

What Does This Work DO?

- Before discussing conceptual strategy, we begin with function.
- This exercise asks you to describe what an artwork does rather than what it looks like or what it means.
- Focus on action, effect, and operation.

Why Ask This Question?

- Descriptions of appearance are limited.
- Interpretations of meaning are subjective.
- Function reveals how a work operates in the world.
- Understanding function is the first step toward understanding strategy.

The Central Question

- What does this work DO?
- What actions does it perform?
- What conditions does it create?
- What behaviors, responses, or shifts does it produce?
- Avoid interpretation. Describe operation.

Using Action Verbs as Tools

- Action verbs help describe function without interpretation.
- Verbs describe what the work does to materials, space, time, or viewers.
- They shift attention from appearance to operation.

Sample Action Verbs

- To cut, bend, suspend, stack, spill, contain
- To repeat, accumulate, erode, displace, compress
- To delay, interrupt, reveal, obscure, exhaust
- The list is abstractly descriptive instead of expressive.

Exercise Instructions

- Select 2–3 works by a single artist.
- For each work, list at least five verbs describing what the work does.
- Compare the lists.
- Identify which actions persist across different works.
- Recurring actions point toward strategy.

What You Are Looking For

- Actions that repeat even when materials or forms change.
- Operations that shape how the work is encountered.
- Decisions delegated to process, system, or condition.

What This Is NOT

- Not a list of materials.
- Not a description of style.
- Not an interpretation of meaning.
- If the verbs only describe appearance, revise them.

From Action to Strategy

- When actions repeat, they form a method.
- When a method persists, it becomes strategy.
- This is how artists think across bodies of work.

Examples



Robert Gober



Tom Friedman



Ursula Von Rydingsvard



Joana Vasconcelos



Jen Starck