The wireless spectrum: the politics, practices, and poetics of mobile media

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8 Terminal City? Art, Information, and the Augmenting of Vancouver

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Art and love can only find their fulfillment in a vision of nature in opposition to our freedom.

– George Grant, *Philosophy in the Mass Age*, 102

I

Every city has its virtue. It has been said of Vancouver that its virtue is not so much civic as natural: that its excellence is attributable not to anything built or done by those who inhabit it but, instead, to the majesty of its situation in the centre of a rainforest, at the foot of the Coastal Range, where the mighty Fraser empties into an endless ocean. This is only half the story. The virtue of Vancouver is that it is a place where artifice and nature collide and, in that collision, bring something true forward into beauty. In this sense, in its very materiality as a city, Vancouver accomplishes the work of art more closely than does any other Canadian metropolis. The city's situation affords this possibility, but it has never guaranteed it.

A good place to witness this collision is (or has been) the University of British Columbia's Museum of Anthropology (MOA). Built by Vancouver-native architect Arthur Erickson, the MOA is made of concrete and glass and light on a design that evokes the post-and-beam style characteristic of the architecture of the first peoples of the northwest Pacific coast. It is tucked into a small forest on the ancestral land of the Musqueam people, its back to the city and its face to Asia. Entry to the building is through two, red cedar K'san doors carved by four Gitxsan masters (Walter Harris, Earl Muldoe, Art Sterritt, and Vernon

Stephens), which convey as much by their sheer weight as they do in their narrative of the first people of the Skeena River region. Very quickly the visitor is drawn by light through an opening onto a gentle downward ramp where she is surrounded by everyday things – Coast Salish bent-boxes and feast bowls, Kwakwaka'wakw house posts, a blanket woven by contemporary Musqueam artists Debra and Robyn Sparrow, and fragments of great Haida poles. The experience of this threshold is one of profound and liberating disorientation. Gravity pulls the visitor forward. The Great Hall of the museum is a massive, quiet space curtained by a fifteen-metre-high wall of glass, filled with the silent testimony of the things of the first peoples: house-posts, totem poles, massive carved creatures. Beyond the glass curtain, on the cliffs of Point Grey, amidst a carefully designed landscape of indigenous plants and grasses, stand two Haida houses, ten majestic totem poles from the Gitxsan, Nisga'a, Oweekeno, and other first nations, two carved house-posts, and two welcome figures carved by contemporary aboriginal artists. And, beyond all of these things, the Coastal Range as its turns northward, the sea, and Japan and China unseen in the distance.

It is difficult to describe the experience of this space and the things in it that open a world. Time moves slowly but surely here. It is a clearing for judgment, in which the virtue of the city of Vancouver stands lighted, at the bottom of the ramp in the Great Hall of this museum. It is not comprised of the city's natural situation, its aboriginal past, its modern architecture, or its Asian futures, but the collision of all of these, a collision that clears a space in which something true about the place can be registered in its astonishing beauty.

That a built space filled with things can make such a registration possible testifies to the possibility of art. Lately, this registration and the possibility it raises have been interrupted by the presence of a new wireless technology designed to augment visitors' experience of the reality of the place and its things. The technology, developed by a company called Ubiquity Interactive in cooperation with the MOA, the CBC, Telefilm Canada, and the Canadian Museum of Civilization, is a hand-held, multimedia, interpretive aid known as the VUEguide. The device measures eight centimetres by fifteen, with a screen about half that size whose features can be activated by touching pixilated buttons using a small, plastic pen. The device also comes with a single earpiece connected by a wire. It resembles in kind, if not in elegance, any number of the small, portable, screen-and-earphone devices that have become customary apparatuses for inhabitation of urban, networked spaces. Inside the device

is a chip on which is stored data that is activated by infrared beacons located throughout the museum, prompting the viewer with a menu of choices for access to additional troves of information.

