

The multi-meaning and instability of visual language in different language and cultural contexts through gesture experiments, and questioned the universality of gestures

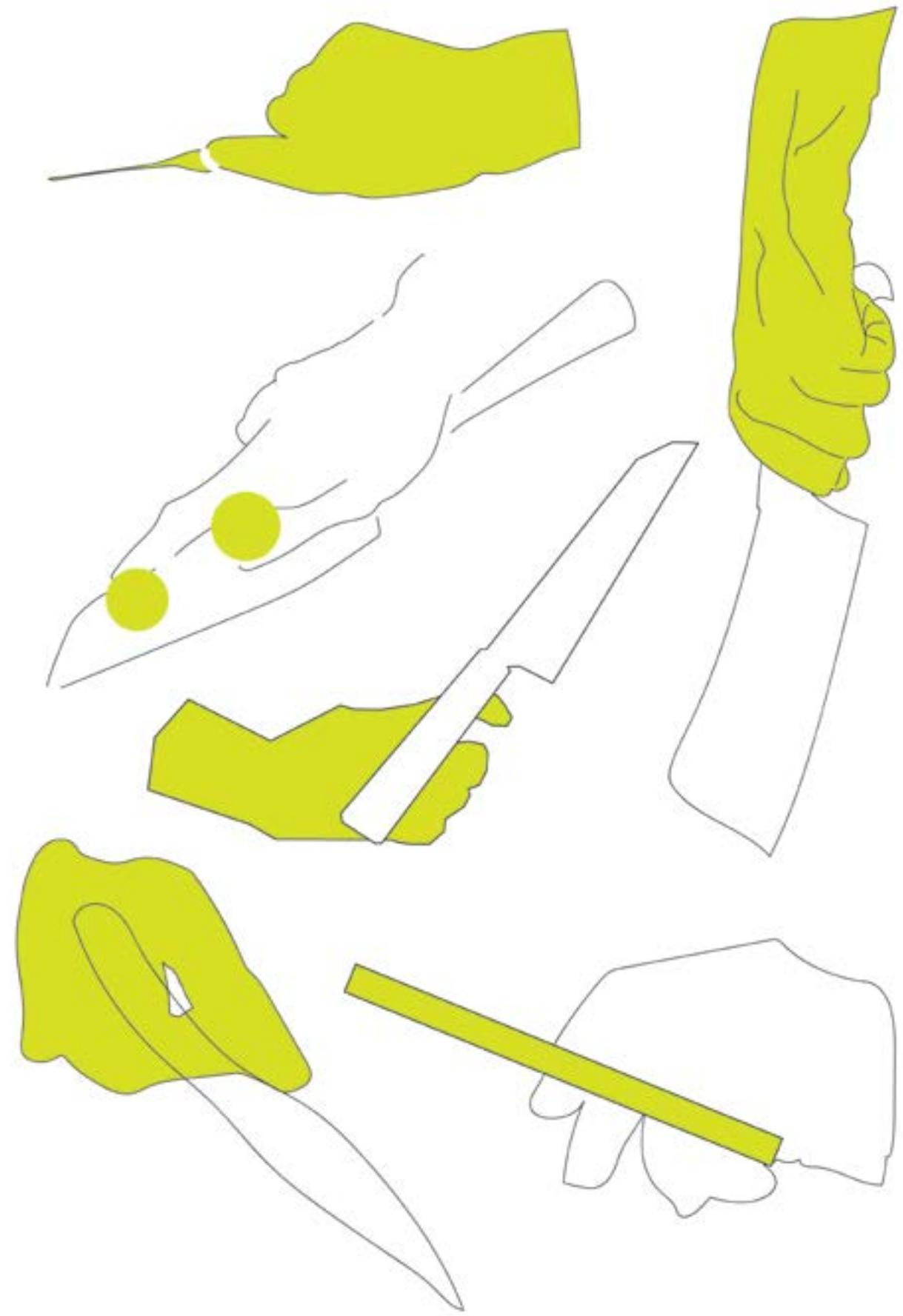
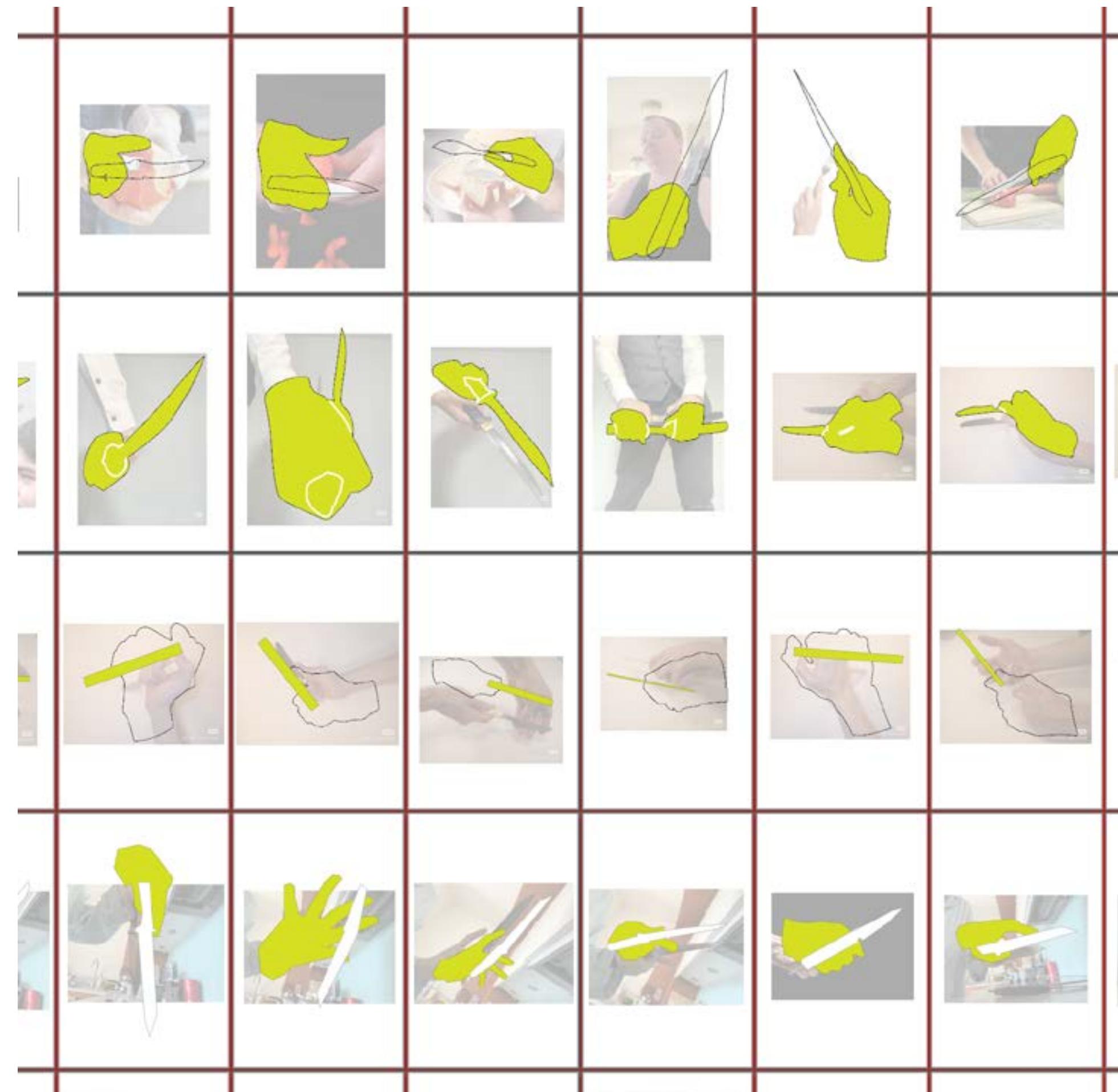
“Gestures as languages, constantly rewritten through culture.”



From Function to Form

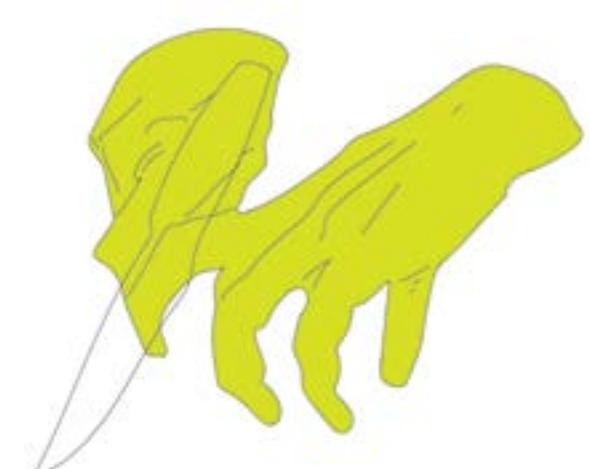
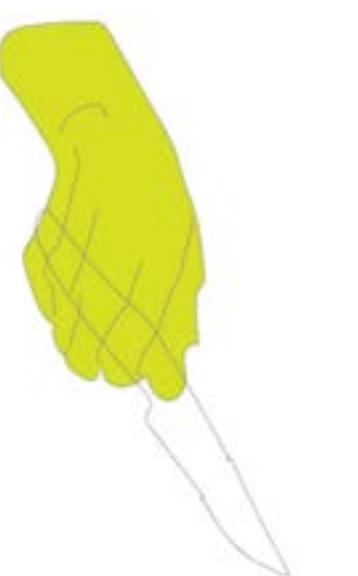
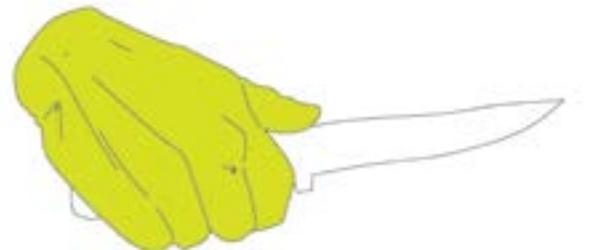
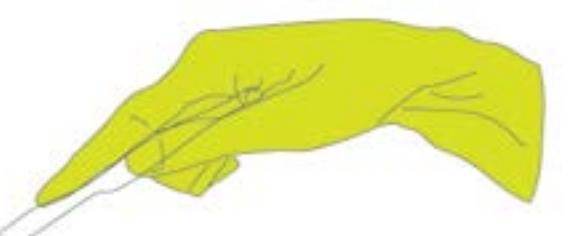


Across one hundred and twenty iterations, I traced the silent dialogue between the hand and the blade. Each posture was defined by the knife's function—the object dictated the movement, and the hand responded to it.

