

Preface

To sit down with a book, gentle reader, seems less and less what life is like. To be alone with your thoughts was perhaps never the usual human condition. Whether in a traditional tribal society or amid today's tastes for perpetual messaging, some people don't share so much as generate their thoughts, even their deepest feelings, through constant social connectivity. Solitary reflection may have always been the exception, a chosen path for a few, or for a few chosen hours in a busy life; introspection remains a difficult art. Fortunately, to sit with a book is to enter a dialogue in any case: unlike feeding among so many short, separate messages at once, it is to take up a longer transaction between reader and writer. It is also enjoyable: books exist not only for greater depth or nuance, but also for the sake of language itself.

Here the transaction is this: like a highway resurfacing project, *Ambient Commons* asks your patience with a temporary inconvenience for the sake of permanent improvement. The project seems justifiable enough: whether you call it "overload"

or “superabundance,” the flood of mediated information defines this era. This book adds a tiny (albeit dense) drop to that flood. For, as the philosophers explain, often the solution to too much information is still more information, not only for tagging and filtering, but also for making sense.

So with hope for improvements in how you cope with superabundance, *Ambient Commons* invites you to rethink attention itself, especially with respect to your surroundings. You may sometime want to look past preoccupation with devices such as smartphones, and to notice more situated, often inescapable forms of information, but this isn’t just about stopping to smell the roses. At the very least, this book may help you justify greater attention to your surroundings as something better than nostalgia. There is a practical new sensibility here. It belongs to a cognitive revolution. So the next time you mumble, “Be here now!” at someone texting while walking in your way, this book could help you mean more by that.

You might also understand that anyone, in any era, may have felt overload. That seems safe to assume. The world has always been overwhelming, all the more so whenever such basic needs as food or safety haven’t been met. If you believe the old truism that you can keep only seven things in mind at once, then perhaps people began sensing overload as soon as there were eight.

Yet today surely something has changed. Much more in the sensory field comes from and refers to someplace else. Much more has been engineered deliberately for the workings of attention. The seductions of personalized media seem quite the opposite of a numbing, monotonous din. They don’t lead to overload so much as to overconsumption. They aren’t confined to specific

sites like the workplace or the literary salon (where ladies and gentlemen of centuries past complained of overload—from the pressure to memorize too much poetry). Perhaps the biggest change is their ubiquity: as you may have noticed, the world is filling with ever more kinds of media, in ever more contexts and formats. Screens large and small appear just about everywhere; physical locations are increasingly tagged and digitally augmented; sensors, processors, and memory are not just carried about in pockets and bags, but also built into objects in everyday life. All these augmentations increasingly connect. This isn't the clanking industrial city that led sociologists to emphasize distraction, nor the media monoculture that led them to situationist critiques of spectacle, nor the all-seeing Orwellian state that many assume to be the inevitable outcome of unchecked mediation. Today's embodiments of information have become something far, far more chaotic, often quite culturally fertile, with ever subtler cognitive appeal. The twenty-first-century arts are the arts of interface. But interface is no longer just about sitting at a machine. To describe how this new technology, these new surroundings, and this new outlook for attention have begun to interrelate, this book adopts a single name, "the ambient."

When it comes to making sense of what just happened, a book still works best, at least across any time longer than a moment ago. (There is Twitter for that.) Although slow to produce, a book may still be the best way to trace an enduring path through the ideas of a recent decade or even a recent century. Here in the twilight of print, it helps to remember that. Although a book can't interconnect ideas nearly so readily as the web, it can penetrate some of them better. As a longer form in a consistent voice, a book may improve individual access to a field of

ideas from many sources. I wrote this one to find out, and not from a position of expertise so much as one where I could do some digging. I wrote to help others find out for themselves, and for people in different disciplines to find out about one another. Please don't read this to learn something new about your own field. Read it instead as one writer's inquiry. The word *inquiry* should keep coming up. To write is to learn. To write well is to bring others along, even through superabundance. Know that, in the quickly rising flood of data, something just happened for attention to surroundings.