



PHOTO: ANDREI SEVERNY



PHOTO: EDWARD TUFTE

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This Isn't *Rocket Science* (but What Is It?)

By Tom Bentley

Professor Edward Tufte has made a career and a calling of making clarity out of murk. His four books are chiseled models of information architecture, embodying his creed of using clean, info-rich graphics and crisp typography as the exemplar of a kind of information purity: just the facts, but facts dense with meaning.

But Dr. Tufte doesn't mind mixing a little fancy into his facts, and thus we have his Airstream like no other. To call his 84-foot fancy simply a "sculpture" seems to deny its high-flying outlandishness.

The sculpture, just one of many large pieces of Tufte's design, is currently leaving the planet—all the while ensconced on Tufte's farm in Woodbury, CT. He dubbed the piece "Rocket Science 3: Airstream Interplanetary Explorer."

"My artworks are high art but not necessarily high serious," says Tufte. "My artwork is a prankish concoction of cartoonish engineering, wonderful materials and massive size. I love the Airstream on my home-brew rocket: it resembles an imaginary spacecraft from a 1960s science-fiction movie," says Tufte.

The trailer, er, spacecraft in question was a 31-foot 1970 International Sovereign Twin. For the project, Tufte and three colleagues cut 10 feet out of the middle of the original coach. He customized the Airstream with rotating TV and radio antennas, an enhanced logo, interior lighting, roof ventilation, LED running lights, a stainless steel trailer hitch, and a low porthole in the door to serve as a viewport ("for onboard dogs").

He added fancy wheels complete with Brembo calipers and ceramic brakes, wheel locks, and a 1960s aluminum-tubing lawnchair, with backup plastic webbing. "My colleagues took special care in restoring the original propane tank, with its classic welded seams," says Tufte.

There is a little bite of irony in Dr. Tufte's explanation of the sculpture's expression of fanciful space travel: "While working on the piece, I received a briefing from a high-level NASA engineer in Houston about their plan to send a few humans to Mars on a one-off three-year trip. For the same cost, however, at least 200 rovers and robots could be sent to many planets. And so my retro Airstream expresses the folly of sending people and their beds, kitchens, and toilets on a roundtrip to Mars. Our Earth is just fine for the Airstream."

The Explorer, which is 31 feet high, was constructed during 2011 and 2012. It stands among his other large sculptural works on his farm, which in total weigh some 700 tons; the more expansive examples of those efforts Tufte calls "megaliths."

Though the Yale Professor Emeritus is quite serious about his megalithic pranks, he doesn't spend all of his time devising new sculpture designs. He continues to crisscross the country lecturing on his art of analytic design and

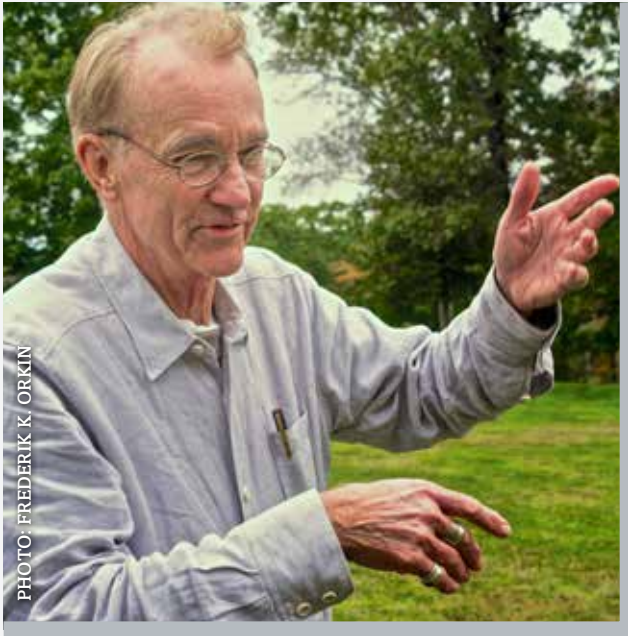


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Construction of Tufte's "Airstream Interplanetary Explorer" took place in a field in Connecticut. Neither sun, nor sleet, nor interstellar snow slows its mission of high-flying outlandishness. **OPPOSITE PAGE, BOTTOM:** A Feynman diagram of a subatomic particle adorns the side.



Dr. Edward Tufte, an expert on analytic design, data theory, and large sculptural works.

data theory, which advocates a way of seeing that intensifies thinking—and consequently, understanding.

One of his sculptures is titled *Escaping Flatland*, based on an old term, which suggests there is a much richer information stream beyond two-dimensional restrictions, like that of most paper-based data and screen representation. Tufte has shown that more information density is more clarity. But that density must be conveyed through simplicity, a kind of “more is less is more.”

Tufte obviously has affection for three-dimensional objects, as shown by his sending of the *Sovereign* out into the great vastness. “The Airstream itself is a beautiful sculptural object, throwing off luscious light from any direction, and catching the independent and earnest spirit (or folly) of setting out on one’s own, equipped to visit where-ever when-ever,” says Tufte. Considering the plane of his current artworks, Tufte says, “They are beyond words, and like the Airstream Interplanetary Explorer, resemble only themselves.” 

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