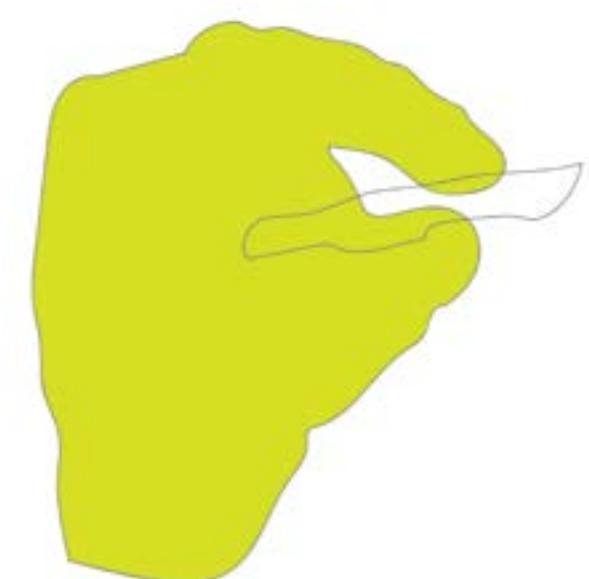
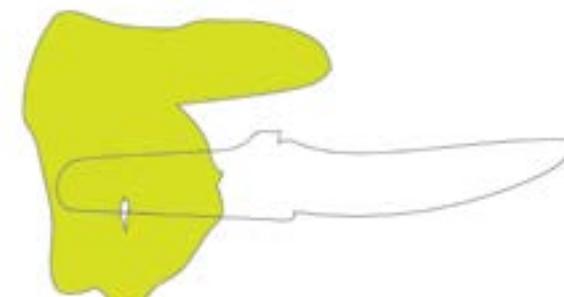
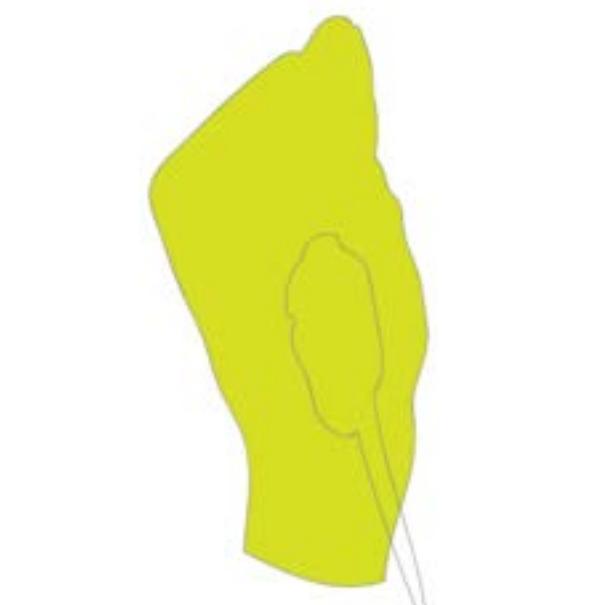
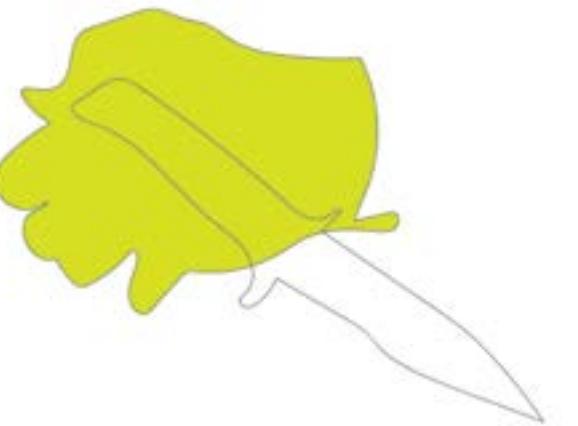


Six simplification ways

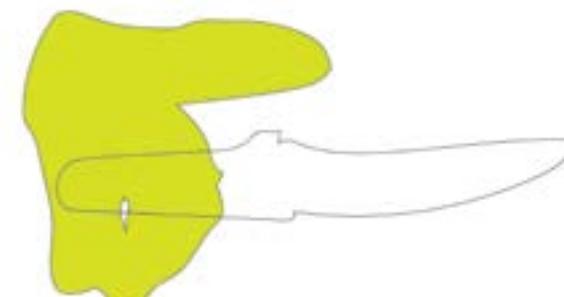
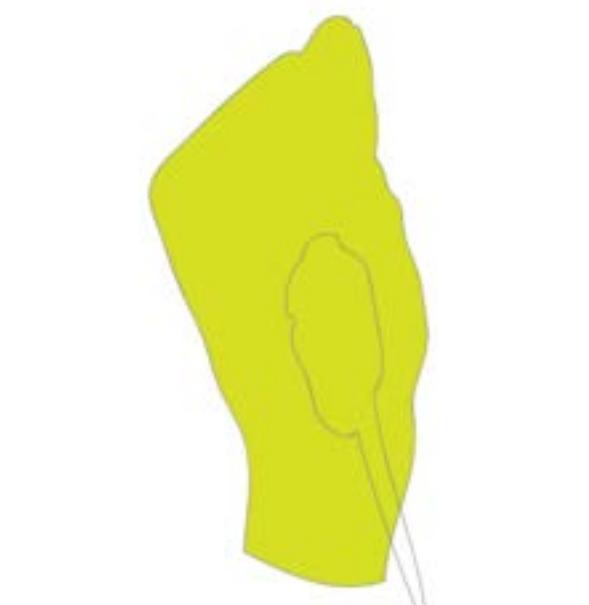
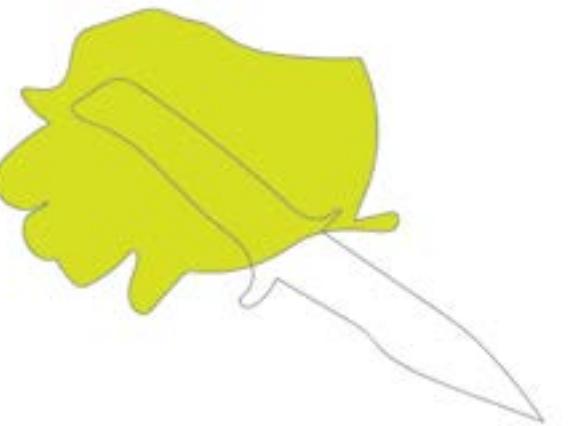
Contour lines outline hand and knife with light inner details
 → Emphasizes grip force and structure.



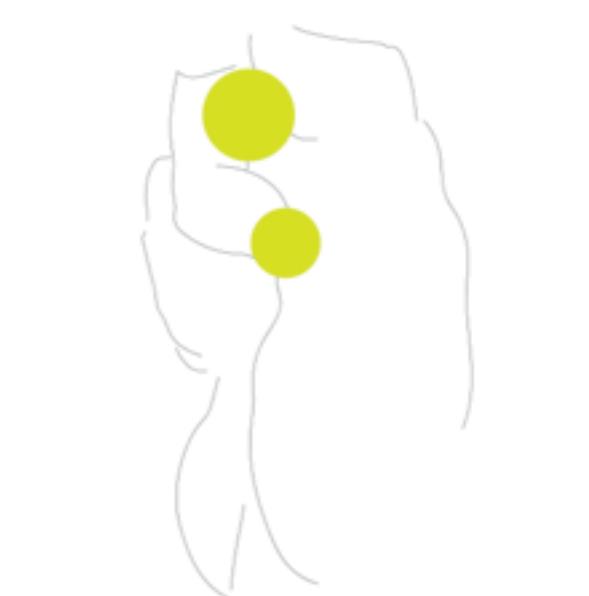
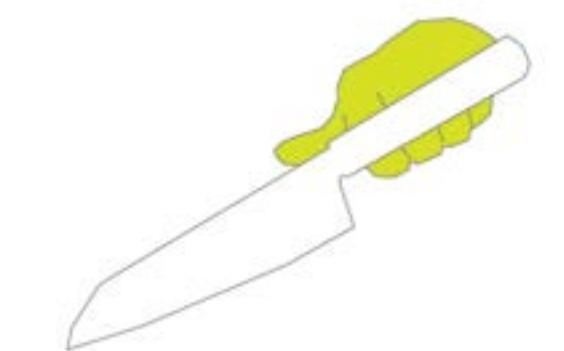
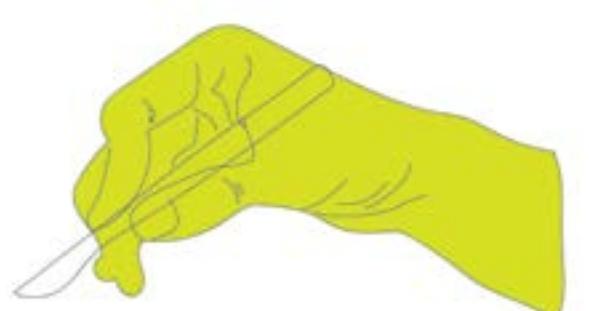
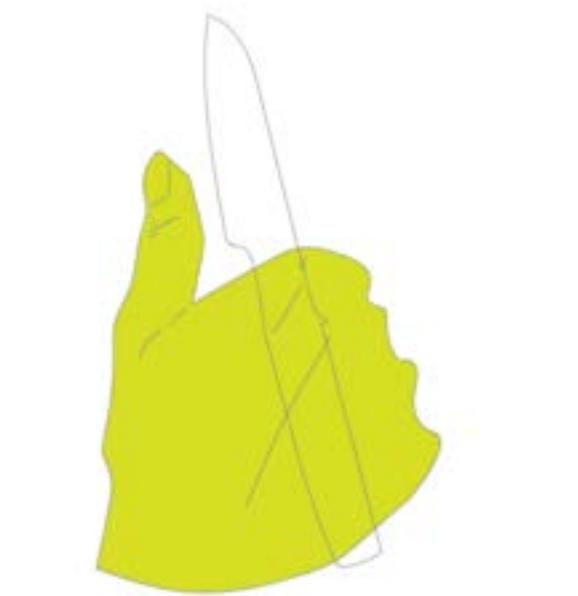
Solid hand fill + outlined knife
 → Contrasts body and tool, highlighting gesture form.



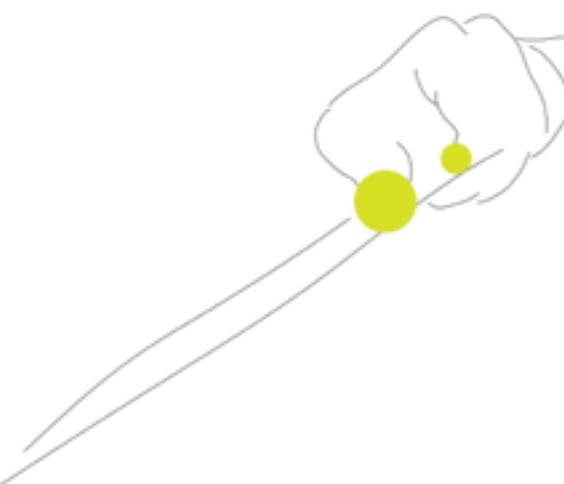
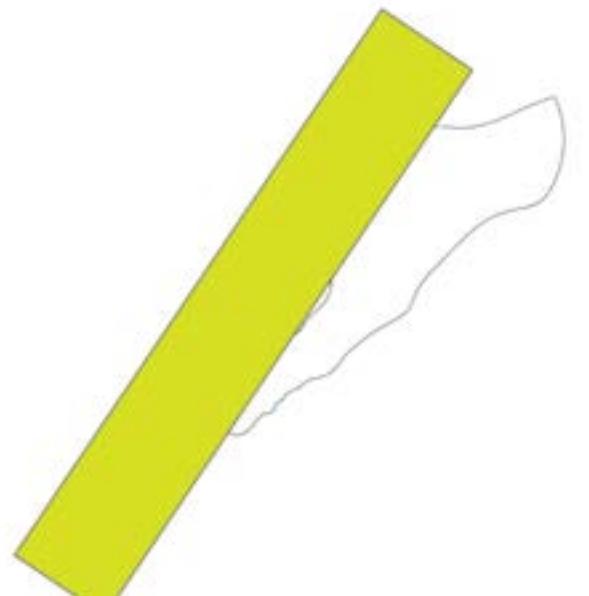
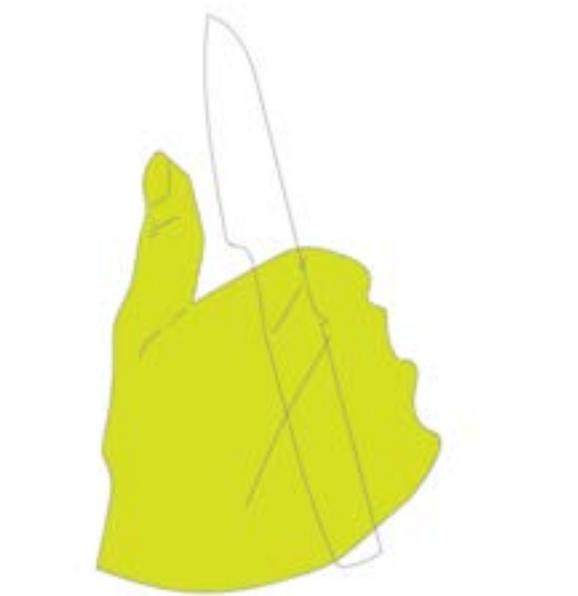
Outlined hand + knife reduced to a colored rectangle
 → Abstracts spatial relation, treating the knife as concept.



