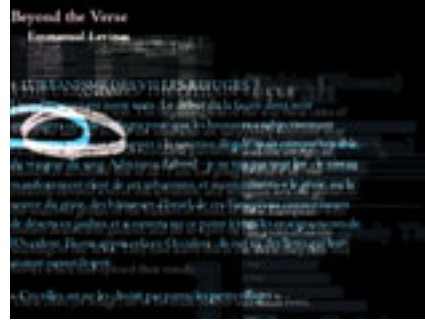


Talmud Project



INSTALLATIONS

A mix of spiritual amazement and intellectual rigor animate David Small's typographic research. Small, who is both a graphic designer and computer scientist, uses three-dimensional and dynamic typography to display complex bodies of information. His visionary explorations of digital text have yielded unbelievable results—stunning in appearance and rich in conception. His projects, many of them produced at MIT's Media Lab, attempt to display complex bodies of information within digital landscapes that users can intuitively navigate.

Awe and intellect converge with special intensity in the *Talmud Project* (1998–1999). The *Talmud* is a collection of sacred writings on the Torah, in which Biblical passages are embraced by a series of commentaries. Small's *Talmud* displays a portion of the *Talmud* and builds additional links to an essay by the modern French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, a text that is itself an extended commentary on a section of the *Talmud*. Small's project envisages a new narrative space in which distinct but linked texts can be simultaneously available in their entirety. The *Talmud Project* employs shifting scale, focus, line spacing, and transparency to allow texts to move in and out of the reader's primary field of attention. To alternate between Levinas's French essay and its English translation, for example, the reader controls the spacing between the French and English lines, expanding and contracting them in order to shift from one language to another or to display them simultaneously. A page from the *Torah* might be in full focus, while the referring page from the *Talmud* appears to hang behind it, blurred just enough to maintain the legibility of the main text. As one passage comes forward, another moves back; as one becomes sharp, another becomes hazy.

Even when individual lines become illegible, the architectural features of the text, such as paragraph and section breaks, remain apparent. Small aims to design for both the reading scale, where five hundred or a thousand words can be displayed at one time, and for what he calls "contextual scale," where a million or more words can be visible but not legible. By allowing text to appear as a body—whole yet indecipherable—Small builds sublime typographic spaces, in which written language imposes its vastness upon the senses as upon the intellect.

To be sublime is to be unbelievable, to invoke awe and amazement within the context of rational structure. Such is the effect of Talmudic study, expanded into other dimensions in this profound typographic project.

(text by Ellen Lupton)