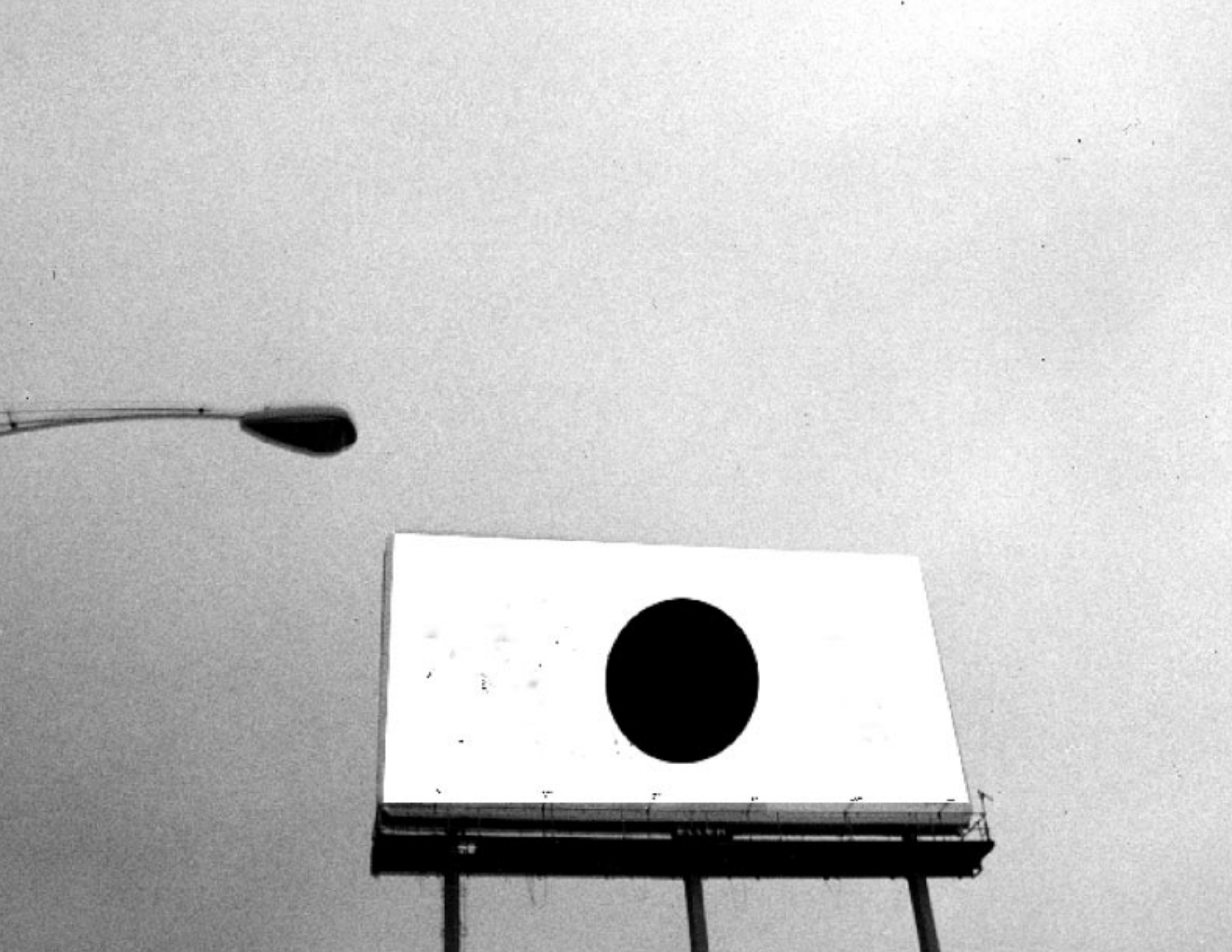




Special thank you to Rita Davies' Second Grade Class at the Berkeley Oxford School for sharing my interests.

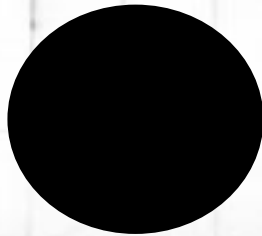
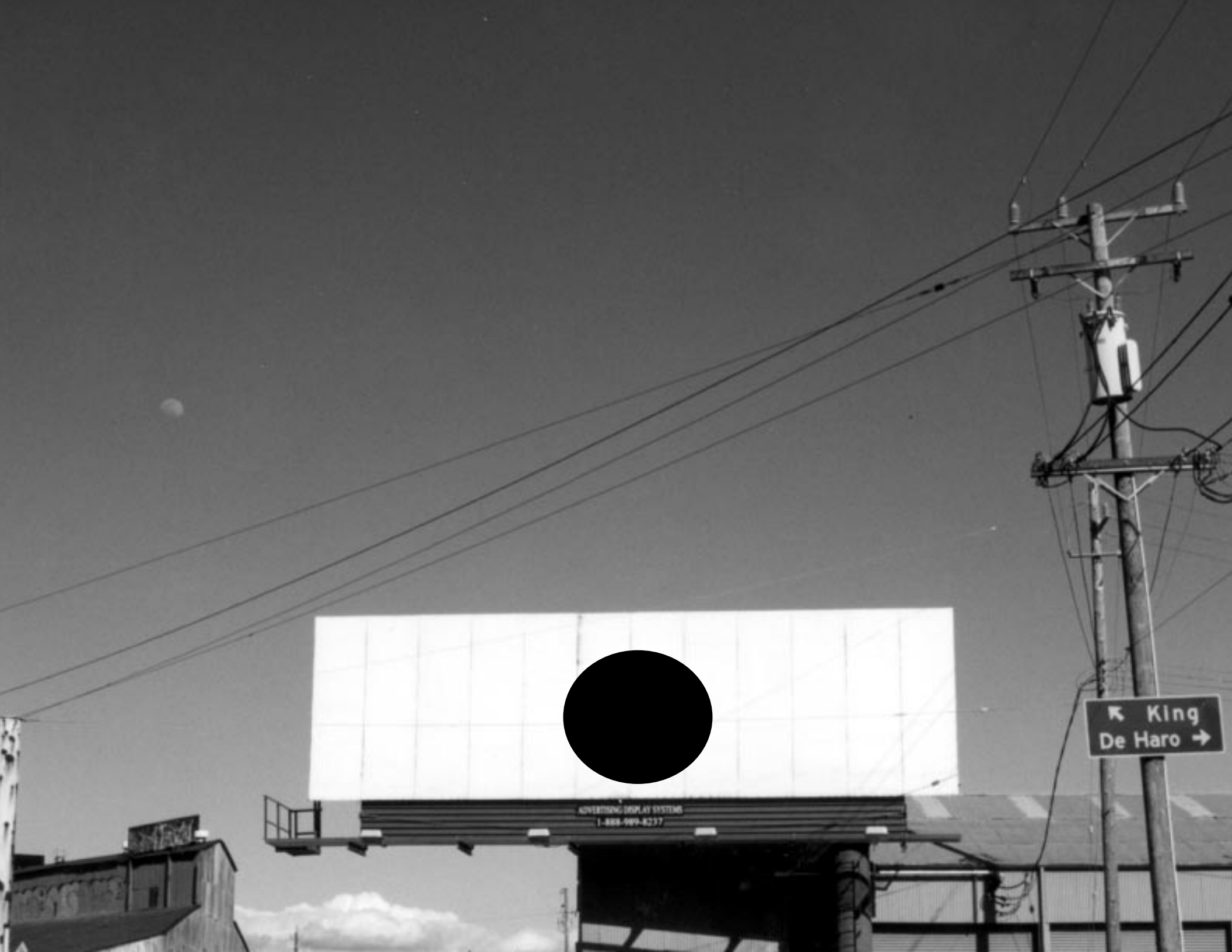
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t h e T h e s i s D o c u m e n t

Stacy Asher

Spring 2002 / Graduate Design

California College of Arts and Crafts

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Master of Fine Arts in Design

Thesis Advisors: Gwen Allen, Geoff Kaplan



ADVERTISING, INC. 1000 W. 10TH ST.
ST. LOUIS, MO. 63101



“Somebody needs to be for quality of life, not just quantity of stuff. And to be so requires an approach that does not trivialize consumption, but accords it the respect and centrality it deserves.”

Juliet Schor, “Do Americans Shop Too Much?”, In a new democracy forum with Robert Frank, Michèle Lamont, Lawrence Mishel, and others.

reference video [black circle.mov]

Influences: wonder what it means to be like them?

The dynamics of popular culture and american commerce's role in stimulating the imaginations of those that consume is the subject of this publication. Commercial messaging is omnipresent, even the most banal aspects of everyday life can be “enriched” by a designer's touch. What impact do commercial messages have on our culture and what type of system do they engender and then reiterate?

When faced with the role of audience, individuals approach the partitions in their environment with identity questions in mind. How an audience decodes the contents of messaging in order to make meaning and define their sense of self. The average person is subjected to over 3600 commercial impressions¹ a day. The role of the designer in the creation of the broadcast message needs to be addressed. What are their responsibilities in referencing the audiences system of beliefs and processes of self definition?

Designers are image makers and are mass media producers. In order to be effective communicators the wants and needs of society must be considered. Enormous amounts of time, money and energy are expended to study what sells. Has culture grown dependent on responding to the messaging in order to maintain identities of inclusion. The strain of keeping up with the appeal falls upon the nerves of society and becomes an arduous race to comply. Has marketing taken a hold of what is unique and reversed its meaning? To be unique is to have the look and feel of the unmistakable stamp of a commercial icon. “Attitude by Nike” is more than a brand name, it is a way of experiencing life in a prescribed manner.

The designer's love affair with form produces aesthetically pleasing visual communications, but are these makers truly aware of the power of the image? As contemporary designers reflect on their position in the process of producing mass media, it is essential to consider the viewer's participation. The viewer can transgress from spectator to author as a message is revealed. Designers are using form to create open ended messages that can be viewed and interpreted by individuals who come to the exchange with an established system of belief.

Can design make meaning based on social and political context by understanding how images construct and are constructed by mass marketing? The social construction of identity in a culture of mass media introduced a call to action by members of the greater design community. Designers who signed the First Thing First Manifesto 2000, challenged visual communicators to create work that is culturally and politically responsible. It is a world of over exposure to mass media and a decline of community and social connection. Can makers of commercial culture become sensitive to the ways in which an individual's sense of social standing and belonging comes from what is consumed? In this sense what does it mean to generate socially meaningful design?

"Designers who devote their efforts primarily to advertising, marketing and brand development are supporting, and implicitly endorsing, a mental environment so saturated with commercial messages that it is changing the very way citizen-consumers speak, think, feel, respond and interact. To some extent we are all helping draft a reductive and immeasurably harmful code of public discourse."