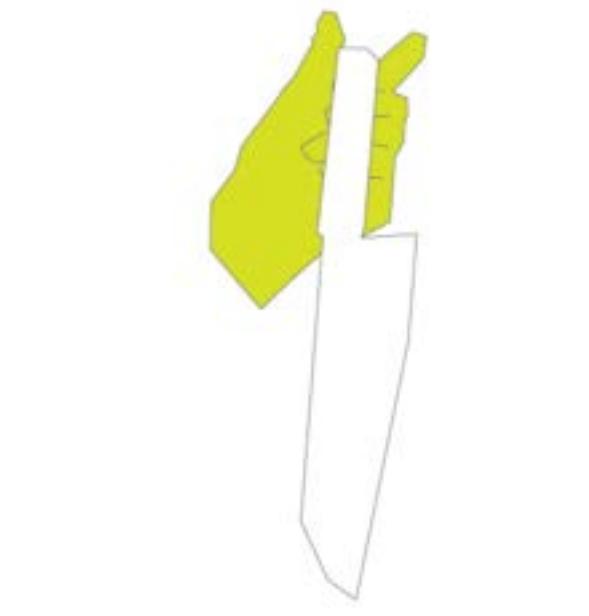
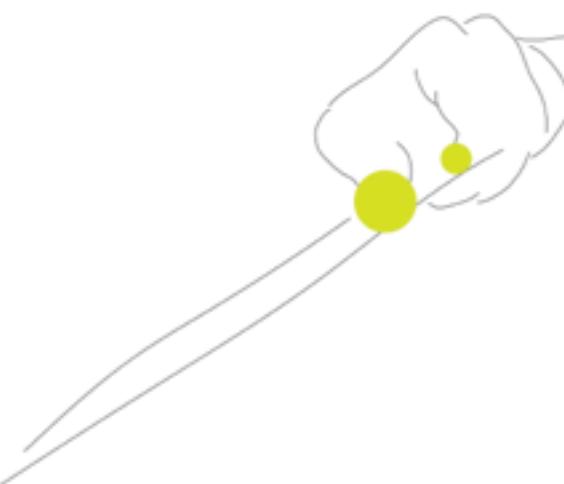
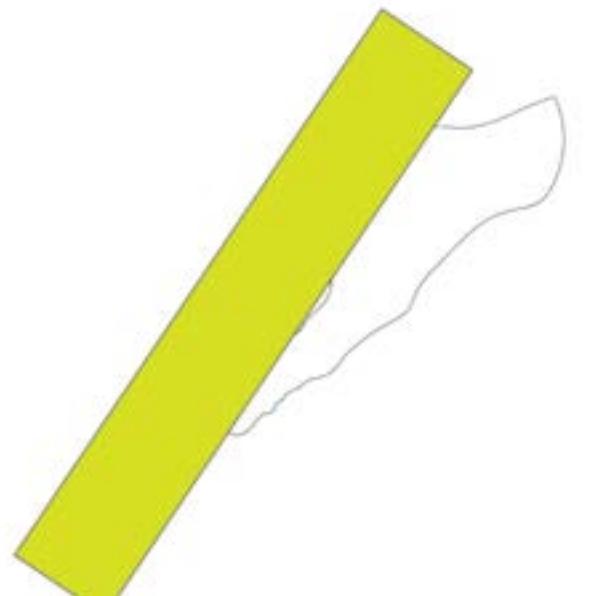
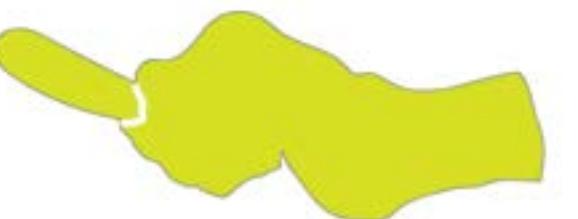
Angular lines and colored interior
 → Removes softness, revealing a mechanized rhythm.



Broken contours + circular pressure points
 → Marks contact zones, creating analytical clarity.



Geometric motion sequences (4–5 frames)
 → Captures gesture dynamics and continuity.



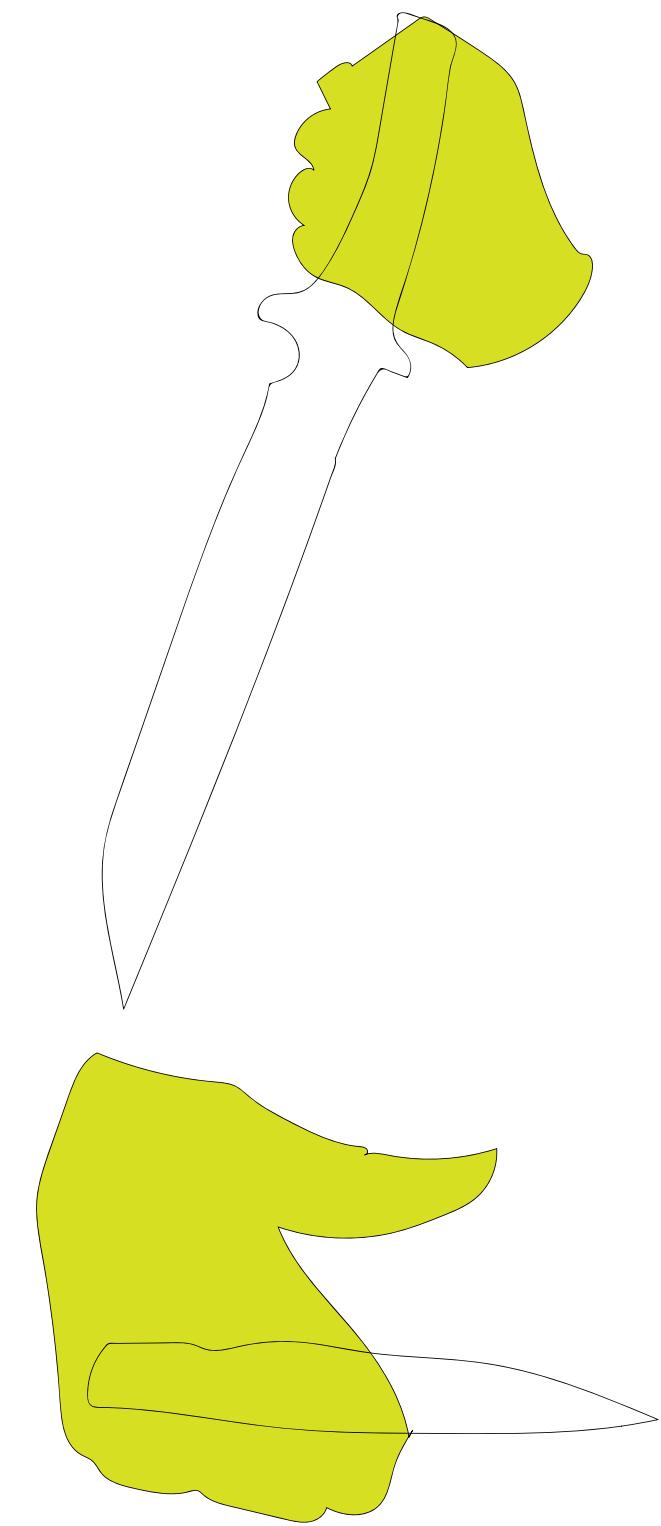
If the knife fails to function—becomes dull, broken, or unable to cut—does the gesture of holding it still count as “using a knife”? Does this suggest that the meaning of a gesture depends on the successful outcome of its function, rather than the gesture itself?



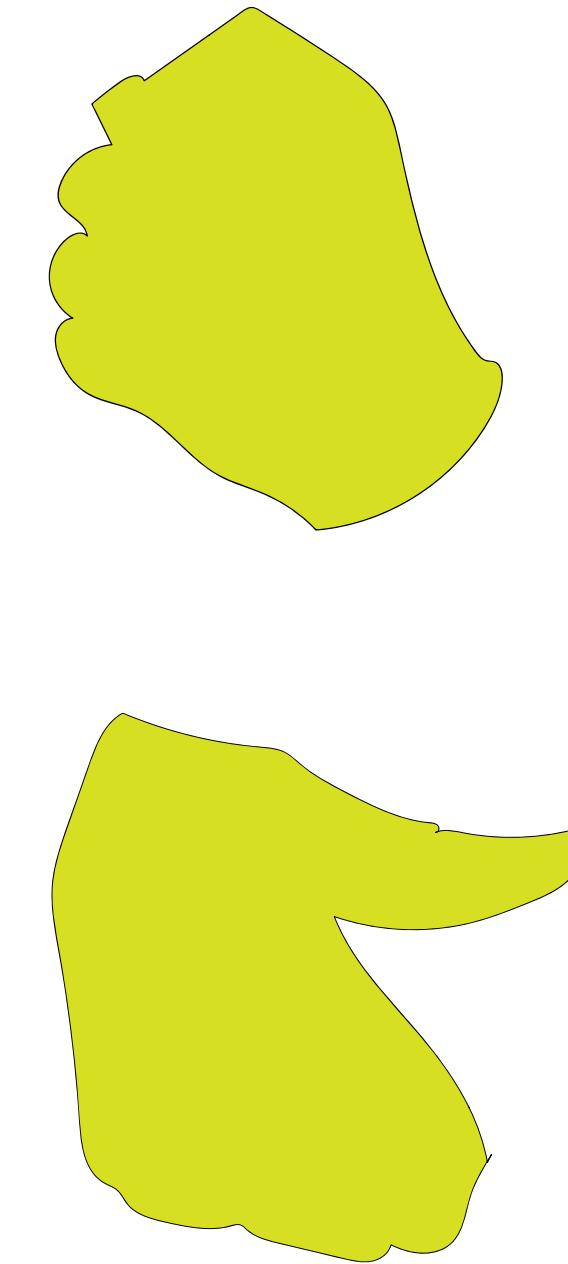
Concept Shift

When the object is removed from the scene, the hand no longer serves—it expresses.
Each gesture begins to construct its own meaning, independent from utility or function.
What once held an object now holds emotion, hesitation, and rhythm.
In the absence of tools, the gesture becomes the tool — a language born from movement itself.

