MAS 005
Gestures and Displays

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Materialien zu Ausstellungsdesign und Szenografie (materials on exhibition design and scenography) is a publication series by the Exhibition Design and Scenography Department at the Hochschule für Gestaltung Karlsruhe. It deals with the Gestaltung ('design'...) of narrative spaces as a critical design practice. The content of an exhibition or the narrative of a play cannot be separated from its mode of display and form of presentation. Linguistic and visual narratives depend on a form of presentation to materialise them and articulate them in space. These modes of display interest us as constructs, as subjects of design processes. MAS is an ongoing collection of materials relating to current discussions within our department. We consider each issue as an exhibition space and the printed pages as a display. We are not primarily concerned with the production of new content, but rather with existing materials, creating new correlations and perspectives by means of selection, combination, contextualisation and commentary.

Editorial

The starting point for this issue is a collection of digital images belonging to designer James Langdon. These images – around 300 – are of a specific type, readily found on amateur archaeology websites and forums. They show objects once buried in the ground, now dug up and presented to the camera. The objects themselves are various and probably not valuable. What defines this collection, though, are the hands that hold the objects: their poses, gestures, and the messages they seem to convey.

These are gestures of display. The positions of the hands – flat, open palms; grips and closures; offering and pointing signs – serve as a frame to mediate the objects they hold. The camera forces these to be communicative gestures, but there is something immediate here too. Objects shaped by humans signal to other humans. Even the most primitive tools make affordances that signal to our hands: **wield me, covet me, behold me.** In these photographs we witness the reception of these signals – sometimes doubtful, sometimes deterministic, sometimes speculative – and we see the circular dynamic between hand, eye, and brain on display.

To facilitate the conversation reproduced on the following pages, prints from the image collection were arranged on a large working table in the HfG Karlsruhe. Around the table a group of commentators spread the

images out, compared and discussed them. Present were James Langdon, art historian Matthias Bruhn, curator Nadja Quante, and the MAS editorial team. Matthias Bruhn is professor for art research and media theory at HfG Karlsruhe. Nadja Quante is artistic director at Künstlerhaus Bremen. James Langdon is professor for communication design at HfG Karlsruhe. The MAS team consisted of Francesca Audretsch (Kunstwissenschaft), Severin Geißler (Kommunikationsdesign), Ioana Spanachi (Kunstwissenschaft), Christina Scheib (Szenografie und Ausstellungsdesign), Klemens Czurda (Medienkunst).



Colophon:

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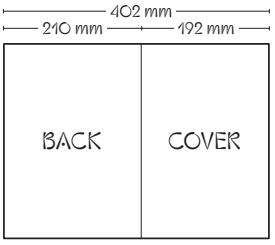
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For the cover of each issue we invite designers, artists or theoreticians to make a visual statement on the term „Darstellungspolitik“ (‘politics of displaying’, the original German „Darstellung“ includes a variety of translations as representation, impersonation and display). The covers are independent from the content of each issue and build a series on their own. Cover 001: Lotte Meret Effinger. Cover 002: Bas Princen & Office KGDVS. Cover 003: Moritz Küng. Cover 004: Anja Kirschner.

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James Langdon

Nadja Quante

Severin Geißler

Christina Scheib

Joana Spanaki

Francesca Audretsch

Matthias Bruhn

Klemens Czurda

James Langdon On the table now, not organised at all, are a couple of hundred images. I started collecting these images from amateur archaeology websites two years ago. The original interest was connected to graphic design, teaching and exhibiting, in a didactic sense. I had the idea that these might be some of the least abstract pictures that you could find. Meaning that they display a lot of information implicitly. There is typically an artefact held in the hand. You get an idea of its size and weight, in human scale. You get some impression of the landscape and the circumstances in which it was found, and who found it — their gender, ethnicity, age. I would like to discuss the idea that the information I identified, and other aspects of our comprehension of these objects, is contained in certain 'gestures' that are legible in the hand.

Matthias Bruhn Are these images made by random people or by the people who found the objects?

JL In the context of the websites where I find the images it's normally clear that the images are taken either by the person who found the object, or by another person involved in excavating at the same place and time. That explains the lack of white gloves and any semblance of professional handling practice.

Nadja Quante Do you have a particular interest in archaeology?

JL No, this collection began with a chance encounter — a found image. I used Google image search to find similar images, and then developed the habit of checking certain blogs and websites.



MB There could be several ways to classify them. One could sort them by format, by colour, by the way the hand is located, the kind of object they hold, and so on. I have the impression that we might find 20 or 30 different ways. Some images try to show the handiness of the object — the fact that they are instruments or tools. These ← are instruments.

