GRAPHIC DESIGN THEORY

READINGS FROM THE FIELD

HERBERT BAYER KARL GERSTNER KENYA HARA JESSICA HELFAND STEVEN HELLER KALLE LASN
EL LISSITZKY ELLEN AND JULIA LUPTON KATHERINE McCOY WITH DAVID FREJ LEV MANOVICH
F. T. MARINETTI LÁSZLÓ MOHOLY-NAGY JOSEF MÜLLER-BROCKMANN PAUL RAND MICHAEL ROCK
ALEKSANDR RODCHENKO, VARVARA STEPANOVA, AND ALEKSEI GAN PAULA SCHER DMITRI SIEGEL
JAN TSCHICHOLD JAN VAN TOORN ROBERT VENTURI, DENISE SCOTT BROWN, AND STEVEN IZENOUR
BEATRICE WARDE WOLFGANG WEINGART LORRAINE WILD

Edited by
Helen Armstrong

With a foreword by
Ellen Lupton

A DESIGN THEORY GUIDE

is the unimpeded spread of this kind of autonomy really possible?
raises serious concerns about efforts to control networks through
ownership and legislation. Wikipedia is not a kit that you buy; you
own your Flickr account and you never will. When you update a
e account you are building up someone else's asset. The prosumer
extracts the value of your work in real time, so that you are actually
ing your own labor.

what would be the role of the designer in a truly do-it-yourself
y? Looking at Flickr or YouTube or MySpace, it seems that when
do it themselves, they need a great deal less graphic design to get it
he more that our economy runs on people doing it themselves,
e people will demand opportunities to do so, and the more graphic
rs will have to adapt their methods. What services and expertise
ners have to offer in the prosumer market? Rashid and Lupton
ovided one answer (the designer as expert do-it-yourselfer), but
esigners come up with more answers, they may end up designing-
selves…and little else.

1 Jessica Helfand interview in Debbie Millman, *How to Think Like a Great Graphic Designer* (New York: Allsworth Press, 2007), 147.
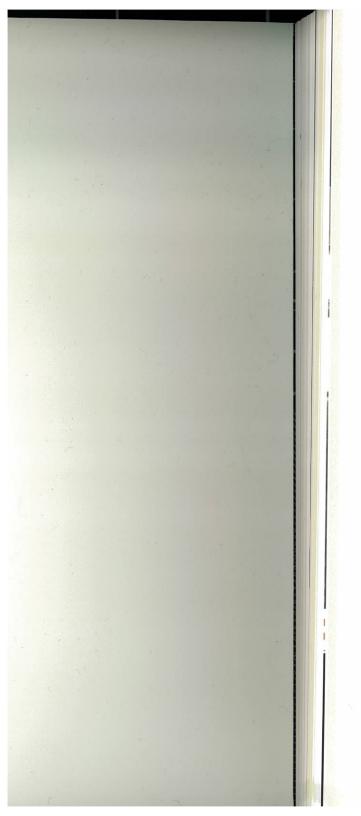
DEMATERIALIZATION OF SCREEN SPACE

JESSICA HELFAND | 2001

From the fifteenth through the early twentieth centuries, our understanding of space and time was bound by an unflinching belief in the four cornerstones of physical reality, framed by what is routinely considered to be a kind of Newtonian paradigm: space, time, energy, and mass. Like Euclidean space, which defines directional thinking in vectors (top, bottom, left, and right), the Western concept of space was absolute: boundless and infinite, flat and inert, knowable and fixed.

Then in 1905, Albert Einstein revolutionized five hundred years of quantum physics by suggesting that energy and mass are interchangeable, and that space and time share a kind of uninterrupted continuum—proving, quite simply, that the only true constant is the speed of light.

Today, as we sit illuminated by the glare of a billion computer screens, we are living proof that he was right. The computer is our connection to the world. It is an information source, an entertainment device, a communications portal, a production tool. We design on it and for it, and are its most loyal subjects, its most agreeable audience. But we are also its prisoners: trapped in a medium in which visual expression must filter through a protocol of uncompromising programming scripts, "design" must submit

I THINK STYLE HAS A WAY OF SUPERSEDING CONTENT, THAT THE RISE AND PROLIFERATION OF INDIVIDUAL TECHNOLOGIES HAVE HAD A NEGATIVE EFFECT ON HUMAN CIVILITY; AND I THINK THAT DESIGNERS ARE GETTING COMPLACENT. BUT THAT'S JUST TODAY.

