

TECH



TECH ELEMENT

Messengers
of Matter

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Discover the
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TECH TEACH

Discover the Pack Rat Within

Why documentation is important, now and in the future

BY REBEKAH FRANK

“How do we capture the attention of creatives to understand the importance of documenting their work and thinking about their legacy?

Artists should consider what they are leaving behind after they are gone. Will it be 97,000 slides in a dusty box, or will they have some form of catalog lovingly prepared? It may be up to the artist themselves to maintain that documentation.”

— Beth Goodrich, American Craft Council Archive

HELLO FELLOW JEWELRY ARTISTS, MAKERS, AND ENTREPRENEURS.

This article addresses a topic you’ve certainly heard about before. The idea might make you yawn, turn the page, or drift off on a daydream, but stay with me. It’s important. Ready?

Documentation is an integral part of being an artist. What is it, you ask? Documentation tells your story as an artist and provides background about the making of a piece. It places your work in an art-historical narrative, which holds added importance when working within an underrepresented medium or tradition. Documentation is all the words that accompany the physical objects you make. As artists, we tend to think of documentation as a tedious chore. We became artists because we like to make *things*, not stare at screens or blank pieces of paper. But by the end of this article, I hope to convince you of why keeping up on your documentation will make your art life easier.

Photo: Sharon McCutcheon, Unsplash

ARTISTIC IDENTITY DOCUMENTATION

Documentation includes your artist statement, biography, CV, and any supporting material that accompanies your work, such as business cards, postcards, wall text, email and social media, communication, published articles; the list goes on.

Let's start with the content that you have the most control over. These three things represent the written core of your artistic identity. You'll use them over and over again to apply for grants and exhibitions, to send to galleries and collectors interested in your work, and to include in catalogs and monographs. Taking a little time each year to update them is time well spent.

Artist Statement

Typically, this is a formal statement using five-dollar words to describe what you think your art is about. Formal institutions require formal statements, so applying for grants, anything in academia, and museums is where this document is most appropriate. Since a formal statement is often inscrutable to the layperson, it's good practice to also have an informal statement for others to read. Remember, artspeak is a barrier to accessibility, and being impenetrable is not a good look.

It's also helpful to have one statement for your overall art practice, a short statement for each individual body of work, and a short statement for each standalone piece. An artist statement ranges from one paragraph to one page, but no more than that.

Biography

This document is a short recounting of your life that provides context for your practice. It can read like your resume in paragraph form or be more personal in tone. Typically, it includes your education and location. Its purpose is to give a glimpse into how you became the artist you are now. It can be fun to include a juicy tidbit to get people interested, so be sure to include that extra-special something about yourself. This is where your hyphenated identities, personal experience, and unique attributes aid in the understanding of who you are and why you make your work.

CV

This is where the really good stuff goes. A CV is a bullet-pointed list of all your artistic accomplishments, typically listed in reverse chronological order and grouped by category. I recommend having two versions—one with *every single thing* you've ever done and one that is the highlight reel, one or two pages max. Update them at least once a year and, if possible, have them accessible on your website.

SUPPLEMENTAL DOCUMENTATION

Supplemental documentation can be more personal. The following three types of supplemental documentation highlight your relationship with your inner self, your outward presentation, and your correspondence with others. Together, they add depth to your artistic identity.

Communication

This can include the letters and emails that you write to your teachers, mentors, collectors, and gallerists, as well as the rejection and the acceptance letters. Also your past presentation decks, like PowerPoints or slideshows, and notes for your artist talks and lectures about your work.

Promotional Materials

The business cards, postcards, posters, etc., that are generated by you, or for you, are fun to create and important to keep track of. These files are interesting to look at and great memory devices; and it can be hilarious to see how your graphic style has changed over the course of your career. This is where your inner pack rat can run free.

Journal/Sketchbook

If you are a journaler, either with words or with sketches, you already know that journals are an incredible insight into your thought processes. But don't forget they are an intriguing addition to your practice for others to see as well.

OTHER DOCUMENTATION

Lastly, there is the text written by others about you. These pieces are hard to get, and should be cherished and celebrated.

Wall Text

In the excitement of an exhibition, it is easy to forget to document the wall text. Typically written by curators for a museum audience, these wall texts show how others contextualize your work and are great reminders that, yes, your exhibition really happened.