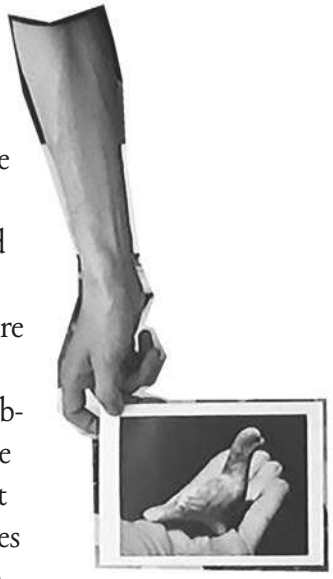




You can see that they have sharp edges by the way the fingers handle them. In this picture ← as well.
Sometimes the hand interprets the object in a specific way, as something precious or useful, but others → you can just see an open hand and some objects, maybe ancient food or a stone, held dispassionately. As if deferring to the photographer to make the interpretation of it.



JL This distinction between a gesture that shows a certain 'anticipatory' knowledge, and a more neutral hand position is important. The second type is not really passive, it is actually quite a deliberate muscular effort to flatten the hand like that. It could be a proud gesture, but I think in this case ← it's more about trying to disappear, to use the hand like a background.

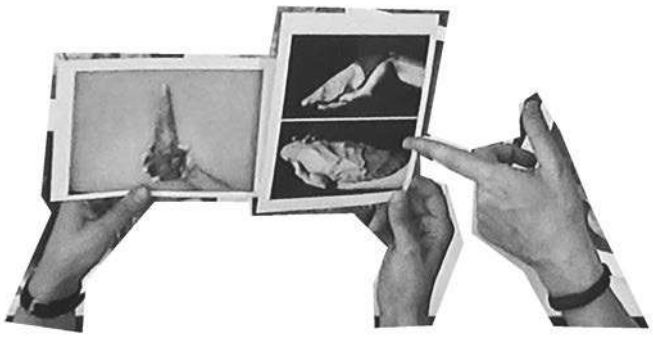




Ioana Spanachi Do we agree that these kinds of hand positions are in fact 'gestures'?

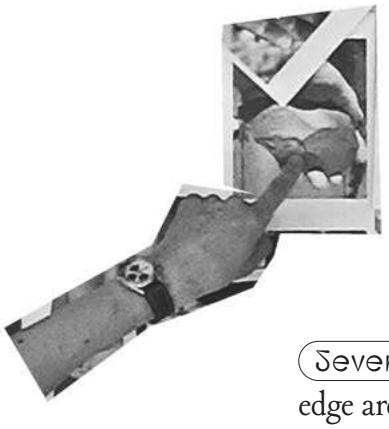


MB I think there are some very clear gestures, like this one → , in which the hand takes a symbolic form, as if in a medieval painting. Then there are gestures that somehow transform the hand into an object. Like the previous example where you have to stretch out the hand and strain the muscles to hold it there. This one here ← becomes a platform, for identifying or measuring something. It turns the hand into something else.



NQ This perspective that the camera brings is interesting because it suggests an object that has a value for society in general. As if one had found gold. There is this typically possessive gesture expressing that value.
In this one [←], the hand and the object really get into each other, in a performative way. I think about touch as constituting a movement between subject and object. The gesture defines and reveals the relation between the two. In this case the touching of the object for me symbolizes a gesture of giving: a contribution to society.

JL I'm interested in the unconscious of these gestures. In that moment of cognition, when the hand automatically adopts an appropriate form to handle an object. I'm interested in what it is to witness that. Is there a communicative intent there that we are interpreting?



MB I think the agency is in the object. The shape of the object itself tells me that it is something that I can handle, and how. I instantly understand this because it is shaped to fit the hand, like this [↘] or this [↙] .
These edges are very sharp — the sharpest thing on earth, even today — but the upper part is smooth, shaped almost like an egg that fits the palm of the hand. And people seem to know, from experience, but also just from seeing the object, how to use it.



Severin Gelßler Objects with a cutting edge are always shown with the sharp edge pointed down. Everybody unconsciously knows this action of cutting something resting on a flat surface.

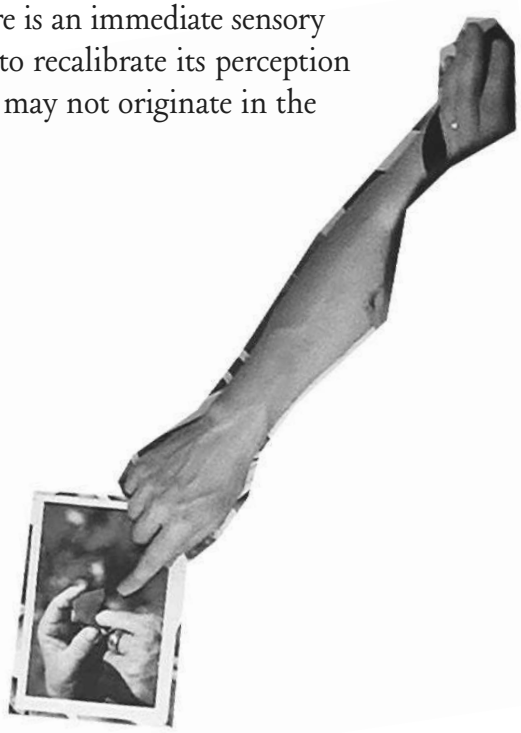
NQ The object extends the body, it becomes some kind of prosthesis or extended limb. It is shaped for the body and yet at the same time the object that is touched forms the body. The gestures show how the body is formed by the objects that are touched.