Looking downward onto the screen of the VUEguide, pen in hand, one enters a different space, a different world. It is a space of flows, a world of digitized information, where time moves quickly and not at all (Castells 1996). It is a brilliant world, to be sure, and its bias is towards overcoming the disorientation one might otherwise feel standing in such an unusual place. Plugged into VUEguide, one not only has access to records tagged to specific objects in the museum, but also to animation, audio narration, graphics, historical and re-enacted video footage, and maps. One hears the voice of Haida artist Bill Reid reflecting on the making and meaning of a frontal house pole. There is a lovely animation of the mysterious manner of making bent-boxes from a single piece of wood. A model of Sea Lion House, as it stood at Quatsino Sound around 1906, is generated on screen in three dimensions from the perspective of the viewer standing in the museum beside a real archway, bench, and house-post recovered from the site. An audio-visual presentation shows the making of *Lootas* – a fifteen-metre Haida war canoe carved by Reid and his apprentices from a single cedar log – paddled between Skidgate and Vancouver for the 1986 World Exposition. Walking around Reid's sacred sculpture, *The Raven and the First Men*, an image on the screen rotates to match the viewer's perspective, and a tap on the image of one or another of the piece's many figures activates precise details of its symbolism and place in the whole. Reams of text and images untagged to specific objects provide comprehensive information on aboriginal cultures, traditions, history, social structure, and artistry. The material is uniformly rich and crafted with great care and intelligence, deep respect, and attention to legibility and detail. The VUEguide is a magnificent technological achievement, especially in the context of a museum whose mission is equal parts cultural, educational, and scientific.

How does this wonderful device, in augmenting the reality of the museum, interrupt the experience of the collision singled out above as the museum's particular excellence? There can be no objection on democratic grounds to overlaying the space of flows and information onto the world presenced by the Great Hall. Patrons had made clear what the old space of the museum and its things left them wanting: more information. Approval ratings of 85 per cent demonstrate that VUEguide has been a whopping success in this respect (Ubiquity

Interactive 2006a, 13). Nor are the devices necessarily atomizing or anti-social. The non-immersive single earpiece allows for conversation with others and eavesdropping; the expertise accessible onscreen enables, and even encourages, spontaneous acts of popular education, as when a stranger corrects a neighbour's mistaken impression that the cracks in Reid's *Raven* are damage (VUEguide informs that these result from nat-urally occurring and self-correcting expansions and contractions of the yellow cedar). And, despite its wireless portability, the device is strictly situated, insofar as it functions and is meaningful only within the physical confines of the museum, in range of the infrared beacons that activate it. Finally, there can be no romantic appeal here to a 'pure,' non-technological, immediate experience corrupted by technological medi-ation: the Great Hall is, to be sure, always-already enabled by technology and mediation.

Nevertheless, there may be a difference between the world opened by the Great Hall and its things, and the world opened by the VUEguide, and between the ways in which access to these worlds is mediated and experienced. The manner in which a visitor moves into the world opened by the Great Hall is described above. With VUEguide, one does not move into this world as a visitor, but instead accesses a network of digitized information in the manner of a user, a label that describes anyone whose life practices are mediated by devices designed to ac-complish instrumental purposes. Stepping over the threshold onto the ramp, the user is immediately prompted by a signal that there is infor-mation available via the network, and so unfolds the *habitus* character-istic of beings that belong to the world of hand-held, portable, wirelessly networked information appliances. Eyes cast downward to the screen, hands ease into point-and-click dexterity, ears tune to the tiny speakers that cram them. As the flow of digital information soothes with its fam-iliar creep, the user's fix takes the edge off the experience of the world opened by the Great Hall. This latter experience is attenuated as access to the space of flows and the network of digitized information is dra-matically opened. The information onscreen is too compelling, the form of its mediation too seductive, for those who inhabit the on-demand world of screens to pass up. To be sure, the information delivered by the VUEguide succeeds in telling viewers far more or, at least, some-thing far different about the objects before them than they would know without access to the device and its content. The loss and gain in this exchange is difficult to measure. Provisionally, one might ask whether these are different modes of experiencing and knowing, and whether

