked doesn't always help creativity. You may need to create a balance for yourself. Don't forget to schedule quality time with other family members and friends.

6

Objectives

Understand why an artist statement is important.

Understand what makes a great artist statement.

Create a clear and effective one-page artist statement—a key component to an artist's success.

Things to Consider

1. Where are artist statements used and why do we have to write one?

Most everyone you ask for anything will require an artist statement, including galleries, grants, applications, arts related jobs, teaching, press releases, exhibitions, critics, reviewers, etc. Artist statements are fairly important for emerging artists, while established artists no longer need to use them unless they are applying for a grant or similar support.

A clear and concise artist statement will operate as a stand-in for your own voice during those times you can't be there to share or talk about your work in person, such as when you send a portfolio to an institution, or your dealer needs to talk to buyers about your work, or a reviewer needs some information about your work.

2. What goes into an artist statement?

Things To Do

Write a one-page, single-spaced draft of your artist statement. If you are having trouble getting started, use the writers block ideas at the end of this section. You may want to get someone else to read it and then continue drafting after getting their feedback. Writing an artist statement is an on-going process and will need to be rewritten with each new body of work you produce.

Writing an Artist Statement

An artist statement is an invaluable tool artists use to better understand how and why they do what they do. It is an ever-changing document that is revisited, often after a new body of work or project is completed, concisely outlining the artist's practice, ideas, intent, materials, and methods. Almost every institution, gallery, critic, curator, funding resource, and collector will ask for or require an artist statement at some point, so it's good to have an updated artist statement ready at all times.

Keep in mind that while everyone can read your statement, most people won't, or they will just scan it. The people who HAVE TO read your statement do so because it's part of their job. These people are curators, gallery workers, critics, people on grant panels (which can be almost anyone), historians, teachers, employers, colleagues, and students. Remember, you should always consider your audience when writing your statements, as a statement for a gallery show might be very different from a statement to a grant panel or a tenure committee.

FAQs

Why should I write an artist statement?

- Writing an artist statement can be a good way to clarify your own ideas about your work.
- A gallery dealer, curator, docent, or the public can have access to your description of your work, in your own words.
- A statement can be useful when writing a proposal for an exhibition or project.
- Statements, or some permutation of them, are often required when applying for funding.
- Most graduate schools ask that you submit a statement.
- Referring to your past statements can help you prepare for a visiting artist lecture.
- An artist statement and a teaching statement are often required when applying for a teaching position. You can use your artist statement to help you write your Teaching Philosophy, which is different from an artist statement. See section on creating a Teaching Philosophy.

- A well-written statement can help you or someone else write a kick-ass press release.

- A good statement can help you write a bio for a program brochure. This can avoid anyone misinterpreting your work.

- An honest and investigative statement can help art writers, reviewers, curators, and critics write more informed texts about your work.

- Your statement is an influential way to introduce your work to a buying public. Often the more a buyer knows about your work the more she/he becomes interested in what you do, which can lead her/him to purchase your work.

- A collection of artist statements over the course of an artist's career can be one of the only written keys to understanding how an artist's ideas about her/his practice has changed over time.

Will one statement do, or will I need different kinds of statements?

You will have to write all kinds of artist statements during the course of your career. Your statement should change as your practice matures and you gain perspective on older work.

Usually you rework your statement after finishing a new body of work. If you make many different kinds of works you might find it helpful to have a separate statement to correspond with each kind of work. That said, here are a few different kinds of statements you will certainly need handy:

Full-Page Statement

This is the statement you will use most often. It speaks generally about your work, your intent, the methods you have used, the history of your work, and where you see your work going. It may also include specific examples of your current work or project. Usually it is around 300 - 350 words long.

Short Statement

A one - to three - sentence statement that includes the most important aspects of your practice to talk about the specific project at hand.

Short Project Statement

This is a very short statement about the specific project you are presenting.

Bio

A bio is a short description of your career as an artist and your major accomplishments. It is usually no longer than a

paragraph. A Bio is not an artist statement. Instead, this short text summarizes your resume in paragraph form. Basically, it is a short version of your résumé or CV.

Your bio should include the following:

- A sentence about you and where you base your practice.
- Your general interests or what your work investigates.
- Your academic background, a selection of where you have exhibited work, and in what notable publications reviews of your work have appeared.
- List important awards, fellowships, and residencies you have secured.

Make sure to include your artist website.

How should I structure my statement?