Francesca Audretsch The mediation of the gestures by photography makes a difference here. If you immediately know what an object is when you hold it in your hand, what of that can be transmitted through an image?

Christina Scheib The images do maintain a sense of empathy, of how it might feel to hold these objects.

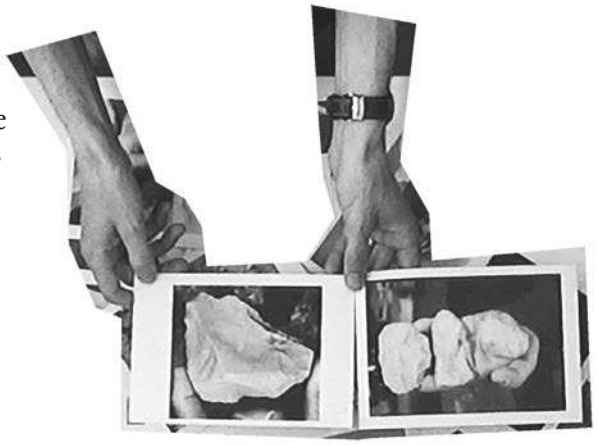
IS I can imagine what some of the objects weigh, better than if I just saw them laying on the ground. It does not need to be my own hand for some appreciation of the object to be intuited.

SG In preparation for this conversation we talked about pain therapy for amputees. There is a treatment that presents an image of the missing limb by reflecting the remaining limb in a mirror. When the amputee sees this they have the impression they still have both limbs. There is an immediate sensory effect, it allows the brain to recalibrate its perception of sensations that may or may not originate in the missing limb.



JL I think these affordances represent a very elementary classification of objects whose form has been 'designed' or manipulated. Objects of this kind are categorically different to 'natural' objects. We can apparently identify them unconsciously, but I want to ask again if it is important that such comprehension be displayed, be made visible. There are some images [→] where we see a second hand making a pointing gesture, an explanatory didactic gesture. That is explicit, but do all of these gestures have some of this communicative intent?

MB If we take these images for instance [↘].



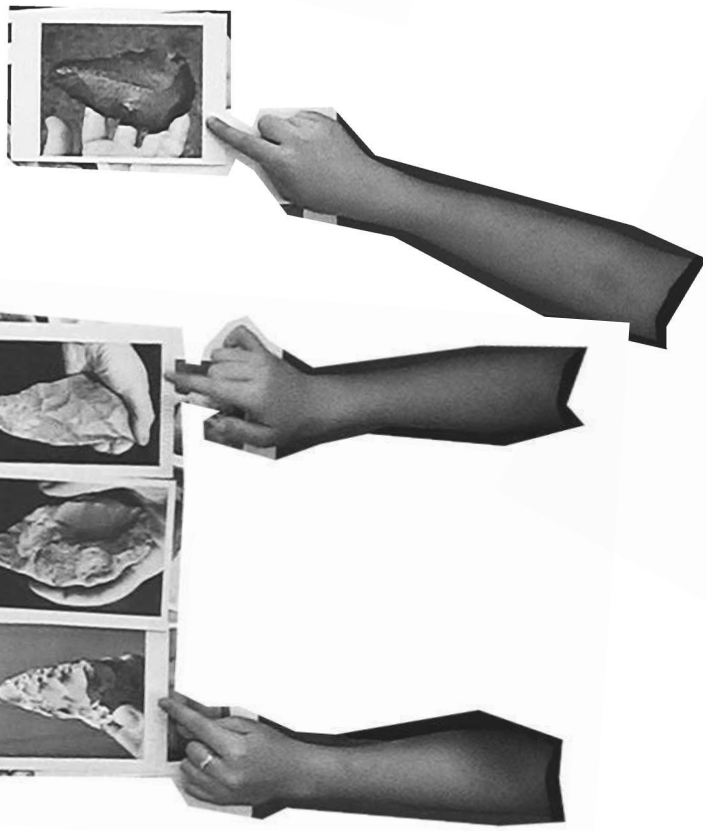
I don't know what he or she wants to tell me. Is it the stone and its shape that's important, or is it the colour, or some kind of traces or particular marks. I don't know. Without a gesture that confers a meaning, or value, I would just think they are insignificant. A stone is a stone! But the gesture prompts me to look for that meaning.