they are at odds. Augmented reality aspires to place a layer of data over the material world that leaves the latter intact and still sensible, but here, it seems, there is the possibility of an eclipse, in which the VUEguide and its network cast a shadow upon the world illuminated by the Great Hall and its things. As set out in a 2004 research report produced by Ubiquity Interactive – in which new media theorist Lev Manovich's notion of 'augmented space' is cited as inspiration – 'mobile devices and the mobile experience' concern not only 'ways of seeing' but also 'ways of being' (Ubiquity Interactive 2004, 8). This is what is at stake in the experience at the bottom of the ramp.

II

To use the VUEguide in the MOA is to confront the difference between experiencing the world as digital information accessible via wireless devices and networks and experiencing the world as revealed by a work of art in its place. In his essay 'The Origin of the Work of Art,' Martin Heidegger (1971, 15-86) argues that the essence of art is poetic. That is to say, the essence of art is the work it does to unconceal what *is*, the truth of beings and the world. Art, writes Heidegger (1971, 69–70), 'is the setting-into-work of truth … the becoming and happening of truth … the letting happen of the advent of the truth of what is.' Earlier in the essay, he puts it as follows: 'The art work opens up in its own way the Being of beings. This opening up, i.e., this deconcealing, i.e., the truth of beings, happens in the work. Art is truth setting itself to work' (Heidegger 1971, 38). Truth, for Heidegger (1971, 49), is *aletheia*, 'the unconcealedness of beings.' Unconcealedness happens only when 'an open place occurs,' when 'there is a clearing, a lighting … That which is can only be, as a being, if it stands out within what is lighted in this clearing' (Heidegger 1971, 51). Clearing and lighting is accomplished in the poetic dimensions of art and thought. Truth happens in the work of art: 'One of these ways in which truth happens is the work-being of the work. Setting up a world and setting forth the earth, the work is the fighting of the battle in which the unconcealedness of beings as a whole, or truth, is won' (Heidegger 1971, 54). In art, an entity 'emerges into the unconcealedness of its being … The nature of art would then be this: the truth of beings setting itself to work' (Heidegger 1971, 35). Heidegger famously refers to Van Gogh's painted depiction of peasant shoes. 'The art work,' he writes, 'lets us know what shoes are in truth' (Heidegger 1971, 35).

The poetic essence of a work of art is realized in *aletheia*, the uncon-cealing of the truth of beings and things. According to Heidegger (1971, 70), 'All art, as the letting happen of the advent of the truth of what is, is, as such, essentially poetry.' The essence of art is not realized in depic-tion, imitation, reproduction, representation or correspondence to ap-parent reality. Nor is it realized in information. It is realized in *poiesis*, in bringing-forth truth into unconcealment. In bringing-forth truth, by making a clearing for it and lighting it, art also presences the world. 'To be a work,' Heidegger (1971, 43) insists, 'means to set up a world.' And what is a world? 'World is never an object that stands before us and can be seen. World is the ever non-objective to which we are subject as long as the paths of birth and death, blessing and curse keep us transported into Being. Wherever those decisions of our history that relate to our very being are made, are taken up and abandoned by us, go unrecog-nized and are rediscovered by new inquiry, there the world worlds' (Heidegger, 1971, 43).

It is worth recalling that, long before the technologies of augmented reality, Heidegger diagnosed the challenge technological experience posed for what he described in his later writing as 'nearness.' We can only experience nearness, according to Heidegger, via an encounter with 'things.' In his essay entitled 'The Thing,' Heidegger (1971, 164) asks, 'What about nearness? How can we come to know its nature? Nearness, it seems, cannot be encountered directly. We succeed in reaching it rather by attending to what is near. Near to us are what we usually call things.' Placement, location, and nearness are materialized in our encounter with things, specifically, for Heidegger, things which 'thing,' 'stay,' or gather materially the fourfold of earth and sky, divin-ities and mortals. Absent a sustained, thoughtful encounter with such things, nearness collapses into its parody – the experience of distance-less distance and timeless time – producing what Heidegger (1966, 48) describes elsewhere as 'the illusion of a world that is no world.'