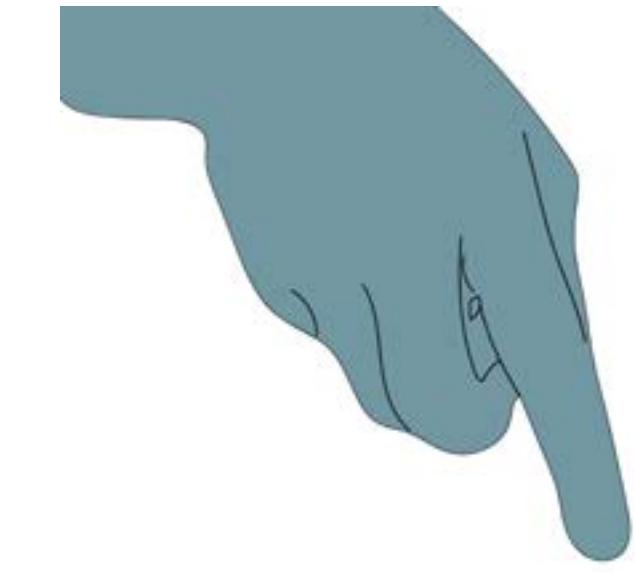
De-functionalisation / Gesture as Symbol / Emotional Reading



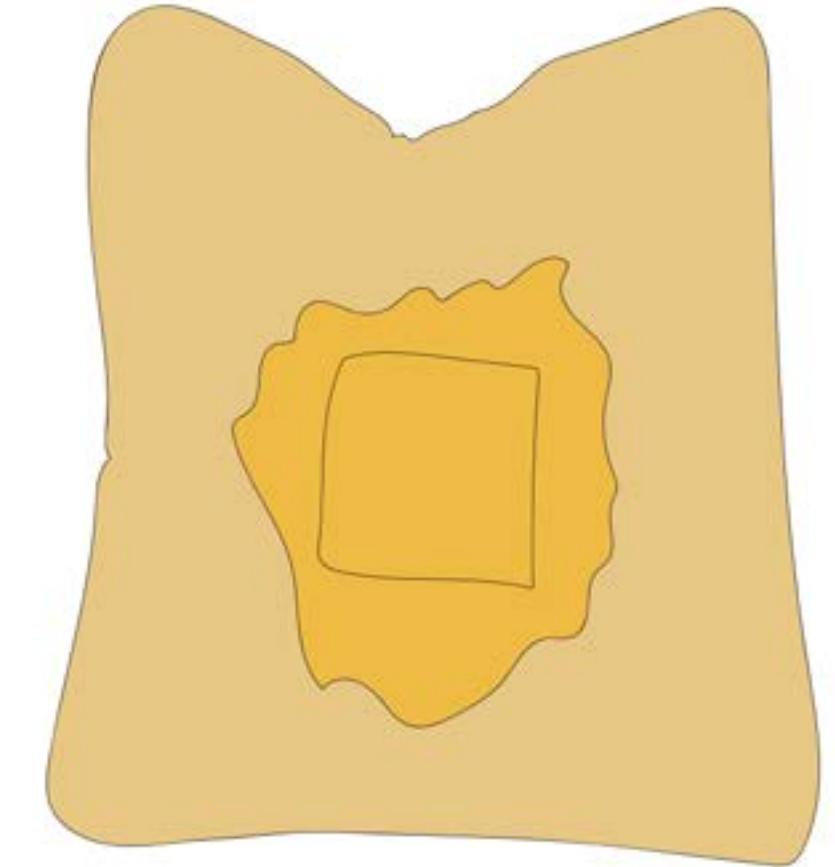
From Object to Gesture

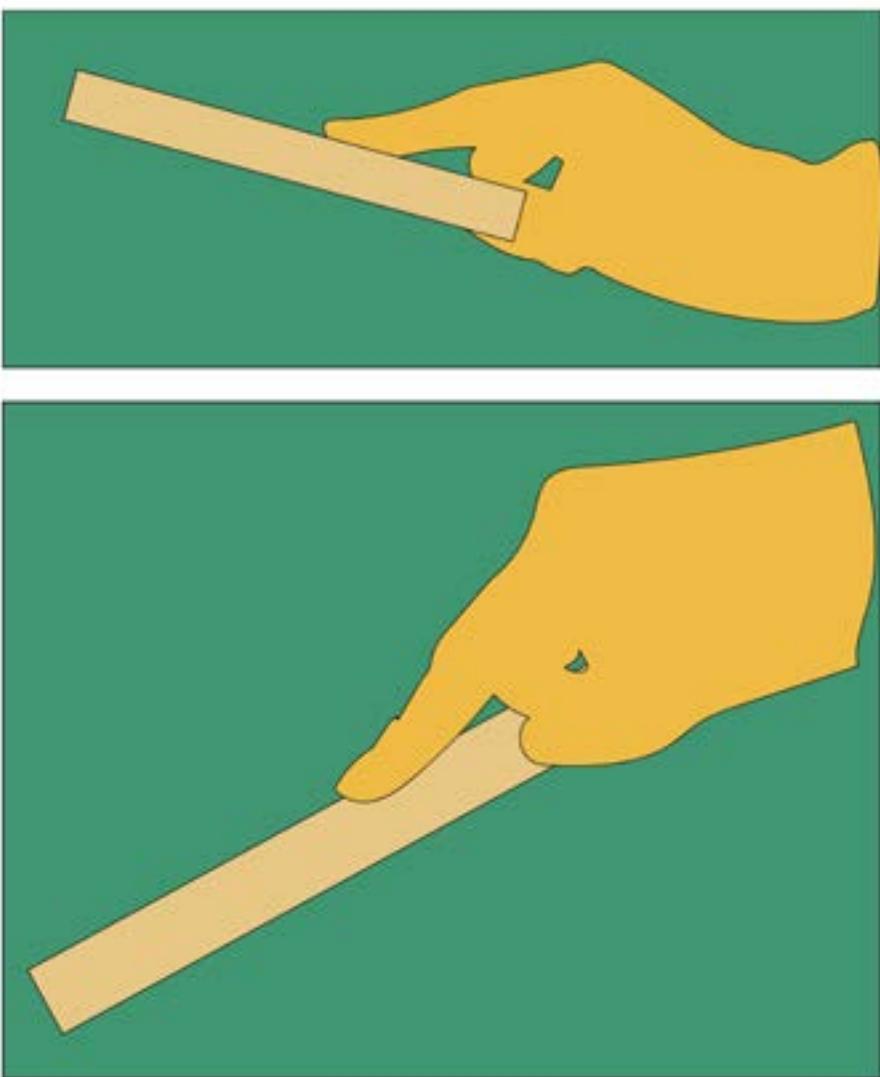


The Turning Point



From Function to Language

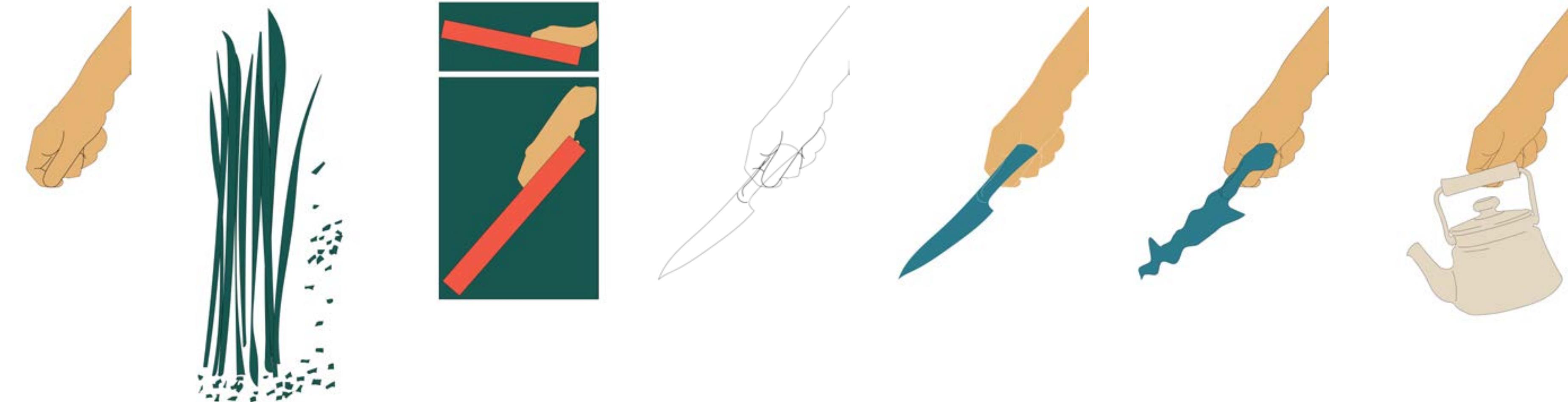


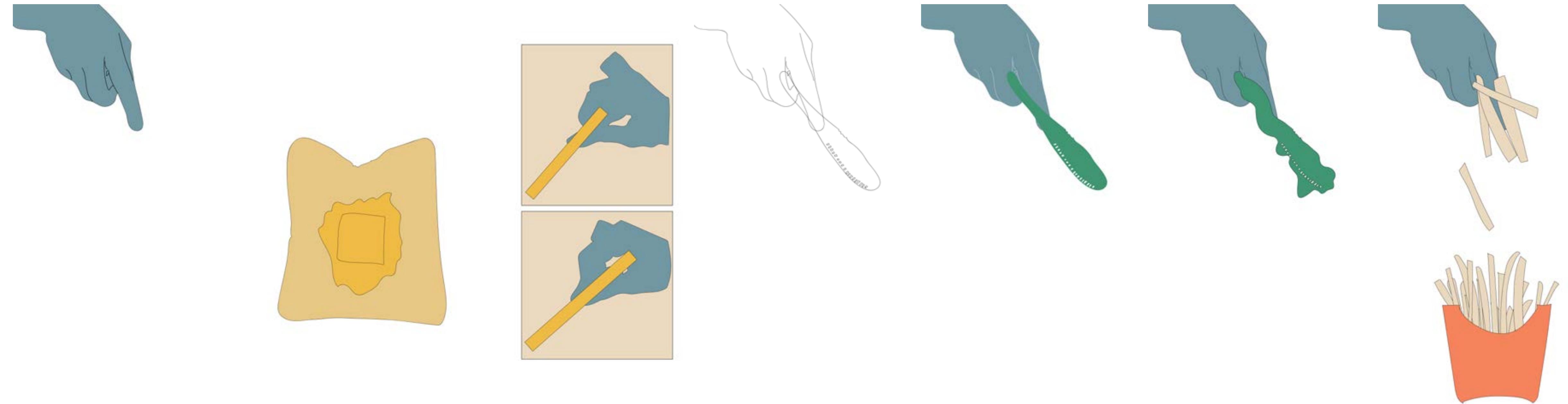


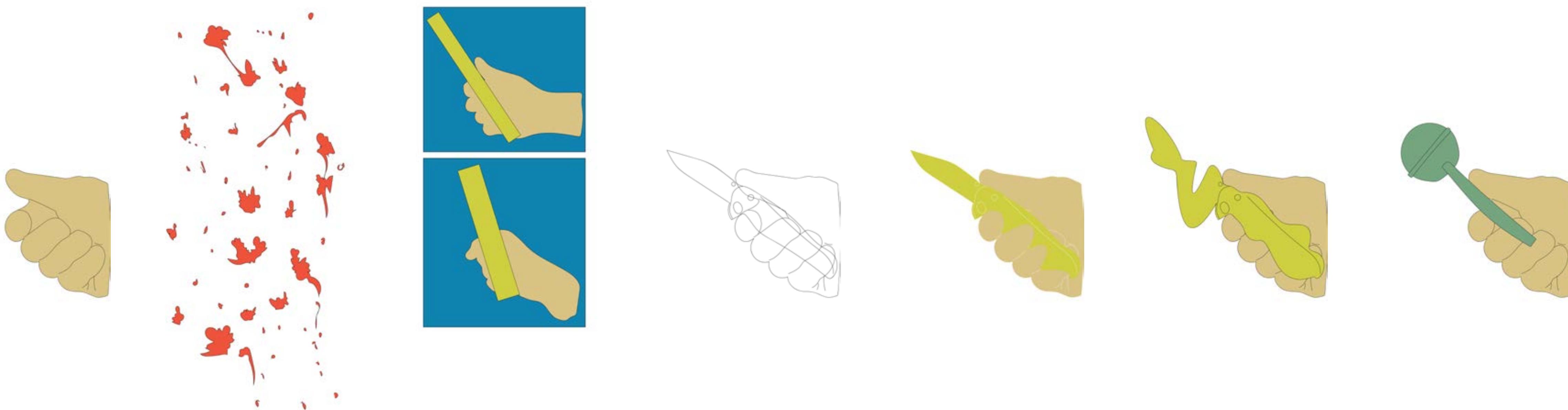
Through a series of simplified visual experiments, I examined how substituting or removing the tool transforms the emotional and contextual reading of the same hand movement. The process began with isolated hand gestures holding knives—later extending to altered or non-functional tools. By gradually replacing the knife with neutral or humorous objects, the work questioned how perception shifts: Can a gesture once read as violent become harmless, even absurd, when the object changes?