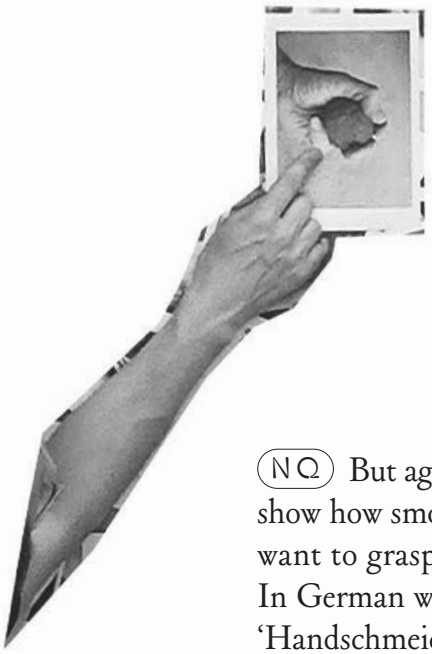
JL It's true that this is not just about utility, you can also see gestures of reverence or tenderness. An idea of care can be contained in a gesture. In contrast to the muscular flat hands, these → softer grips speak about that.



NQ But that interpretation could be confused. Maybe it's also just about the surface, not utility or meaning. Because I think, in this picture ← for example you can see that smoother objects afford different grips.

CS This hand → does not seem to know what it holds, the sharp edge is held with the tips of the fingers. And here are two pictures ↘ where similar objects are held differently.





JL Yes, we may be wrong in our interpretations, and some of the subjects in the photographs also perhaps do not understand the objects. This ← is a strange one. This gesture suggests to me a throwing action, which seems incongruous with the object. It seems an overly deterministic gesture.

NQ But again, it could also just mean to show how smooth the surface is, that you want to grasp your hand around it fully. In German we would use the expression 'Handschmeichler'. Comforting the hand.

JL Yes, interesting. I think that is related, the phenomenon of objects designed to distract the busy hand.

(MB) The device of showing the hand in photographs has become familiar. People put their hand on something and make a photograph, they use it as a scale, but also as a material witness. 'I have been there.'

(JL) Yes, in that sense the hand is immediate, and substitutes for the professional apparatus of archaeological photography: scale cubes, labels, and so on. It's worth considering too what the appearance of the hands tells us. There are clearly some characteristics that define an 'experienced' or 'expert' hand in this context. A hand that is used to digging in earth, that bears the patination of that work as a sign of expertise.

(NQ) Also, I would say that there are intuitive gestures and learned gestures. For example the gesture of pointing with the index finger at things marks a certain stage of development in children and is an early form of non-linguistic communication, whereas other gestures are learned in a more conscious way.



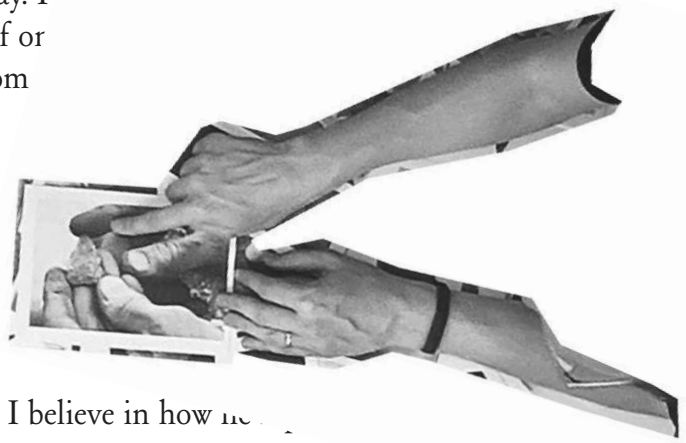
(JL) A gesture like this [←] implies some collective knowledge, but that [→] is more authoritarian: 'I am telling you what this is.'



(MB) The gesture is teaching. In the context of these amateur archaeology websites I think it's obviously about the sharing and community.

(IS) So it is the context that produces a consensus, not the gesture.

(MB) Not only the ges· The gesture and the object. And putting the ·aking them public. This context a' committal in a way. I up photograph of or would get less from



(JL) I think that these hands [→] are perhaps the most believable that we have. The age and experience, the dirt under the fingernails, combined with that teaching gesture.

(IS) What do you mean exactly? Do you believe that this man found this thing?