At the bottom of the ramp at the MOA, visitors cannot help but feel the nearness of things and be drawn by artistry into a world in which the fourfold of earth, sky, divinities, and mortals are gathered. This is what Heidegger (1977, 28) might call 'an original revealing.' Indeed, this spot may be one of very few in Canada where Heidegger's bizarre language actually becomes transparent and spontaneously meaningful. The con-trast between the experience of the world presenced at the bottom of the ramp and that of the world of spatial augmented reality may be the dif-ference between inhabiting a world of things and commanding a world

of objects. Promotional material describes VUEguide as a tool designed to provide 'curatorial on demand multimedia' (Ubiquity Interactive 2004, 1). Is it possible that VUEguide takes the world of things opened at the bottom of the ramp and converts it into a standing-reserve of objects about which we can expect to be informed at our command?

III

This conversion is also suggested by a second recent attempt to augment an artistic experience in Vancouver by wireless technology. The 2006 Vancouver Sculpture Biennale saw twenty-two large-scale sculptures by major international artists installed outdoors at public sites throughout the city. Most were placed at locations along the scenic seaside walks that follow the shores of English Bay and Burrard Inlet, often visible at a distance from several vantage points, and approachable enough for climbing and touching. At Sunset Beach and Vanier Park, on opposite banks where False Creek exits into the ocean, stand Bernar Venet's *217.5 ARCS x 13* and *3 ARCS x 5*, two sets of massive (they weigh 5,500 and 2,700 kilograms respectively), rusted steel arcs welded together at precise angles and staggered intervals that, on this site, evoke the exposed ribcages of great whales haunting the harbour. At Devonian Park between Georgia Street and Coal Harbour, against a backdrop of Stanley Park and Cypress Mountain beyond, John Henry's *Jaguar*, a steel thicket of towering red sticks attempts the sky at twenty-five metres, even as gravity's hold on its 2,700 kilograms ensures the attempt can never succeed. At English Bay, in the heart of Vancouver's gay village, in a country that has recently legalized same-sex marriage, stands Dennis Oppenheim's *Engagement Rings*, two huge aluminum and steel engagement rings topped by illuminated glass solitaires, celebrating without apology the dignity and joy of the strolling couples whose place this most surely is. And on the south shore of Burrard Inlet, amid the gleaming glass and steel towers of the city's intoxicating wealth, a single bronze figure squats heavily, arms extended and sweeping. Ju Ming's *Tai-Chi Single Whip*, quietly defying the monuments to commerce, comfort, and technology that surround him, enacts an ancient practice that testifies to the many spiritual and ethnic diasporas that define this city and its futures.

   In their awesome settings, these twenty-two resolutely material things open the world of this city in dramatic fashion. To use language deployed earlier, they bring the truth of the city forward into beauty

and clear a space for judgment. Experiencing these works in their settings by walking and standing near them is something different than being informed about them, which is the aim of the free cell-phone tour augmenting the exhibition. Plaques beside each installation provide a local telephone number that connects to Ubiquity Interactive's Metrocode system. A code specific to the sculpture being viewed activates the audio commentary accompanying the work. The commentary takes the form of a casual conversation between a pair of erstwhile viewers, a man and a woman, played by two local improvisational actors. The dialogues – typically between two and three minutes in duration – are full of interesting information: details of the piece's fabrication, materials, history, and reception; the resumé and profile of the artist; possible artistic intentions and avenues of interpretation. The manner of presentation is defiantly populist, never didactic, and completely successful: it is witty, smart, engaging, and generous. In its most clever moments, the dialogue anticipates behaviour in which viewers enjoying such close proximity to these pieces are likely to engage. Just as an agile viewer, feeling rebellious, attempts to walk up the inside curve of Venet's *3 ARCS x 5*, she hears 'You know what I like to do? I like to walk up as far as I can before I fall backwards, then I walk backwards as far as I can before I fall forward' (and she wonders, just for a second, if she is being watched). Sitting on the grass watching two small children scale the joyous red ringlets of John Clement's *Kini's Playground*, the viewer plugged into Metrocode hears: 'This thing is a magnet for families and kids.' Following the dialogue, users are prompted with options to hear a list of 'Fast Facts' about the piece, leave a piece of commentary of their own (for possible posting on a website), or vote for which sculpture the city should retain from the exhibition. As Ubiquity Interactive co-founder Leora Kornfeld puts it: 'This is art for the people. The Vancouver Biennale is in the public domain, and Metrocode allows the public to use their cell phones to interact with the sculptures, get engaged and it makes art accessible to everyone' (Ubiquity Interactive 2006b).