Isolated Hand Gestures Result of Action Dynamic Abstraction Functional Gesture-Line Functional Gesture-Color Tool Distortion Object Replacement

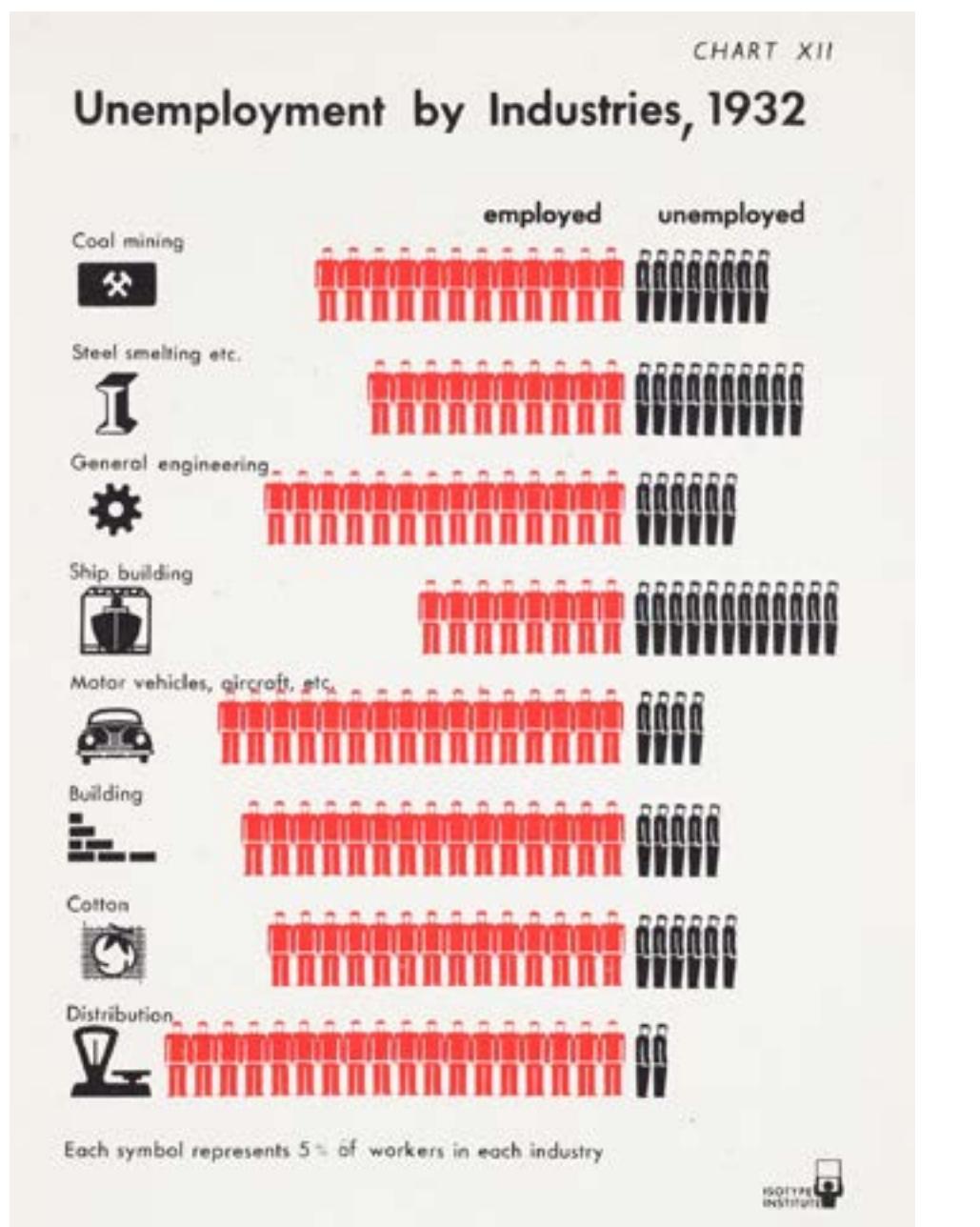
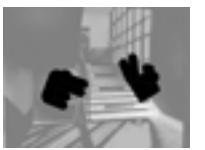






Theoretical Grounding

Neurath's ISOTYPE — standardized pictograms for universal readability; inspires archival 'cataloguing' methods but my work opposes the idea of neutral universality.



Theoretical Grounding

Vilém Flusser Gestures — gestures as cultural codes; supports treating gesture as primary content, not mere accompaniment.



GESTURE AND AFFECT

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was once called its "mental aspect"), they still tend to reduce the gesture to causal explanations (that which was once called "nature"). They do this to win the right to call themselves "sciences." But it is exactly what keeps these disciplines (psychology, sociology, economics, historical area studies, linguistics) from developing a theory of the interpretation of gesture.

Of course, there are newer research fields called "communication research" that are rapidly accumulating knowledge and that appear to be particularly concerned with working out such an interpretive theory. In contrast to the phenomenological character of the other "humanities," communication research has a semiotic peculiarity. It is concerned with the same phenomena as the other "human sciences" but focuses more particularly on their symbolic dimension. Words such as "code," "message," "memory," and "information" do occur frequently in the discourse of communication and are typical for interpretation. But then something remarkable happens that I think sometimes goes unnoticed. These semiological terms pass from communication research into the causal disciplines and change their original meaning. So we have concepts like "genetic code," "subliminal message," "geological memory," and others. Then these concepts return to communication research, but because they have taken on explanatory meaning, they no longer serve the needs of interpretation. In following a fashion for being "scientific," communication research, initially a field of semiotics, is very rapidly moving away from interpretation and toward explanation.

I will summarize the preceding: one way of defining "gesture" is as a movement of the body or of a tool attached with the body, for which there is no satisfactory causal explanation. To understand a gesture defined in this way, its "meaning" must be discovered. That is exactly what we do all the time, and it constitutes an important aspect of our daily lives. But we have no theory of the interpretation of gestures and are restricted to an empirical, "intuitive" reading of the world of gestures, the codified world that surrounds us. And that means that we have no criteria for the validity of our readings. We must remember this as we try, in what follows, to read gestures, to discover the affect in them.

The definition of *gesture* suggested here assumes that we are dealing with a symbolic movement. If someone punches me in the arm, I will move, and an observer is justified in saying that this reaction "expresses"

"These texts frame the question: can visual signs be universal — or are they always negotiated through culture?"

My project is precisely a reverse response to Neurath's philosophy:

I want to show that "universality" is not an eternal truth, but a process that is constantly being misinterpreted and negotiated.

Simplification/Style Experiment

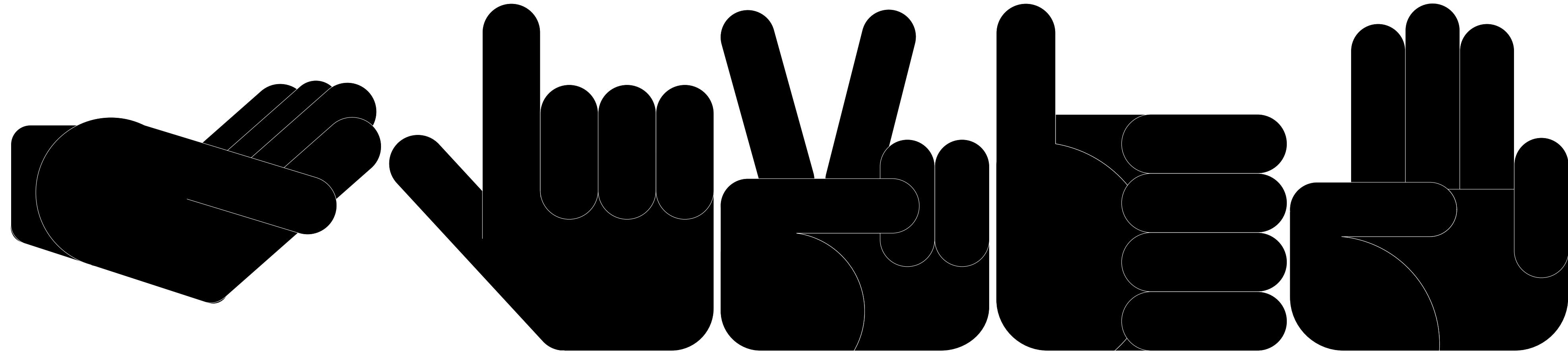
I considered: gestures as carriers of emotions/feelings, or gestures that mimic the shape/definition of objects.



Shape + line combination

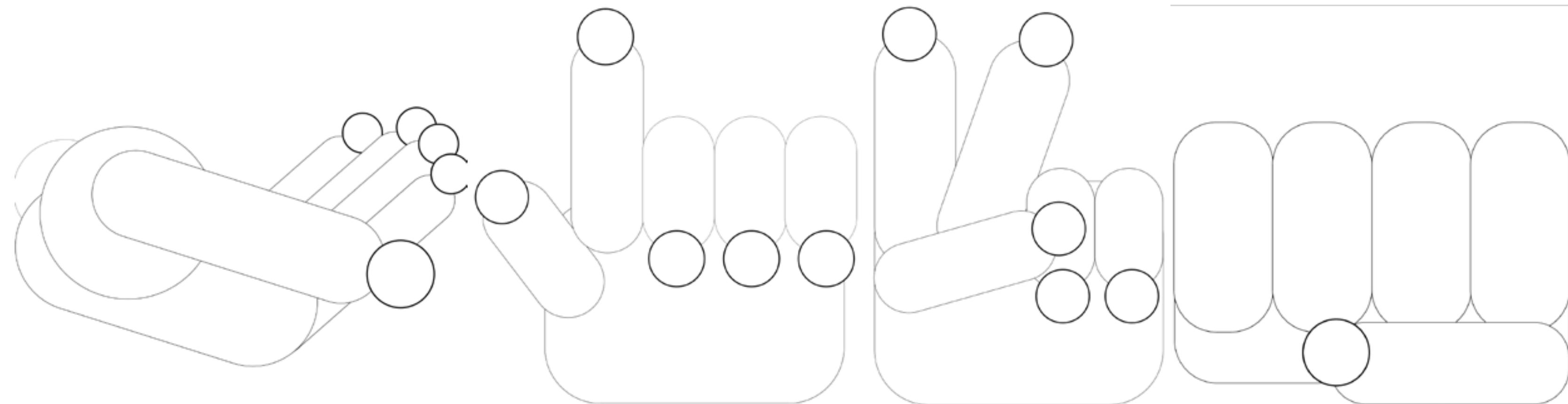
Gestures can communicate in two ways:

- Substitutional meaning – e.g. an outstretched hand can match a “STOP” sign.
- Cultural convention – e.g. the “OK” sign, understood socially.

