

ARTSLANT

Douglas Coupland's *Bit Rot*: Trying to Understand Yesterday While Confronting Tomorrow

by Edo Dijksterhuis



Bit Rot

Douglas Coupland

Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art

Witte de Withstraat 50, 3012 BR Rotterdam, Netherlands

September 11, 2015 - January 3, 2016

"I miss my pre-internet brain," says the sticker handed to visitors of *Bit Rot*. The text brings an affirmative smile to faces—or is it more of a smirk? This kind of dry humor with a nostalgic tinge and an air of fatalism is difficult to process without some feeling of ambiguity. It's typical for life in the early 21st century. Things are moving ahead so rapidly that we're constantly trying to catch up but never really do. The

technology driving us forward grows faster and more complex at an exponential rate, so the gap between reality and our understanding of reality is bound to widen. Depending on your outlook and disposition, we'll end up as happy cyborgs in techno-heaven or become obsolete in a machine-dominated world.

The sticker for *Bit Rot* is designed by Douglas Coupland. He is best known as the Canadian author of 14 novels that have repeatedly grabbed the zeitgeist by the increasingly virtual balls. His debut *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* (1991) portrays a completely vacuous and bored generation, a bunch of kids even more apathetic and emotionally numb than the cynical nihilists in Brett Easton Ellis' *Less than Zero* (1985). The novel struck a chord and became a bestseller. The same is true for *Microserfs* (1995), in which Coupland predicts the end of the dotcom bubble; *JPod* (2006) recreates the experience of a novel read online; and in *Player One* (2010) the world comes to an end reminiscent of an apocalyptic first-person shooter game, while the protagonists sit in an airport cocktail lounge and muse about identity, religion, and death.

Before becoming a writer Coupland was educated as a sculptor and a designer and he has continued making art ever since. He's also an avid art collector. In *Bit Rot*, his first European solo exhibition, these three modes of expression come together. The show consists of works by Coupland and others, plus a collection of short stories and essays provides background and food for thought. *Bit Rot* is a highly exciting, multi-level patchwork, a mental roadmap for navigating the mind of "possibly the most gifted exegete of North American mass culture writing today," as *The Guardian* heralded Coupland in 2006.



Douglas Coupland, *Vietnam Swamp Soldier*, 2000, Installation view at Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, 2015.

Photo: Cassander Eeftinck-Schattenkerk

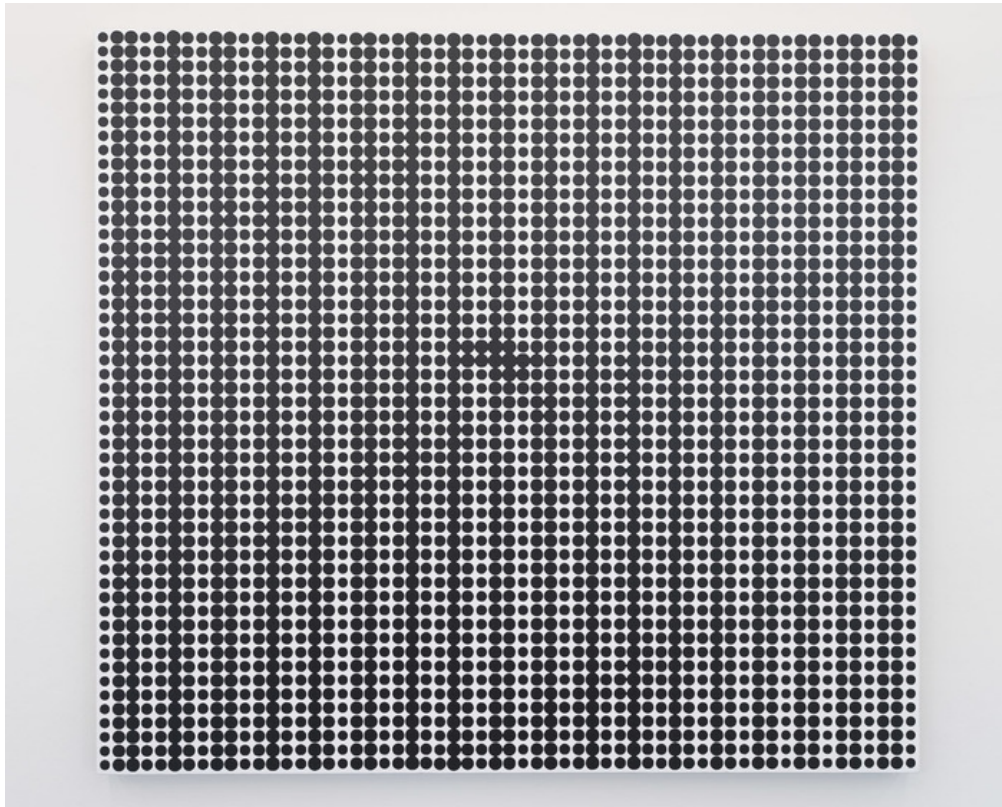
Pop culture abounds in *Bit Rot*. David Bowie's death mask, bought through eBay by the author, sits across the room from Andy Warhol's wig flattened behind a sheet of plastic. Posters styled after low-budget supermarket advertisements proclaim the closeout of western culture. A large-scale, green plastic toy soldier cut off at midriff as if wading through a swamp, brings Vietnam films to mind. In a world filled with images and a highly developed but fragmented system to distribute them, these icons are probably the last to attain the status of universally recognized. Coupland is a modern day beachcomber, trying to salvage them and using current technology to do so. He bought, for example, a cache of anonymous photographs from the 70s sold online by an American press agency discarding its paper archive.