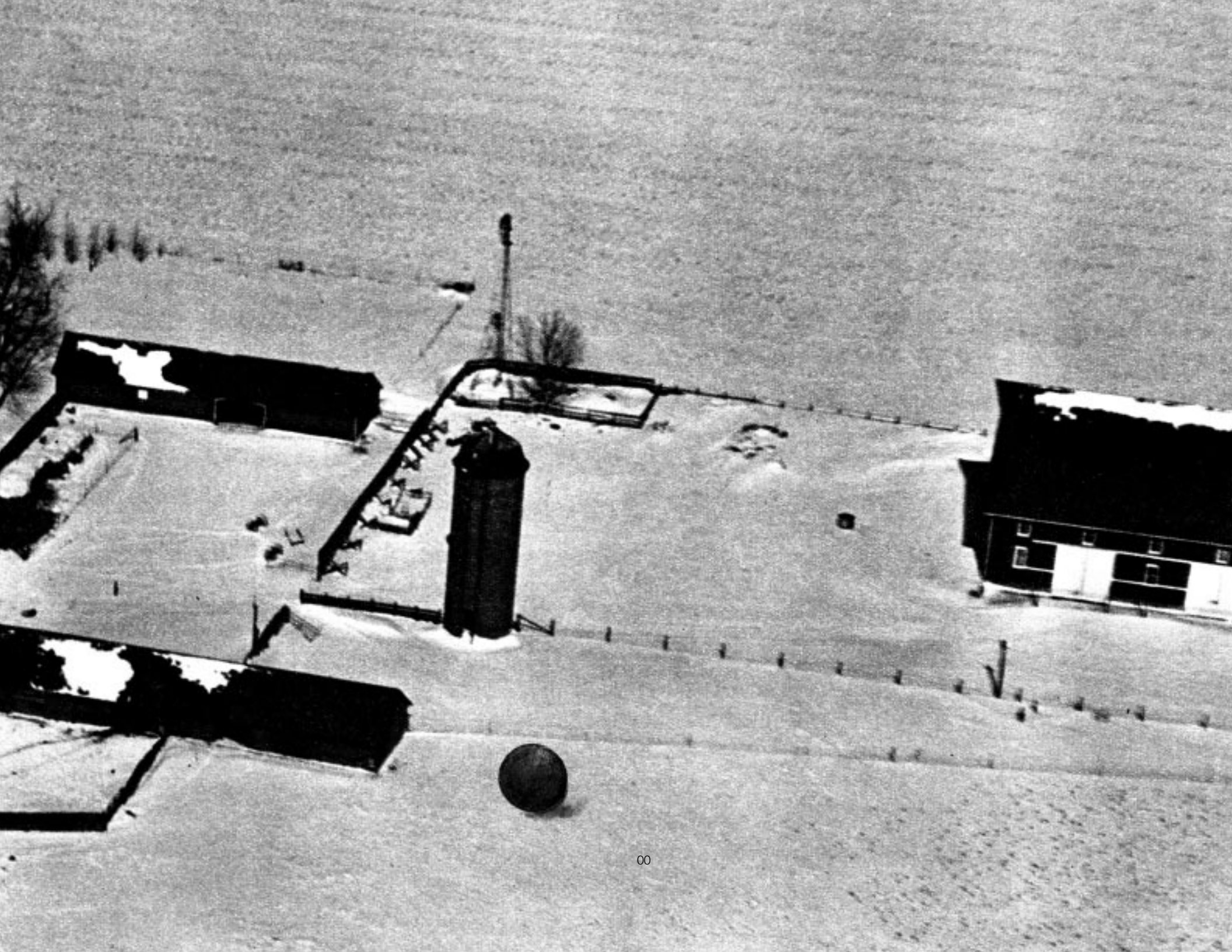
²Jonathan Barnbrook, Nick Bell, Andrew Blauvelt, Hans Bockting, Irma Boom, Sheila Levrant de Bretteville, Max Bruinsma, Siân Cook, Linda van Deursen, Chris Dixon, William Drenttel, Gert Dumbar, Simon Esterson, Vince Frost, Ken Garland, Milton Glaser, Jessica Helfand, Steven Heller, Andrew Howard, Tibor Kalman, Jeffery Keedy, Zuzana Licko, Ellen Lupton, Katherine McCoy, Armand Mevis, J. Abbott Miller, Rick Poyner, Lucienne Roberts, Erik Spiekermann, Jan van Toorn, Teal Triggs, Rudy VanderLans, Bob Wilkinson

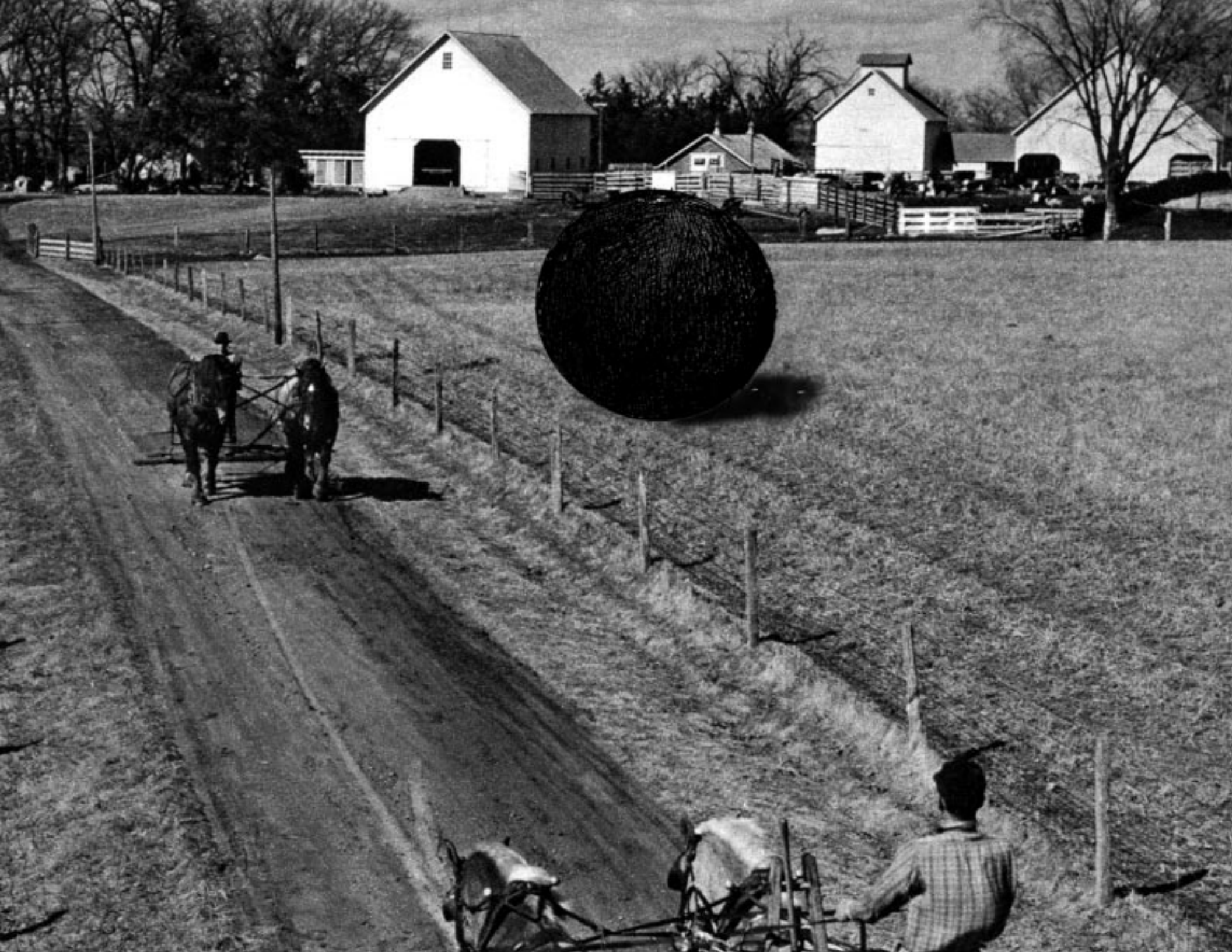
Is advertising/branding using allegorical imagery to act as a passport into a world of desire, fantasy and wonder in order to entice an audience into consumption? The prominence of advertising and its effectiveness in instilling a narrative along with an object/actor/souvenir of the experience allows me to think about how this society is dominated by a belief in magic or wonder. The cultural theorists Remm Williams, called it the “magic system”¹ where goods are held to have incredible power. Today, technological advancements efficiently produce “hyper-real” special effects of simulated realities that can easily seduce an audience by crafting fantastic mythologies about the experience, knowledge, insight these products infer. If objects are consumed, qualities of the natural world [ie. agelessness] are captured along with the ability to perform feats of transformations and bewitchment. These mythologies created from allegorical images are telling stories of instant happiness and gratification. Believing in magic is easy. Tales re-canted from the efforts of top notch creative teams create allegory, an open ended communication specifically designed to target a particular individual.

Would an understanding of how the framework for commercial impressions construct meaning assist an audience to utilize information that is constantly confronting them in a more constructive manner? Today’s surplus of visual stimuli generates the need to develop new strategies for visual communications. Does a shift in perception need to occur before a personal viewpoint can be re-directed? Can an audience generate the ability to “overlook” interpretive forms that do not contribute positively to their definition of self? Ultimately, it is not this knowledge in itself that is valuable, but its potential to change the system which is its object. Because of its powers of absorption and of its introversion and lack of respect for the private sphere it is valid to keep abreast with, understand and eventually criticize advertising’s ideological system.

Through questioning the practices of consumer culture, can the investigative possibilities of how its manifestations in interpretive forms and experiences be the humanizing element that assists an audience to comprehend how meaning is imposed on them? Today is time of unprecedented faith in a world wide economic culture of consuming and producing more. I am at task reflecting the expansive cultural hegemony of the consumer aesthetique with its non-metaphysical promise of happiness.

¹Sut Jhally, “Advertising at the End of the World”, Professor of Communications at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst











Shapes patterns or organization, features, and behaviors are some of the vehicles through which designers can invoke the perception of identities. Visual language of commercial impressions is seductive form. Can a distinction can be drawn between identities that are a cognitive framework to present “deeper structures” or the “essence” of something imposed? Impressions rely on considerable detail, surface appearances, or elaborate meanings that can only be created through context. However, the context is the everyday, the landscape of the community. Commercial impressions mediate material exchanges and suggest that identities are constructed through them. People ‘are’ the sum of their consumer goods. We re-create ourselves every day, in accordance with an ideology based on property— where we are defined by our relationship to things, possessions, rather than to each other.

The more vague, the better for today’s commercial messaging. Increasing the level of ambiguity increases the level of questioning and mental absorption. The more thought process required, the more time for message to become embedded. There is a billboard that depicts a blue sky with two streaming “chem-trails” from airliners speeding high above. Two multi-cultural arms, monumental in perspective, majestically reach up into the sky. The tension of the energy exerted to lift above the constructed hierarchy is evident. The arms are aspiring to reach as high as they can, to touch something magnificent. A slight shadow of a sphere suggesting a basketball is unnecessary as the action of the arms suggest the rules to a very specific game. On the bottom right corner of the billboard is a black star indicating Converse and linking the message back to the commodity. The mythological language, constructed from the visual form create an abstract image of desired qualities.

The simple black star rested deceptively at the bottom. It took me a few minutes to figure out what the ad truly represented and I found myself wondering about it later on. A visual representation of a specific product or line of products was not apparent as I made the necessary connection with the Converse black star. The mythical results of reaching un-attained heights are highlighted to create a desire for the experience. Was the ad really telling the viewer that they can jump higher, that they can be successful, that they can **win**? The monumental experience can be obtained, however Converse products are required.

Branding is concerned with the activation of the spectator's desires. It is the psychic toll of branding that has a material component when individuals buy and wear products. While the branding process may result in that actual act of spending money, it seems, that it is an effect not a cause of branding.