What could possibly be wrong with that? Like VUEguide, the Metrocode Biennale audio tour is a brilliant technology, expertly executed with commendable intentions. Information is not all bad: it can tell you how much things weigh and suggest to you what they might mean. Still, one wonders whether the experience provided by Metrocode differs in kind from the experience of standing in the way cleared by the sculptures. An encounter with 5,500 hundred kilograms of rusted,

perfectly geometrical steel arcs, placed mysteriously on a beach in the middle of a city, forcibly extracts people from the networks of digital information-on-demand, the space of flows and the experience of what Albert Borgmann (1984, 42-3) calls 'commodity.' The Metrocode cell-phone tour eases people right back into those networks, that space, and that experience. The losses and gains in this transaction are difficult to specify, but this much is suggested: one experience confronts us with a way of encountering the world that is radically different from the manner in which urban technological settings are now customarily inhabited; the other tends to confirm this latter as the normal way to be in the world.

IV

It is this difference – specifically, the viability of the abnormal condition of experiencing the world without recourse to information made available by digital networks – that is at stake in spatial augmented reality. Augmentation, it could be argued, is precisely the attempt to obliterate this abnormality, this difference, this other way of being in the world. The VUEGuide and Metrocode systems are quite basic attempts to produce the sort of 'augmented space' envisioned in contemporary accounts of augmented reality. As Manovich (2005) describes it, augmented space refers to 'overlaying layers of data over physical space … augmenting this space with additional information.' Recognizing that there have always been ways of accomplishing this overlay of data on physical space (one thinks, for example, of signage), Manovich defines augmented space specifically in terms of augmentation by electronic or digital data, enumerating a list of technologies – cellular telephones, intelligent buildings and spaces, portable and embedded computing, pixilated screens, radio-frequency identification tags – that are symptomatic of a broad and dynamic range of steadily emerging applications of what is now often described as pervasive or 'ubiquitous' computing, digital media, and networks.

In their discussion of pervasive computing, Jerry Kang and Dana Cuff (2005, 95–9) identify three core elements of the augmentation of public space by digital information. These are: *ubiquity* (wherein digital networks are accessible anywhere, via a broad range of mediating devices and interfaces); *embeddedness* (whereby interface, computing, and network infrastructure are miniaturized and installed, virtually undetectably, in a wide array of objects in the material environment); and *animation* (wherein networked computing elements are capable of automated response to a broad range of physical stimuli, including

biometric information). As these authors describe, implementation of pervasive computing will mean that digital networks 'will always be around – in the air and the walls – providing an ever-ready information template overlaid on the "real" world we navigate … What we can expect, then, are networks of miniaturized, wirelessly interconnected, sensing, processing, and actuating computing elements kneaded into the physical world' (Kang and Cuff 2005, 94, 99).