Douglas Coupland, *50 Books I Have Read More Than Once*, 2015, Installation view at Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, 2015.
Photo: Cassander Eeftinck-Schattenkerk

Even though he obviously loves these artefacts of a not so distant, more physical past, Coupland isn't blind to the creeping influence of digitalization—even when his own mind is concerned. *50 Books I Have Read More Than Once* is like a three-dimensional infographic of the artist's literary preferences. The books—ranging from Marshall McLuhan's *The Gutenberg Galaxy* and Omar Kholeif's *You Are Here: Art After the Internet* to Nanny Mitford's *The Pursuit of Love* and Norman Mailer's Marilyn Monroe biography—are stuck on the ends of beams. Each beam's length is indicative of the book's importance. Their color mimics the color of the pages—fifty shades of yellowed paper that will probably look very alien to tablet-reading Generation X-types.

At heart Coupland is not a finger-wagging moralist but a satirist, and this is best illustrated by *The Living Internet*. The installation (at top), made last summer as artist-in-residence at the Google Cultural Institute, consists of sculptures on wheels, bumping into each other. Putin's head, a mushroom cloud, Tetris blocks, a machine gun, and of course, a cat, collide without any sense or reason, like the catch dredged up by a search engine. Monochromes bearing slogans advertise the resulting "snippet culture": "we never been smarter, we've never felt stupider," "the future feels like homework," or simply "epic fail."



Douglas Coupland, *The Poet*, 2013, Installation view at Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, 2015.

Photo: Cassander Eeftinck-Schattenkerk

Bit Rot's most impressive piece, though, is *The Poet*. It's a collection of dots on canvas which don't amount to much when looked at directly. The lens of a smartphone, however, distorts the dots and turns them into pixels changing the abstract blur into a recognizable picture of people

falling off tall buildings. Coupland made this work (and others like it) after 9/11. In the year of the terror attacks which effectively marked the end of the 20th century, there were no smartphones as we know them, and surprisingly little footage exists of the disaster. Coupland's prints offer an opportunity to understand the events by translating them to today's technological means. Whether we'll be able to make sense of terrorism by forcing it into a YouTube-like format, is questionable though. Coupland will probably have to come up with something very different in 14 years or so to make us catch up with the recent, abundantly filmed Paris attacks.

- Dijksterhuis, Edo. "Douglas Coupland's Bit Rot: Trying to Understand Yesterday While Confronting Tomorrow", *Artslant*, November 17, 2015.