The billboard, website, or ad are vehicles for branding. Branding is more than just a product or service. It is the ideology behind a product or service. Branding is the construction of the perceived meaning deciphered from the mythological messages directed to sell a product, service or idea. With the efficacy of branding's infiltration, the public and private spheres are interdependent until commercial messages become a framework for self-definition. Advertising, and the media make it difficult to find inner beauty in ourselves. Designers spend their hours making ads and products more sexy and desirable until we are seduced by the message of the exotic "other". We fantasize and suddenly, we aren't thin enough, dressed appropriate, or smelling "good." We aren't relaxed enough, enlightened enough, tan enough, fit enough, happy enough. Society wants **more** and consumer culture is there to give it to us.

reference video [in house.mov]

Branding

Individuals actively and creatively sample available cultural symbols, myths, and rituals to produce their identities.

³Juliet Schor, "Do Americans Shop Too Much", Professor of Communications at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst

A brand is not just a product, it is an experience. It was proven early on that brands could conjure a feeling— but more importantly that corporations could themselves embody a meaning of their own. One only need think about a commercial that affected them to gain an understanding of how this occurs. Advertising and sponsorship have always been about using imagery to equate products with positive cultural or social experiences. What makes late capitalist society different is that it increasingly seeks to take

these associations out of the representational realm and make them a lived reality.

"The goal of branding," says Naomi Klein, in *No Logo*, "is not merely to have child actors drinking Coke in a TV commercial, but for students to brainstorm concepts for Coke's new ad campaign in English class". It is as if brands are intended to be more than sponsors of culture but to be the culture. If brands are not products but ideas, attitudes, values and experiences, why can't they be classified as culture as well? It is the intent of advanced branding to push the hosting culture into the background and make the brand itself the focal point.

Brand names arrive un-announced and are proven to slip into minds until the construction of a personal identity can be seen to be somewhat problematic and difficult. Young people are surrounded by influential imagery, especially that of popular media. It is no longer possible for an identity to be constructed and not be influenced by branding. Lives are seen to be 'media-saturated'. Therefore, it is obvious that in constructing our identity, we would make use of imagery derived from the popular media.

Youth culture is being targeted more aggressively than ever before. Youth style and attitude are among the most effective wealth generators in the entertainment economy, but real live youth are being used around the world to pioneer a new kind of disposable workforce. Kids today can name more brands than trees and I feel that this deserves attention. Knowing about trees is not necessarily more important than knowing about brands, but at the heart of a brand is a drive to profit. The profit driven message is at the heart of branding and has become a form of education for children. Advertisements and branding clearly produce knowledge—otherwise Old Navy's latest billboard could not occupy such a large amount of public space for an extended period of time—but this knowledge is always produced from something already known, that acts as a guarantee, in its anteriority, for the "true message" in the ad itself.

Young people have frequent access as well as an extreme interest in the media, so it is fair to say that their behavior and their

sense of 'self' will be influenced to some degree by what they see, read, hear or discover for themselves. Such an influence may include a particular way of behaving or dressing to the kind of music a person chooses to listen to. These are all aspects which contribute to the construction of an identity.

One objective of my thesis is to reveal the process of which branding occurs. What does it matter to know how branding works? Is it enough to merely understand what that knowledge can offer an individual? What can happen once it is understood how easy it is to fabricate the fictional seduction that entices an audience to comply. Is it possible to make more informed decisions in this hyper-mediated, overly marketed era? Choices that are framing personal happiness around acquiring products that are associated with upward mobility and keeping up with others is counter productive. If fitting in means having the "right" clothes to become part of collective that was perceived as significant. Sadly, what significance the "team" holds is constantly revolving and is impossible to fully grasp. Chasing after this elusive image of media constructed perfection, and continuous need to fit in, alters the ability to feel authentic.

Branding is already a form of education in the sense that ideas and knowledge are formed through its messaging. Branding and advertising are not the same process. Advertising any given product is only one part of branding's grand plan for sponsorships, endorsements, logo licensing are also part of a branding strategy. A brand is the core meaning of the modern corporation and advertisements are only one vehicle used to convey their meaning to the world. The advertisements on the floor of a local grocery chain prove that it is nearly impossible to define the limit of the public sphere. I question whether any limitation can exist as images with commercial content litter the terrain. Does an audience have any authority over the messaging that appear effortlessly before them? Is it possible to acquire private space relative to the weight of the mass media?

Corporations take over private concerns and infiltrate the public sphere. The private and public spheres are interdependent, so it is difficult to clear a space within the bombardment of branding. Individuals only come to know themselves as an independent entity

distinct from others and the world, through language and other systems of representation. But because of the nature of commercial representation and subjectivity, this self-recognition involves a series of inadequacies, or an absence or lack inscribed in the heart of our subjectivity. Is a balance as opposed to purity [utopian ideal of a non-brand world] possible? Can design offer some insight for how to cope with the expansionist agenda of branding whose agenda all along has been to quietly integrate into the heart of culture? Corporate sponsors and the culture they brand have fused together to create a third culture: a self-enclosed universe of brand-name people, brand-name products and brand-name media.

Capitalist consumption is the consumption of product characteristics designed to stimulate sales, though claiming to satisfy new needs. Capitalism generates pseudo-needs. Changing product characteristics redefines needs. Rapidly changing product characteristics, like the new styles of clothing flooding the market every six months, destabilize needs. With the destabilization of needs, we are less satisfied than before. How is it even possible now to know what we need when there are too many possibilities for acquisition and too many messages telling us how to do it? Brands put a name to our nameless desire, thus offering the idea of achieved completeness when we fall for this deception. We stop searching for the heaven of understanding our mind [well being] and turn our attention to brands. Because we continually want MORE, satisfaction can simply not be bought.

In his text, "The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism", Frederic Jameson describes this phenomena. "Capitalism and the modern age, as a period in which, with the extinction of the sacred and the "spiritual," the deep underlying materiality of all things has finally risen dripping and convulsive into the light of day; and it is clear that culture itself is one of those things whose fundamental materiality is now for us not merely evident but quite inescapable. This has, however, also been a historical lesson: it is because culture has become material that we are now in a position to understand that it always was material, or materialistic, in its structures and functions."

Opening up an email account can testify to the amount of advertising and branding that slips into our view. The flooded world of internet, television, radio, and print materials prescribes behavior in and a multitude of fashions and flairs. Accounts are littered with commentary on how to "lose 10 pounds by June" and offers of lower interest rates through particular brands of banking. Branding hits its target before consumers realize it. The transformation from spectator to author is evident as individuals agree to comply or not. What if the cus-



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tomers begins to understand the relationship between form and content? This transgression has the potential to generate awareness and induce change. Can I create a message system that will allow an audience to consider the origin and intention behind branding?

T-Shirts are walking billboards.

Individuals dress to adorn and protect their bodies. Wearing clothing is a mode of self preservation and is un-avoidable. The T-shirt was an ideal field for conversation on the branding process. The body it covers becomes a public site that occupies social space. By choosing a T-shirt that has a message that is suited to us we are making meaning out of what we have selected. Many people have illusions about our capacity to decide things for ourselves. I believe we have a measure of freedom, the very existence of "style" and "fashion" tells me that people can be swept away and carried along in certain ways. Fashion is a form of collective behavior. The individual choices that many people make are often choices to go along with others in wearing a specific T-shirt. Everyday, millions of us wear T-shirts bearing complex messages that are simply displayed. By doing so we are putting ourselves into certain categories so that we can be part of a collective. We are constructing our identities.

From its humble utilitarian beginnings, the T-shirt has risen, at least metaphorically, to assume an important symbolic role. It has become one of the prime emblems or "icons" of modern life. It is a sign vehicle whose functions not only express "self", but the social and political fields in which it exists. They have become widely-available mass produced signs of identity. They have also become a tremendous opportunity for communicating an idea in a simple, direct manner. The message of the shirt is not only about the club, place, ideology, play or business, but about the wearer's status claim: "there is more to my self than what you see". People want to assimilate and want to express themselves. They want to be anonymous and want to be seen. People experience things and want souvenirs, records of these experiences. They want to be included in something of perceived popularity, coolness, status or fame. In the pursuit to be recognized and understood a T-shirt claiming the owner is communicating something about themselves. T-shirt messages are caught in the mesh of inter-subjective reality amplified by the media.

The T-shirt expresses mass informality: it is not an occasioned item of dress, but crosses social classes, gender identities, and social situations. It is worn as an item in the uniform of the mass consumer, but can be worn in virtually any setting. It carries iconic puns and displays hyper-reality. As T-shirts become commodified and exchanged in part for their image-creating value, they no longer directly

index experience, action, membership, institutional or social identity. They display signifiers with ambiguous signifieds. They may index experiences or statuses the wearer has not had or does not possess. They may reveal fantasies, or imagined status honor. Various forms of truth are reproduced and honored. Signifiers float and play on fictional relationships and social identities. T-shirts now speak to manufactured, copied, or fabricated identities, or reflections of the purely personal. They are intended to display their status as a desirable consumable. It connects self and substance.

The connections between self and display are complex, mediated and problematic; the instantaneous quality of the code are open to multiple interpretations. Particularly today in this age of visual overload and mass consumption why wouldn't the signs convey messages that are arbitrary, ironic, commodified, and intertextualized.

T-Shirts now mark claims and display fantasies about status honor and wishes for recognition. They increasingly communicate about the fashion system, its connotations, and about themselves. The features of T-shirts no longer merely mark differences within the code of clothing; they mark distinctions in the imagined- the fantastic world, and fashion's simulacra. These shirts publicly transmit messages about one's self, status, life style, and attitude(s) to life, as well as what wishes to be known as. They display what one is "not", and may call out for validation of one's unfulfilled desires.









Even Up
3.85
2 Pack

Chips

Cheese & Crackers

Little Debbie



wonder what it is?

I recently read an article in the New York Times that described the use of ambiguity in marketing. DigitalPersona, a fingerprint recognition technology company introduced a smiling blue and yellow creature that stumped the crowd. It was intended to be a large friendly fingerprint but only confused the crowd at a Consumer Electronic tradeshow while attempting to act as a mascot for the company. Attendees were stumped when defining what it represented and many often mistook it for an anthropomorphic food item. The creators of the icon were pleased with the amount of attention it received and the level of permanence it generated in the memories of its viewers. This ambiguity is used more and more for commercial messaging.

Imagine if a giant inflatable Nike Swoosh appeared in your neighborhood park? That wouldn't seem so out of the ordinary but a large black circle stumped people. A group of kids walking by it once asked if it was a bomb and needed to touch it. Drivers by crank their necks to see it for real. The relationship between the ambiguity of the black sphere and circle in my work relates to the ambiguity of current advertising techniques. It's large scale suggests a promotional character on a new car lot. If it was tied to string and inflated with helium it would be another balloon in the sky to draw in masses from a distance. Is it a sale? Is it a special event? Because it was constrained to the ground it became part of the landscape. I am intentionally mimicking this vagueness so as to "inoculate" the viewers against the ambiguity of contemporary commercial messaging. It is a homeopathic strategy meant to "arm" the viewer with a new awareness of the subtlety of advertising techniques and thus activate the viewers capacity to resist such techniques in his/her own life.