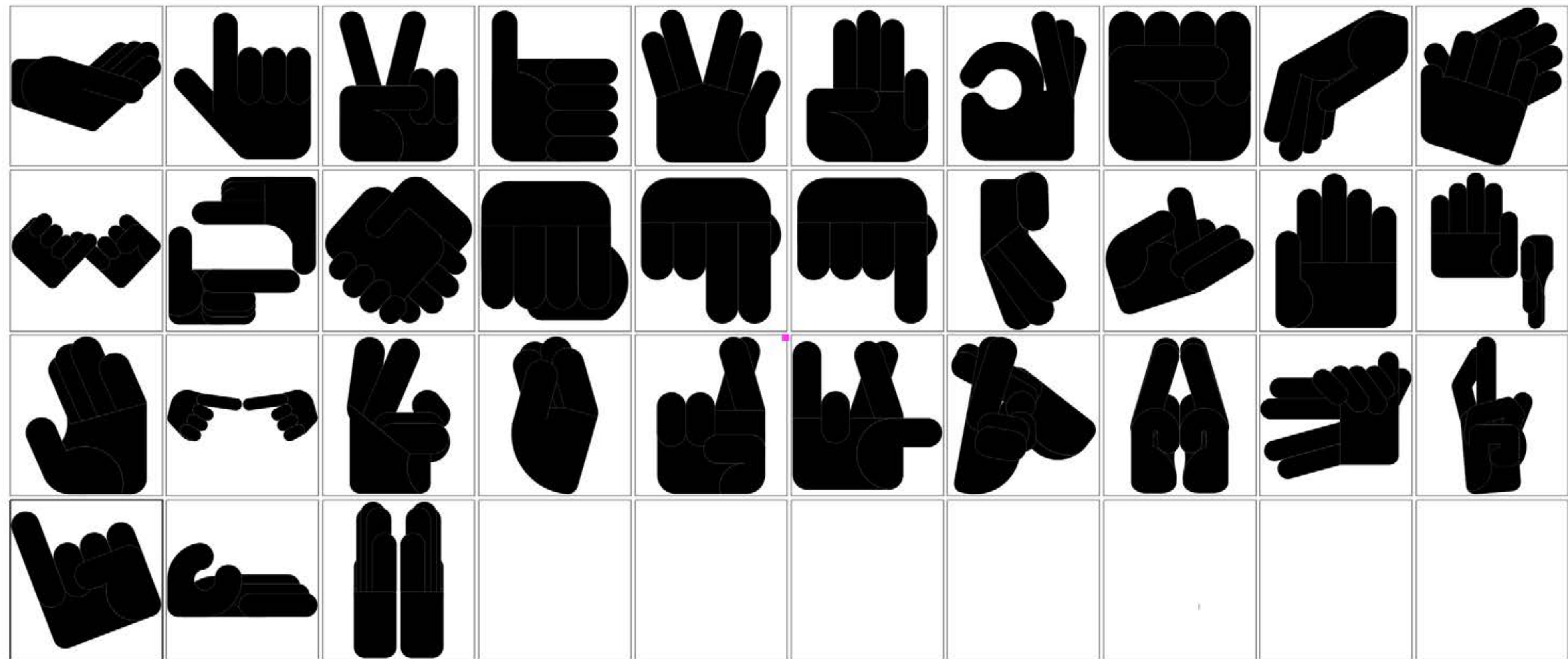
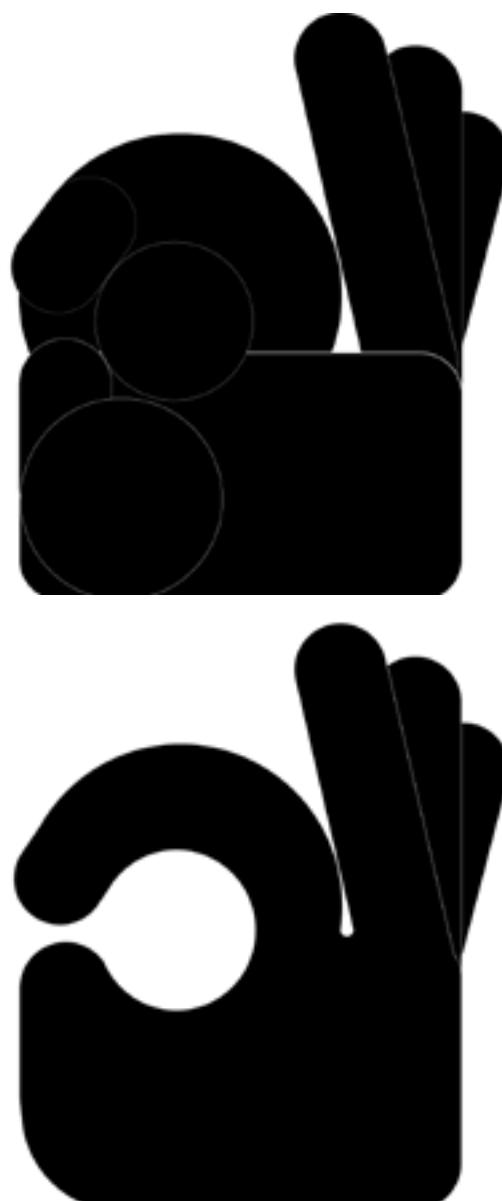


Line-based simplification

Disassemble the hand structure and mark the contact points of the fingers at the same time



Gestures in Contexts
China / Japan / Italy / Animation



- Accept, provide, carry

- A welcoming gesture

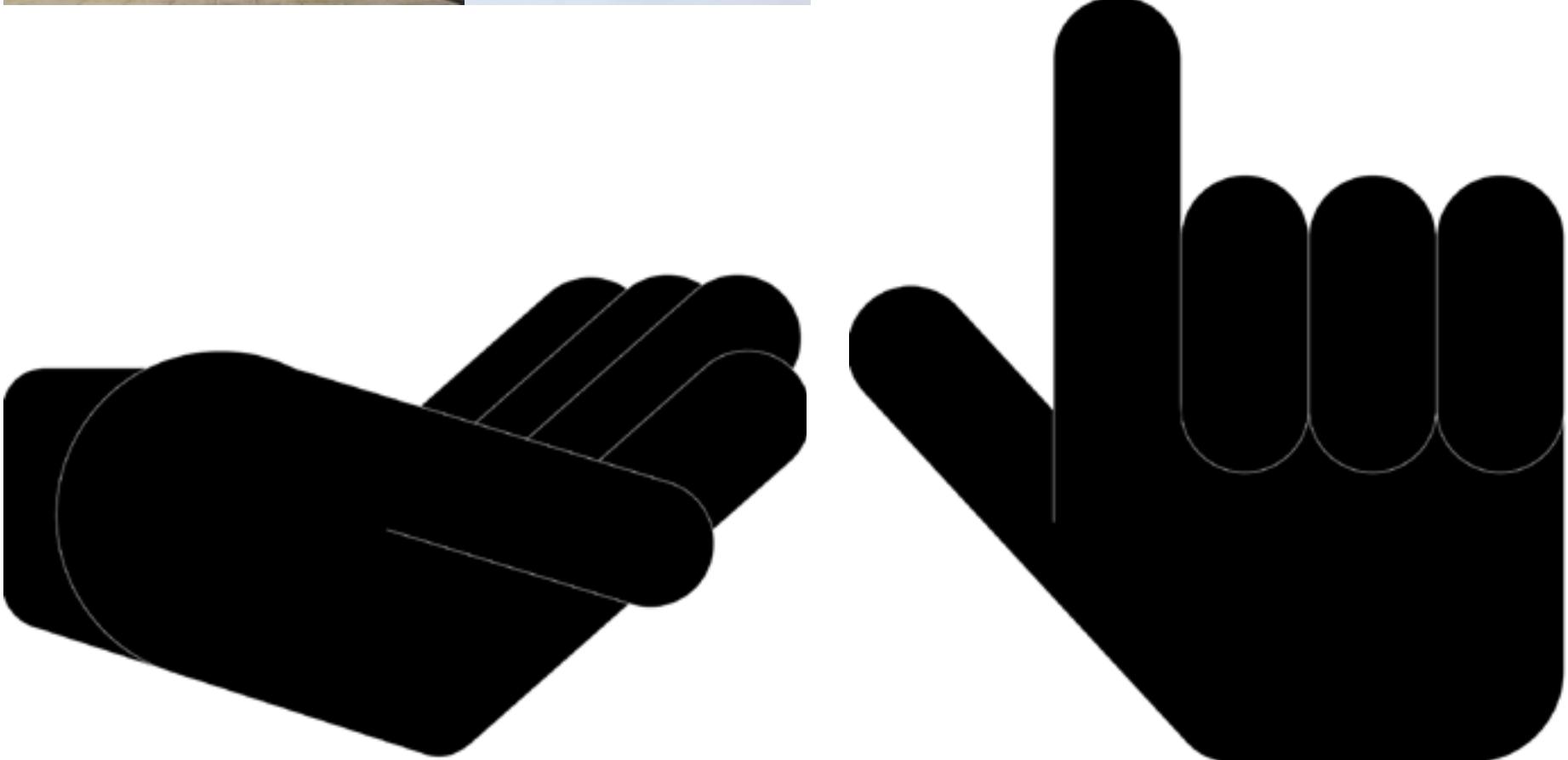
- It can also be understood as “holding” or “carrying” something

- Alternative buildings/objects

- Building - Square entrance/Arch (as a symbol of welcoming and opening)

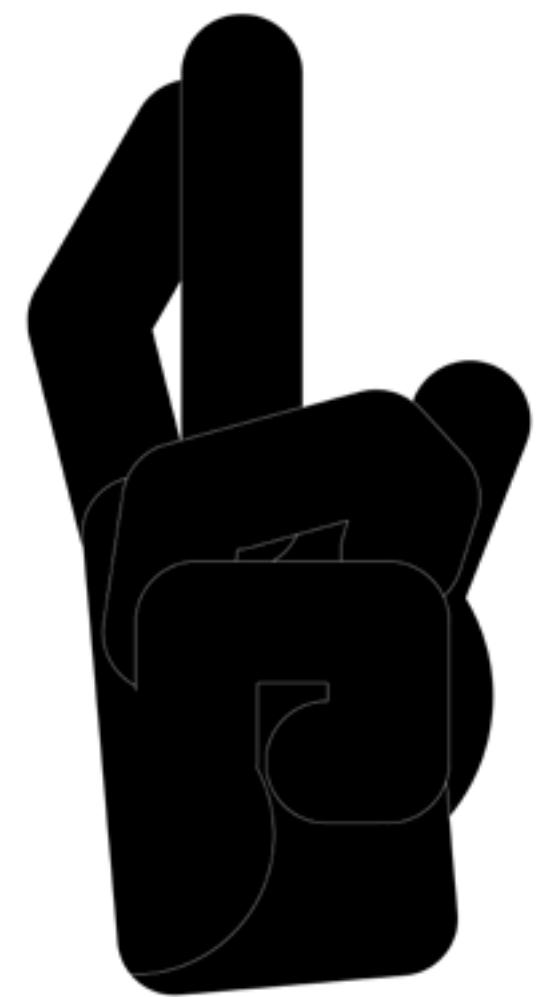
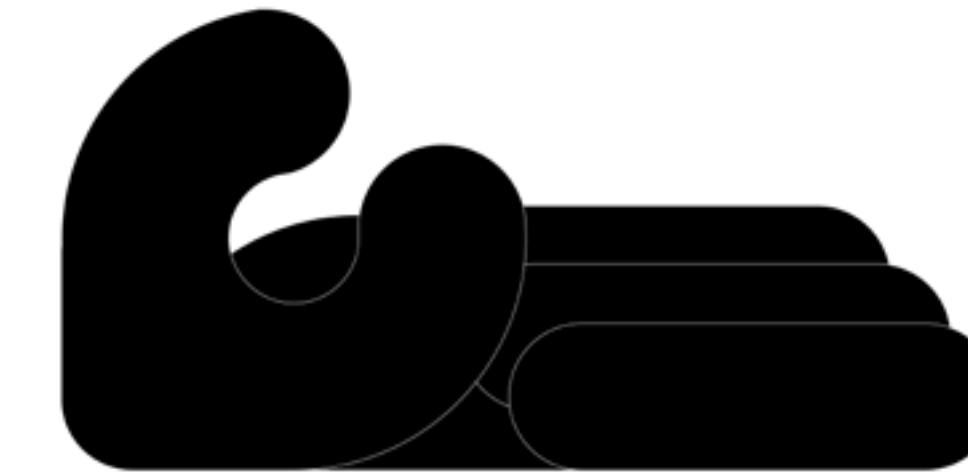
- Object - Bowl/Tray/Stage (Carrying function)

- Scene meaning - “This is a space that can be entered and accepted.”