Implementation of pervasive or ubiquitous computing systems oriented to realizing the various aspirations for spatial augmented reality is well underway, and now exceeds the integration of radio-frequency identification tags and tracking into the retail environment highlighted by Manovich (2005). Telephone companies, hardware manufacturers, Internet service providers, and search engineers are currently in frantic competition to roll out mobile social networking applications that enable users of portable, wireless, Global Positioning System–enabled communication appliances to locate friends, gather information on potential meeting places, and share directions (Hamilton 2007). The Tokyo Ubiquitous Network Project will install ten thousand infrared RFID transmitters throughout the Ginza neighbourhood to provide shoppers and tourists with wireless access to commercial information and navigation advice in four languages; a similar project in Tokyo linking cell phones to the Internet and GPS networks seeks to provide users with an electronic compass that includes step-by-step directions combined with detailed descriptive information and advertisements for over 700,000 locations throughout Japan (Williams 2006; Markoff and Fackler 2006). Researchers at the University of Guelph are presently at work compiling a database of small sections of the DNA sequences of every known species on the planet. In parallel, designs are underway to provide network access to this database from remote locations using a hand-held device capable of reading DNA samples scanned from organisms in the field (Jones 2007). The project, dubbed 'The Bar-Code of Life,' aims at a scenario in which any person, anywhere on the planet, will be able to identify any species and access information about it almost instantly. As the project's lead scientist, Paul Hebert, puts it: 'Any person equipped with a bar-coder can walk through the forest and identify the life around them' (quoted in Jones 2007, A7). Closer to home, academics might have had the pleasure of experiencing 'SpotMe,' a technology that enables conference-goers equipped with hand-held wireless devices to identify, locate, and send messages to fellow attendees with whom they would like to 'network' (Shockfish 2008).

Such applications are merely the tip of a very large, very sleek, ice-berg. What augmentation of public, social, political space by pervasive computing and ubiquitous access to digital information via embedded networks will *mean* for the character of these spaces and our inhabita-tion of them is difficult to predict. It is certain that the affordances of these technologies will be deployed by corporate actors and state agencies for purposes of trade and commerce, the marketing and sale of entertainment and recreation, surveillance, and the enforcement of discipline and order. It is equally certain that artists, educators, and ac-tivists will seize upon these very same affordances in their own efforts to use these technologies to enrich our experience of the public sphere, and to craft new spaces of social and political encounter, in ways that encourage rather than discourage criticism, excellence, equality, and di-versity. The technologies of spatial augmented reality thus bear a polit-ical ambivalence that is characteristic of technological systems more generally. Given the ongoing history of emergent media, it is safe to pre-dict that every strategic deployment of these technologies for purposes of entrenching existing formations of socio-economic and political power will give rise to tactical appropriations aimed at contesting and subverting these very formations. It is even possible that, together, these 'secondary instrumentalizations' will shift the rationalization of spatial augmented reality in an altogether democratic direction (Feenberg 1999). It is entirely possible that the space of the Old City of Montreal might be augmented with data such that a tourist walking by Place Royale, scanning the screen on his cell phone for a map and review of a nearby restaurant, would also learn that, in 1734, a slave woman named Marie-Joseph Angélique was hanged there (Cooper 2006).

V

Still, while augmentation may be motivated by, or directed to, a variety of contingent purposes, there is nothing ambivalent about ubiquity. Ubiquitous, from the Latin *ubiquitas*, means everywhere and pervasively present. The Ubiquitarians were a sixteenth-century sect of Lutherans who believed Christ's body was present, everywhere, at all times. Ubiquitarianism was, and remains, a doctrine. For the Ubiquitarians of the sixteenth century, ubiquity meant the omnipresence and inescapabil-ity of God, and this was good. For the ubiquitarians of the twenty-first century, ubiquity means the omnipresence and inescapability of digital information, and this, too, is good. To the extent that spatial augmented

reality is defined, at least doctrinally, by the goal of ubiquity, it is fair to say that it aims at an experience in which digital information, media, and networks are everywhere and cannot be escaped. It is in this sense that the achievement of spatial augmented reality might entail an eclipse of other, different ways of being in the world, regardless of the content, orientation, or application of the data it makes available. As Kang and Cuff (2005, 102) put it: 'Once implemented, opting out of pervasive computing will not be easy, and will eventually be seen as Luddite. After all, who among us regularly opts out of electricity, paved streets, security cameras, bar codes, web cookies or, in places like Los Angeles, even the automobile if we can afford one?' In the ultimate realization of spatial augmented reality, the standard rejoinder to the Luddite – 'if you don't like it, just turn it off' – is, by definition, unavailable. This is especially so when system ubiquity is combined with embeddedness throughout the material environment and automated animation by involuntary registration of biometric feedback (indeed, often by mere presence). It is at this point that spatial augmentation by digital information and networks becomes compulsory, the point at which it becomes, in a meaningful sense, reality.