When someone experiences something that is unfamiliar they begin to look for answers. Individuals participating, interacting, activating the ball created an experience that became stored in their memory. Because it was not certain what the form meant, it acted as an invitation to wonder, to think what it means for themselves. Can this black sphere act as an anchor of perception by engaging the spectator long enough to want to acquire more information about it? How does an audience understand that it is appropriate to experience this phenomena? How can an individual transform intimate subjectivity into an objective demonstration? Individuals are the per-

ceivers and the perceived. They act and are acted upon. They are the censored and the sensed. Their behavior constitutes a dialectical interchange with the world they occupy.

I collected countless examples of the black circle used as an icon for everything from local country club to a diesel engine manufacturer. I imagined the black circle being a mark that takes on this familiar form but all visual clues of what it stands for will be stripped away leaving it in its simplest form— a perfect black circle or sphere. As a known form, it is familiar so it assumes the physique of a brand without really “standing” for anything. The authority of it as a brand was established. This simplicity, or open-ended quality of the brand like form will leave something to the imagination. Is it perceived as a logo with no intended meaning, or is it assumed that a meaning is already applied because that is how it usually done. If, the imagination is the link between meaning and meaningless can the black circle’s minimalist aesthetique mimic the phenomenological implications of branding?

I began by hypothetically placing a black circle on billboards throughout the city. Drawings and altered photographs were composed to illustrate the potential for the black circle to become disseminated as a “non-brand”. The blank white surface of billboards easily became a stage for the black circle as a “non-brand” to perform.

Toy rubber balls became models for the “branded” individuals. They stood obediently in front of the billboard with the looming black circle placed directly in its center. They lined up militantly and waited to be told what to do. A few “spectators”, formed a group of outsider balls and watched from the sidelines. One managed to get away. Viewers could find “it” quietly contemplating the same billboard that had been cleansed of its “authority”.

This miniature model quickly worked its way into a 6' tall, interactive sphere. It was placed into the landscape and became personified. It acted as a metaphor for the personal space that is imposed upon by commercial messaging. It's mass represented the weight commercial messages that infiltrate our landscape. This seemed to be an ideal model to attempt to reveal how the branding process

works. When it entered the public sphere, questions immediately came up. People were curious and wanted to understand what was occurring and often asked: What does it do? Where did you get it? What is it made of? What does it mean? Through these series of questioning and asking, I did I create a sense of wonder?

Minimalism places the emphasis on the beholders and their experiences, or perspective. The activity of the viewer's relationship to the black ball or the mark on the blank T-shirt is essential to understanding its meaning. Minimal art communicates in the gallery context, why can't it communicate on billboards and T-shirts as well? Minimalism is a style of art in which objects are stripped down to their elemental, geometric form, and presented in an impersonal manner. It is an Abstract form of art which developed as a reaction against the subjective elements of Abstract Expressionism. Minimalism concerns the act of placing an object within a space to which it would bear a relationship.

The black circle identity mark and its effective economy of form, acted with objectivity, achieved with the simplest of artistic means, and eschewing virtuosity, saturation and extravagant wastefulness. This matter of factness is allied to modesty and simplicity in the choice of motif and of material. Rudolf Arnheim in his book, "Visual Thinking" states "The heavenly bodies are said to move in circles because the circle is the simplest natural shape and fits the roundness of these bodies themselves. The primacy of circle and sphere is of purely perceptual origin, and so is the notion that the movement of a body confirms to its shape." The ideas that the perceptually simplest shape is also naturally the most fundamental one has never quite abandoned the human mind. The ubiquitous nature of the black circle contributes to its ability to communicate on many levels.

The black circle and sphere are non-referential geometric forms. Their minimalist sensibility is theatrical because it is concerned with the actual circumstances in which the beholder confronts it as a literalist work. Creating an effect: the beholder then knows himself/herself to stand in an indeterminate, open-ended and unexacting situation. The large black ball had the qualities to elicit a "situation", and un-intentionally affirmed that minimalism can be successful in visually engaging the beholder.

Minimalism focuses on the relationship between the spectator and the object. Does it require the viewer to become more aware of his or her own role in knowing the work [experience]? Does the familiarity of the form and the awareness of its differences in the environment create wonder? Its element of surprise creates unfamiliarity and will be experienced spontaneously. Did the use of the black circle and sphere appear to be carriers for a message of less materialism, more reflection and encouraged investigation? The ambiguity of the forms reveal the ambiguity of current advertising techniques. By mimicking such ambiguity could they act to "inoculate" or arm viewers with a new awareness of the subtlety of branding and thus activate the viewers capacity to resist such techniques in his/her own life?

The use of the black circle had become a form of 'Neo-Plasticism' (a name by which de Stijl is alternately known) that rejected figuration as the goal of art and replaced it with the pared-down vocabulary of elemental shapes and primary colours. This paring down allowed art/design to express its own 'plastic' language free of the concerns of representation. Does the designer in this embodiment of form as language act as author of a subjective work or an agent of a universal harmony?

Minimalism does not transcend the condition of non-art, it is merely an object that requires a duration of time to behold and places emphasis on the beholder and the space in which it exists. Isn't this what branding does by expecting a certain reaction by inviting a call to action? The black ball evokes the minimalist object in part because it is concrete and literal. The black ball and circle make the "non-brand" literal - and thereby short circuiting its activation of unfulfilled desire. The symbol of the back circle seen on the T-shirt and billboards is given a literal referent [the actual 6' black sphere]. It is as if the Nike swoosh became three dimensional and appeared as an object instead of just symbolizing status and unfulfilled desires. By acting as a space making gesture, the black sphere functioned to clear a space within the bombardment of commercial impressions. Does this allow the viewer to reclaim some knowledge of their own true desires?

Context of location was important as the role of the spectator and the importance of the relationship between the work and the sur-

rounding space was observed. The large scale of the ball and its architectural proportions allowed it to dominate an environment. It could intrude or impose aggressively on the spectator's space [without warning] or the spectator could be drawn into the event [sculptural space]. The black sphere acted ambiguously, creating a spatial dislocation for the spectator with complex meanings. Did this introduce the possibility of transforming contemporary aesthetics about design/public art?

I was driven to develop a mark that could provide the insight into one's own nature. Existing brands accomplish this goal by appealing to our longing to belong and to feel adequate. Did I succeed with generating a "non-brand" that doesn't have any specific request but to offer a point of departure to wonder about the intentions of the creators of branding?

An un-armed audience, one that is unaware how easily a fabricated value can be applied and understood before meaning is constructed are victims. If an audience understands how meaning is constructed will it shed any light on defining a truer sense of self? Consciousness results from taking responsibility for actions. By emphasizing the origin of the branding process, could I generate models for illustrating how meaning is made through form and content [design]?

Meaning from design is made through personal interpretations. The system of beliefs of the viewer form a framework for assessment. If an audience can name a form. It is a black circle or black sphere. But the scale and arbitrariness of the form is foreign to the context. Its proximity to other things generates its meaning. If no one is around it would be perceived as a threat? If children are around it, the meaning changes, and associations can be made in order to establish meaning. However attempting to answer what it means is where the wondering and questioning begins. Can this wonder empower the viewer with authorship? If this is possible, then imagine the potential for more culturally affective visual communications?

Form is what something looks like, a black circle, a black sphere. Content is the meaning that is made from experiencing the form. Content depends on context and the space the form exists within carries meaning. The sphere appearing in front of a public build-

ing could denote a threat. The black sphere sneaking onto a playground with a group of friendly adults bearing T-shirts with black circles could have denoted a threat but its ambiguity and open ended meaning was precisely the draw.

The 2nd graders at Berkeley Oxford School experienced the 6' black sphere and black circle t-shirts and made meaning from it. Some were afraid, some were excited but they all participated. There was a level of equanimity on the playground that day that was pleasing to observe. They were a team with common goals and intended experience. After activating the branding experiment the students gathered in the classroom to talk about what design is, what role it plays and how it enhances their lives. A "brochure" customized to the specific audience, illustrated how design operates. In addition, they actively engaged in a conversation about known brands and how they are activated, ie. through their cereal box. This dialogue indicated that a 7 year old's identity is already partially constructed through branding.

The role of the spectator and the importance of the relationship between the black sphere and the surrounding space was highly considered. The large scale of the ball and its architectural proportions allowed it to dominate an environment. It could intrude or impose aggressively on the spectator's space [without warning] or the spectator could be drawn into the event [sculptural space]. The sphere acted ambiguously, creating a spatial dislocation for the spectator with complex meanings. Did it possess the ability to transform contemporary aesthetics about art/design?

When I took the 6' black sphere to the elementary students in Berkeley, I introduced form into their environment that was meant to be experienced only as model for a carrier of a message. However, the message had no specific meaning attached to it except to wonder what it was about. The black circle and the large black sphere were merely representations of vehicles for conveying meaning. Without any assigned meaning they acted as empty vehicles for open ended communications to occur.

The work of art is a secret sign exchanged between meaning and meaninglessness – Octavio Paz

The message of what the black sphere and black circle meant was up to the viewer. The audience had the responsibility to attach meaning to it. Open ended communications require active participation for a transmission of information to occur. Since the audience must be open to receive the information, they are then participating in the “designing” by adding the content to the form. Did the audience become empowered by the authoring role?

It is easy to perceive a sign that represents something that is already known. It requires little imagination or wondering about what it is because the information about the sign has already been placed in the appropriately labeled file cabinet of the mind. It will be filed under an association or a direct representation so that it is accessible. When information about the sign is already on file, the reader can quickly form an assessment. If a sign doesn't register with a particular association in the file cabinet, is the reader's continuum interrupted? And if this occurred, what did that indicate? If it doesn't register with an association, will it be forgotten? If the reader is forced to contemplate what it represents will it be memorable because of the duration of time devoted to the exchange? Is it possible to create a message about nothing specific except an invitation to wonder about what it means? We want to think for ourselves, but do we need a point of departure before we can make an assessment? Without an appropriate association is it accessible?

Our computers speak only in zeros and ones. Modern mathematics and physics have shown that “nothing” can be the source of everything. Once we create a symbol to represent an idea, the symbol gives rise to new operations that in turn lead to new ideas. We have a curious need to give names to what we create— and then we wonder whether we exist apart from their names.

Th students played with the black sphere, then they were asked to wear a white T-shirt with a black circle on it. This object was given to them as a souvenir of their experience, the interaction with a playful conjecture. They were enthusiastic to wear the T-shirts out on the playground for the upcoming recess. And an immediate feeling of inclusion was evident. Once on the playground, wearing the “non-brand”, they resembled a team in matching jerseys. The other children paid attention and a few started in by teasing them about being the “black dots.”

reference video [installation[black circle].mov]

one giant experiment?

"Imagine if a giant concrete sphere materialized in the landscape unexpectedly. Would it create a disruption, forcing spectators to experience an initial surprise? Could it generate enough questions to turn the fleetingness of the immediate present into a memory that would withstand a little time? Would it pose a threat? Could it offer enough questions to reorganize the viewer's bank of images and knowledge while making room for the understanding of a new sensation? Could it provide enough questions to distinguish one's voice among memories, emotions, suggestions, provocations; in the end, enough questions not to need any other question immediately, and thus leave room for a silence? This silence is, in and of itself, a poetic stage suitable for a unique perception." notes from my journal, September 16, 2000

The black circle and sphere were used to perform as the most fitting symbols – for a 'non-symbol' which utopically, would provide insight into one's own nature. A symbol of being content with who and what you stand for. It would remind us that "less is more". It is an endorsement for sponsoring yourself, and just being who you are without external pressures and seductions. Advertising, and the media make it difficult to find gratification and happiness in ourselves. Designers spend their lives making ads and products more sexy and desirable until the point where we are seduced by the message of the exotic. We fantasize and suddenly, we aren't thin enough, dressed appropriate, or smelling "good". We aren't relaxed enough, enlightened enough, tan enough, fit enough, happy enough. We only want "more" and our dollar driven society is there to give it to us.