JESSICA HELFAND
Interview with
Debbie Millman
2007

to a series of commands and regulations as rigorous as those that once defined Swiss typography. Aesthetic innovation, if indeed it exists at all, occurs within ridiculously preordained parameters: a new plug-in, a modified code, the capacity to make pictures and words "flash" with a mouse in a nonsensical little dance. We are all little filmmakers, directing on a pathetically small screen—yet broadcasting to a potentially infinite audience. This in itself is conflicting (not to mention corrupting), but more importantly, what are we making? What are we inventing? What are we saying that has not been said before?

WHERE IS THE AVANT-GARDE IN NEW MEDIA?

What Einstein did was challenge a fundamentally logical supposition. And looking back, what was particularly striking was the aesthetic response that paralleled his thinking over the next quarter of a century: from cubist fragmentation, to surrealist displacement, to futurist provocation, to constructivist juxtaposition—each, in a sense, a radically new reconsideration of spatial paradigms in a material world. And while there was dissent, there was also consensus: streamlined shapes, a rejection of ornament, an appeal to minimalism, to functionalism, to simplicity. A response to the machine age—not just to the machine.

It is, of course, a particular conceit of postmodernism that a lack of consensus is precisely what separates the second half of the twentieth century from the first. But does this alone explain the creative disparity so evident in electronic space? More likely, it is not space that demands our attention now so much as our representation of space, and our ability to mold and manage ideas within boundaries that are fundamentally intangible: what we need is a reconsideration of spatial paradigms in an immaterial world.

To date, our efforts to define space on the Internet have required a basic fluency in the fundamental markup languages that are needed to bring design to life; SGML, HTML, XML, WAP protocols, and soon, with the imminent convergence of television and the web, TVML. Each deals in linear, logical, Cartesian alignments: ones and zeroes, x's and y's, pull-down menus and scrolling screens. Supporting software products remain essentially rooted in the finite world of printed matter: most are based on editing and publishing models and, not surprisingly, have a page-oriented display system, adding additional "media" as needed to extend or evoke information beyond the customary offerings of text and image. And though they purport to be more multidimensional in nature, architectural opportunities to place 3D models

; of commands and regulations as rigorous as those that once
wiss typography. Aesthetic innovation, if indeed it exists at all,
thin ridiculously preordained parameters: a new plug-in, a modified
capacity to make pictures and words "flash" with a mouse in a
al little dance. We are all little filmmakers, directing on a pathetically
en—yet broadcasting to a potentially infinite audience. This in itself
ing (not to mention corrupting), but more importantly, what are
g? What are we inventing? What are we saying that has not been
e?

S THE AVANT-GARDE IN NEW MEDIA?

stein did was challenge a fundamentally logical supposition.
ing back, what was particularly striking was the aesthetic response
leled his thinking over the next quarter of a century: from cubist
ation, to surrealist displacement, to futurist provocation, to con-
t juxtaposition—each, in a sense, a radically new reconsideration
paradigms in a material world. And while there was dissent, there
onsensus: streamlined shapes, a rejection of ornament, an appeal
alism, to functionalism, to simplicity. A response to the machine
just to the machine.

f course, a particular conceit of postmodernism that a lack of
s is precisely what separates the second half of the twentieth centu-
e first. But does this alone explain the creative disparity so evident
nic space? More likely, it is not space that demands our attention
uch as our representation of space, and our ability to mold and
leas within boundaries that are fundamentally intangible: what
a reconsideration of spatial paradigms in an immaterial world.
e, our efforts to define space on the Internet have required a basic
the fundamental markup languages that are needed to bring design
ML, HTML, XML, WAP protocols, and soon, with the imminent
ce of television and the web, TVML. Each deals in linear, logical,
alignments: ones and zeroes, x's and y's, pull-down menus and
creens. Supporting software products remain essentially rooted in
world of printed matter: most are based on editing and publishing
d, not surprisingly, have a page-oriented display system, adding
"media" as needed to extend or evoke information beyond the
offerings of text and image. And though they purport to be more
ensional in nature, architectural opportunities to place 3D models

in "space" offer little more than sculptural simulations, providing basic
toolsets for rotating geometric forms that mimic movement in a primitive,
awkward, cartoony sort of way.