Printed Publications

Keep every single piece that has ever been written about you: articles, catalog essays, reviews (good or bad), press releases—anything and everything. Be the proud “art mom” of your success and scrapbook them, frame them, or at least digitally toss them in a folder.

Note: Of course, documentation also includes photographs, but for the purpose of this article, I'm going to focus on the printed matter. Overall, I think most artists understand the importance of photographing their work, and there are many articles that address how to do this well.

INFORMATION TO INCLUDE

ARTIST STATEMENT	ARTIST BIOGRAPHY	OBJECT INFORMATION	CURRICULUM VITAE (CV)
Artist Name	Artist Name	Artist Name	Artist Name
Intent	Background	Title	Birth Place/Date
Influences	Lived Experience	Part of a Series?	Education
Avoid	Include	Edition Number (Ex: 1 of 5)	Solo Exhibitions
Art Speak	Juicy Tidbits	Date Made	Group Exhibitions
		Object Type	Awards
		Material List	Residencies
		Maker's Marks	Lectures
			Workshops
			Collections





“As a maker I always felt my work should ‘speak for itself.’ However, I find that the more articulate I can be, the more others are willing and able and enthusiastic about engaging with the work. This is the same for me if I am the viewer. As a teacher, I have taught ‘professional practices’ type classes where the students write artist’s statements. They often resist, and despite the fact that part of me still wants the work to exist in some autonomous vacuum, it truly helps me to understand the student and their practice better.”

—Judith Schaechter, stained glass artist

REASONS FOR DOCUMENTATION

Now that we have defined what documentation is, let’s look at why keeping it is important for your artistic life right now. So often, we look at documentation as an end-of-life endeavor, something that is for the future. In reality, keeping good records helps you expand your practice and reach for new opportunities.

Knowing your artistic self

Self reflection is not always fun, but it is a necessary part of being an artist. When you look at past artist statements you’ll see how your practice evolved, and can take that into account as you write your new statement. Your constantly growing CV is *your* success story and a record of past achievements. Seeing your past promotional material is also a reminder of what you’ve done and can inspire you to try something new. Reviewing your journals and sketchbooks can remind you of a forgotten idea and inspire you to try again. Reading reference letters from the past is a great pick-me-up, especially when times are lean.

Communicating your story with others

The all-important process of convincing others to see you and your work is often conducted through words. These documents contain the seeds of every grant application, response to an exhibition call, conversation with a gallerist, and artist talk. Instead of starting from scratch, having these documents on hand allows you to cut and paste for each new opportunity. It will also allow you to respond and apply to new opportunities quickly and professionally—which will make you look really good. Each time you apply, you’ll evolve and expand to meet the required application criteria and in doing so, create a new understanding of your work for yourself and others.

Making your experience accessible

I strongly believe that an artist CV should be on your website. Why? Because your success is a ladder for the artists coming next. Share your artist statement, show your growth, include your biography, add links to the publications you’ve been in—not just for your ego but to show others the way. Be sure to include the awards, residencies, and grants you’ve received—the artists coming up behind you will appreciate it.

Building a network

Every achievement you have involves other people: the curators, collectors, writers, galleries, professors and mentors. Keeping track of your records includes keeping track of these essential people. As your career continues to grow, so will your network, but only if you maintain it.

Misconceptions About Documentation



Some artists have what they see as valid reasons for not doing this work. Let’s do our due diligence and give those reasons a look.

“Art should speak for itself” This is a very familiar argument. While I would agree that an artist shouldn’t need to give a two-hour lecture for a piece of art to be understood, documentation isn’t simply an explanation. Instead, it puts the work, the artist, and the practice in its appropriate context. This argument also comes from a place of privilege. Why? In the context of our current museum system, which is dominated by white male artists, led by white administrators, and funded by white donors, artists of other experiences—women, LGBTQIA, BIPOC and all intersections of these experiences—need additional context for their work to be understood.

“I’m not concerned with legacy-building” Perhaps it seems hubristic to think about your “legacy,” but your record will be much richer and more complete if you think about it now. If not you, then who? Besides, who are you to say your work won’t be important in the future? Do you want to have a monograph written about your work one day? Then start now. Do you think your art matters in the art world dialogue? Prove it. If you want to be taken seriously, then spend the time to treat your work like it matters—now.

