

# THE ART OF ARTIST STATEMENT

The Art of the  
Statement and the  
Artist's Role

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## W. F. GARRETT-PETTS AND RACHEL NASH

MOVING BEYOND THE FALLACY OF 'MUTE LOOKING':  
ARTISTS' STATEMENTS AS ART

We first became interested in artists' statements as a form, as a kind of genre, five years ago when one of us, Garrett-Petts, was asked to address a studio art class on 'Writing about Art: Writing as Art.' We were familiar with the general intent of artists' statements; and we were very familiar with the general ambivalence, and even anxiety, that artists' statements evoke among practising artists. Artists' statements, we speculated, are often viewed as afterthoughts, as

obligatory gestures written reluctantly and (sometimes) with little sense of either authority or audience. But, after studying literally hundreds of statements—in preparation for, first, the talk, and later what became an ongoing area of joint research project—it struck us that the very best statements presented an intriguing, if problematic, example of what Milan Dimic calls 'literatures of lesser diffusion,' minor

works of prose poetry or criticism that, lacking either the status or dissemination of more canonical writing, have gone unnoticed or become hidden from public view.

Our interest in the art of artists' statements became the starting point for an exhibition, *Proximities: Artists' Statements and Their Works* (Kamloops Art Gallery, OCTOBER-DECEMBER 2005), involving eight international artists interested in the notion of 'exhibiting statements,' and in the related notion of the artist's statement as art. Together with Paula Levine, Ashok Mathur, Donald Lawrence, Jan Peacock, Brenda Pelkey, Brigitte Radecki, Sandra Semchuck, and Stephan Kurr, we are looking at artists' statements in terms of their aesthetic, physical, and social proximities to art and artistic practices. Proximities, like Georgia Kotretzos and Maria Paschalidou's *The Art of Artist Statement*, seeks to move artists' statements from the periphery to the center of the exhibition space.

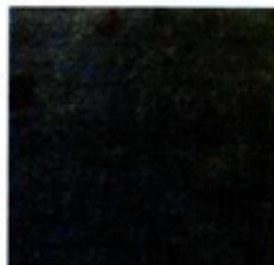
Artists' statements take the form of short comments—miniature essays—that usually introduce an actual or proposed exhibition. Like prefaces, forewords, prologues, and introductions in literary works, the artist's statement performs a vital if complex rhetorical role: when included in an exhibition proposal, a slide application package, and sent to a curator, the artist's statement must provide content, context, technical specifications, establish the artist's ethos and persuade the reader of the artwork's value; when hung on a gallery wall, the statement (or 'didactic') becomes both invitation and explanation, and in some measure an element of the installation itself. Less formally, artists' interviews, journals, albums, sketchbooks, and all manner of private correspondence can, when made public, create meta-narratives that speak to and about the work.



**BRIGITTE RADECKI.**

Two paintings from *The Black Notebooks* series.  
60 x 60 inches. Acrylic on canvas.

Photo by Dana Novak.  
Image reproduced courtesy of the artist.





Not all artists and curators are comfortable with the public foregrounding of private aesthetics, written typically, as Derrida reminds us, 'in view of their own self-effacement'; yet the visual arts community nonetheless employs artists' statements as key liminal documents, as writing that both directs the viewer's gaze and indirectly announces or affirms the artist's rite of passage. Artists' statements call attention not only to the artworks they introduce, but to themselves—and to 'the artist' as creative and critical agent. Artists' statements are palimpsests, presenting, in words, a narrative or argument apparent beneath (or overlaying) each principal visual representation.

Verbalizing one's creative practice may seem to some redundant; as David Perkins puts it, "There is a 'mute' understanding of looking at art that says, roughly, 'Talk about art is bound to be empty. Words simply lack the precision and evocativeness to capture the intensity and nuance of deep engagement with a work of art'" (124). Such a view may seem at first glance compelling, for it seemingly valorizes the visual as a legitimate, even primary, mode of discourse. Yet the principle of 'mute looking' (and 'mute making') assumes a purely mimetic relationship between work and word; if, however, we consider the artist's statement as more than an attempt 'to recreate the experience of the work' (Perkins 124), as more than a verbal complement or supplement, we open up the possibility of viewing artists' statements as artworks.

Works like Brigitte Radecki's *The Black Notebooks*, for example, ask us to reconceptualize the role of the statement, denying it full authority while letting it wander, emerge and linger as a gesture of partial understanding. In *Notebooks*, Radecki, a contributor to the *Proximities Exhibition*, begins with the private diaries of Elizabeth Smart (an author whose books were burned by her own mother, who was embarrassed by their content). Passages from the diaries are enlarged and transferred onto canvas, a reverse palimpsest acting as vernacular muse for Radecki's obsessively intense paintings.

'What is of interest to me,' says Radecki, 'is to contaminate the silence and purity of Modernist abstract painting and to re-introduce narrative, history, and references to life outside the painting while maintaining the sensuousness and primary experience of abstraction' (Personal Correspondence). By *restating* words already present in another's text, she lets 'the emphasis shift from the artist as originator' to the artist as both viewer and re-creator of meaning. Radecki's work both celebrates and interrogates the personal.

We would argue that the very best artists' statements evoke the vernacular as a form of catachresis, a 'naming out of difference': at root, vernacular means a local or indigenous form of expression, one tied to the ordinary or everyday. The dictionary defines the vernacular as 'a slave language,' as removed from the so-called dominant discourse. What interests us is how the vernacular—including vernacular theory—emerges accidentally or whimsically in relation to (often in opposition to) sites of cultural power. It emerges most often as a sign of loss, a nostalgic or melancholic token. Ironically, the vernacular is, by definition, that which is least 'at home' in popular, mass, and high art cultural expression—and yet one senses that these other forms of expression could not exist without traces of the vernacular. So, while the vernacular may embody the local, the affective, the past, it becomes visible or readable *out of difference*. Artists' statements work this way too; reading them is always approximate, a matter of proximity.

#### References

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