Nowhere do we see the kind of variety, or depth, or topographical
distinctions we might expect, given the boundless horizons of Internet space.
Nowhere do we see a new spatial paradigm, an alternative way of represent-
ing ideas—of experimenting, for example, with what philosopher Gaston
Bachelard lyrically refers to as "the psychological elasticity of an image."
Nowhere do we see, or feel, or discover a new sense of place, freed of the shack-
les of Cartesian logic—space that might ebb and flow, expand and contract,
dimensional space, elliptical space, new and unusual space. Homepages, in-
deed! What could possibly be said to be homey about the web—or even about
TV, for that matter? Do we find shelter, permanence, or comfort there? Does it
smell good? Is it warm, familiar, personal? What domestic truths are mirrored
in the space of the screen, projected back to us, and beamed elsewhere?

This is one of the more irritating myths about the electronic age, yet one
that perpetually seems to reinstate itself with each new technological advance.
Space on the screen is just that: on the screen. Not in it. Not of it. Design tools
are mere control mechanisms perpetuating the illusion that Internet space
is made up of pages, of words, of flat screens. Why is it that design thinking
remains so brainwashed by this notion? The world of the Internet is its own
peculiar galaxy, with its own constellations of information, its own orbits of
content. And it is by no means flat.

DISPLACEMENT (OF THE OBSERVER)

The rectangle of the computer monitor frames everything we see on screen.
Our peripheral vision is at all times influenced—if not altogether compro-
mised—by the stultifying presence of the container, an unforgiving geometry
if there ever was one. (Oddly, this same frame circumscribes the photographer
looking through the camera lens—yet here, the frame itself fades from view
the minute the shutter clicks. Not so when the mouse clicks, however.) More
puzzling still, the lure of networked interaction on the web is predicated on
precisely the opposite set of conditions: though circumscribed by a steadfast
box, virtual space celebrates the intangible gesture, the dematerialized transac-
tion, the inconquerable, timeless exchange.

What has not been recognized is the extent to which the viewer is a
moving target. Are our conceptions of electronic space lodged in geometric
exactitude in an effort to harness the dynamic of an unruly audience?

Efforts to break out of the box—and here some of the experimental studies conducted at places like the MIT Media Lab, among other schools and research facilities, merit attention—have addressed this conflict by creating what might broadly be characterized as "ambient" media: websites projected on walls, push-button and hand-held devices replaced by portable, mutable media that gesture and respond to sensory input—all are attempts both to reinterpret and reinforce monitor-free interaction between human beings and the machines that serve them.

But this trend in portability points to a broader, more significant cultural phenomenon: in an age in which perception itself is synonymous with transience, we remain more preoccupied with the space surrounding the technology than with the space inside the technology.

Though this is particularly true of the Internet, our understanding of television space is not dissimilar. Here, too, we chart the course, control the path, and click our way through a kind of visual no-man's land. What has not been examined is the degree to which our spatial perception skews, like a reflex, as if to automatically compensate for the fragmented nature of the journey.

DEMATERIALIZATION (OF WHAT IS BEING OBSERVED)

What is missing from Internet space is not only a defining set of physical boundaries but the temporal references that give implicit direction—meaning, even—to our actions. Not so in the 24-7 space of the Internet, where space and time do, in fact, share an uninterrupted continuum, and where the conventions of timekeeping—clocks, calendars, the occasional sunrise—are rendered virtually immaterial. (The television tactic of rationalizing time through programming will itself be rendered somewhat immaterial as well if the promises of webTV are fulfilled. The introduction of TiVo—"TV your way"—is the first significant step in this direction.) More interesting, perhaps, is the shape of things as they are happening: indeed, the qualitative difference between hyperspace and more passive screen environments (television and film, for example) lies in the celebration of the journey itself. In interactive environments, the promenade—and its implicit digressions—are as important as the destination.