The focus of my work questions the role and responsibility of the designer as a creator of contemporary visual culture. There is a mythical world beneath the slick, "overly seductive" appearance of advertising and marketing. It is within this pseudo-reality that individuals define whom they are. I am hoping to dissolve the idea that design is a delimited entity, an object distinct from the field it occupies. There is a relationship that is created when the "publication" of autonomous objects [design] are incorporated into the site of display. I entered into the conceptual parameters of design by using a black circle and black sphere for a discussion on form,

form as language, and form as identity.

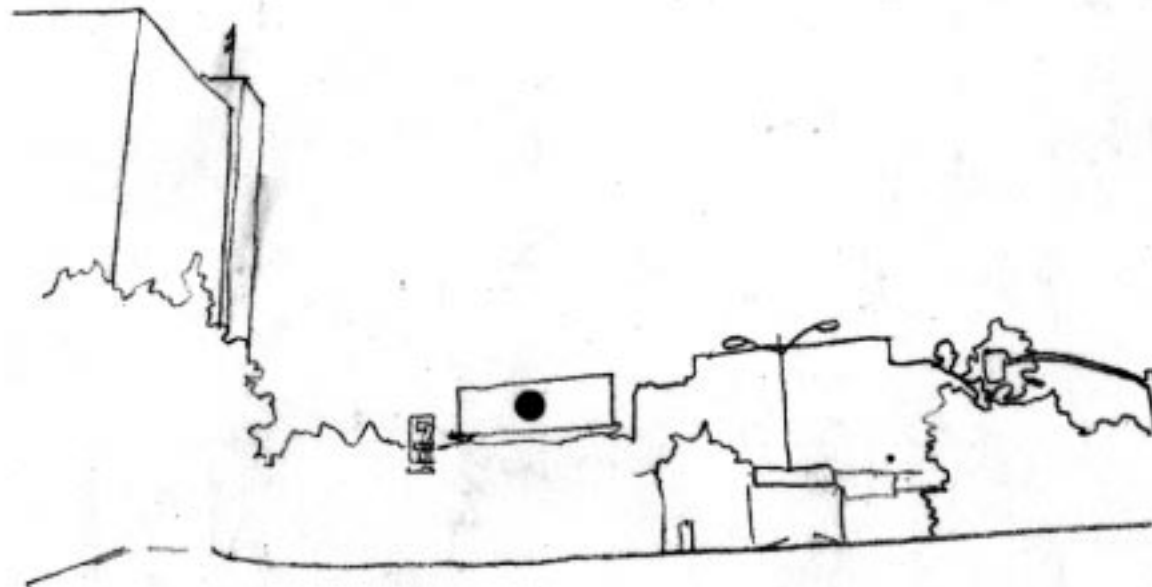
I began by using video to hypothetically place a black circle on billboards throughout the city. The blank white surface easily became a stage for the black circle as a “non-brand” to perform. The black circle worked its way into a three dimensional form, a 6’ tall, interactive sphere. It was placed into the landscape and became personified. It acted as a metaphor for the personal space that is imposed upon by commercial messaging.

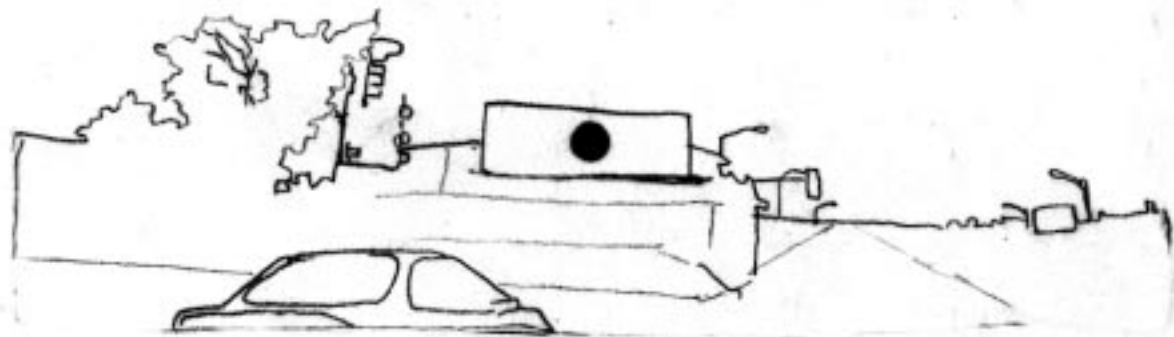
A T-shirt brands individuals who experienced the black sphere with a black circle on the participant’s chest in the form of a free gift. The branded individuals left the experience with an association, a memory, or an artifact. The T-shirt acted as a souvenir of the experience but also performed as a conversation piece for further dissemination of the ideology of the “black circle” brand.

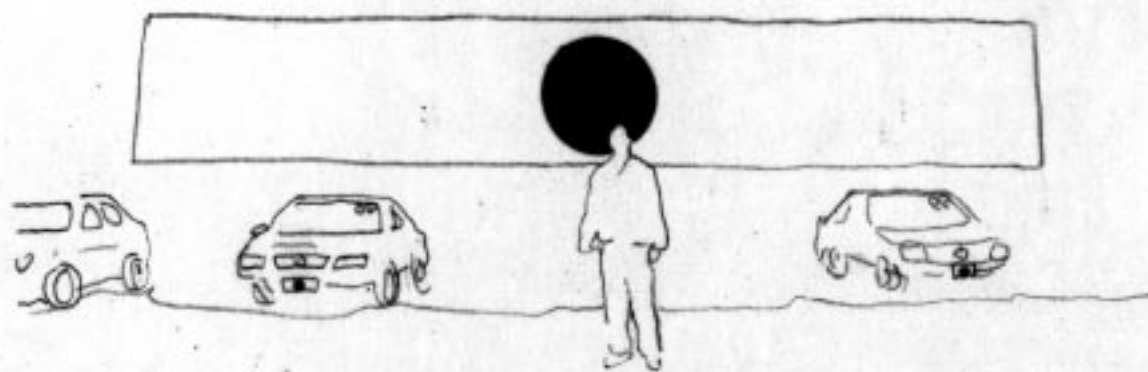
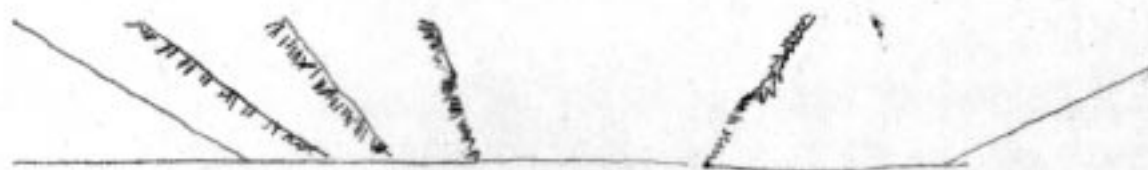
I have incorporated short clips of branding experiments into a short video and was included in the installation for the thesis exhibition. In addition to the video, I generated a machine for distributing black circle “goods”. The 6’ black sphere, dynamic in scale in the interior of CCAC, was placed beside the vending machine and video to draw in the viewer. A vending machine stocked with “black-circle” merchandise acted as the distribution device. Viewer’s stood beside the black ball to watch the video of children, adults and white shirt clad mannequin’s become branded by the forms of the black ball and circle. Afterwards they stood in line to purchase “empty” black circle merchandise. A miniature black sphere, a black circle bumper sticker, temporary tattoos, black circle stickers, black circle coasters, black circle gum and black circle T-shirts were available for the consumers. As there was no specific meaning attached to the branded items, they were intended to act as icons to instill wonder. The content for the work was in the model of the system it represented.

The pressure to commercialize– to turn things into commodities and then market them as charms–has always been around a long time. However, there seems to be more pressure than ever to consume. The mass of commercial messaging is impressive and my projects

were attempts to reveal how culturally significant it is. Designers are mediators between spectator and object. They have the ability to activate meaning making systems and they possess the skills to make them seductive and slick. As makers of culture, are designers truly aware of their power to generate meaning? Is it possible to demonstrate the level of responsibility an audience has in the communication exchange of commercial messaging?







Design = Form + Content

Form is the black circle and the black sphere, the content is their memory of the experience, their associations, their applied meanings. They are a product of design. They are design. They are designers. The children had been branded. By wearing the shirt they were releasing a message into the landscape. They became carriers of meaning. Because they have a memory of the experience they could choose to talk about it should others inquire. Because of its ambiguities, starkness and “otherness” it raised questions. What is the meaning of the black circle on their chests? Could the students retell the story of form and content? Could they explain that the circle is a carrier of meaning and means nothing more than to wonder what it is about or how it was experienced? Did the black circle event hold permanence? Did they want to re-tell the story of the 6' black sphere that appeared one day on their playground?