The first paragraph should be a general introduction to your work, a body of work or a specific project. It should open with a basic overview of the work, in two or three sentences or a short paragraph.

The following paragraphs should go into detail about how issues or ideas are presented in the work. If writing a full-page statement, you can include some of the following points:

- Why you have created the work, and its history.
- Your overall vision.
- What you expect from your audience and how they will react.
- How your current work relates to your previous work.
- Where your work fits in with current contemporary art.
- How your work fits in with the history of art.
- How your work fits into a group exhibition, or a series of projects you have done.
- Sources and inspiration for your images or texts.
- Artists you have been influenced by, or how your work relates to other artists' work. (Be careful how you include these references because you don't want your work to appear derivative.)
- How this work fits into a series or larger body of work.
- How a certain technique is important to the work.

- Your philosophy of art-making or of the work's origin.

The final paragraph should recapitulate the most important points in the statement and leave the reader wanting to experience the work, and learn more. This is also where you might want to talk about any long-term goals you have with your practice.

What shouldn't go in an artist statement?

- Pompous or arrogant language, exclaiming your artistic genius. Leave that up to other people.
- Empty and cliché expressions about your work. The phrase "feast for the eyes" is trite and unimaginative. Use your own words, and make them count. Remember, if you think you've heard it said before, it probably has been used often, so take it out.
- Technical jargon. You want to keep them reading, so find a way to connect without sounding like a robot.
- A long dissertation or explanation. Short and sweet is the key. Don't linger on one thought for too long. Leave your reader room to form her/his own opinions.
- Discourses on the materials and techniques you have employed. OK, if you're using the nectar of a rare Siberian orchid to make drawings on endangered palm fronds, then mention that, but don't bore the reader with your inventive use of materials. If you paint, mention if it's in oils, acrylics, etc, but don't go on and on about your masterful glazing techniques. As always, get to what the work is actually about.
- Poems or prosy writing. Great artist statements are not cute haikus. Write about your art.
- Folksy anecdotes, autobiographies, or stories about your life. Don't include anything about your childhood or family life. Leave these stories out unless they are directly related to the work or integral to the content and meaning of the work, in a way anyone reading will understand.
- Bragging language, a list of accomplishments or something like a boring press release. Don't mention where you've shown, awards you've won, or pieces you've sold in your statement. Save this for your bio.
- Indecipherable text. Now, if it's for an exhibition and it conceptually relates to the work, you might have cause to use this sort of a statement. But in general, obtuse, rambling statements, statements consisting of one sentence, or state-

ments that are artworks themselves, may risk coming off as condescending, disingenuous, or just plain stupid.

How should I write my statement?

This most often depends on the context where it will appear. The most important thing to keep in mind is who will read your statement and where she/he will be when they read it. What assumptions can you make about your reader's knowledge of your work, art and art history, and any references you mention? It is important to remember that an artist should have many variations of an artist statement, one that will fit to any occasion.

Depending on your reader you might want to alter your:

- Emotional tone. Some readers will respond to the urgency of your ideas and convictions in different ways. A grant panel may want to know about your emotional investment in your work, while some critics might dismiss it. The choice is up to you.

- Theoretical context and academic tone. There's nothing wrong with being able to situate yourself within a theoretical context. But some readers may not want to read about or begin to understand your desire to create "works that speak to the subaltern impulse as informed by Deleuze's relationship to Derridian archiving impulses prevalent in post-industrial American hegemonic centers of cultural production." There are publications where this kind of writing is appropriate, but only write this way for these publications.

- Analytic approach. Some people might want you to write about your work from a formal standpoint. Others may want you to discuss how your work functions socially. There are readers who are interested in how a work operates politically. Some readers may want to know how a work navigates the marketplace. How you analyze your work can say a lot about your stance as an artist, and can help readers understand how you want your work to function.

- Humor. Two artists walk into a bar. There. That's the end of the joke. Get it? A poorly written, pushy joke can ruin any statement. If your work is humorous it might be a good idea to let it stand on its own. Use your statement to speak about the ideas that inform the work. If you want to be funny, then try this: Have five people you don't know, who don't know your work, read your statement. If four out of five of them laugh, out loud, where they should when reading it, then you're probably safe. Remember, you can try to be Jon Stewart, but you risk coming off like Carrot Top. (Bad jokes can ruin writing!)

- Antagonistic approach. "I dare you to even try to understand my work. "Thanks, but no thanks". You want your statement to be readable, understandable, and written out of a genuine desire to connect.

