

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

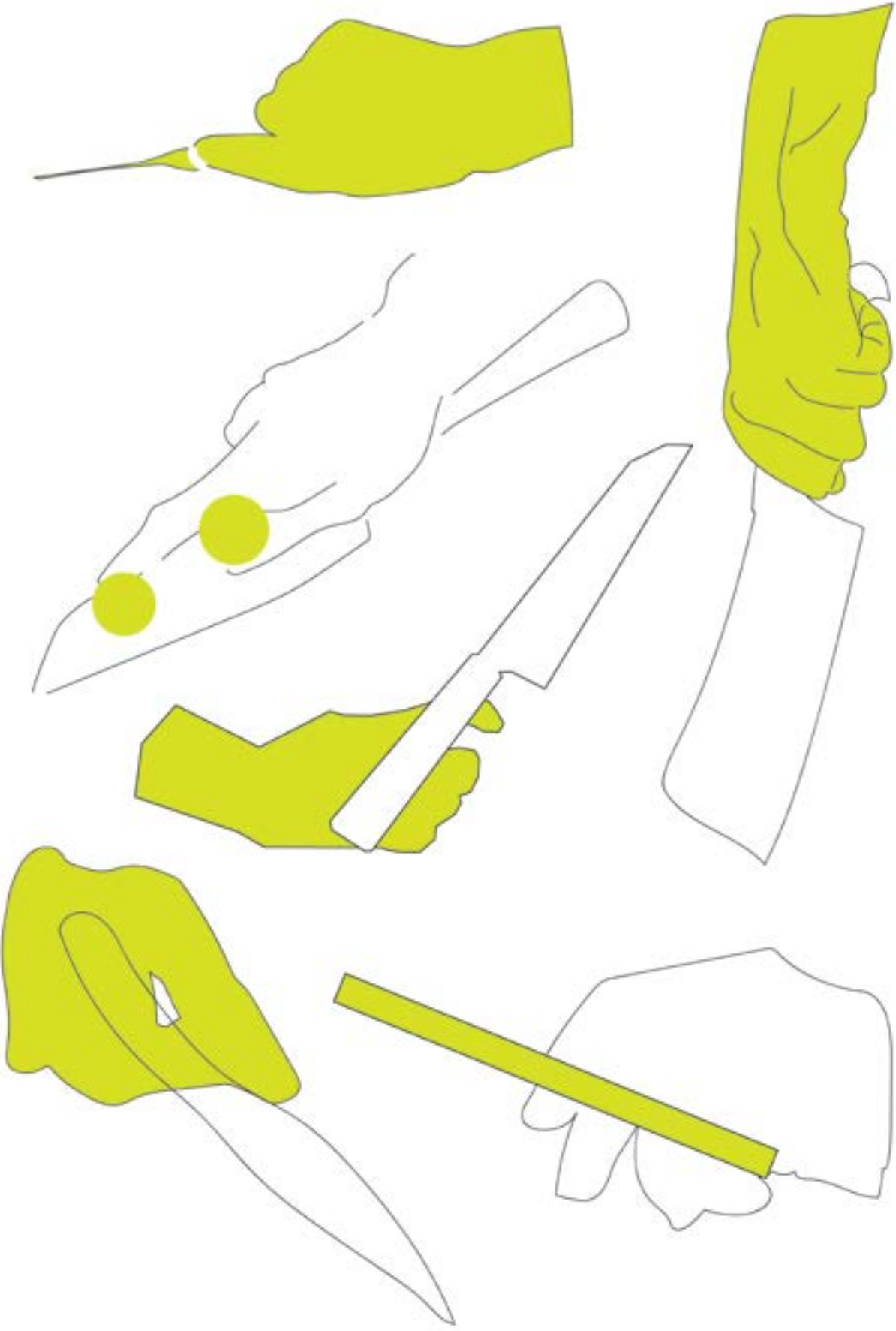
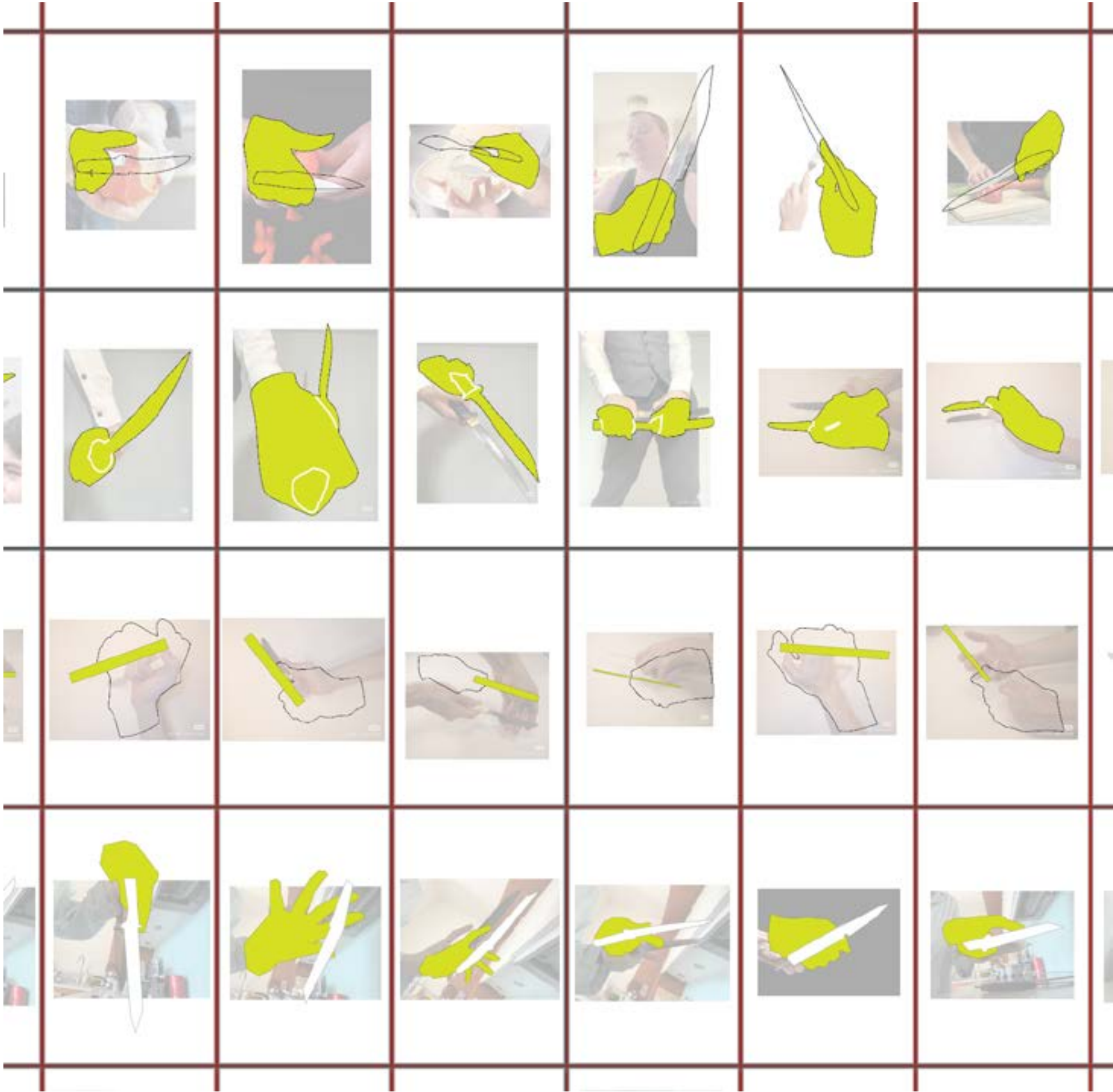
“Gestures as languages, constantly rewritten through culture.”



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.



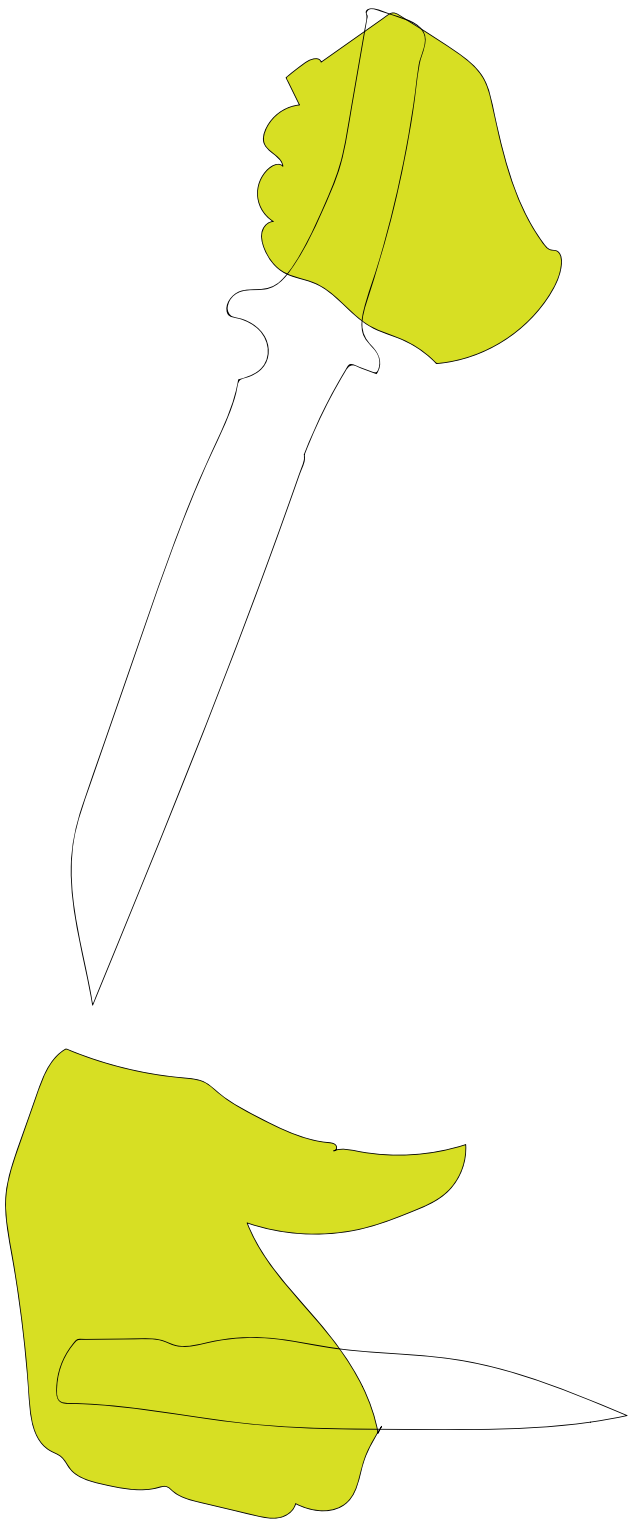
If the knife fails to function—becomes dull, broken, or unable to cut—does the gesture of holding it still count as “using a knife”? Does this suggest that the meaning of a gesture depends on the successful outcome of its function, rather than the gesture itself?