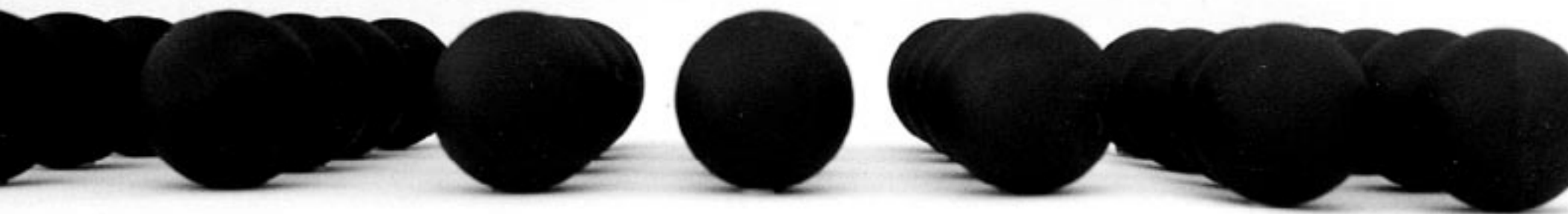
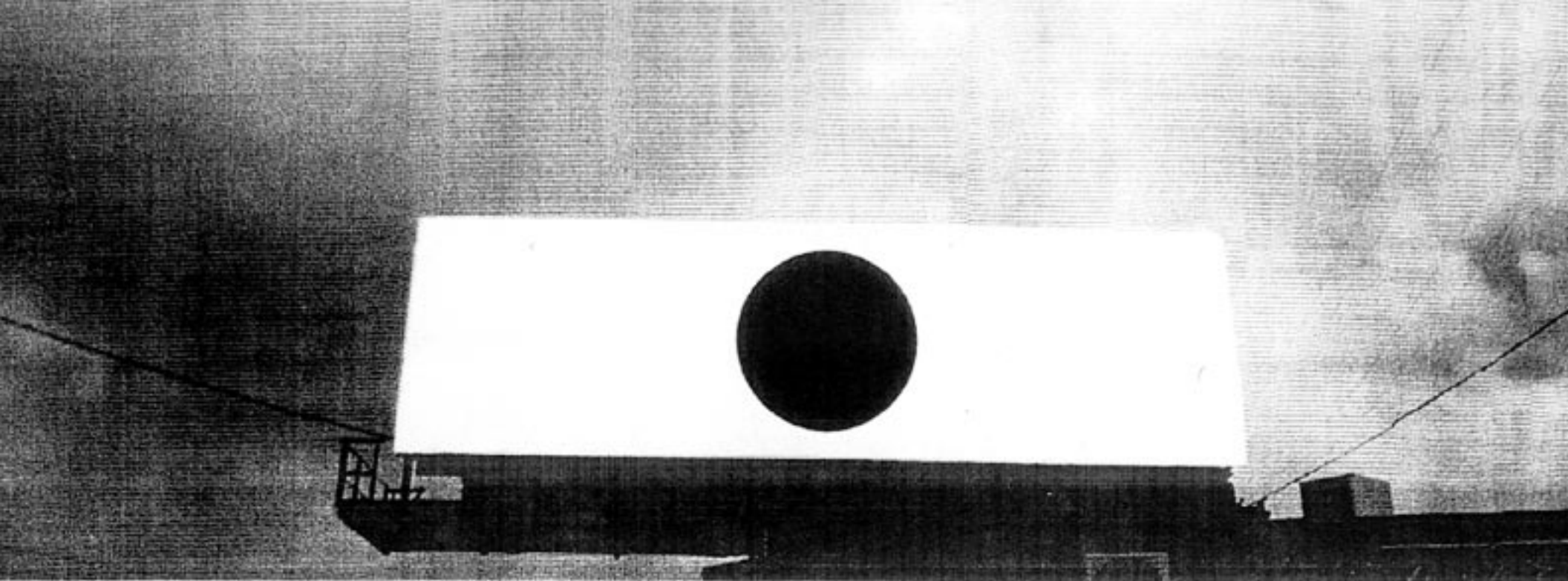
Hopefully this experience offered them a better understanding of what design is and how it affects their lives. I can only hope to have assisted them by putting a couple of useful tools into their belt of knowledge. Can these tools assist them as they navigate through the landscape of commercial impressions, but more importantly, is there any relevance to revealing how a branding process works?

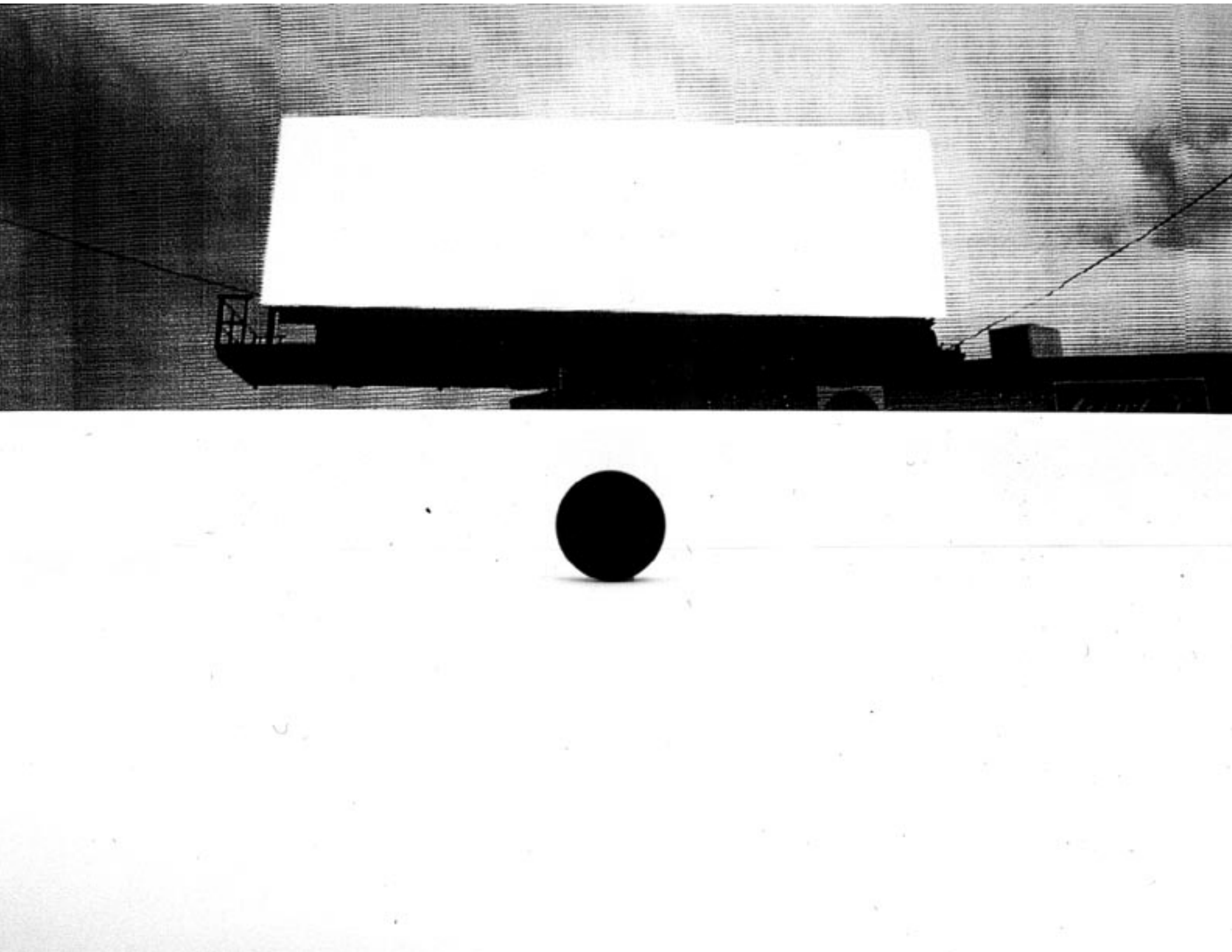
reference video [exhibition.mov]

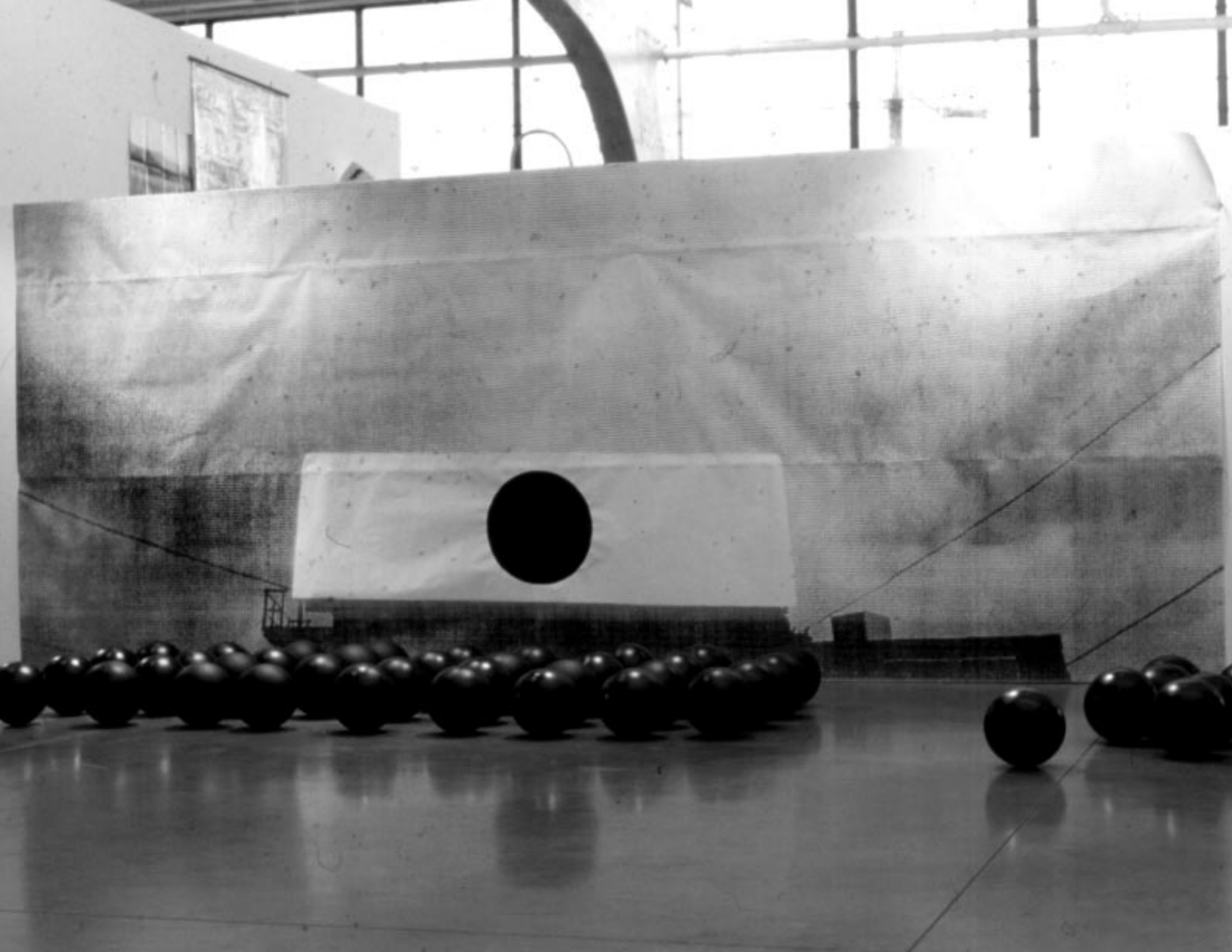
Is an individual branded if they don't take and wear the T-shirt? If someone only experiences it or sees it without acquiring a product, are they branded? Do they need to perform an action before the branding message is received? Can the memory or experience attained perform the branding function? If individuals are wearing the branded shirt can it re-inforce that memory in others?

During the exhibition, many people stood around to watch the video. They seemed to have been engaged and some stayed for the entire duration. After they viewed the “critique” of branding and how the black ball was activated, they lined up at the vending machine. I invited them to participate in a system of symbolism that had a value but the value was uncertain.

