

## EXERCISE:

### THE HANDSHAKE SPEECH

Now that you've done some writing and had an opportunity to think about your art and your role as an artist, I challenge you to describe your work as concisely as possible.

#### **Word subtraction**

How many of these blanks can you fill in? How briefly can you describe your work?

My art is about \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

In five words: My art is about \_\_\_\_\_

Four: My art is about \_\_\_\_\_

Three: My art is about \_\_\_\_\_

Two: My art is about \_\_\_\_\_

One: My art is about \_\_\_\_\_

Finding just a few well-chosen words is the perfect way to arrive at what you will *say out loud about yourself*. Distill a description of what you do, reduce it down as far as possible. This is a way of being considerate to your listeners—because they can always ask more questions—and of making you sound more confident.

You will often act as your own ambassador or agent. Speak up. Confidence and enthusiasm are the very best

self-promotion tools, so prepare something brief to say about your work and yourself.

The way you speak about yourself and your work sends people to the intended destination: your art.

In business, this is called your “elevator speech.” I don’t care for that term because it makes me envision people packed into an elevator, all of them staring forward and talking about themselves. So let’s call it the handshake speech, which implies that some kind of connection will take place. Imagine someone reaching out his or her hand to you—a stranger, an art-worldling, a gallery owner, a collector. Will you be ready to introduce yourself?

This is a performance. Write your lines. Know your lines!

Hi, my name is \_\_\_\_\_ I’m an artist  
I work in (mediums) \_\_\_\_\_  
My art is about \_\_\_\_\_  
I’m working on \_\_\_\_\_  
I’m based/my studio is \_\_\_\_\_  
You can see my work (online/gallery) \_\_\_\_\_

This is a good time to hand them a business card, and what’s really important is to be prepared with a question *for them*. Asking the other person a question helps to bridge the weird pause at the end of your handshake

speech. Try, “Are you an artist?” because non-artists like that question, and it’s a good lead-in for conversation.

Far too many times, I’ve seen my artist friends get tongue-tied and reticent when asked what they do. Frankly, my dears, this does not work. You have an occupation just like everyone else. And your occupation requires self-promotion. Imagine asking a plumber what they do and hearing the answer, “Uh, I plumb. Pipes, primarily. I can connect them. Basically, um, water transportation. Systematically.” Would you hire this person? Would you want to keep talking to them?

In the contemporary art scene, art and artist are packaged together. If you’re getting queasy right now from all the sell-speak, remember: your art is the treasure and everything else is just the map.

I urge you to create your handshake speech and rehearse it out loud. No matter how awkward this may feel right now, it will be far more awkward in social settings if words fail you. Don’t miss opportunities to make connections and sales because you weren’t prepared with a few short sentences. Take what you write and put it to good use off the page.