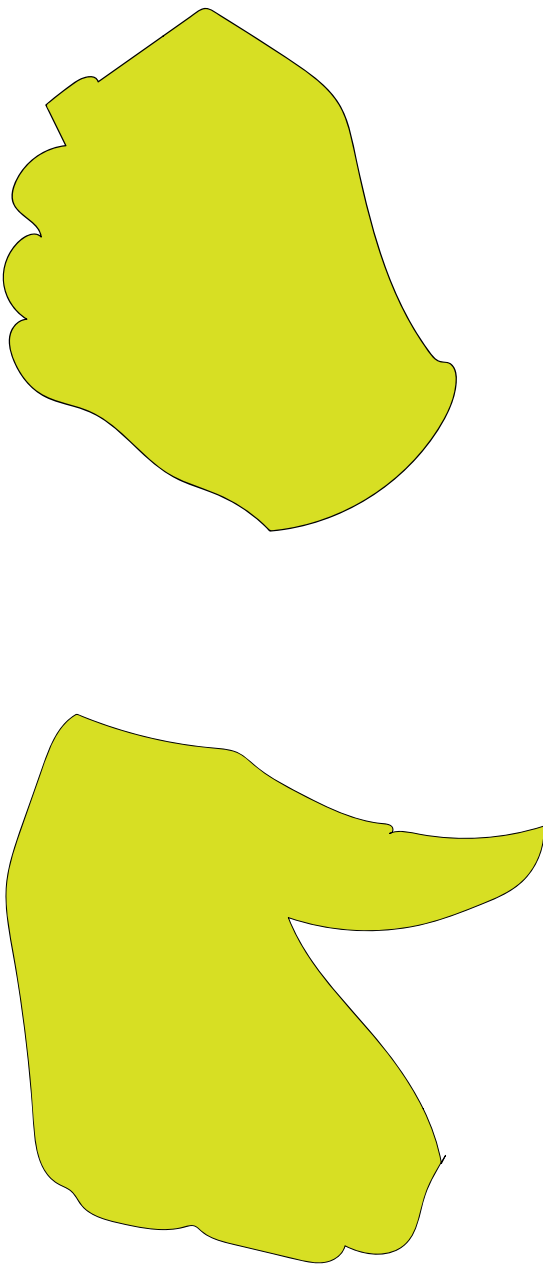
Concept Shift

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.

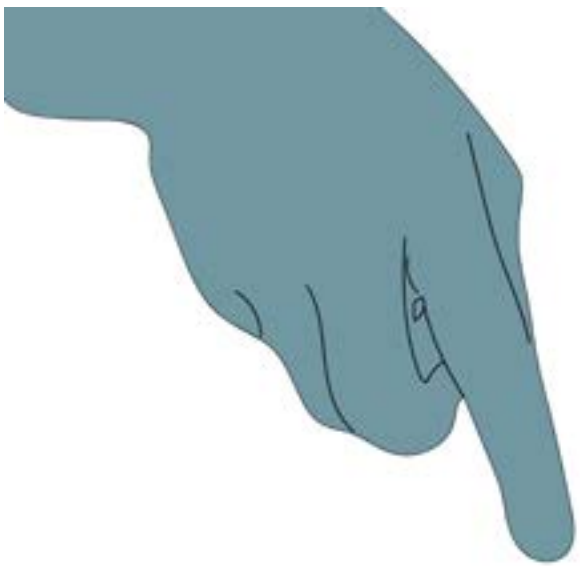
De-functionalisation / Gesture as Symbol / Emotional Reading