The vending machine filled with black circle merchandise was an extension of my research as it revealed a model for questioning the



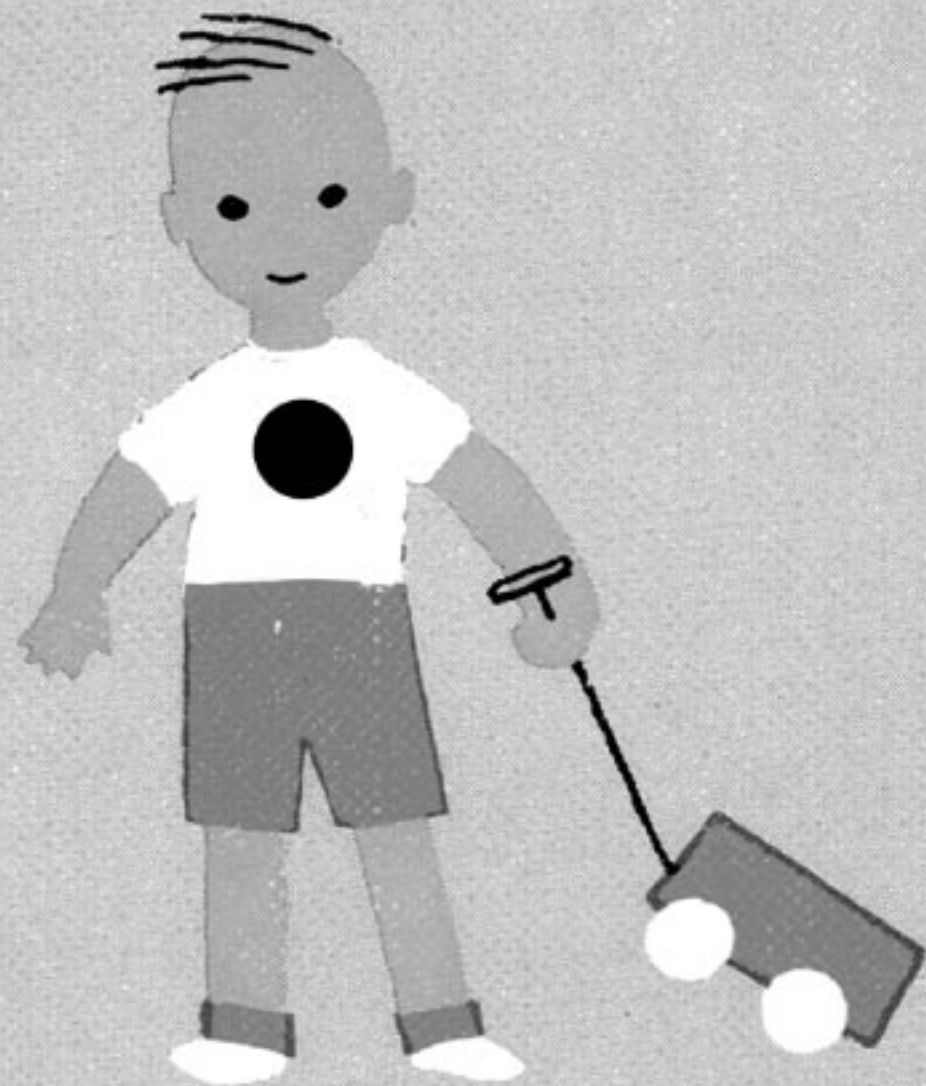


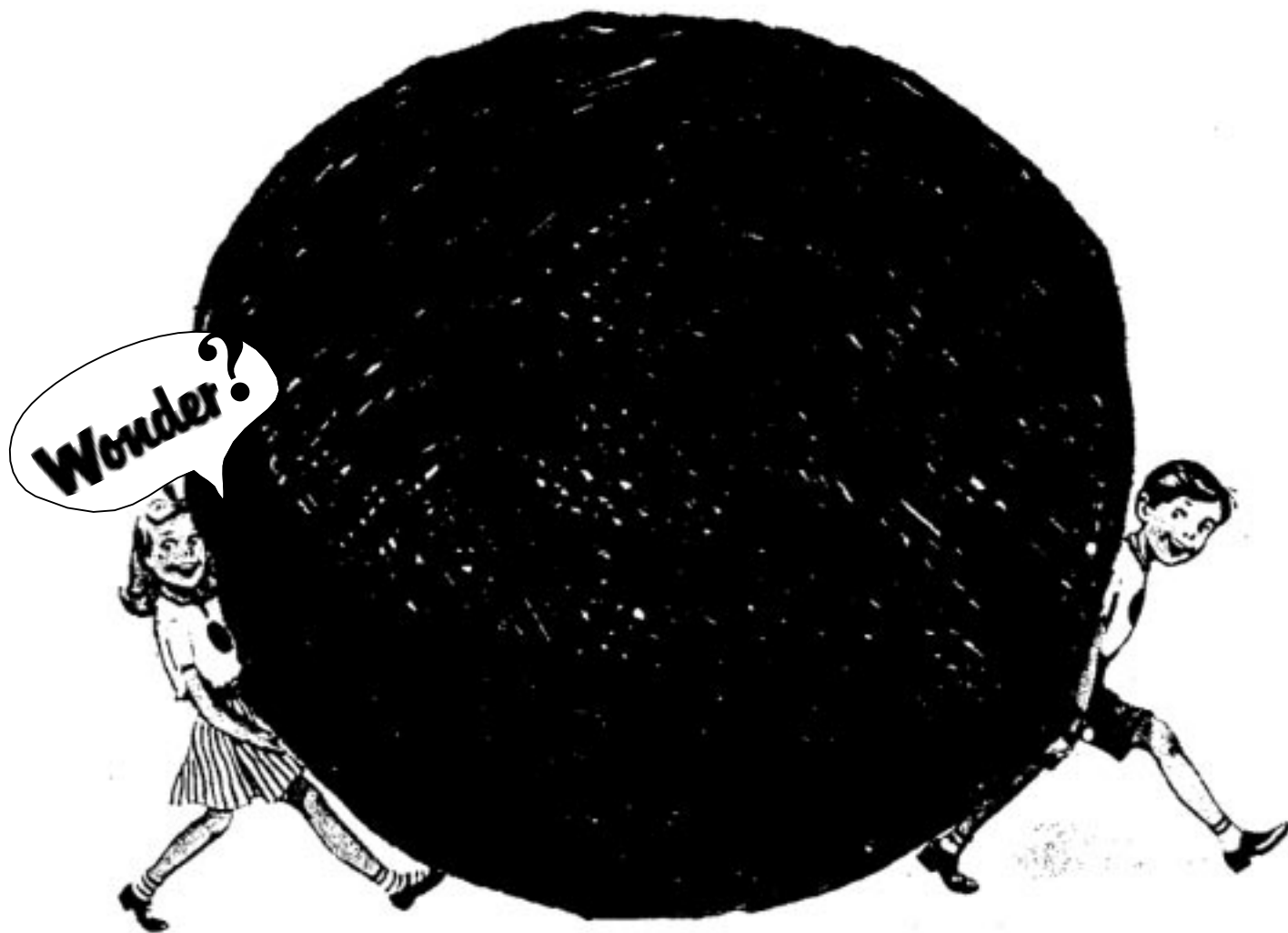


perceived value of an object. Why do we value certain things over others? What made those objects so desirable? Why did people want them? One theory is that And this event was obviously a bit of a scene. Had the installation been in a parking lot at the local supermarket it probably would it have been less popular? What kind of results would be achieved after re-creating similar installations in various other locations such as: a public library, a gymnasium, a junior high school lobby, a park, a farmer's market, or the beach? I created a system of symbolism that has a value but the value of the object is uncertain or open. Was the real value the meaning that was constructed from the experience?

reference video [dot man.mov]







