

JESSICA HELFAND SEIZED THE SLIPPERY REINS OF NEW MEDIA WHILE IT WAS STILL IN ITS INFANCY. She took on interactive design in the 1990s through website design, online identities, and her media column, “Screen,” in *Eye* magazine. In 2003 she joined William Drenttel (her husband and business partner), Michael Bierut, and Rick Poyner to create the blog Design Observer, an intellectual nexus for online debate and discussion of graphic design. To Helfand, the web is the new frontier, and designers need the guts to take it on. In the essay below she demands, “Where is the avant-garde in new media?” She herself sets a bold example. From Winterhouse, their rural Connecticut studio, Helfand and Drenttel write, edit, publish, educate, and design. They embody evolving models of graphic authorship as they crisscross the worlds of print and new media. Their personal library of around eight thousand volumes informs their work both practically and theoretically. In 1994 Helfand became a critic at Yale School of Art. She says of the design profession, “Somehow, I think graphic design succeeds best when it resists definition.”¹

¹ Jessica Helfand interview in Debbie Millman, *How to Think Like a Great Graphic Designer* (New York: Allworth 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

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

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 representing 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 shackles of Cartesian logic—space that might ebb and flow, expand and contract, dimensional space, elliptical space, new and unusual space. Homepages, indeed! 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 compromised—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 transaction, the unconquerable, 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.

DEMARCATIION (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 imperatives 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.