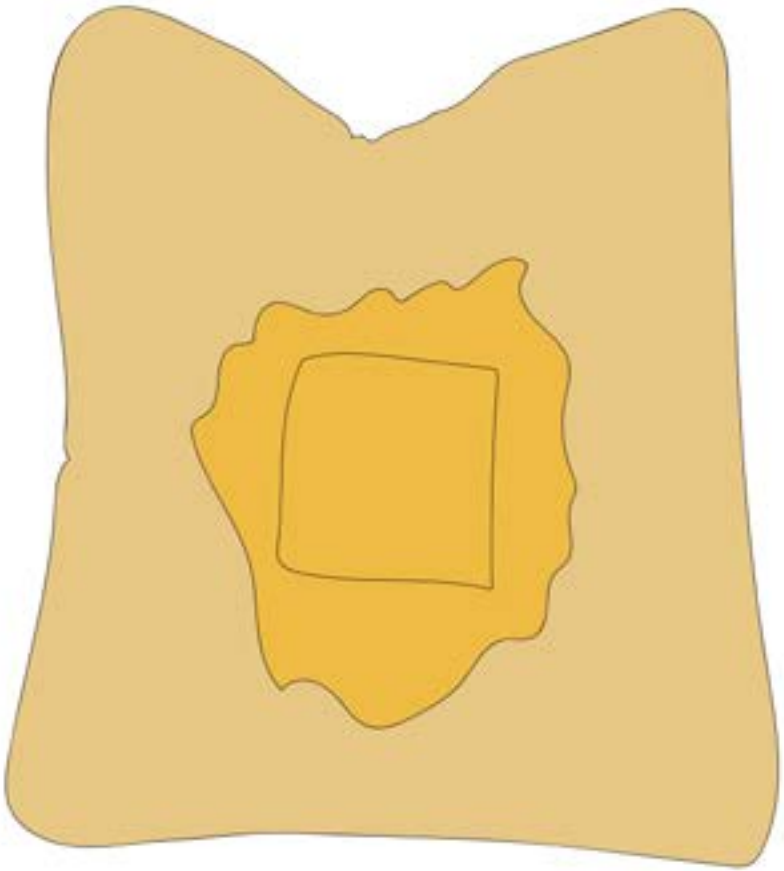
From Object to Gesture



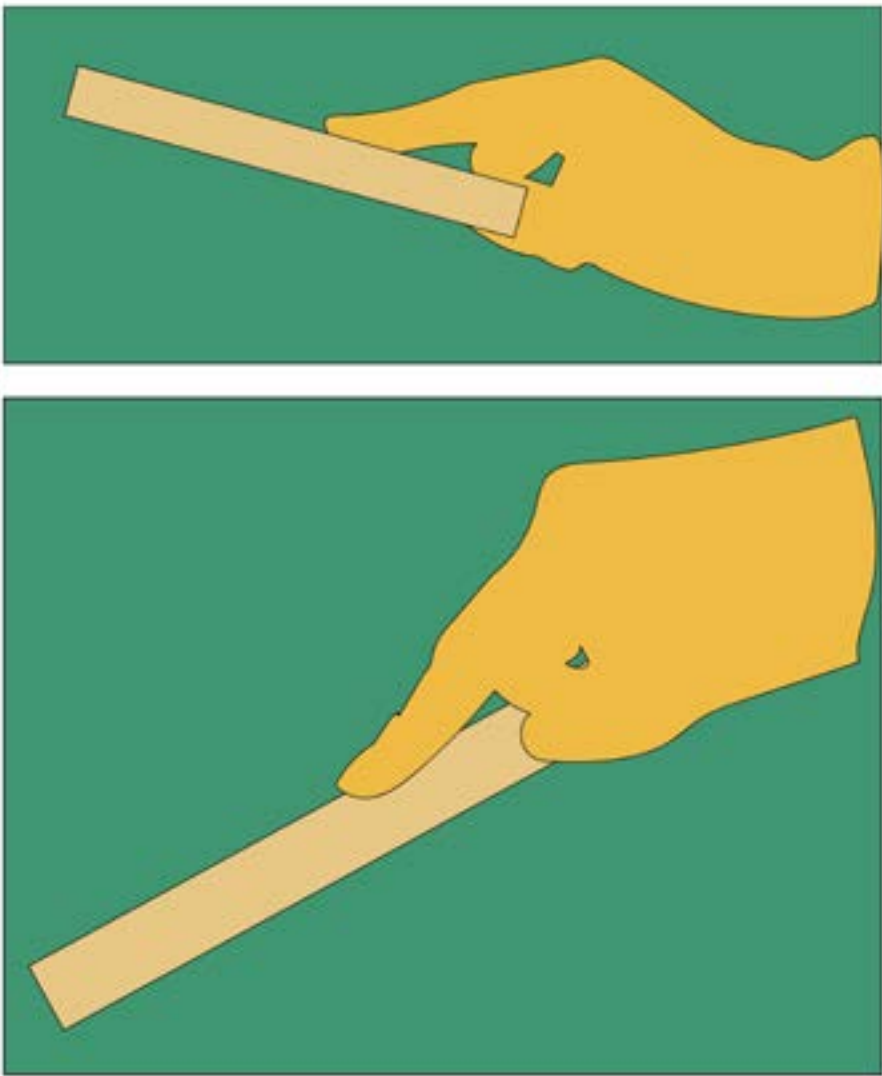
The Turning Point



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

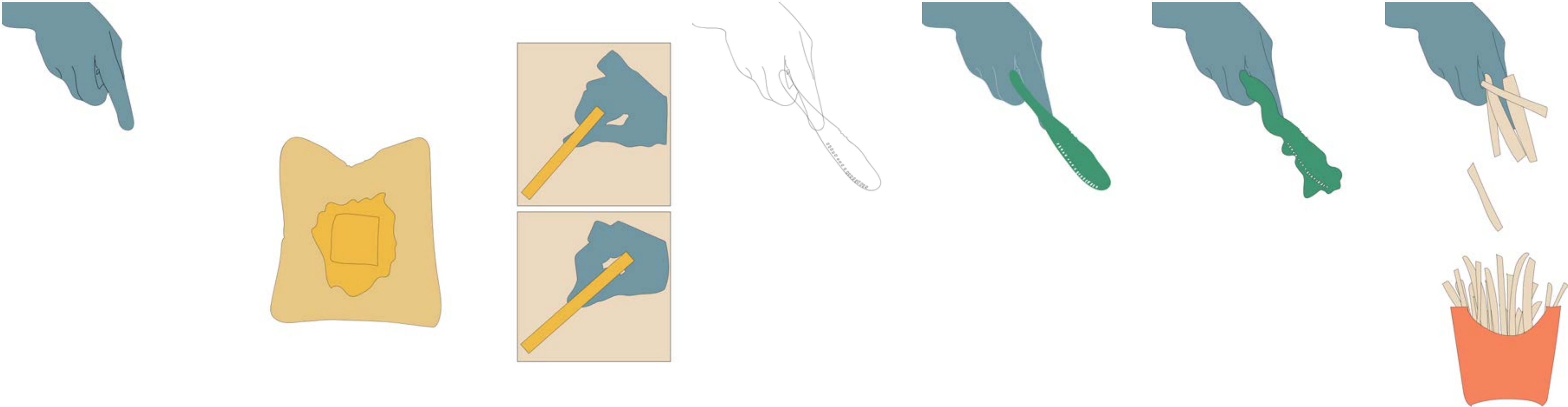
Functional Gesture-Line

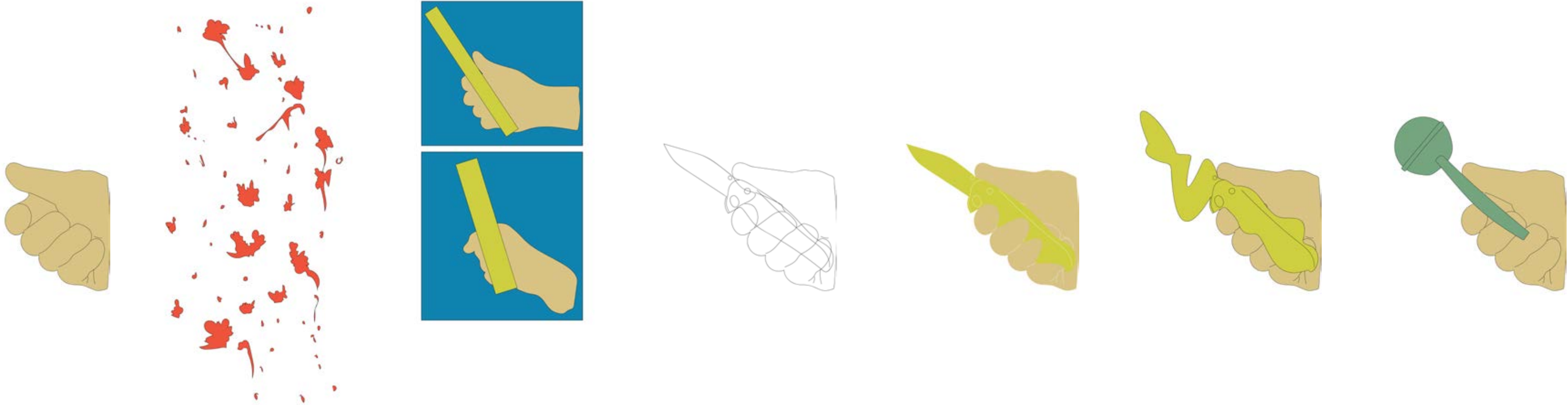
Functional Gesture-Color

Tool Distortion

Object Replacement



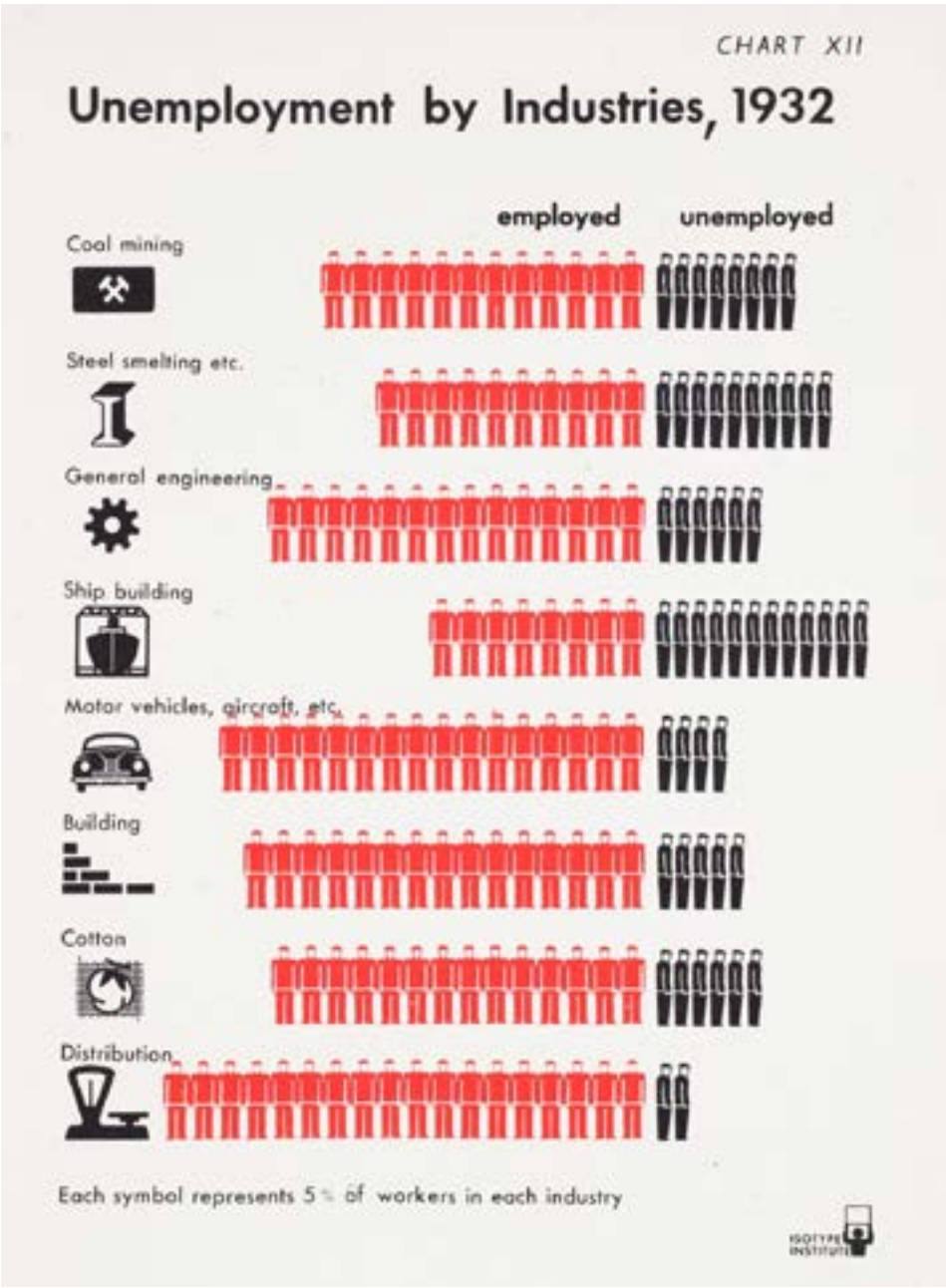






Theoretical Grounding

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 3

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?”

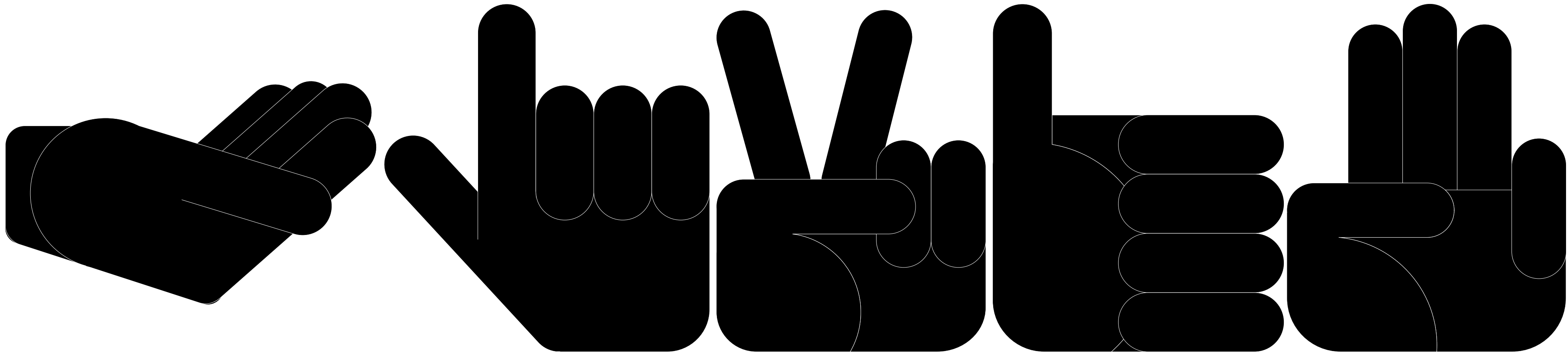
My project is precisely a reverse response to Neurath’s philosophy:  
I want to show that “universality” is not an eternal truth, but a process that is constantly being misinterpreted and negotiated.