To use a now disfavoured language, we might say that reality – in the sense of a compulsory framework of experience – comprises the *telos* of spatial augmentation by digital technologies – and that this *telos* is implied in all the diverse and contingent applications of the technology, including those that are democratic and those that are not, and those that fall short of completion in their actual deployment. It is with this in mind that one might ask: what sort of reality is it that is characterized by compulsory commerce with digital information, media, and networks? I would suggest that the character of the reality of ubiquitous, embedded, animated information and networks – the reality of spatial augmented reality – is indicated by the contrasting experiences of the space at the bottom of the ramp in the Great Hall of the UBC Museum of Anthropology, or the spaces opened by the sculptures of the Vancouver Sculpture Biennale, and that of the spaces opened by the VueGuide and Metrocode cell-phone tour. What can be detected in this contrast is the difference between inhabiting a world built upon compulsory enrolment in the flow of information and a world revealed in and by art.

One must proceed with caution in making such suggestions. Along with his reflection on art, things, and world, Heidegger had something

to say about information. In a 1962 lecture on traditional and techno-
logical language, Heidegger (1998, 139) contrasts information with
language, or '*saying* as showing and as the letting-appear of what is
present and what is absent, of reality in the widest sense.'
Information, by contrast, is an atrophied form of language proper to
the regime of technology, 'the mere transmission, the reporting, of sig-
nals' (Heidegger 1998, 141). Language – which Heidegger clearly
identifies with the possibility of art – and information are radically
distinct. 'That is why,' writes Heidegger (1998, 141), 'a poem does not,
on principle, let itself be programmed.' This distinction might assist us
in making sense of the world at the bottom of the ramp in the Great
Hall and its difference from the world of information opened by the
technologies of spatial augmented reality. For while the Great Hall
and its things were surely made to communicate – the totem poles of
the Gitxsan and Nisga'a peoples are media of communication even as
they are works of art; the K'san doors are carved with a narrative ac-
count the Skeena River peoples – it is arguable that the form of their
communication is much closer to language than it is to information.
This is why those who are not native to these languages (or to the lan-
guage of Venet's sculpture), those who have never learned or been
taught them, have to work very hard to understand whatever these
things might be saying to them. Communication is difficult under the
burden of language, but this burden can be lightened by information.
This is precisely the promise of spatial augmented reality.

   This promise, the promise of a life free from the burdens of art, lan-
guage, and communication, can be evaluated on ethical, as well as
technical and political, grounds. 'If,' writes Heidegger (1998, 141),
'one holds information to be the highest form of language because of
its clarity, and the security and speed in the exchange of reports and
assignments, then the result of this is also the corresponding concep-
tion of the human's being and of human life.'[1] Heidegger goes on to
quote directly the cyberneticist Nobert Weiner's *The Human Use of
Human Beings*: 'To see the whole world and give commands to the
whole world is almost the same thing as to be everywhere … To live
effectively means to live with adequate information.' This, we might
say, is a premonition of the ubiquitarian creed of contemporary spatial
augmented reality. However, it is an open question whether living ef-
fectively is living well. This is the question raised by the recent aug-
mentation of Vancouver.

NOTE

1 As one might expect, for Heidegger (1998, 141), the stakes here are equal parts ontological and ethical: '… as long as human being's relationship to those beings that surround and carry it, as well as to the being which it itself is, rests on the letting-appear, on the spoken and unspoken *saying*, the attack of the technological language on what is peculiar to language is at the same time the threat to the human being's ownmost essence.'