This is as close to a definition of "vernacular" as we are likely to get in electronic space: if the viewer moves through the information, and the information itself is moving, it is this kinetic activity—this act of moving—that circumscribes our perception, dominates our senses, and becomes, in a very noticeable sense, the new prevailing aesthetic.

NATURE ABHORS A VACUUM, AND SO SHOULD DESIGNERS: HISTORY IS AN IMPERATIVE PART OF HOW WE WORK, WHAT WE MAKE, AND HOW WE CONTINUE TO GROW AS DESIGNERS AND AS HUMAN BEINGS.

JESSICA HELFAND
Interview with Cary
Murnion in *Baseline:
Journal of Parsons
School of Design*
1997

break out of the box—and here some of the experimental
...cted at places like the MIT Media Lab, among other schools
...facilities, merit attention—have addressed this conflict by
...might broadly be characterized as "ambient" media: websites
...walls, push-button and hand-held devices replaced by portable,
...ia that gesture and respond to sensory input—all are attempts
...erpret and reinforce monitor-free interaction between human
...e machines that serve them.

...rend in portability points to a broader, more significant
...omenon: in an age in which perception itself is synonymous
...ce, we remain more preoccupied with the space surrounding
...than with the space inside the technology.

...his is particularly true of the Internet, our understanding of tele-
...s not dissimilar. Here, too, we chart the course, control the path,
...way through a kind of visual no-man's land. What has not been
...he degree to which our spatial perception skews, like a reflex, as
...ically compensate for the fragmented nature of the journey.

...LIZATION (OF WHAT IS BEING OBSERVED)

...ng from Internet space is not only a defining set of physical
...t the temporal references that give implicit direction—
...n—to our actions. Not so in the 24-7 space of the Internet, where
...e do, in fact, share an uninterrupted continuum, and where the
...f timekeeping—clocks, calendars, the occasional sunrise—are
...ally immaterial. (The television tactic of rationalizing time
...ramming will itself be rendered somewhat immaterial as well
...es of webTV are fulfilled. The introduction of TiVo—"TV your
...irst significant step in this direction.) More interesting, perhaps,
...f things as they are happening: indeed, the qualitative difference
...rspace and more passive screen environments (television and
...ple) lies in the celebration of the journey itself. In interactive
..., the promenade—and its implicit digressions—are as important
...tion.

...close to a definition of "vernacular" as we are likely to get
...pace: if the viewer moves through the information, and the
...self is moving, it is this kinetic activity—this act of moving—
...ribes our perception, dominates our senses, and becomes, in
...le sense, the new prevailing aesthetic.

DEMARCATION (OF NEW BOUNDARIES)

It is easy to equate the notion of wide, open spaces with freedom and
opportunity—qualities that we associate with the bold ambitions of early
settlers, of westward expansion and manifest destiny and the inimitable
American frontier. Such pioneering spirit has long retained its almost mythic
status in modern culture, symbolizing freedom, individualism, and a kind
of peculiarly American democracy.

Like the once-open West, Internet space is uncharted territory. Air is free
and land is cheap. And, indeed, its presence in our lives points to a kind of
utopian idealism prefigured a century ago, when we thrilled to the notion of
pure, mechanized efficiency.

But today, the boundaries have shifted. New boundaries are enabled by
new kinds of technologies, by the demands of new products and the impera-
tives of new economies. The Internet is all these: a kind of chameleon-like
civilization that seems to perpetually remap its identity in response to the
ever-changing demands of a mercurial market. In a world in which everything
is customized, even our boundaries are on the move.

So it all fits together: portable media, transient journeys, movable boundaries.
Unlike our nineteenth-century predecessors we have not shaped this new world
with nuance and detail, with an urban-industrial east or a preservationist west. We
have not responded with a hue and cry borne of the kind of revolutionary fervor
typified by early-twentieth-century designers and artists. More likely, our response
has been a reactive one: to technological imperatives, to pragmatic considerations,
and to each other. To think beyond these practicalities is to respond to a broader
and more compelling challenge: the idea that, as designers, we might begin to
tackle the enormous opportunities to be had in staking claim to and shaping a
new and unprecedented universe. There, if anywhere, lies the new avant-garde.