(JL) I believe in how it·

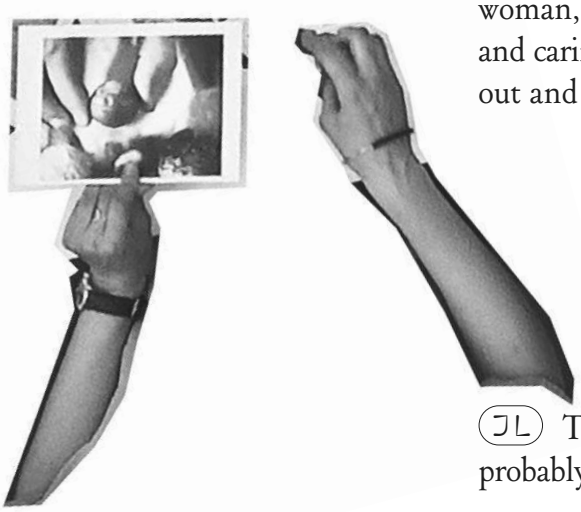
(IS) So you see some kind of truth?

(MB) The experience maybe.

(JL) The expertise.

NQ And I would say that it is very male.

JL Do you mean that the didacticism is pretentious? We could call that 'man-splaining'!



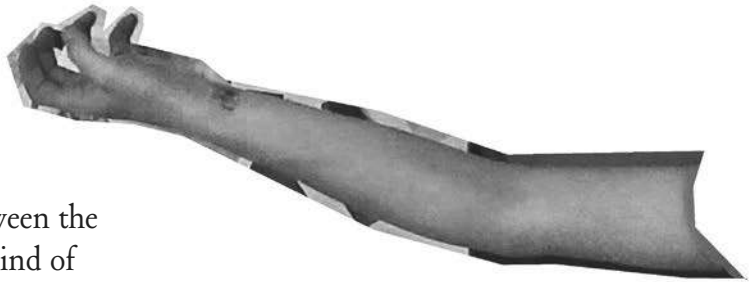
NQ Yes, but irrespective of whether the knowledge is genuine — meaning trained — I attribute a gesture like the one on the image here ← , to a woman, because it seems more tender, encompassing and caring, in comparison to a palm that is stretched out and exposing the object holding it.

IS The perception of gendered handling is socially constructed.

JL This subculture of amateur archaeology, and probably this is just a stereotype, seems typically male.

Klemens Czurda To me these pictures seem very violent. Something is being ripped out of the ground. In this image → you have an object still partly embedded in the soil, and someone approaches it with a fine brush, preserving the relation between the object and where it is found, but mostly that kind of sensitive treatment is not represented in these images.





NQ I think it is also very much an act of abstraction when you take an object from the ground and show it in your hand.

IS Is that also a colonial gesture — 'What I find is mine?' MB A claim.

JL It's true that these images appear quite naive to us — we joke about their amateurism — but they could be read in more sinister ways. They are violent, as you said. We have to consider the overwhelming whiteness of the hands.

CS Are there any black hands?

FA Here, for example. But very few.

JL I would note that since these images were all found according to a narrowly defined set of visual parameters, they are all, in a way, reproductions of the first image in my collection. Nevertheless, despite the amateurism of the culture that produced them, they do contain something of the colonial narrative of archaeology. All of the 'assumed' knowledge that we have observed in gestures could be problematised in this way.

SG We talked about how these pictures are shared. So what does it mean that they are seen on the internet and not in an exhibition?

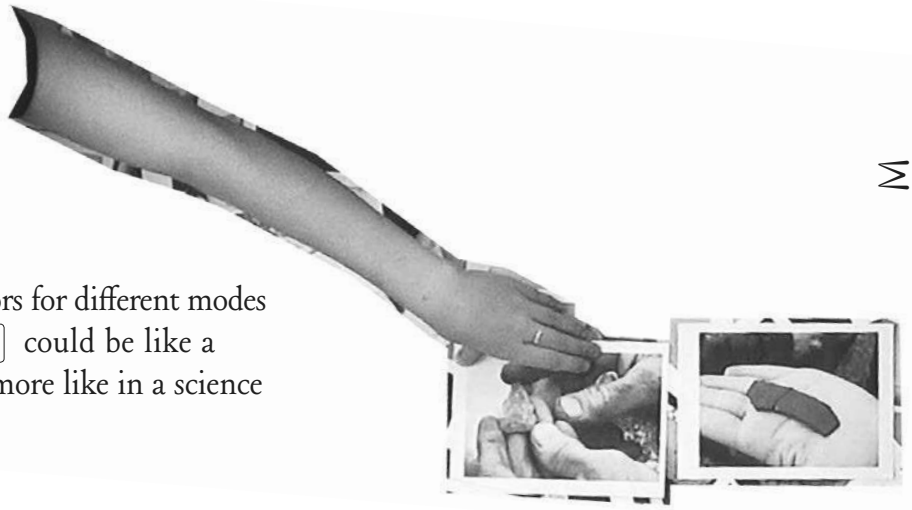
MB This speaks to a culture of amateurism. In any place you dig you will find these flint stones. Billions of them must have been made. They are not extraordinary, but there is still some evocation of a special moment of discovery.