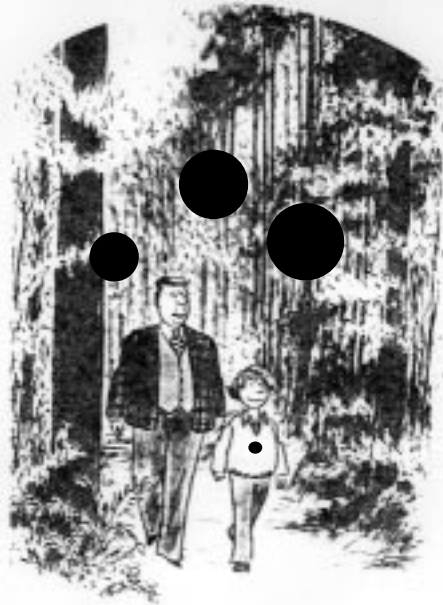






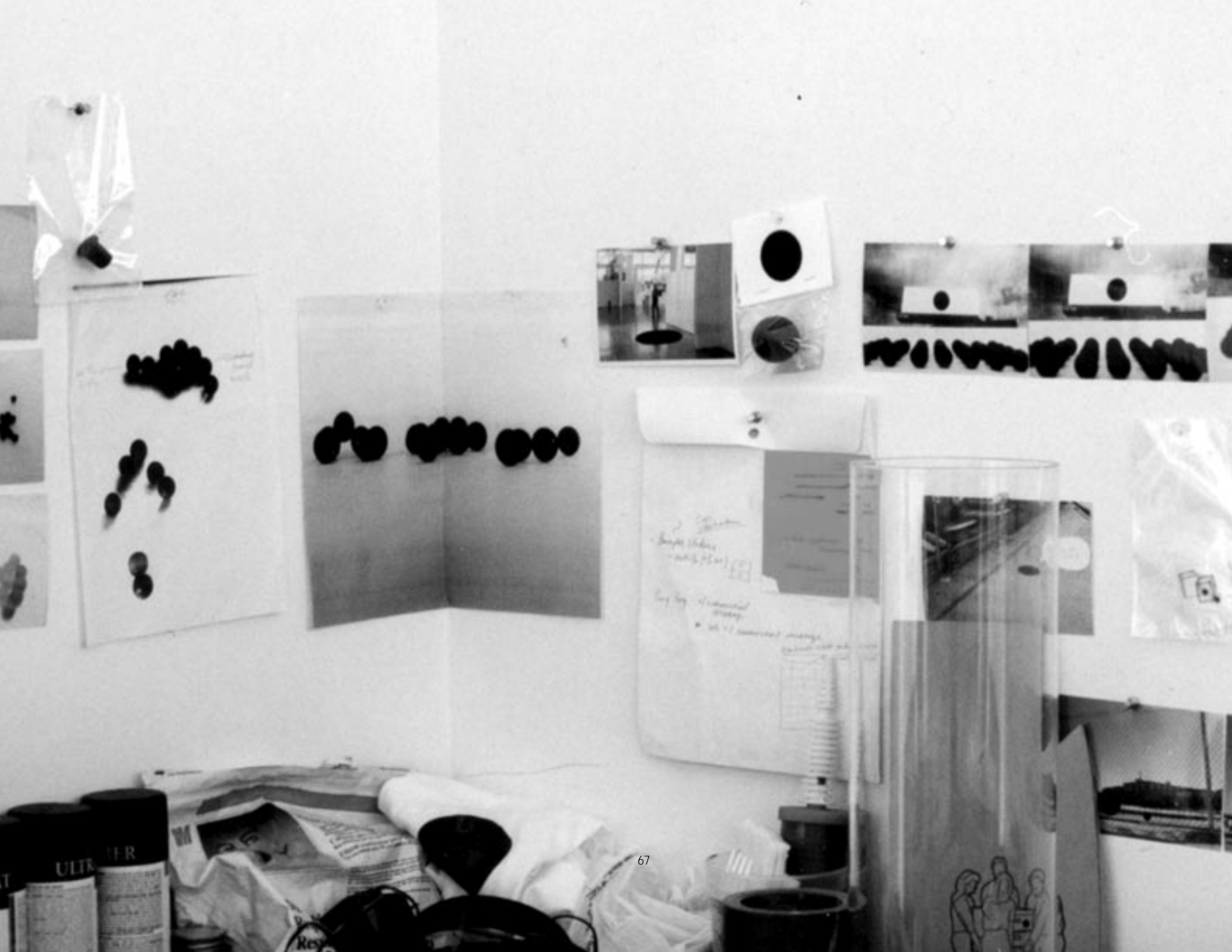


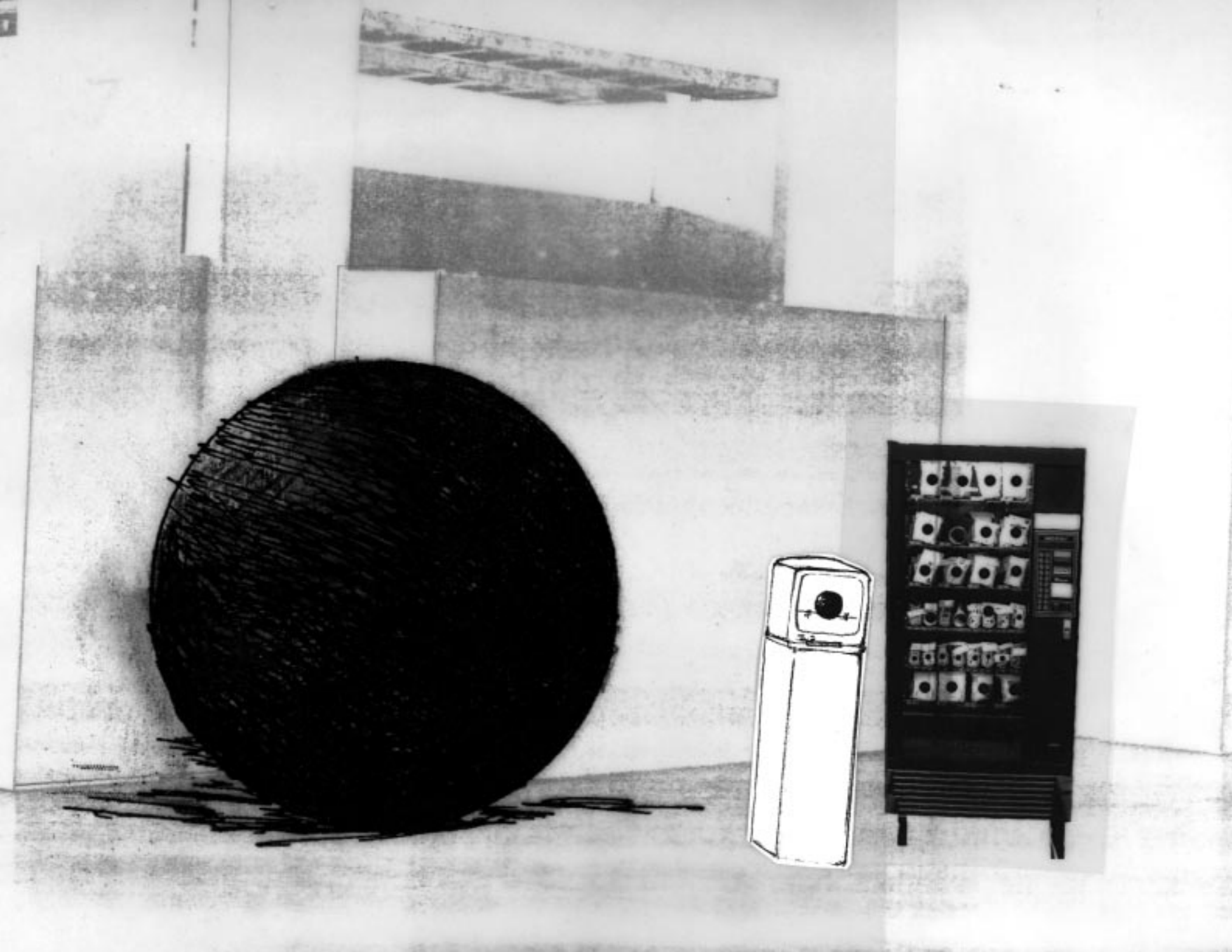




*"It's good to know about trees.
Just remember,
nobody ever made any big money
knowing about trees."*















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my parents recently vacationed in california & they acquired these t shirts with nothing but a black dot on them. they arrived at home & handed a shirt to my brother & one to me & my question is what is the story behind the black dot? people are asking me what is its significance & i've no clue what to tell them. i would really appreciate a reply. thank you very much.

kenny mattson

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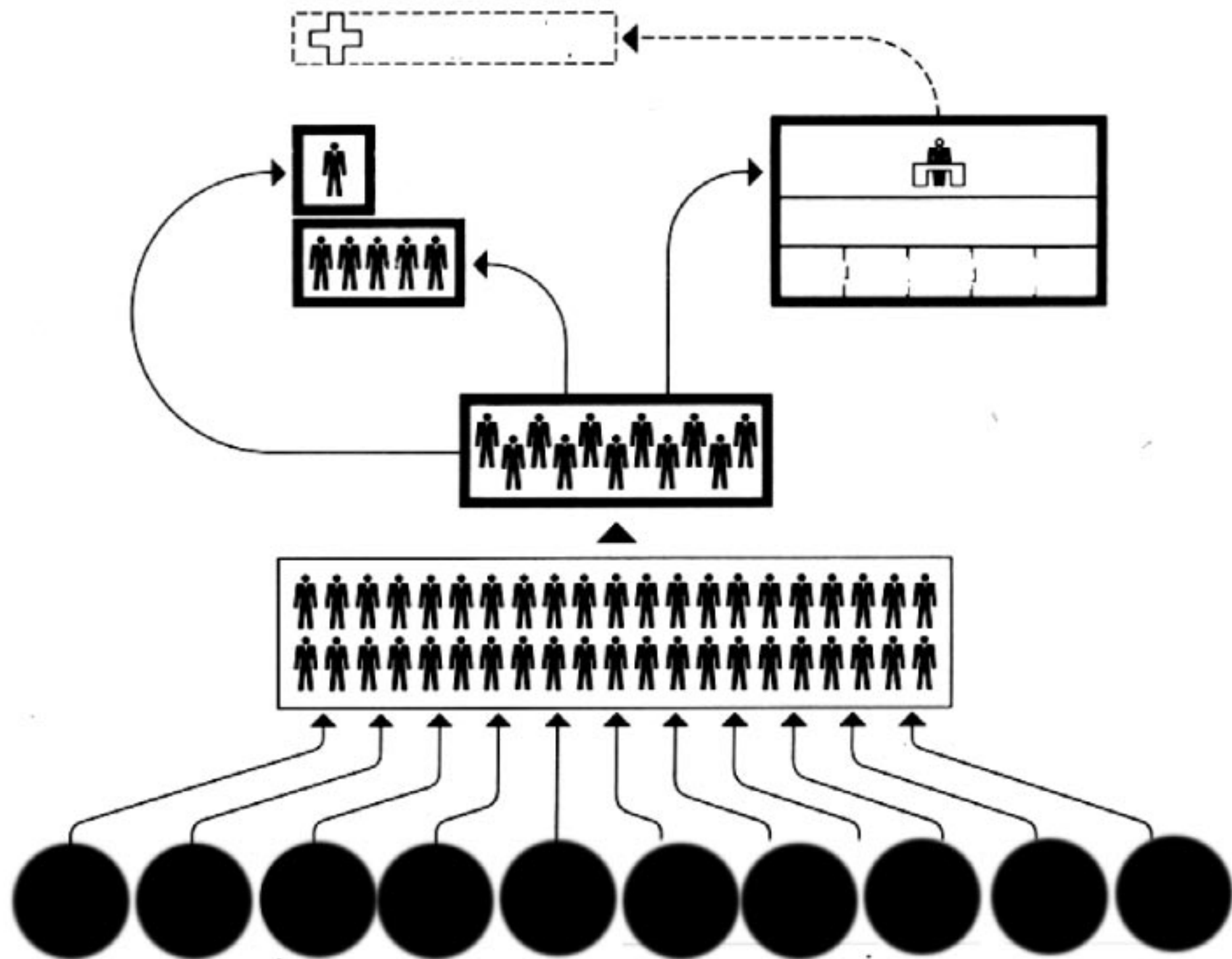
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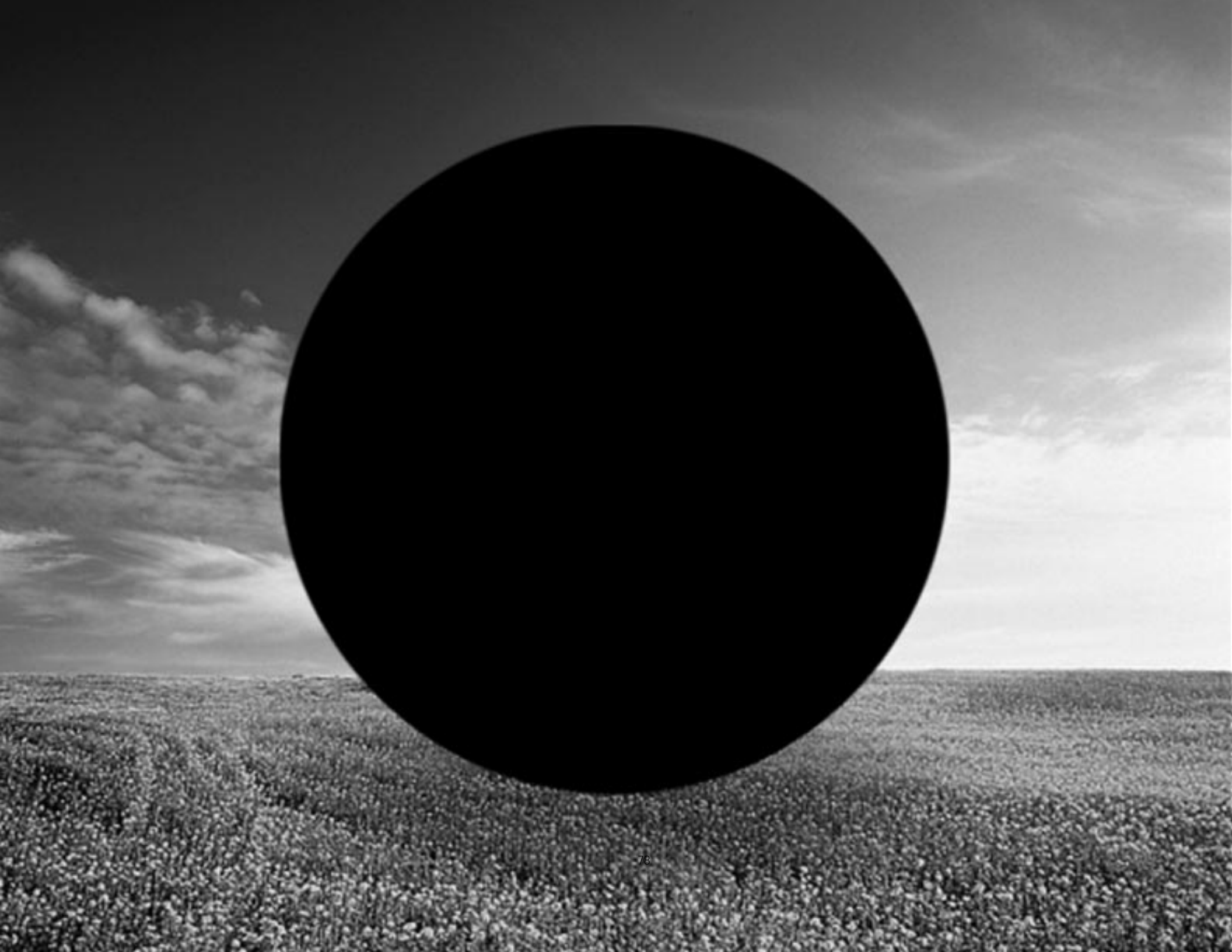
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