- Political assertiveness. There is nothing wrong with having political beliefs and there is nothing wrong with making work that attests to these beliefs. However, you don't want your statement to get in the way of your reader coming to her/his own conclusions about the work.

- Professional appearance. A statement for a job review will demand a certain level of professionalism that you might not have to employ in a statement for a publication, exhibition, or lecture. Picture how other artists, colleagues, and superiors will read your statement, not just now, but in the future.

Other Points

- Ask yourself pointed questions: "What am I trying to say in the work?"; "What influences my work?"; "How do my methods of working (techniques, style, formal decisions) support the content of my work?"; "What are specific examples of this in my work?"; "Does this statement conjure up any images?" Answer these questions using specific examples in the work itself.

- Make sure the statement matches up with the work. There is nothing worse than a statement that seems completely contrary to an artist's work. If you say your work addresses questions of environmental destruction, then this should be backed up in the work. Some artists create many bodies of work and find synthesizing this pluralistic practice into one statement to be difficult. Don't worry. Just find the common themes that unite these projects and write about them. When presenting each project you can have a totally different statement.

- Be honest. Don't try and force some external set of ideas on the work if that's not what the work is about. Don't try and construct a false narrative for the work or lie about its origins. Don't linger on what the work is not. Stay positive and use an informed voice.

- Try to capture your own speaking voice. One way to do this is to talk to a friend about your work and record the conversation. Sometimes we are much better at communicating our ideas when we speak versus when we write. Another way to ensure your statement reads well is to actually read it aloud. Doing this will help you to see the hiccups and confusions in your writing.

- Use descriptive language so that the reader can better “see” the work. One way to do this is to start by just describing the work, “It’s X big, made with X materials, it’s X color, it sits in X place in relation to the floor, etc.” Really get down to details. Don’t include this long description in your statement, but use key sections as descriptive elements in your statement.

- Avoid using passive voice. Don’t use phrases like “I hope to,” “I attempt to,” or “I am aiming at.” This will only put the reader in doubt of you and your practice. An active voice is extremely important to the strength of your statement. Have confidence in what your work is doing and avoid speculation.

- Write your statement on a word processor so that you can make changes and update it often. Consider using a program where other people can make edits you can see and approve or reject. You should keep older copies so that you can refer to them if you should need to write or talk about your older work, or if you have a retrospective.

- Refer to yourself in the first person, not as “the artist.” Write it like, “In my work I explore X.” This way, there is no doubt the ideas are yours.

- Make it clear and direct, concise and to the point. Go over your statement and see if you have repeated yourself. Look out for redundant words and sloppy grammar. In general, each sentence should take up no more than three lines and be very easy to read. The length of a sentence should relate to the complexity of the idea it intends to convey.

- Use no smaller than 10 – 12 point type. Some people have trouble reading very small type. Watch out for your font style choice when selecting a font size. Although you selected your favorite font at 10-12 point type it might look huge or tiny in comparison to a more standard selection.

- Artist statements are usually single-spaced.

- Do not use fancy fonts or tricky formatting. The information, not the graphic design, should wow your reader. Remember to be consistent with your other written content such as your bio, CV, teaching philosophy, etc. You will not appear professional to a curator, grant panel, or job interviewer if you have different sized fonts, various font styles, and irregular formatting. This will only look sloppy.

- Make sure to include your name at the top as well as the date. This will help people know whose artist statement it is and when it was written. Depending on your reader, it is customary to include at the top left corner of all written mate-

rial your name, address, phone number (optional), email address, and website.

- Always keep copies of all your artist statements. Don’t write over a previous one. You might have a retrospective one day, and you may be asked to talk about what you were thinking a long time ago.

Writer’s Block

Writing can be difficult, especially for artists who have not had to write about their work before. It’s best to keep things in perspective and realize that it will take many, many re-writes before you’ve come up with an effective, well-written statement. So don’t panic if your first attempts are wrought with false starts and half-constructed ideas. Remember, you have to start somewhere. The most important thing is to start writing! Once the momentum kicks in things tend to fall into place.

Warm up with short writing exercises. Find a place where you will not be interrupted for about two hours. Start by setting a timer for three minutes, and then, without worrying about punctuation, spelling or grammar, begin writing down words and short phrases that describe your work and your process. Work fast and do not edit or erase anything. When the timer goes off, put this piece of paper aside, or save your work on the computer. Writing in short spurts gets you past the overly self-critical hump, reduces stress, and cuts to the chase.