Simplification/Style Experiment

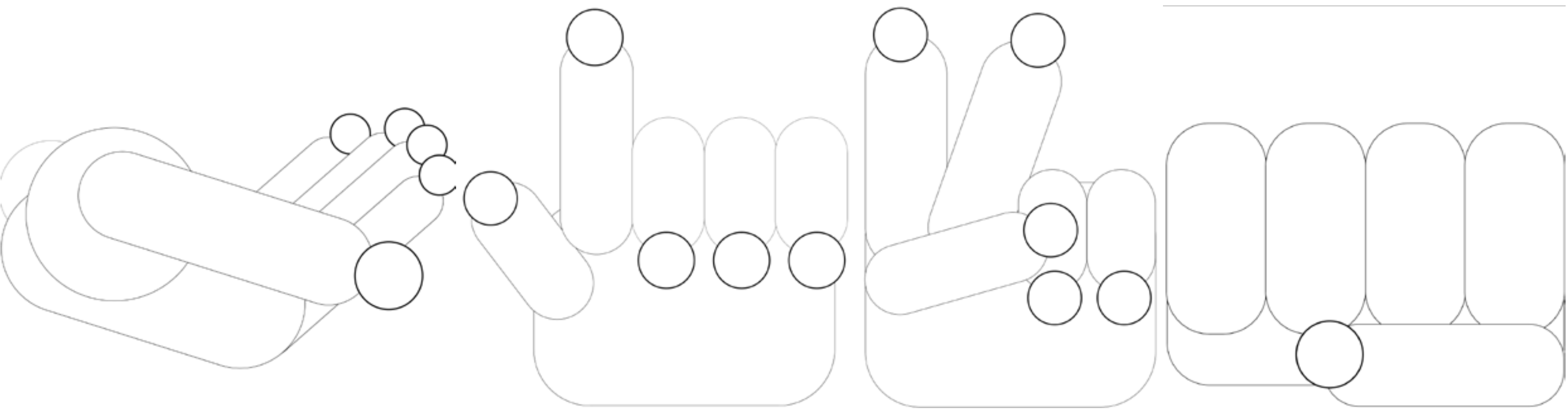
I considered: gestures as carriers of emotions/feelings, or gestures that mimic the shape/definition of objects.



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.

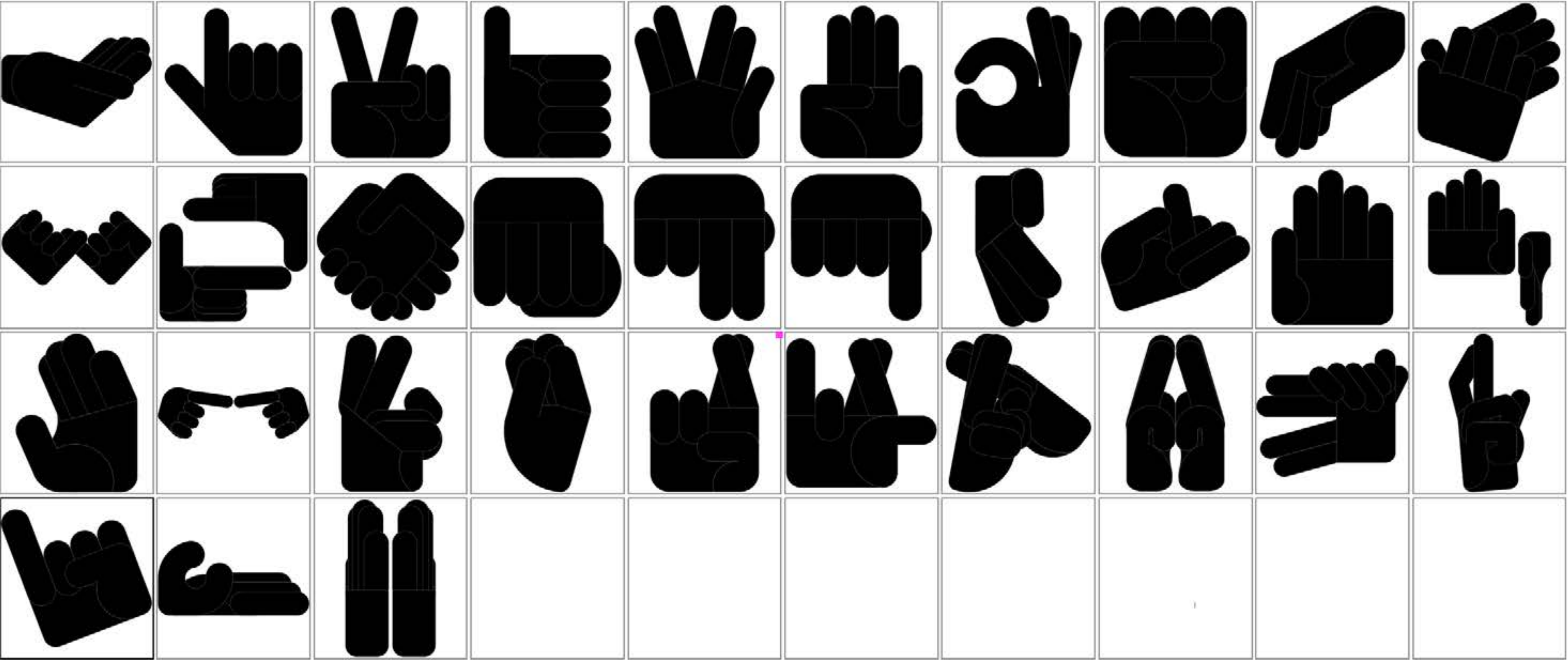
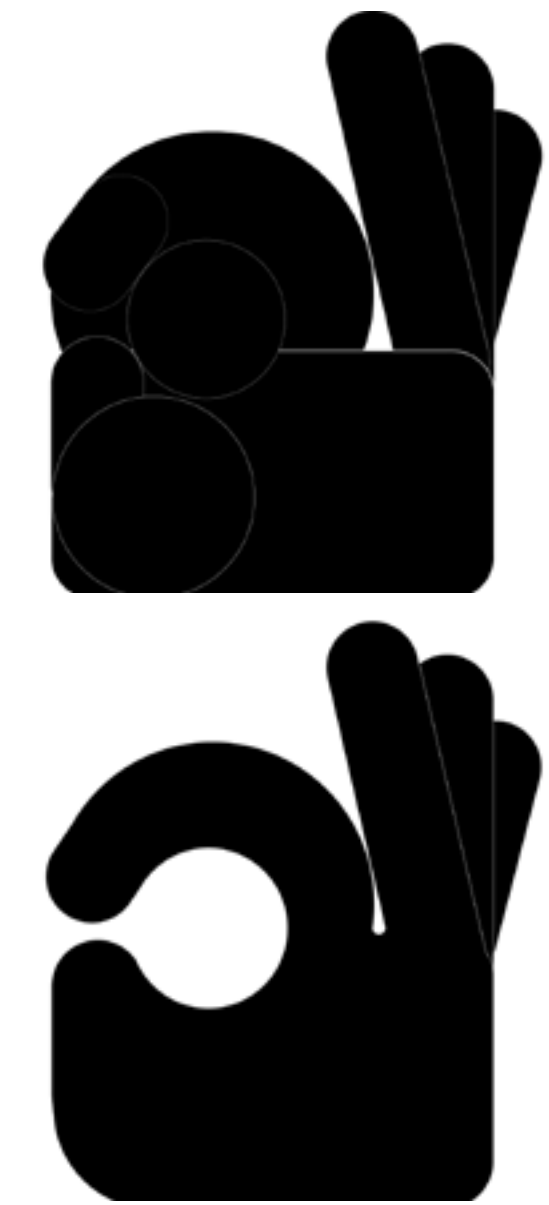


Line-based simplification  
Disassemble the hand structure and mark the contact points of the fingers at the same time





