

## Curatorial Statement Guidelines

Your curatorial statement is a great opportunity to guide the way the public perceives your exhibition. It's a chance to communicate directly with viewers, help them understand your point of view, and get them excited and curious about the work they're about to experience.

When writing the curatorial statement, it's good to keep some general guidelines in mind. The statement should be about 200-300 words and 2-3 paragraphs. It can be helpful to follow a basic structure—for example, using the first paragraph to establish the overall premise of the exhibit, the second to illustrate the range of artists' approaches with examples, and the third to suggest the wider significance of your theme. If there's a particular work that was especially instrumental in the way you thought about the exhibition, it might be interesting to describe that work in depth to draw the viewer into your thought process. Some Gelman curators also write a supplementary handout that describes each work in the show in some detail. (See the *Unnatural Science* example on the back of this sheet.)

You should also think about the style of the statement. There are two audiences for your exhibition: the RISD community and the wider public. You want to be specific enough when articulating your agenda to engage the RISD community, but avoid using the kind of art-world jargon that might alienate a general audience. For instance, if there is a specific term that's essential to the theme of the exhibition, make sure to define it in your curatorial statement. There is a great example of this in the "Synthetics" statement from the Whitney Museum below. "Synthetic" is clearly defined—as it pertains both to the physical properties of paint and to artificiality as a cultural ideal. As is the case in this example, thoughtful consideration of your audience can often help you articulate your ideas more clearly.

In general, you want an informative and persuasive tone, somewhere between an academic paper and a newspaper article. The samples below should help you get a feel for the appropriate tone. Of course, the best way to find out how to express your thoughts is to get started writing your statement. We look forward to reviewing it with you.

A few samples:

### ***Synthetic, The Whitney Museum, 2009***

In the 1960s, artists began to use a range of new products that changed the possibilities of painting and sculpture. Synthetic polymer paints—popularly known as acrylics—became the first widely used alternative to oil, a material that had dominated painting since the Renaissance. Unlike oil, these water-based colors dried quickly and to a uniform surface. Artists such as Morris Louis explored their physical properties, especially their ability to stain and be poured directly on raw canvas. Medium and support could merge and become equal. These new approaches advanced one of the fundamental ideas of modern painting: acknowledging flatness as part of a painting's status as object and picture. Other artists—those not working abstractly—explored how synthetic and commercial materials could impact an image's meaning.

The new emphasis on surface took on metaphorical as well as material importance. Andy Warhol inextricably merged process with subject matter in his screen-printed paintings. Richard Artschwager used commercially made materials to create a slick, plastic look that was integral to that which was represented. This exhibition explores how new synthetic products not only allowed for a new look but also aligned with subject matter to change the direction of postwar American art.

### **After Nature, The New Museum, 2008**

*After Nature* surveys a landscape of wilderness and ruins, darkened by uncertain catastrophe. It is a story of abandonment, regression, and rapture—an epic of humanity and nature coming apart under the pressure of obscure forces and not-so-distant environmental disasters. Bringing together an international and multigenerational group of artists, filmmakers, writers, and outsiders, the exhibition depicts a universe in which humankind is being eclipsed and new ecological systems struggle to find a precarious balance.

The artists in *After Nature* share an interest in archaic traditions and a fascination for personal cosmologies and visionary languages. It is a peculiar form of magic realism that emerges from the works on view, coupled with a renewed belief in art as a tool for mythmaking.

Departing from the fictional documentaries of filmmaker Werner Herzog, *After Nature* assembles a collection of prophetic images and outlandish forms—a cabinet of curiosities that pieces together a fragmented and unreliable encyclopedia. In his 1999 manifesto, Herzog described a truth liberated from fact: a poetic, ecstatic truth that “is mysterious and elusive, and can be reached only through fabrication and imagination.” The works in *After Nature* aspire to such: folding fact into fiction, the exhibition brings together artworks that can be interpreted as relics, idols, and documents. Temporally detached from any point of orientation, the exhibition emerges as a study of the present from a place in the future. A requiem for a vanishing planet, *After Nature* is a feverish examination of an extinct world that strangely resembles our own.

### **Unnatural Science, Mass MoCA, 2001**

The art in *Unnatural Science* exploits scientific narratives, practices and aesthetics. Humorous and irreverent, though scientifically well-informed, these recent installations, sculptures, video works, and photographs owe much to the playful art of Marcel Duchamp, Alfred Jarry and Raymond Roussel in their use of science as a springboard for fantasy. The explorations of botany, genetics, chemistry, physics and other sciences are both poetic and profound, beautiful and visionary. Drawn from the collections of artists, galleries and museums all over the world, the works in *Unnatural Science* hailed a significant trend in contemporary art—one that not only demystifies, but also poeticizes science.

### **Janine Antoni**

*Slumber* was a performance/installation: whenever it was shown, the artist lived in the gallery, weaving during the day and sleeping with an EEG machine recording her Rapid Eye Movement (REM) at night. The REM is an analogue to Antoni’s dreams, and she weaves this pattern into the blanket that covers her bed while she sleeps. In this piece, an uneasy truce exists between contemporary medical technology, ancient myths of weaving and the mysterious world of dreams.

### **Catherine Chalmers**

Chalmers raised and photographed a four-step food chain in her New York apartment. Caterpillars eat a tomato, then are eaten by a praying mantis, which has sex with and then is eaten by another praying mantis, which is then consumed by a frog. We may remember food chains like this described in junior high science class, but seeing each step—5 feet across and in brilliant color—removed from any educational purpose is quite a different thing. Chalmers’ photographs in *Unnatural Science* documented these very normal, yet surreal, gruesome, and riveting encounters.

### **Peter Fischli + David Weiss**

One of many collaborations between Peter Fischli and David Weiss, *The Way Things Go* is a film made in the artists’ studio. It follows a staged series of chain reactions relying on the fundamentals of physics, such as gravity and inertia, and using simple machines like levers and inclined planes. Their goal was to make their chain reaction come as close to not working as possible. The result is both whimsical and excruciatingly suspenseful.