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Douglas Coupland: an omnipresent superstar for an easily distracted era



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You get the feeling Douglas Coupland's house is a sort of architectural manifestation of his brain: an understated Prairie Style gem that feels bigger and more complex on the inside than its modest exterior suggests, surrounded by the natural beauty of West Vancouver – crammed with art and, in the form of books, ideas.

In the studio around the back and up the stairs, he makes his art – work often obsessed with technology and pop culture. Off the living room, in the nook with the huge window overlooking the creek, he two-finger-types his books.

The latest is *Worst. Person. Ever.* – a satirical, misanthropic romp through reality television, environmental disaster and apocalyptic possibilities. Once again, Coupland – who has tackled the McJob (*Generation X*), the dot-com bubble (*Microserfs*), school shootings (*Hey Nostradamus!*), video-game culture (*JPod*), and, long before they became fashionable, the disappearing bees (*Generation A*) – has asserted himself as a documenter of our times and anticipator of societal threats.

“I’ve always thought that you live in the present, you live in a specific present,” said Coupland, 51, during our talk. “You are writing, present tense, so write in the present as it is. You [might worry that in] a million years it’ll look dated, it’s gonna look strange. No, it becomes a nice little time capsule.”

As Coupland publishes his 14th novel, he has much more on the go: a slew of talks, including a Future Imperfect symposium at the Tate Modern in London, and a new column for London's Financial Times Magazine. His public art seems to be everywhere in his city of glass. His 2010 biography of Marshall McLuhan is still getting traction. There's also a TV pilot in the works based on his novel *Girlfriend in a Coma*. Next year will see a large solo exhibition at the Vancouver Art Gallery.

If he's overrated, it's difficult to detect amid the tireless attention – some would say overexposure – he gets. Coupland has a new project! He's donating his archives! He's designing clothing! Furniture! An urban park! He's writing about Terry Fox! He's making a movie! A TV series! A new installation!

The plugged-in consumer-culture philosopher has created a brand of his own, becoming – and, over the long haul, remaining – a thinky superstar for a distracted era. More than 20 years after he became a pop-culture darling with *Generation X*, Coupland is still innovating – not simply cranking out words and sculptures, but making a significant contribution with astute observations, especially as they relate to technology, say observers who seem in no way to be suffering from Coupland fatigue.

“I’m in awe of his ability to do all these things at once,” says Ron Burnett, President of Emily Carr University of Art + Design, from which Coupland graduated in 1984. “There’s a deep level of insight that I marvel at.”

As the country’s go-to guy for art, design, and contemporary social commentary, could Coupland be Canada’s Biggest. (Cultural). Brain. Ever?

“Look at how many chairs he’s able to occupy successfully,” says Richard Cavell, an English professor at the University of British Columbia, who teaches Coupland to his students: “He’s a thinker. He’s a novelist. He’s a screenwriter. He’s an artist. He’s a designer. He’s a landscape designer. He’s a sculptor. You know, it’s astounding.”

Words to live by

Coupland is not very interested in talking about how he astounds, how he does it all – or whether he’s stretched too intellectually thin. During an hour-long conversation, that on-the-go brain bounces through a dizzying array of topics: genetically modified foods, swearing, smartphone etiquette, Kodak’s influence on photography, how apocalyptic thinking has been co-opted by organized religion, the landscape of the local newspaper industry, the 25th anniversary of his quitting smoking (this Halloween).

Sitting behind a stuff-covered desk in his airy studio, he picks up a bottle filled with something white-ish and explains that it’s a jar of mayonnaise that’s been sitting there for a decade. In his kitchen, he opens the window a smidge and offers nuts to the Steller’s Jays and squirrels, who then engage in a bit of choreographed-by-Mother Nature fight for sustenance, which delights him.

Writer’s block, when he is afflicted with it, is dealt with by a long drive on the main highway into the Interior, a favourite playlist cranked, a night at a motel (it must be a motel, nothing fancy), then a more remote route for the return trip home.

“You park the car, and problem solved.”

Deadlines are good. (“It’s like having guests over. It’s the only way the house is ever going to get cleaned.”) Writing is necessary. (“Anyone who’s ever quit smoking knows that feeling. And that’s me if I don’t get to write. It feels like I’m jonesing.”)