Gestures in Contexts  
China / Japan / Italy / Animation



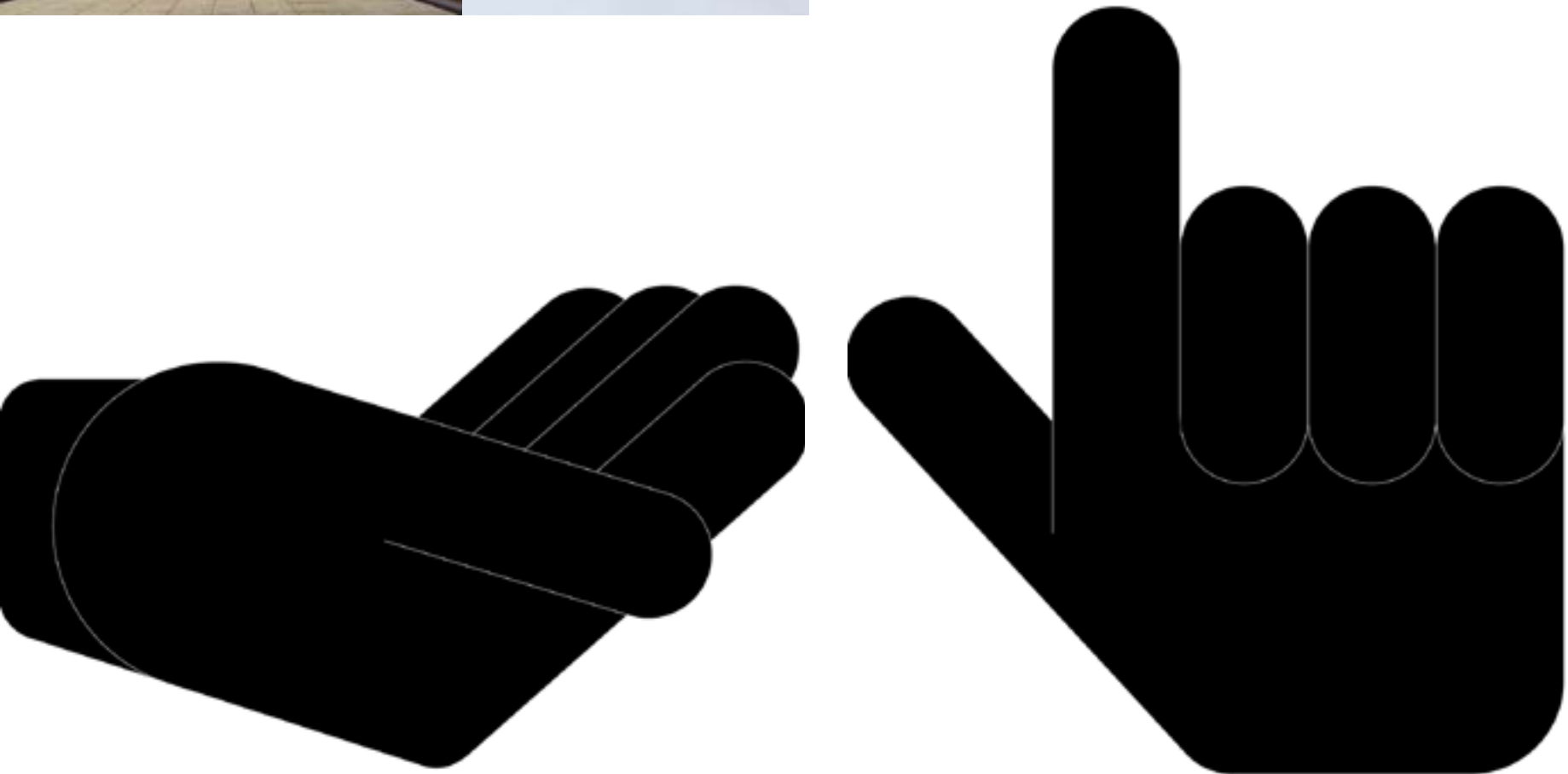
- Accept, provide, carry
- A welcoming gesture
- It can also be understood as “holding” or “carry-  
ing” something

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.”

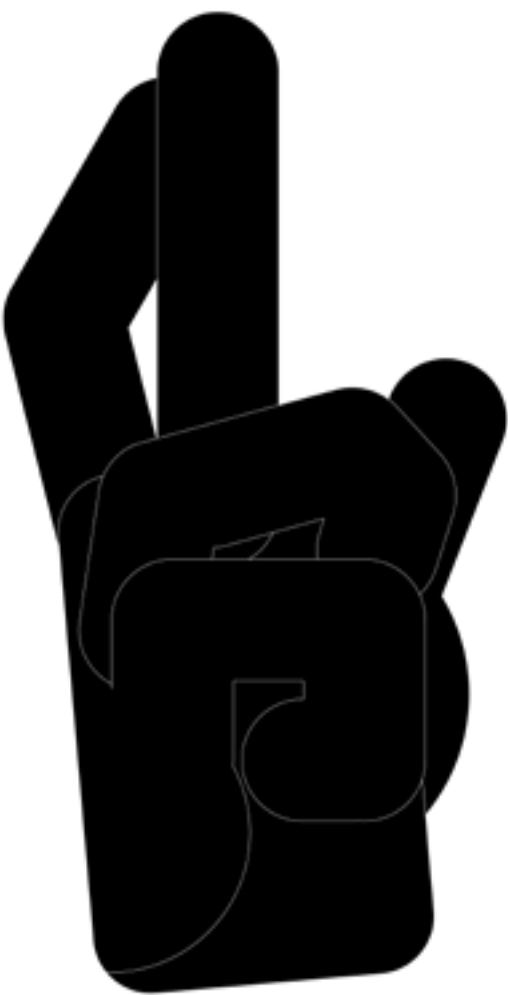
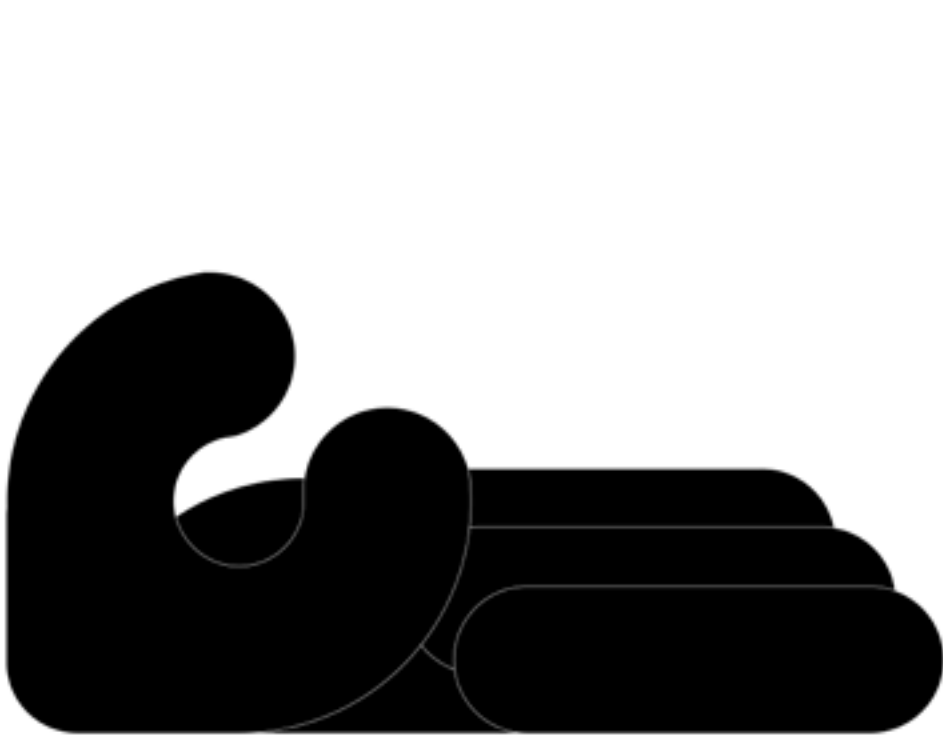


Japan- Money

A: The gesture of Guanyin

Animation- Magic spell

A: A pardon at the time of swearing



“Same gesture, different meanings.”