Without looking at what you have previously written, set the timer again for three minutes and begin by writing about your work in the way you would tell your Aunt Florence or a friend about your work. Do not do any editing at this point. Silence your inner critic and let it ride.

If you are having trouble with writing anything at all, write down why you should NOT write an artist statement, and what is getting in the way. Do you fear your writing style or the fact that you never learned the rules of grammar? Do you have lousy spelling? Are you unsure that you can write what you know about your work? Give yourself three minutes, and then set this writing aside.

Then, write down every reason that you should and will write an artist’s statement. Again, you have three minutes. Set this aside. Go back to the three-minute writing exercise about your work.

Only when you have collected a pile of three-minute quotations and jottings should you then begin to put them into some kind of order and start to edit.

Sometimes you can find great inspiration in past notes you have taken in your sketchbook. Or you may want to refer to pieces others have written about your work. Think back to critiques and conversations you have had and consider using those ideas if they are relevant.

Still stuck? Record a conversation with a friend about your work. Choose someone you trust who is knowledgeable about your history and your larger body of work. It's best if this person isn't a spouse or family member, as they will probably not give you the critical feedback you need. Find someone who knows a little about art but is also willing to give visceral, gut-instinct feedback. Record the conversation, then go back and transcribe the parts you find most relevant to your work.

You should always be keeping notes and references about other artists making work similar to yours or dealing with similar ideas. Research articles written about these artists. How have critics, curators, and writers described their work? What key phrases keep cropping up? Think about borrowing some of this descriptive language when describing your own work. Just remember not to plagiarize.

Listen to how other artists describe their work, and go to a number of visiting artist lectures. Read interviews in art magazines and consider how these writers and artists talk about work.

When reading relevant literature that might speak to your work and/or your practice, try to keep a separate notebook for pertinent quotes or ideas. This notebook will come in handy when you need that perfect sentence to bridge your thoughts together.

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gyst

Making life better for artists.

GETTING YOUR SH*T TOGETHER

The Ultimate Business Manual For Every Practicing Artist

Far too often artists find themselves having to compromise their art and their life because they were not taught accurate up-to-date methods for dealing with business situations. Because of this lack of preparedness artists miss out on valuable opportunities, financial rewards, and access to receptive audiences. This book aims to help all artists everywhere avoid these pitfalls and get on the track to success on their own terms. Whether you are a gallery-bound artist, a public artist, an emerging artist, a hobbyist, a crafts-person, a student, or a seasoned artist in need of a tune up, this manual is meant for you.

This comprehensive book is informed by decades of experience and years of research into how to perform as a professional artist in the 21st century art world (or worlds). This book is filled with easy-to-follow instructions that will help you do everything – archive your work, start a mailing list, write a grant, and everything else you can think of. This straightforward book even addresses topics you may not think you need to know about now, but you sure will later! Consider this a handbook for all your artistic endeavors. This book is written and designed to empower you to take your future into your own hands.

About The Author

Karen Atkinson is arguably the leading expert on professional practices for artists in America. She basically pioneered the teaching of business skills for artists across the country. Dozens of colleges, non-profits, and established artists look to her for professional guidance. As a visual artist, curator and educator, Karen Atkinson has taught *Getting Your Sh*t Together* for over a decade at the California Institute of the Arts, Side Street Projects, and all over the world. After sharing her wealth of knowledge with countless artists, and seeing these artists put her advice into action, it made sense to create an artist manual.

Atkinson is the co-founder of Side Street Projects, a revolutionary artist-run, artist-support organization in Los Angeles. She has worked with many city and national non-profits and organizations, including the National Association of Artists' Organizations, LACPS, Installation, Foundation for Art Resources, NYFA, Chicago Art Resources, and over two dozen other well known artist-centered organizations. Atkinson has shown her work all over the world. She has experience as a curator, director, editor, writer, installation artist, public projects organizer, grant writer, and teacher. Her involvement in nearly every facet of the art world gives her a unique perspective into how this world works - not just in the rarified world of the international "art market," but also on the ground floor where artists work.

About GYST-INK

Founded in 2001, GYST-Ink's mission is to make life better for artists. We are an artist-run company providing information, technology and solutions created by artists for artists. We support artists and arts organizations with an integrated mix of software, services and information in order to keep artists working. We are dedicated to empowering and educating artists so that they can develop sustainable and successful careers on their own terms.

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