JL Certainly they haven't been scrutinised by any curatorial standards, but I'd like to ask if we see in the gestures we have described any prototypical moves that we might relate to exhibition-making and curatorial practice?



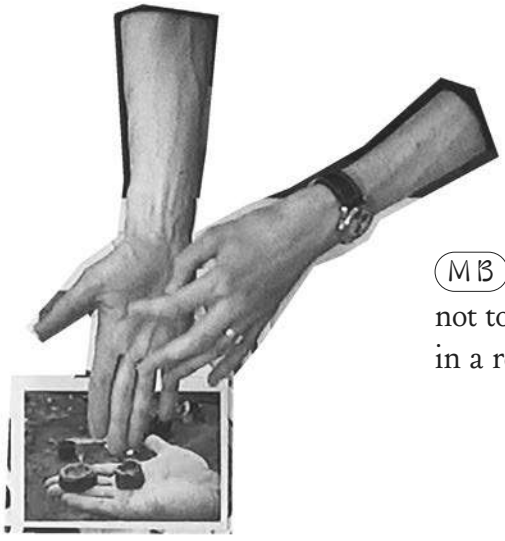
IS Here ← we find some curatorial process, in the arrangement of a group of objects. Why did this person decide to put them all on one hand?

JL I suppose that represents one day's findings.



CS We could identify metaphors for different modes of displaying objects. This → could be like a gallery, and this → could be more like in a science museum, a didactic context.

IS Or in an interactive mode, for some museums the idea of interaction is crucial to their displays.



MB This hand ← signals that we may not touch this object, or may only touch it in a restricted way.

NQ Does anybody know something about the procedures of documenting professional archaeological research? When something is found do they have to take photographs in-situ?

MB Yes, and some of them still draw. Now there are some modern technologies for making three-dimensional measurements, for larger objects and even entire spaces. For small objects like these you take photographs and put them in a box with a number.

NQ I would be very interested to see drawings like that.

MB In the nineteenth century it was absolutely standard to keep journals, with descriptions and drawings of the shapes.

CS When we looked at a collection of images belonging to a palaeontologist at the Staatliches Museum für Naturkunde Karlsruhe, we saw a lot of on-site photographs where an everyday object like a pen or a lighter is used for scale. The specimens were not held in the hand, they were left where they were found, in the ground or in the surroundings.

MB Because of my own professional training as an art historian, I would never take an object in my bare hand and photograph it. But I know that there are such traditions of image-making in palaeontology and archeology. In the nineteenth century, at important digs in Olympia, or Troy, the assistants doing the minor work were asked to pose in photographs, to show the size of the dig. So there is a professional tradition here. But we are not dealing with a 'professional' rhetoric. Today professionals would just put something on a plain surface with a device to show scale.

JL These comparisons to museum and auction practices have a tension with the observations we began with, about how the hands in our images confer value. In professional contexts touch represents amateurism — in the negative sense — and detracts from value.

SG The distinction is more between high and low cultures. We could find images like these on eBay, or other online auction sites. The kind of value we are contrasting is more to do with cultural significance.

NQ I think what we are looking at here precedes a curatorial process of producing meaning or value. For example, you might create an archive by photographing all the works of an artist. And then a curator comes and selects from it, and makes connections between its contents that are enabled by the archiving process. Here we don't know if the objects will ever get such a treatment or if they have value, so I find it difficult to compare the process to a curatorial one like in a museum.

MB The internet is nowadays the archive, in a way.

IS But this is an archive that we cannot have an overview of. It is its own world, like a parallel universe.

NQ I find it interesting here to talk about the institutional processes for assigning value. In art there are academies. Somehow artists need a certificate, a legitimation from the academy.

JL I think it is possible to see, here on the table, relatives of certain institutional, curatorial, or academic practices. There are degrees of mediation, recourse to concepts of neutrality, and so on. As we talked about the 'trying to disappear' gesture is in fact not a relaxed hand [→], it is quite a forced position.



MB In museum displays they use grey backgrounds, with objects placed on miniature plinths or clear acrylic supports to show them in a certain way. When an object is placed into such a display it must be handled with white museum gloves, and as smoothly and carefully as possible. Usually there is nobody else present to disturb this work, or to bring dust or dirt. These procedural gestures are very distinct because they are not public. They are seen only by the professional.

IS But why was it decided, in the museum context, that the artist is not present to show work in the hand to the audience? There are some minimalist artists, Carl Andre, for example, who placed sculptures directly on the ground, to remove the framing devices of the plinth or wall. So this is also a gesture. But in some cases the museums owning these works don't allow you to walk on it or to touch art works. Is this only for conservation? Or is it about elevating the object beyond the hand?

