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Federal Project No. 2

Project Title: *Our Roots Run Deep*

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Through black and white photographs of farmworkers, migrant laborers and rural families, Roy Stryker created a compelling story of the Great Depression. Stryker, head of the Information Division of the Farm Services Administration (FSA), had full control in crafting the perspective of the project, editing and curating the final images for publication. He chose images that engendered empathy for the suffering and highlighted the importance of Roosevelt's New Deal. Negatives that were cut—perhaps images with poor exposure, undesirable content, or that did not fit the prescribed narrative were “killed” by a simple hole punch. By preventing select images from being printed, Stryker shaped the tone of discourse and influenced how many Americans viewed the Great Depression.

The Library of Congress has digitized many of Stryker's killed negatives and I was immediately drawn to the black dot created by the hole punch. When printed, the hole punch appears as a small black sphere hovering over a face or a rural landscape. The dark round circle, randomly punched and placed within the confines of the image, reads as a contemporary mark, echoing interventions by artists such as Yayoi Kusama and John Baldessari.

Much as Stryker crafted the narrative of the Great Depression through photo editing, Monsanto and Dow Chemical frame their stories through curated on-line photos. Their websites feature striking images of sunny fields and healthy crops, noticeably obscuring their history of chemical manufacturing. They position themselves as modern agricultural companies, supporting farmers and acting as sustainable stewards of the land, while actively concealing their pesticides' decades-long toxic impact on the soil.

My collage project *Our Roots Run Deep*, examines how chemical companies curate their image and deliberately conceal their past. The project repurposes historical and contemporary photographs, and employs a variety of circle interventions to collapse the distance between past and present narratives. The black dot found in Stryker's hole-punched negatives serves as a compositional tool throughout the project. Black and white photographs of chemical factories are situated against color photographs of corn, soy, canola, wheat, and alfalfa fields. Cut-outs, hole punches, collaged spheres, and ink circles are introduced and serve as viewfinders, a resting point to focus the eye. It is this back and forth tension between bleak chemical plants and fertile farms that underscores the industry's false narrative.

*Our Roots Run Deep* is a tagline used by Dow Chemical, telling the story of seed development, farmer support, and sustainable solutions to preserve the environment. I chose *Our Roots Run Deep* as my project title to suggest there is more to the story, more under the surface—that we are being shown only part of the picture. Stryker set the tone of discourse by actively selecting and de-selecting photos to support the narrative of Roosevelt's New Deal. Dow and Monsanto use their on-line images to create an idealized version of farming, choosing photos with strong emotional impact, giving the impression they are feeding the world while protecting the planet. *Our Roots Run Deep* questions what is being presented, who is telling the story and what is missing. Digging deeper to understand the long history and impact of chemical intensive farming is an important step in resurfacing this past and illuminating the misdirection. By creating a direct and truthful relationship, *Our Roots Run Deep* spotlights the persistent corporate greenwashing and reveals the chemical legacy of Monsanto and Dow Chemical.