Cultural Experiments

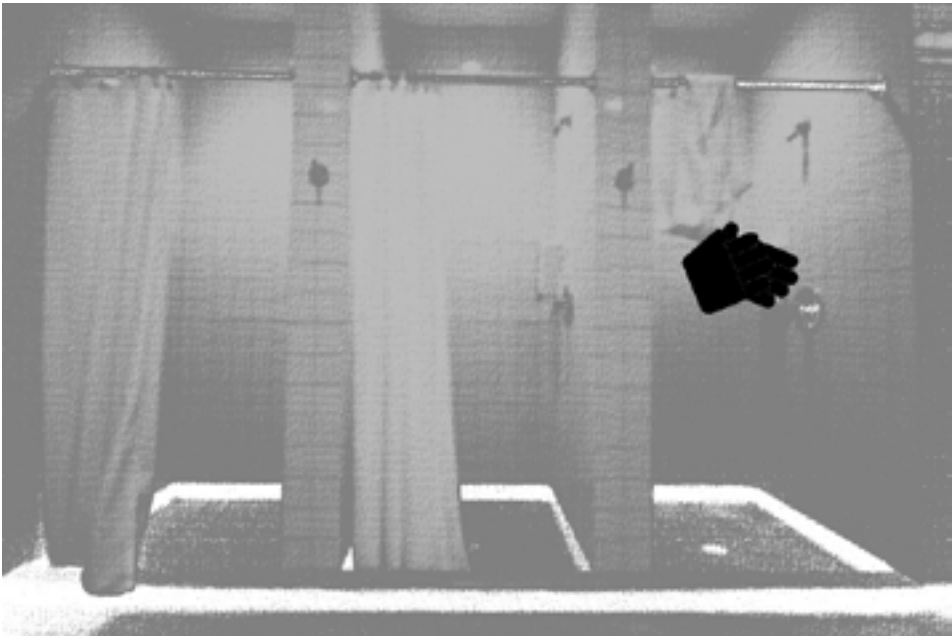
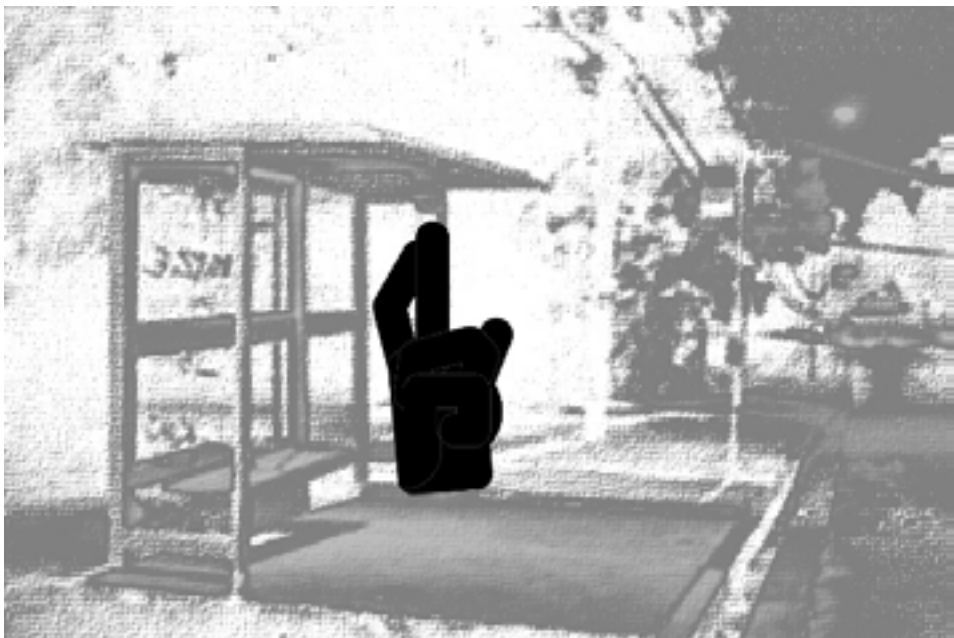
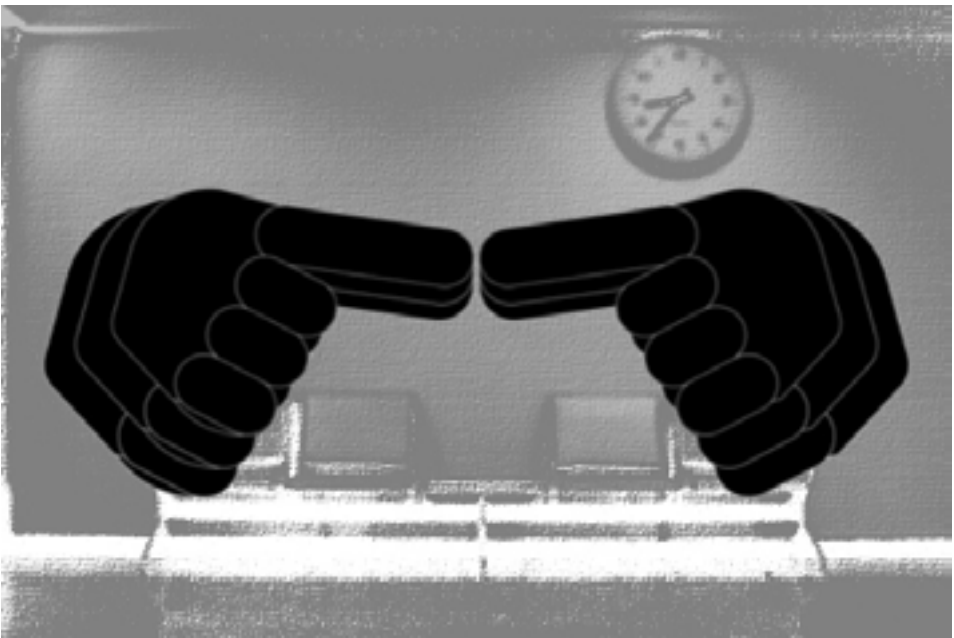
To eliminate emotional and contextual bias, I used black-and-white blurred background images of real and imagined environments. Inviting participants from different cultural backgrounds to insert gestures into these empty scenes.



- 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



001

Two people were secretly smoking in the corridor





002

The battle is imminent. Unleash your magic moves





003

I want to extend the awning a little





004





005

Here is your change. Please keep it well





006



Squeeze a little body wash





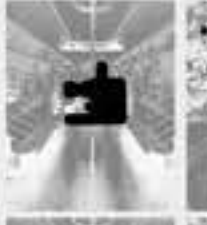

007





008



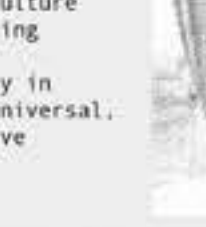
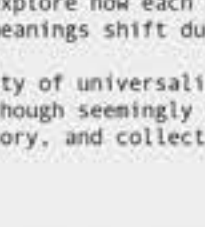
009



