
PROXIMITY

The Gestalt principle of proximity states that objects or elements that are close to one another appear to form groups, even when they are dissimilar in other ways. If elements overlap or touch, we assume they share something in common or have some conceptual affinity. If one element encloses another, we read this as a dependent or hierarchical relationship.



Figure 3.44
Proximity

The distances among people sitting on the steps of this building hint at the strength of relationships. Familiarity determines social proximity; strangers are kept at a distance while friends and family often enter personal space.

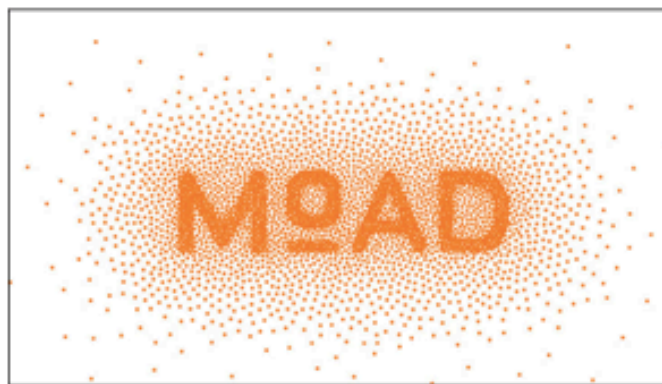


Figure 3.45

Museum of the African Diaspora logo, 2005 Sussman/Prejza

The graphic identity for the Museum of the African Diaspora uses visual proximity to signify the migration of people from Africa to communities all over the world.

Composition is never neutral. We assign meaning to the order or position of objects within a visual field, even when they are abstract and lack literal content. We are likely to read elements that are close to each other in space or that share common distances among

them as a group or constellation, and separate from other elements on the page ([Figure 3.44](#)). In this way, we assume some relationship that is important to our understanding of the message. Sussman/Prejza's logo design for the Museum of the African Diaspora uses proximity to represent the dispersal of people from Africa through slavery ([Figure 3.45](#)). Designer Abbott Miller's Swarm logo imitates the proximity behavior of bees ([Figure 3.46](#)).

The principle of proximity is particularly important in typographic compositions as it can either determine or undermine the traditional reading order of text. We expect words that are part of the same thought to be close to each other. When there is physical separation of words from other text in the composition, it draws our attention, provides emphasis, or distinguishes its subject from other content in the message.



Figure 3.46

**Swarm Logo Imagery courtesy of Abbott Miller, Pentagram
Exhibition logo for Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia,
Pennsylvania (2005)**

This logo is autological; the word looks like what it means.
The proximity of tiny figures that create letterforms is
consistent with the closeness of insects in a swarm.