But really, how does he manage it all?

“The one thing about my life that’s different from others is that I wake up for no one, and for some reason, that’s just good for your creativity,” says Coupland, who was born on a Canadian Forces base in Germany in 1961, moved with his family to West Vancouver in 1965, and now lives with his long-time partner, an architect. “Nothing happens before 12:30. ... As long as you get 450 words done, the rest of the day can be a total sack of shit, but you got your words done. So it’s like an armour that gets you through the day.”

By the book

Worst. Person. Ever. follows the irredeemable and unlucky Raymond Gunt from London, where he lives, to California and then to a private island, where he has been hired (by his hated ex-wife) to serve as a B-unit cameraman for a *Survivor*-like TV series. Ray is unlikeable, offering thoughts such as: “I like to see elderly people trying their hand at painting even though they couldn’t possibly have a career ahead of them because they’ll soon be dead.”

The character is based on an actual British B-unit cameraman Coupland encountered during a 1994 MTV shoot in the California desert. A vile bloke who swore up a storm, he was filed away in Coupland’s brain until the time was right. “It was fun. I mean, the funnest books are the ones that [you] basically get it up and running, you know where it has to go, and they just sort of surprise you along the way,” says Coupland. “It’s not a serious book. It’s a fun book.”

Fun, maybe. But it also addresses some serious issues: the Pacific Ocean trash vortex, the cultural depravity of reality television, our absolute dependence on the Internet. Early reviews out of Britain (the novel comes out here Saturday) have been mixed. The Sunday Times called it “an outrageous comic riot” and “tear-inducingly funny.” The Guardian suggested it may be “the Worst. Book. Ever.”

While the Guardian reviewer charges Coupland with being “not a terribly careful writer,” others reject the notion that he’s just churning it out. “I don’t think he’s looking at his cash register as he’s writing this or that brilliant innovation,” says Derrick de Kerckhove, former director of the University of Toronto’s McLuhan Program in Culture and Technology. “I think he’s looking more at the intense pleasure that he feels having discovered it.”

Coupland, who came out of nowhere to draw a huge international following with *Generation X*, still appeals to a young demographic. In 2010, when he performed the first of his Massey Lectures at the Chan Centre in Vancouver, the place was packed with twentysomethings – not the usual crowd.

That same year, down the UBC mall, Coupland had an extraordinary encounter with the work that took him from obscurity to fame. He had recently donated his archives to UBC – and agreed to meet with a small group of Cavell’s graduate students. For the occasion, the archivist brought out the handwritten manuscript for *Generation X*. “He opens it up, and for a moment he was just transfixed,” recalls Cavell. “And we were all dead silent because we were watching a major moment in cultural history: the author looking at his manuscript of this major, major work. ... I think it was very significant for him to re-encounter that seminal work.”

More than words

Coupland has a theory about turning 40. Around that time, “everyone makes two-and-a-half really stupid decisions: They split up, they hook up, they make a bad business decision or whatever. My one-and-a-half bad decisions I won’t go into, but one decision I did make that actually worked out was: I can’t just work with words any more.”

While Coupland re-engaged with his visual art practice in a significant way at that time, his art has always been integral to his creative output (his Twitter bio says “never left art school”). The way Burnett – who has developed a friendship with his star alumnus – sees it, the two operate on a continuum, informing each other.

The VAG felt it was time for an assessment of his work. Entitled everywhere is anywhere is anything is everything, the exhibition will comprise both pre-existing and new works, in five sections. Canada Noir will explore Coupland’s thoughts on Canadian cultural identity, and will include a major new installation built out of Lego – with public participation. (There will be Lego-building events at the VAG, likely starting next month.) “Doug is really engaged with the broad public,” says Daina Augaitis, who is curating the show. “It’s interesting to work with an artist who is so conscious of the public.”

The exhibition's other sections include a major new sculpture. Containing hundreds of objects Coupland has acquired over the years, which he's kept in 165 bankers' boxes, the work is to be a proxy for the busy, richly chaotic force inside the creator. Because what you intuitively collect, he says, reveals so much about yourself.

Coupland is calling it *The Brain*.

-Lederman, Marsha. "Douglas Coupland: an omnipresent superstar for an easily distracted era", *Globe & Mail*, October 12, 2013.