JL There are contemporary artists who work with those dynamics. Michael Dean has made sculptures that are literally held by the gallery staff until someone comes into the space, at which point the artwork is handed to the visitor. It looks like stone, so you expect it to be cold, but it channels the warmth of the hands of the person who has been holding it.

IS But conventionally, we, as the spectator, have learned, when we go to the museum, just to approach artworks with our eyes.

JL In that way the grey background or the white wall are just the pretence of this prioritisation of looking, of optimising the conditions for the eye.

CS In the museum, mediation happens through a layer of textual interpretation. All the information we can deduce from the photographs here would be explained in text in a museum context.

JL Now I think we are not so much characterising the museum as the producer of neutrality but as the producer of consistency. We see in these images that everything is quite random, we don't know whether these ambient details are important or incidental. One function of the museum is to make the conditions of the encounter with an object consistent for each visitor. That someone can come today, and again in a month, and see the same.

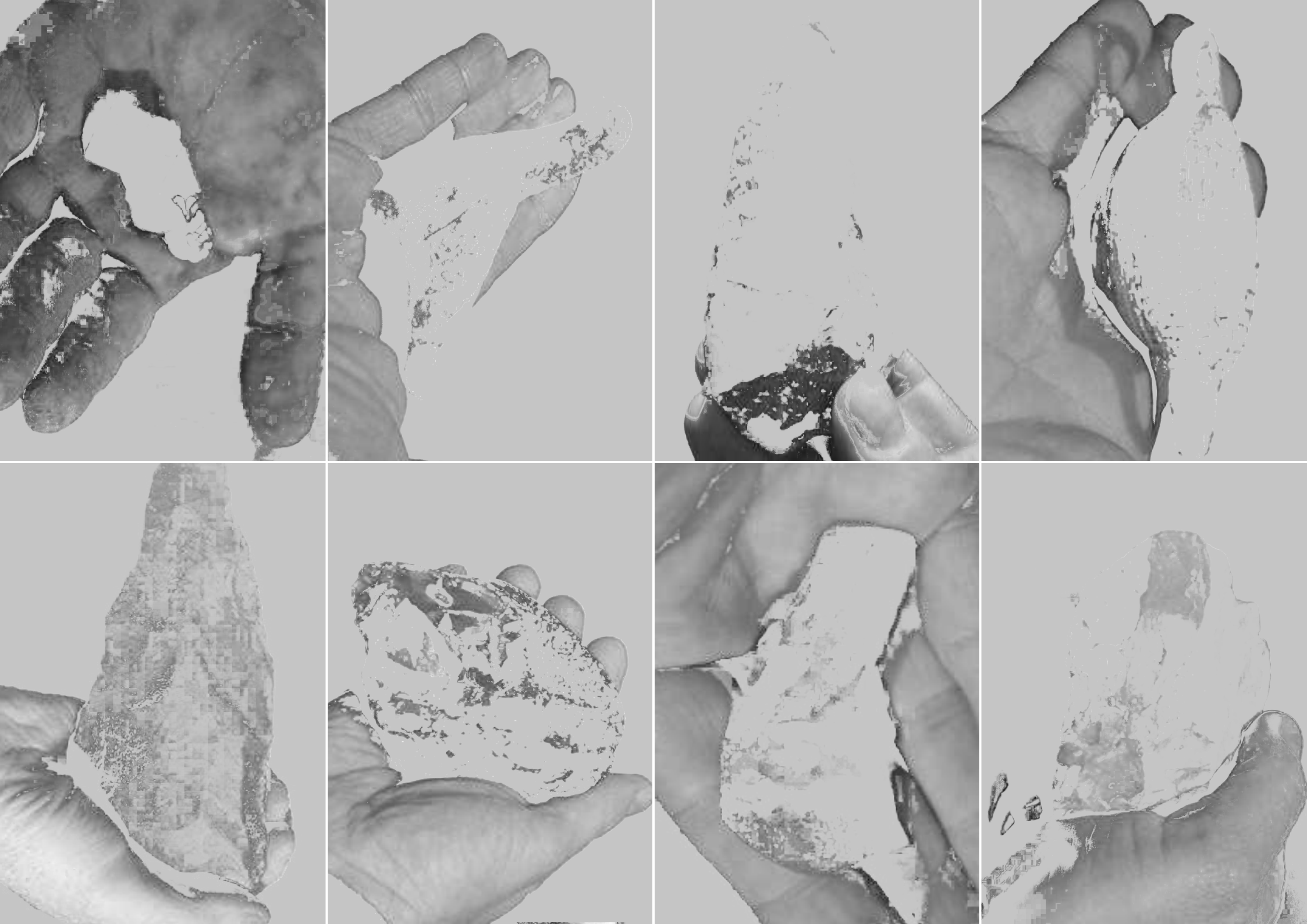
MB The neutral background is used to visually highlight the shapes, the contours of the object. Indeed this inhibits storytelling, or relegates it to text, as you said. There is a new museum of prehistory near Berlin where they have reshaped ancient arrow tips and put them on sticks of wood to produce a working arrow with very low cost material. They have demonstrations showing what you can do with this arrow, and a bow — shooting through a dinner plate from a distance of 10 to 15 metres, to prove how sharp these tips are!