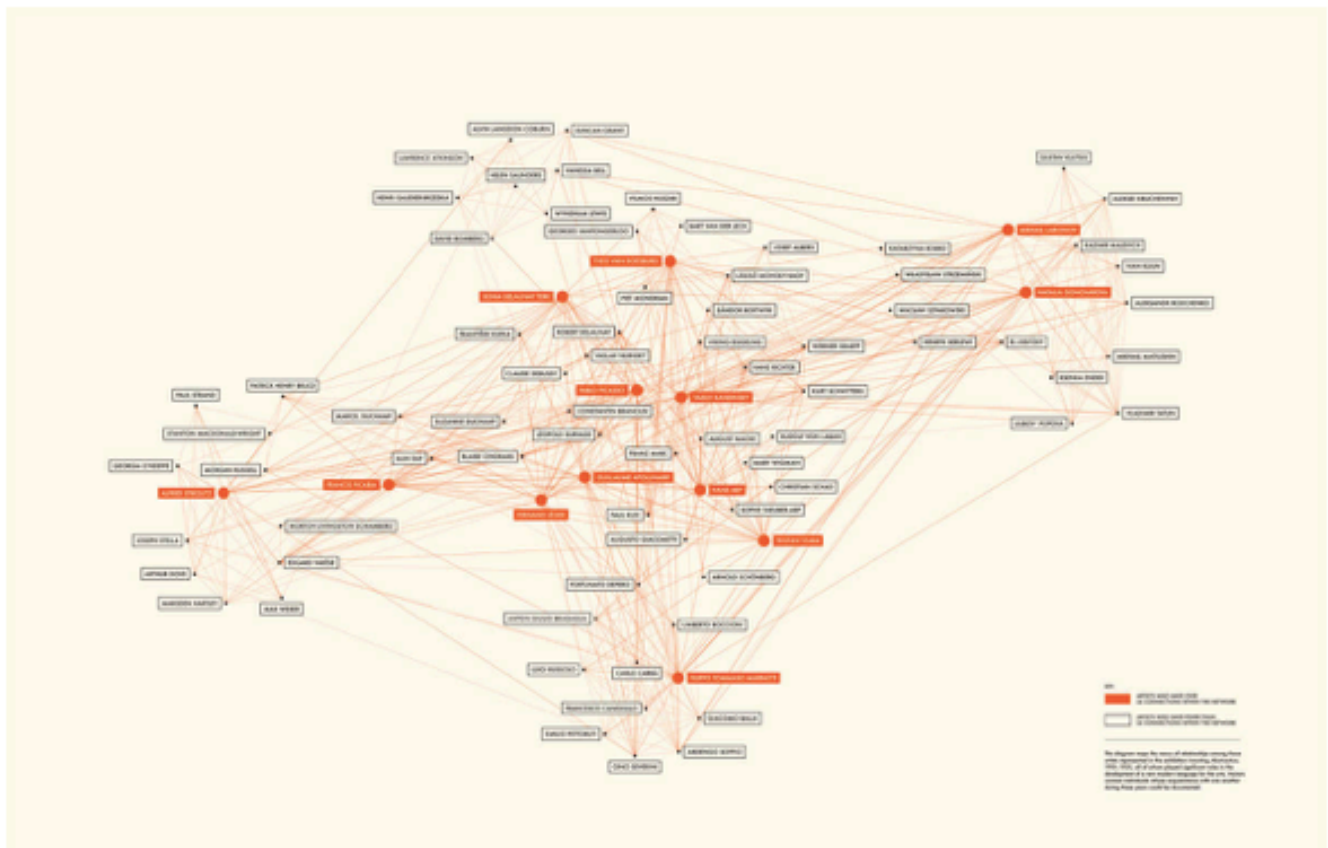


Figure 3.47

***Inventing Abstraction* website Museum of Modern Art Image: The
Museum of Modern Art website for its 2012–2013 exhibition
Inventing Abstraction, 1910–1925, designed by Second Story.
Pictured: Artist Network Diagram. The diagram was a collaboration**

between the exhibition's curatorial and design team and Paul Ingram, Kravis Professor of Business, and Mitali Banerjee, doctoral candidate, Columbia Business School. Contributors at MoMA were Allegra Burnette, Masha Chlenova, Hsien-yin Ingrid Chou, Leah Dickerman, Sabine Dowek, Jasmine Helm, Nina Léger, Jodi Roberts, and Catherine Wheeler. © 2016 The Museum of Modern Art, New York

The MoMA website, *Inventing Abstraction*, identifies connections among modern artists and designers. The proximate distance between nodes in the site tells users about the strength of the relationship between any two individuals.

Proximity is equally important in representing the relative strength of relationships among elements. The distances we feel are comfortable between ourselves and family members are much smaller than with social acquaintances and strangers. Web-like diagrams use space to indicate the strength of the relationships among nodes ([Figure 3.47](#)). In the Museum of Modern Art website, *Inventing Abstraction*, artists and designers who were part of the Avant-Garde from 1901 to 1925 are connected in a web according to their personal relationships and shared philosophies.

The space between things, therefore, is meaningful. It defines and draws our attention to relationships over

and above the meaning of elements themselves. We see significance in spatial patterns and make judgments about where to look on that basis.