- Japan- Money

- A: The gesture of Guanyin



- Animation- Magic spell

- A: A pardon at the time of swearing

“Same gesture, different meanings.”



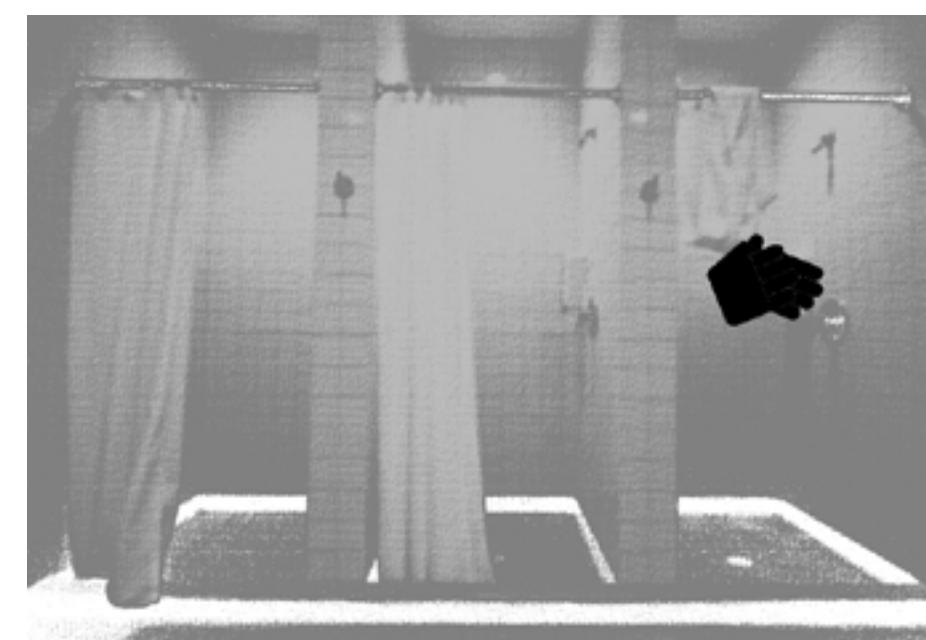
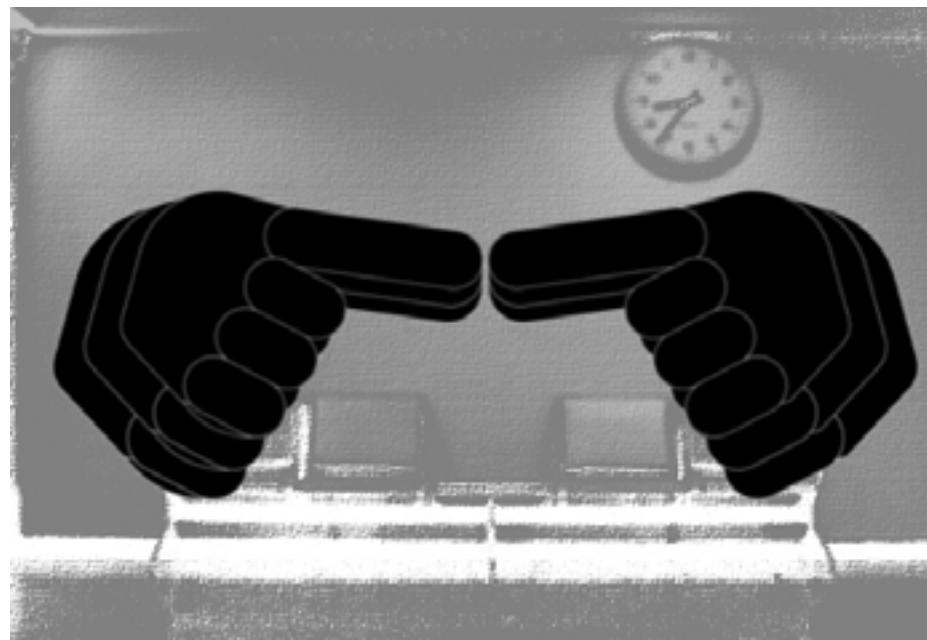
Cultural Experiments

To eliminate emotional and contextual bias, I used black-and-white blurred background images of real and imagined environments. Inviting participants from different cultural backgrounds to insert gestures into these empty scenes.

Restaurant sofa seats
 School toilet
 An empty classroom
 British bus stops
 New York subway station
 Subway carriage
 Public shower room
 School corridor
 Seats in the corridor
 Anime Road
 Supermarket
 Public toilet
 Supermarket cash register
 Anime Street
 Subway station staircase
 Corner of the staircase
 Anime roadside station



How gestures, often assumed to be universal, are in fact deeply shaped by personal experience, culture, and context.
A single hand movement can shift meaning entirely depending on who performs it, and who is watching.



Visual Format — Newspaper

Fragmented layout / Multiple entry points / Meanings constantly reassembled

The act of simplification is not merely aesthetic, but conceptual – it questions how much of a gesture's meaning depends on its physical form versus its cultural interpretation. When gestures are stripped down to their most essential shapes, they begin to operate as a universal visual code that simultaneously exposes its own fragility. Through this process, I examine whether gestures can communicate beyond language, or whether they inevitably carry cultural bias even in their most abstracted form.

001 Two people were secretly smoking in There are two paths to take the corridor

002 The battle is imminent. Unleash your magic moves Come on, bus!

003 I want to extend the awning a little A person is sitting at the bus stop playing with his mobile phone

004

005 Here is your change. Please keep it well

006 Which one should I buy? I want them all!

007

008 Squeeze a little body wash Photography is prohibited here.

009

010

011

012 The mobile phone fell into the track and was crushed A person is struggling to carry a suitcase

013 Pointing at the blackboard, the teacher is lecturing seriously

014 The students raised their hands actively to speak

015

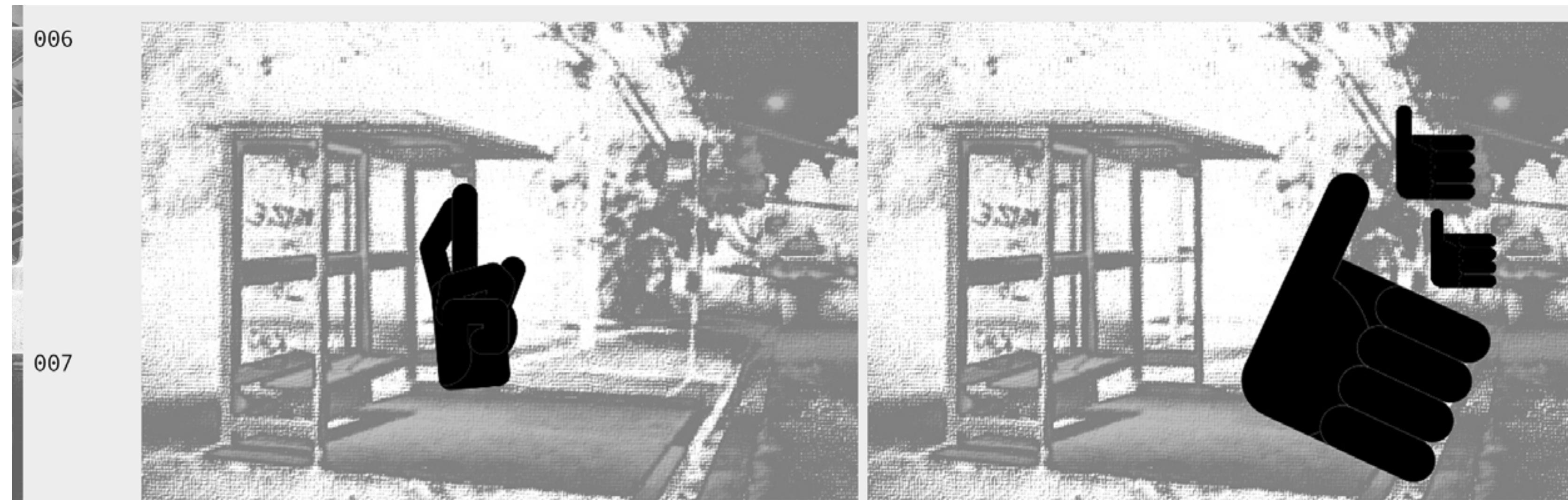
016

017

How can gestures, as a non-verbal communication system, reveal the instability and cultural specificity of “universal” visual language?

001: Restaurant sofa seats
002: School toilet
003: An empty classroom
004: British bus stops
005: New York subway station
006: Subway carriage
007: Public shower room
008: School corridor
009: Seats in the corridor
010: Anime Road
011: Supermarket
012: Public toilet
013: Supermarket cash register
014: Anime Street
015: Subway station staircase
016: Corner of the staircase
017: Anime roadside station

This comparative experiment will explore how each culture visually encodes gesture and how meanings shift during cross-cultural communication. This project reveals the instability of universality in visual communication – gestures, though seemingly universal, are deeply shaped by culture, history, and collective interpretation.



003

I want to extend the awning a little

A person is sitting at the bus stop playing with his mobile phone



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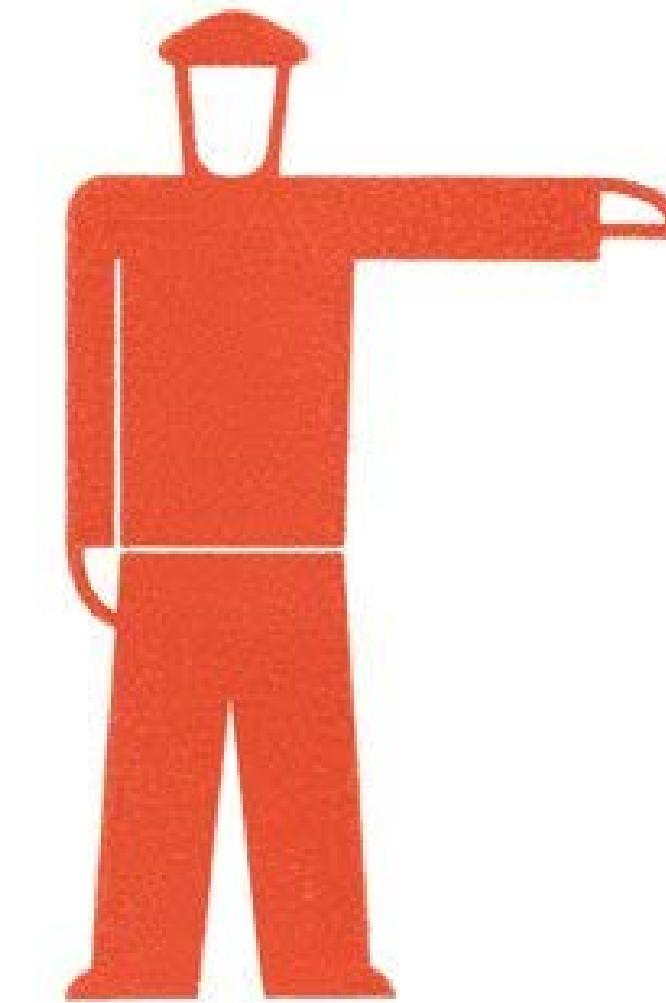
This comparative experiment will explore how each culture

ISOTYPE vs. Gestural System

“Gestures expose the myth of neutrality.”