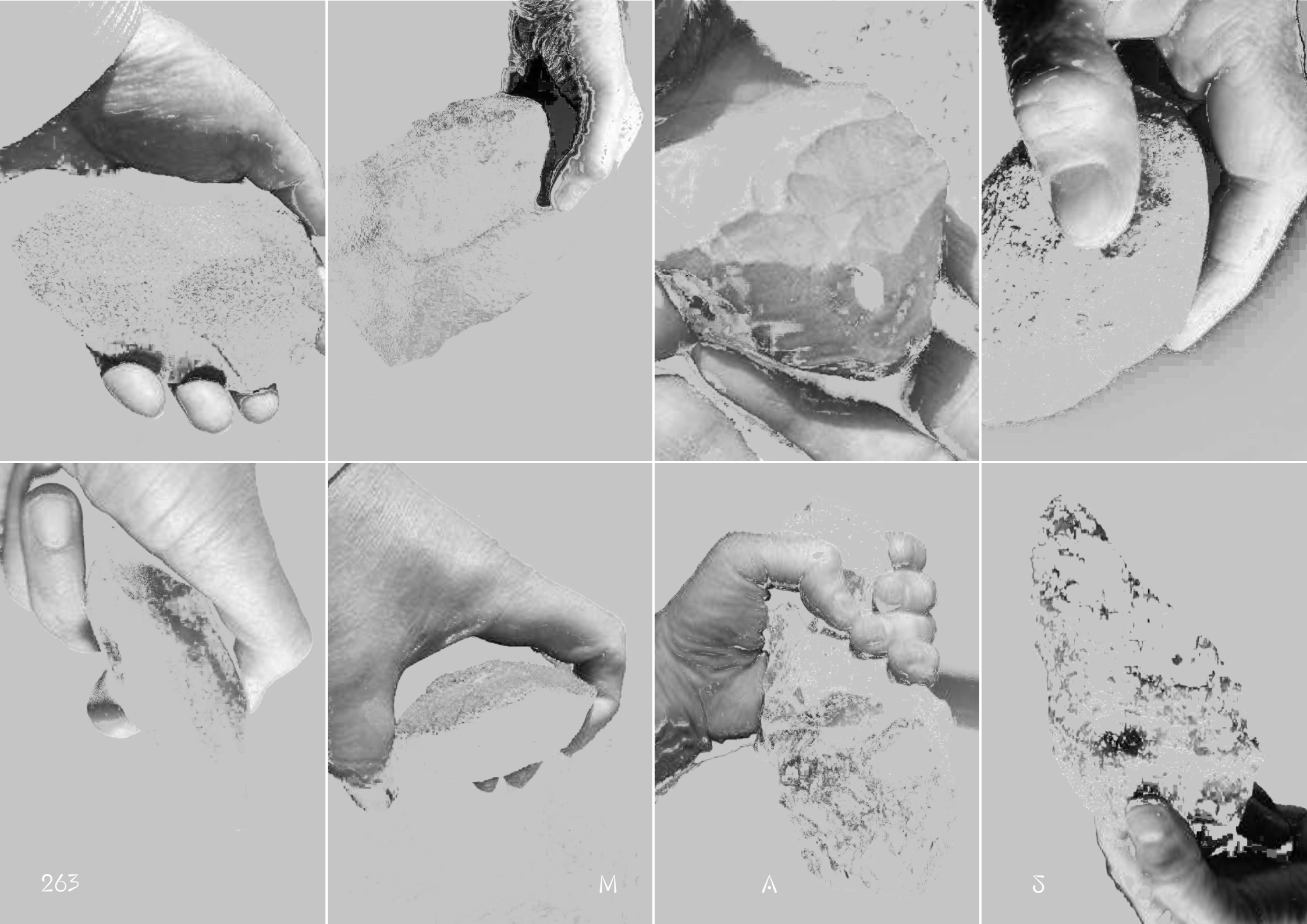


NQ For many of these images movement and animation are important. This one ← looks like a film still to me. When we talk about displays, putting objects in a museum, it is like freezing them. These gestural ways of showing objects do more to suggest movement.

JL I imagine the photographer saying: 'Hold it right there ... '


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