“It’s too hard...” Please. It’s just not. Deep breath, block out two hours, sit your butt down, and get started.

RECIPIENTS OF DOCUMENTATION

In the great scheme of things, you make art for others to enjoy, wear, and collect (and, fingers crossed, to support yourself financially). This includes an entire cast of people who are on the receiving end of your creative brilliance. Once they have the *objet d'art* and a few years have passed, they won't remember the details any longer. In the moment, they think they won't forget when they visited your studio in Paris and you blew their mind, but they will. It's simply human, and that is who we make art for, after all: humans. So by including your documentation with every transaction, having it accessible on your website, and making sure you keep track of your work, you will be able to come to the rescue when your work resurfaces in someone's collection, in a museum bequest, or another magical situation.

Customers/Collectors

Did you know most collectors don't know they are collectors? One day, they wake up to find they've run out of room for their next beautiful, "can't live without it" object, and they think, "OMG, what have I done?!" Keep this in mind if you sell directly to anyone; you don't know at what point they'll realize they are truly collecting and not just avid art appreciators. Provide every direct sale with your CV, biography, and statement. An easy way to slip this information in is to include it as an attachment to the bill of sale in a follow-up email.

Gallerists

If you sell through a gallery, make sure your gallery has your updated documentation on file and find out if they make a practice of sending a documentation packet to their clients. By doing so, you've done your due diligence, and it is now up to the collector to compile your documentation in their collection.

Curators

When your piece is selected for a museum exhibition or for purchase, first—congratulations! Next, curators need your CV, biography, and artist statements, as well as the complete identification of the individual piece. Complete identification includes: artist name, birth date, nationality, titles, comprehensive material list, dimensions, and any marks. This information is entered into the museum database and is an important part of the archival process. If you already have this information together when they reach out, you will look like a rockstar.

Archivists

Archivists are the nicest people. They are librarians extraordinaire who want to keep your work from disappearing into the darkness of history. They are likely to use the word "legacy" in conversation, which freaks out many artists who are often only thinking as far ahead as the next bill cycle. Archivists are called upon by museums and collectors for information about an unknown piece, and then they scramble to try to find that info. By having your documentation in order and available, you make it possible for archivists to find that information easier.

ACTION STEPS

Here's a list of action steps.

- Include your name and contact information on each piece of paper, digital or printed. This seems obvious, but papers get separated, so it really matters.
- Find a system that works for you: a shoe box, a paper filing system, digital files, etc.
- Don't make it overly complicated. For me, organizing by year makes sense.
- Make the cloud work for you. I use a combination of Google Workplace and Dropbox but use what system you are comfortable with.
- Invest in an archiving database, like ArtworkArchive, to streamline the process even more, especially if you have a lot of inventory that moves often.
- Pace yourself and don't compile your documentation all at once.

RESPECT

To close, let's talk about respecting yourself, your art, and your labor. As an artist, you

create from a space that is uniquely yours. No one can make the work that you make.

Keeping track of your art is your responsibility; it is part of the job. Someone once told me that an artistic life is like completing an MFA every two to three years.

This work may seem difficult, but writing your own history is powerful. This is especially important for women, people of color, and Black and indigenous people, as well as artists working in non-traditional mediums. While there are still obstacles toward representation, the art world is experiencing a shift right now that will, hopefully, result in more opportunities to show work that has traditionally fallen outside the art historical canon. Taking the time now prepares you for the shift in museum gatekeepers, exhibition opportunities, and archives. Thorough documentation signals not only that you value your work, it demands that others pay attention as well.

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Rebekah Frank is a studio artist and independent writer who enjoys traveling the world in search of interesting experiences to fuel both her art and writing practices. You can find more of her writing and work at www.rebekahfrank.com or on Instagram as @rebekahgailfrank.

“ With any artist I'm interested in, a CV places the artist and their work in a context, and documents their evolution and growth.

A biography gives insight into who they are, and how that's reflected in their work. Interviews, in print or video, put a face and a voice to who the artist is and how their life intersects with their philosophy, aesthetics, and process. ”

— Jeffery Lloyd Dever, Maker