010





011





012

The mobile phone fell into the track and was crushed





013

Pointing at the blackboard, the teacher is lecturing seriously





014

A lot of people began to quarrel





015



The two people hugged each other fiercely





016



017



018



019



020



021



022



023



024



025



026



027



028



029



030



031



032



033



034



035



036



037



038



039



040



041



042



043



044



045



046



047



048



049



050



051



052



053



054



055



056



057



058



059



060



061



062



063



064



065



066



067



068



069



070



071



072



073



074



075



076



077



078



079



080



081



082



083



084



085



086



087



088



089



090



091



092



093



094



095



096



097



098



099



100



101



102



103



104



105



106



107



108



109



110



111



112



113



114



115



116



117



118



119



120



121



122



123



124



125



126



127



128



129



130



131



132



133



134



135



136



137



138



139



140



141



142



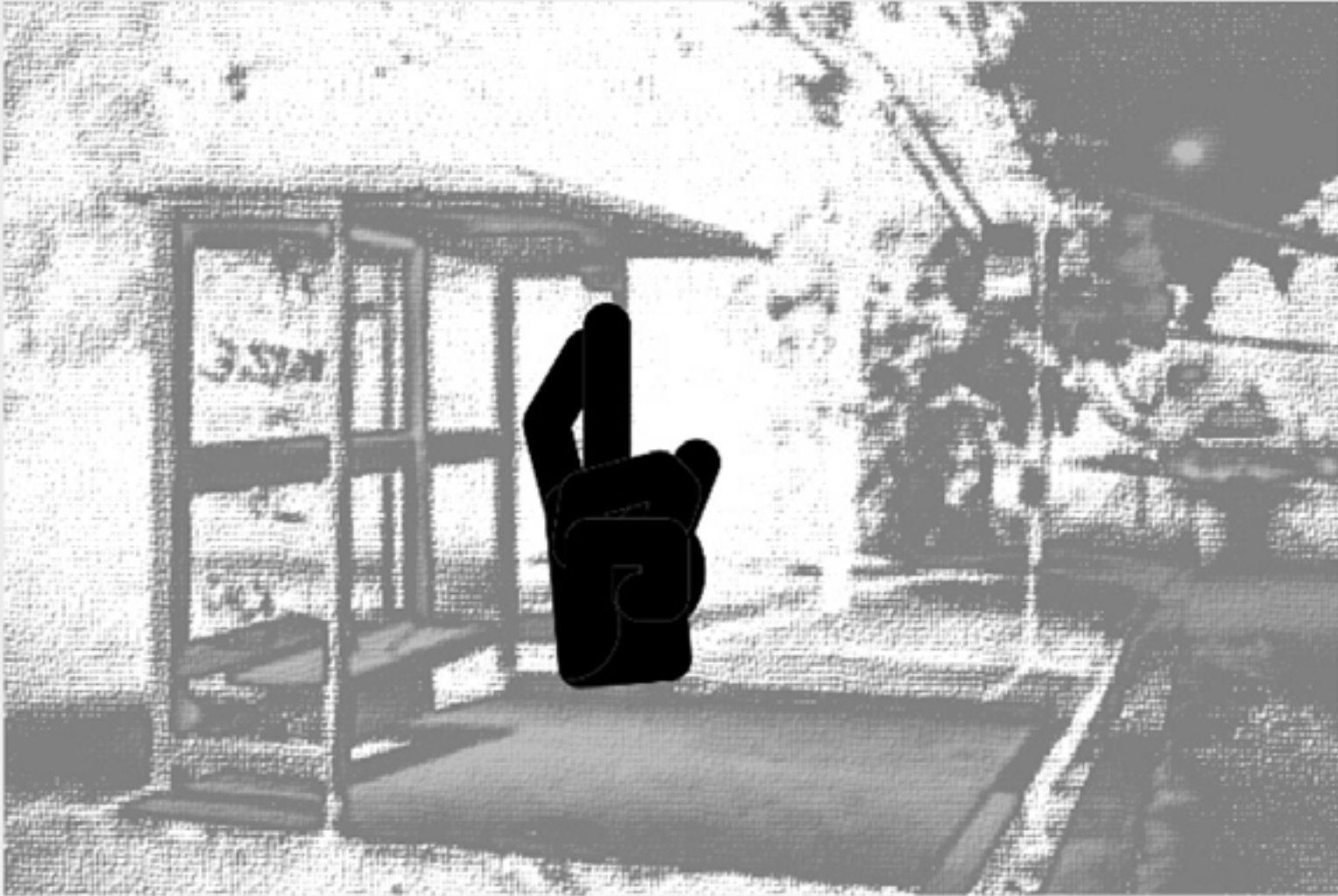
143



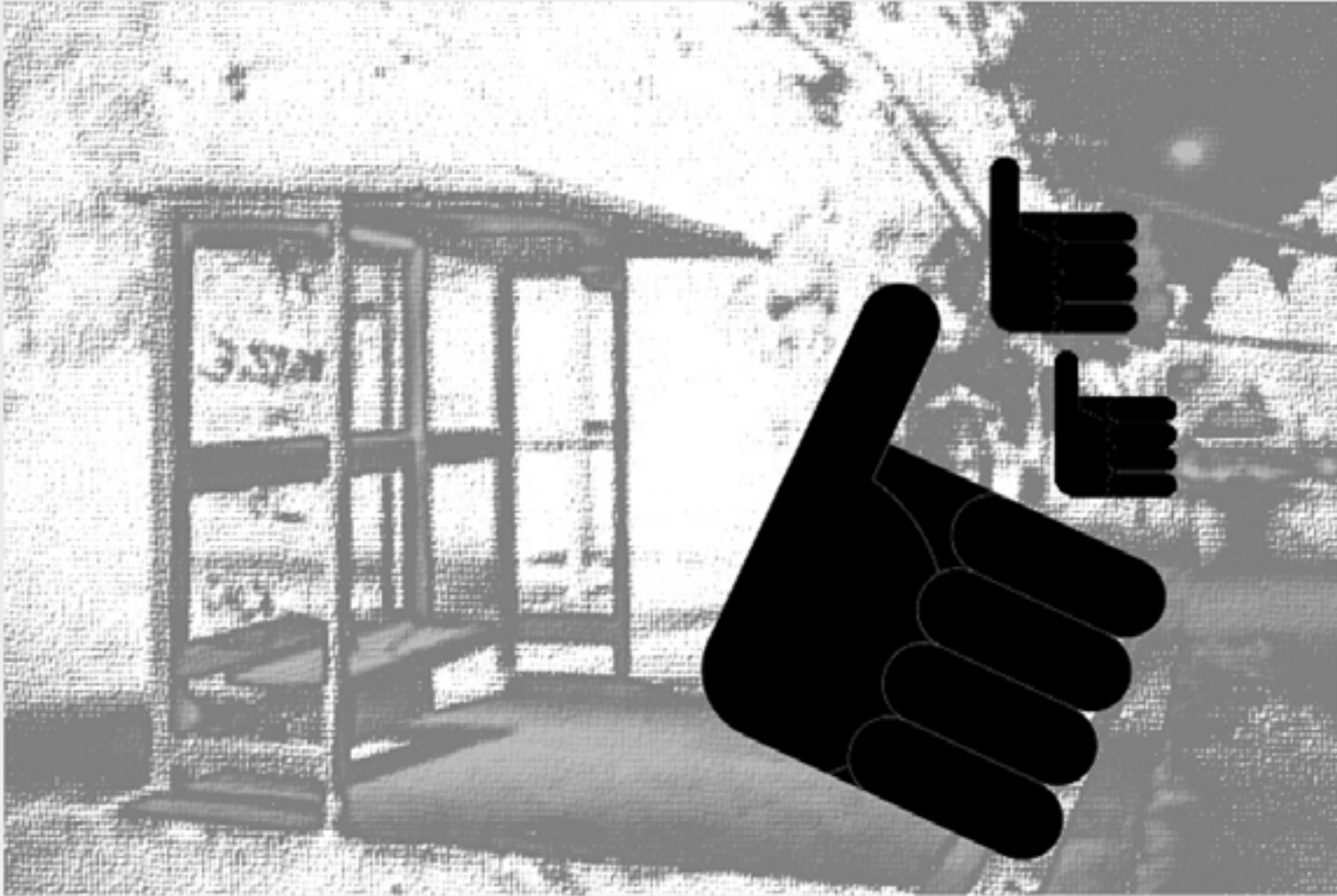
144



006



007



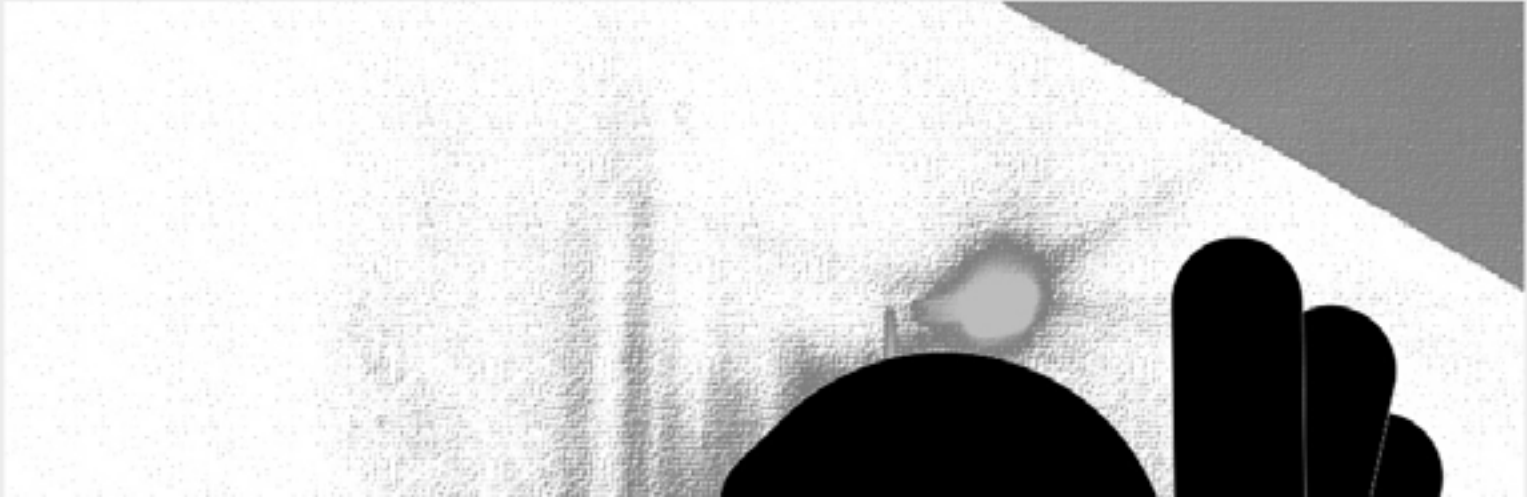
008

003

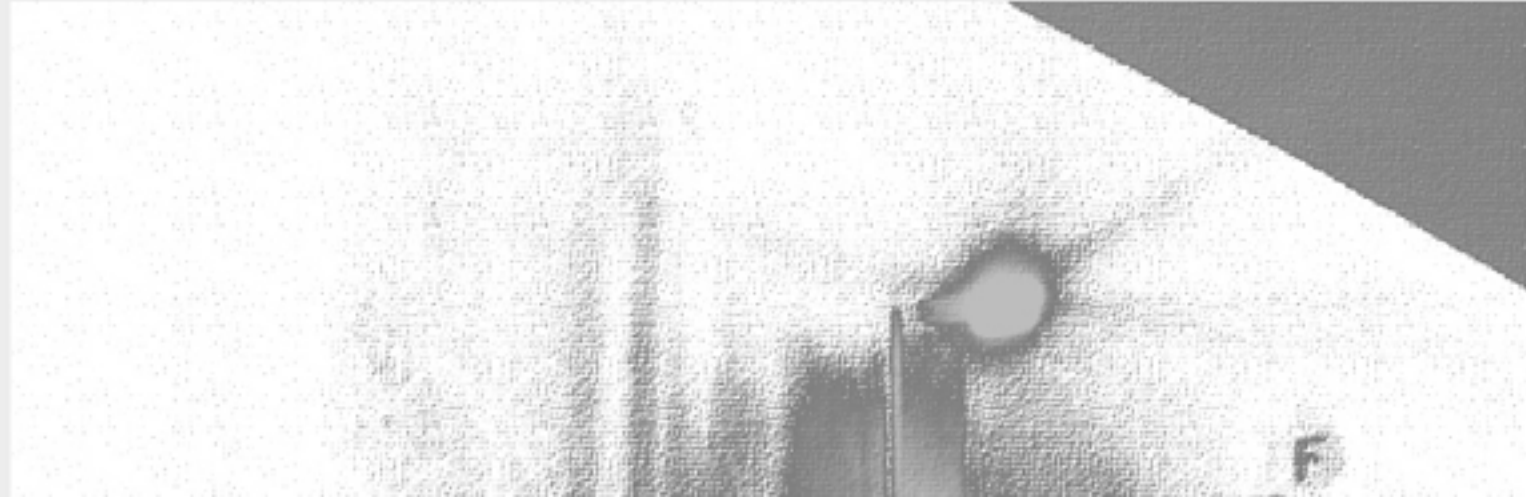
I want to extend the awning a little

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

009



010



011

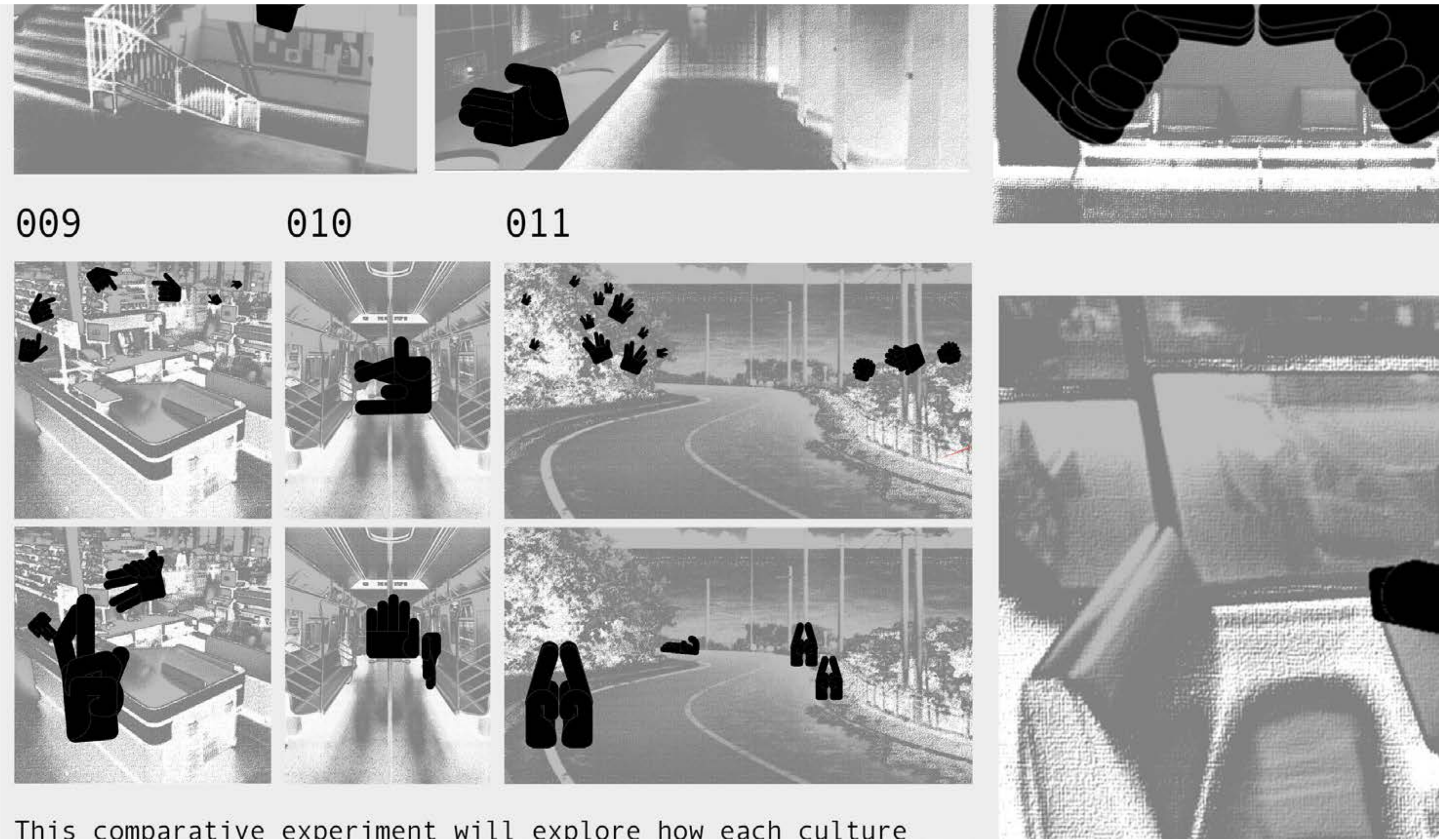
How

a no

comr

reve





This comparative experiment will explore how each culture

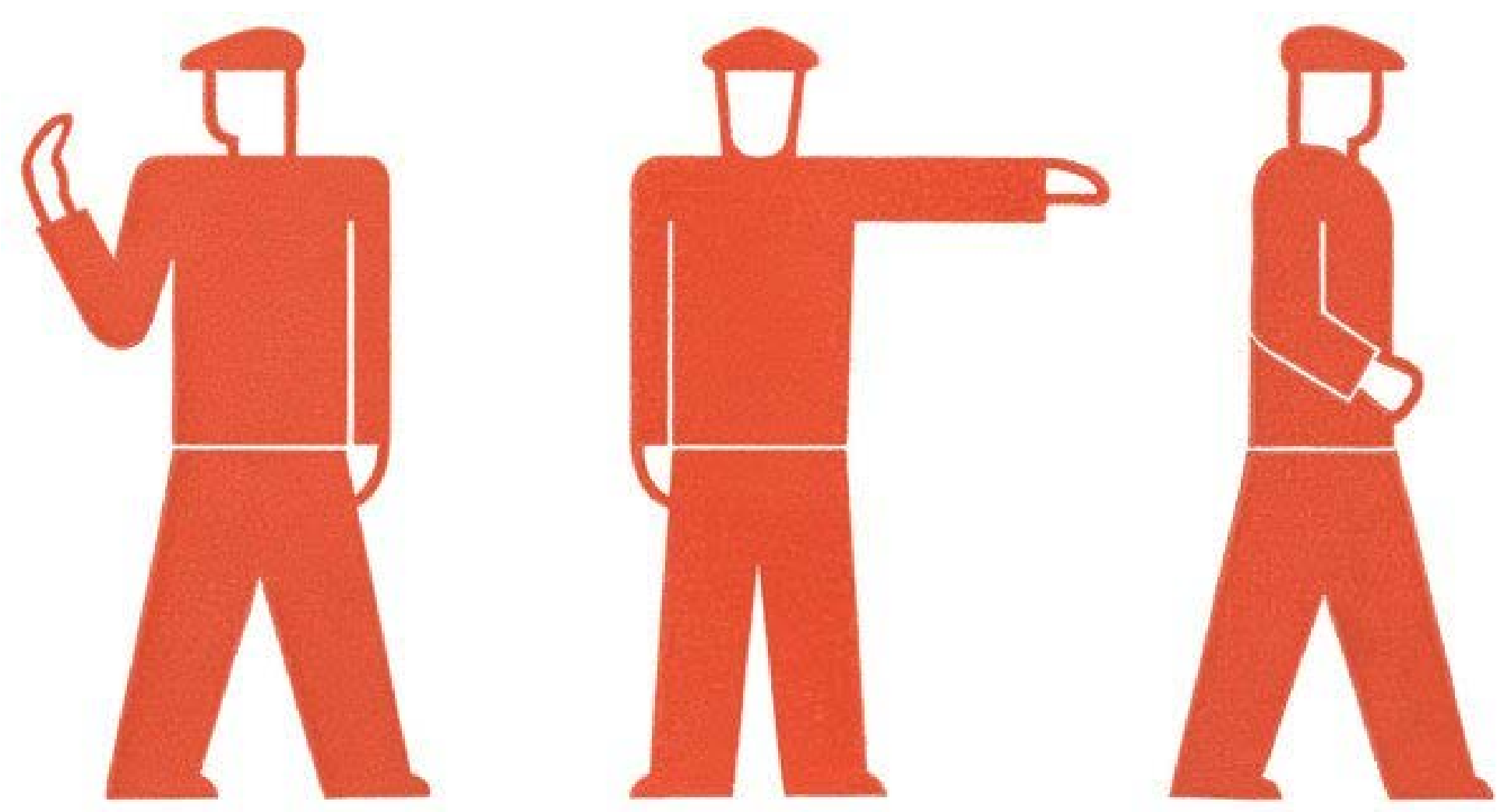


ISOTYPE vs. Gestural System

“Gestures expose the myth of neutrality.”

Neurath

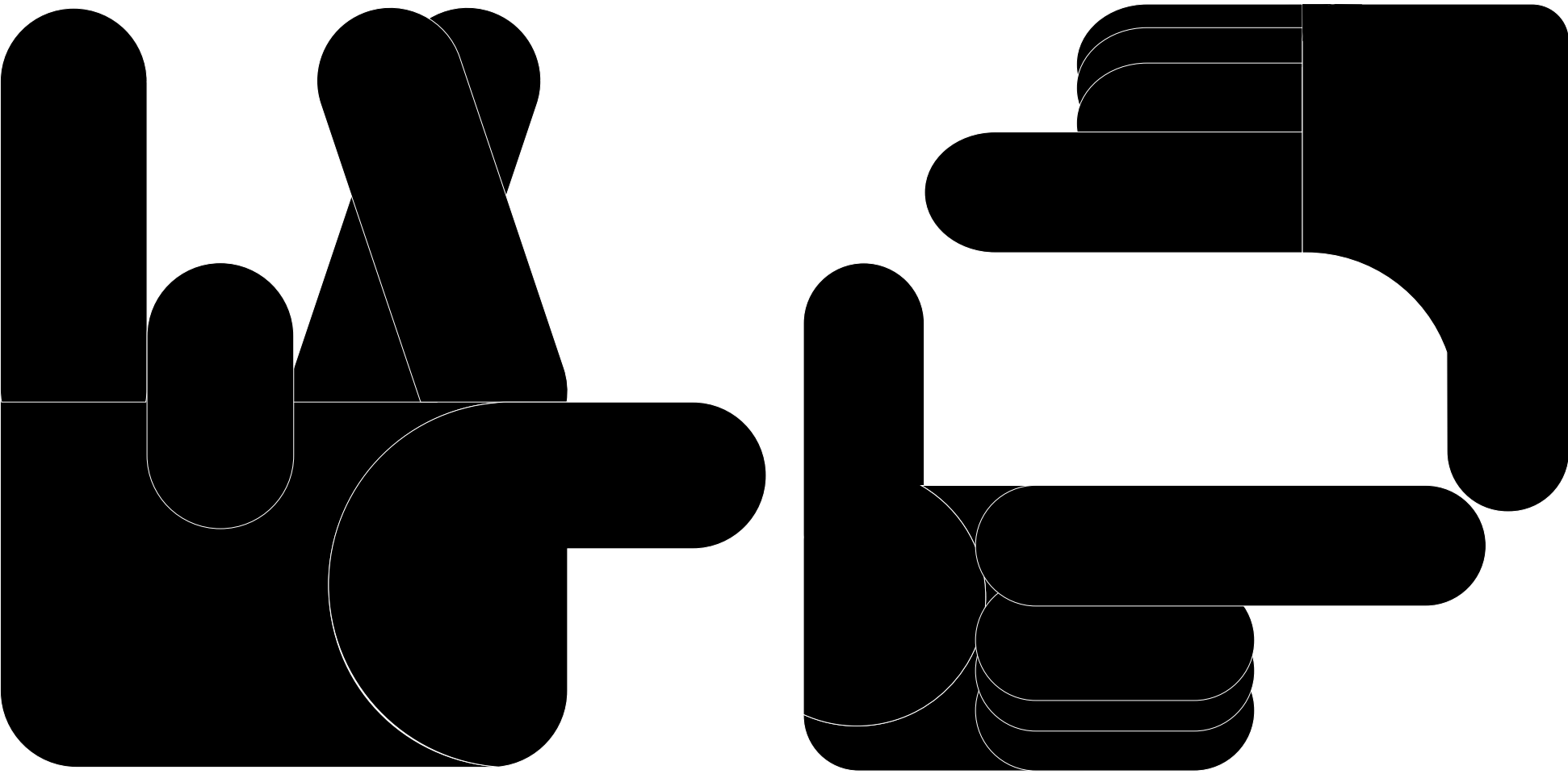
Universal, fixed  
Neutral, objective  
Eliminate ambiguity



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.

Me

Contextual, fluid  
Emotional, interpretive  
Embrace ambiguity



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.”