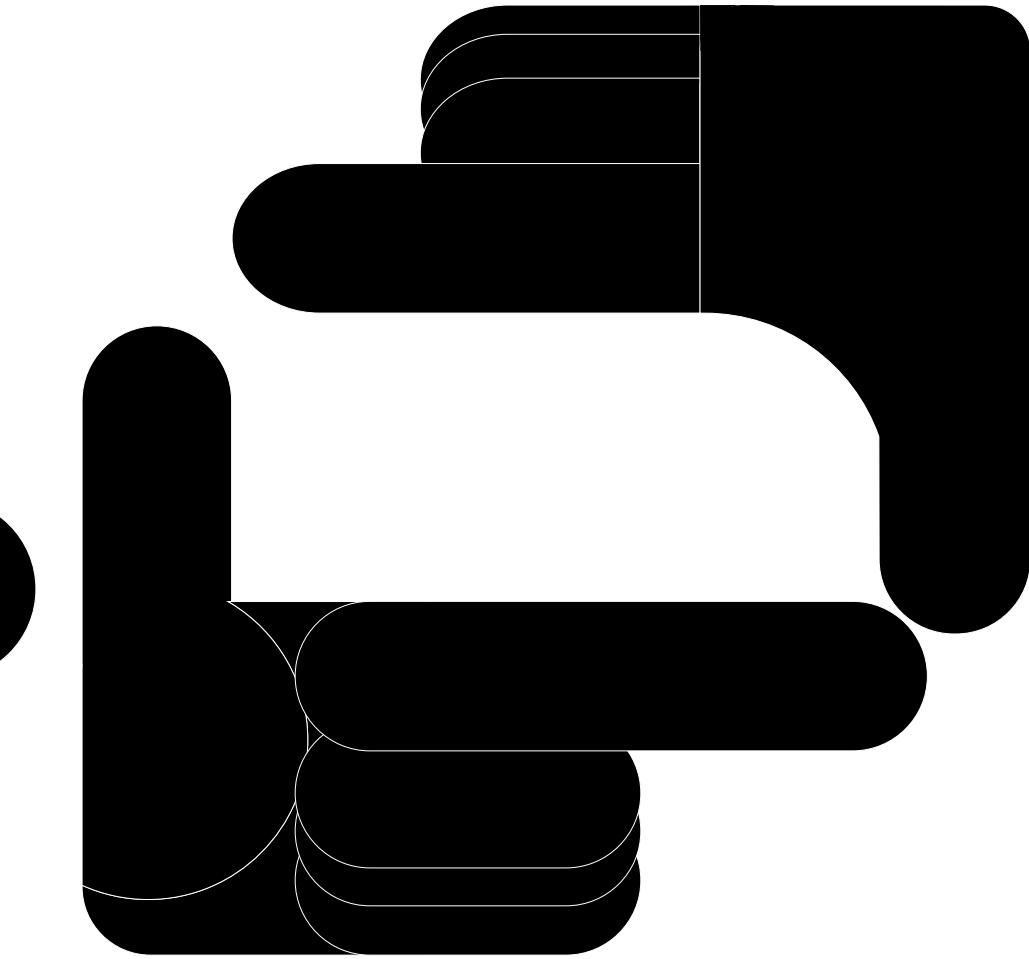
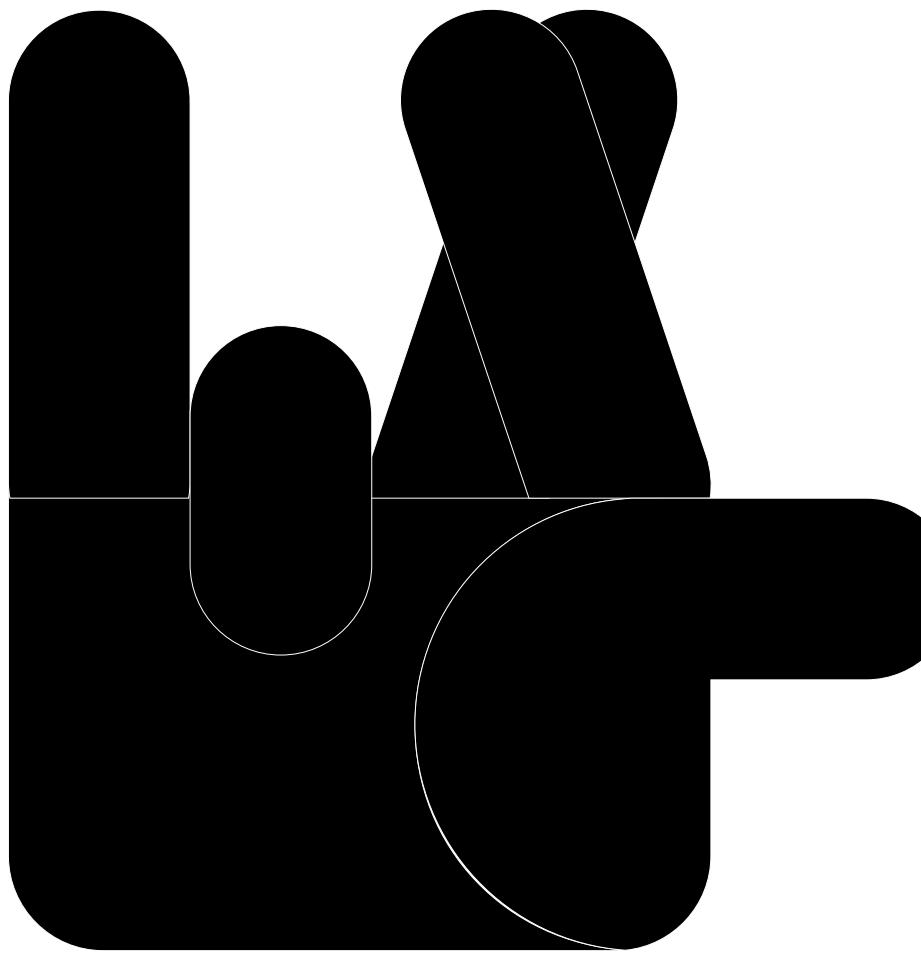
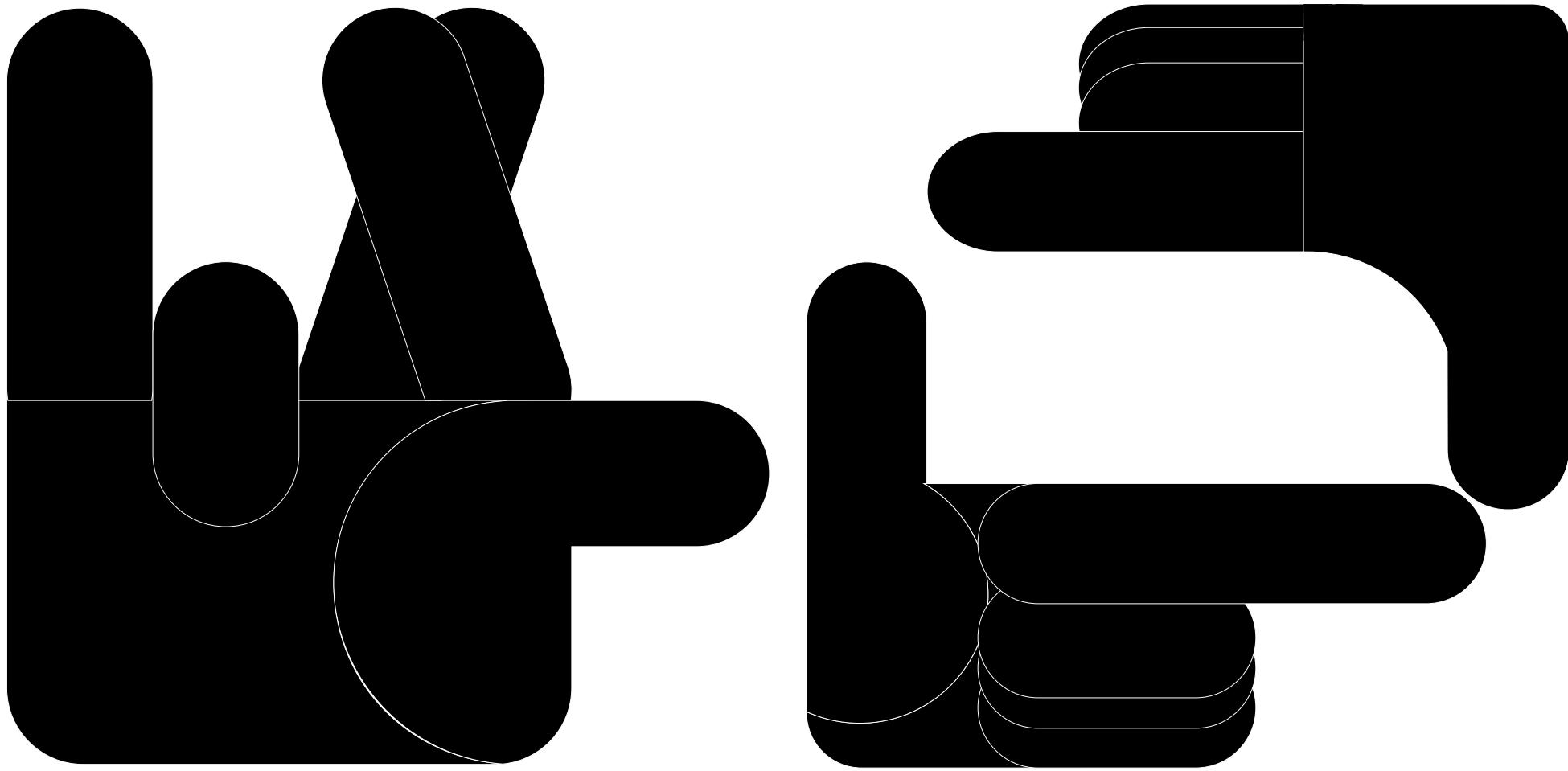
Neurath

Universal, fixed
Neutral, objective
Eliminate ambiguity



Me

Contextual, fluid
Emotional, interpretive
Embrace ambiguity



Social status: The era he lived in coincided with the time of two world bomb bursts in Europe, an era of social unrest and rapid changes in information dissemination.

Social status: In the era of rapid information dissemination, a great deal of information is effectively spread globally, thus making it simple and fast to obtain information

Future Direction

The multi-meaning and instability of visual language in different language and cultural contexts through gesture experiments, and questioned the universality of gestures

Build a “super-specific gesture identification system”
Hyper-specific / Fluid / Cross-cultural

“An open archive that keeps rewriting itself.”

“Meaning is not universal — it’s negotiated.”