

# ARTFORUM

## Douglas Coupland

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View of "Douglas Coupland: everywhere is anywhere is anything is everything," 2014.

*The writer, designer, and artist Douglas Coupland hit the ground running in 1991, when his first novel, Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture, became an international best seller. In 2000, after much acclaim for his novels and nonfiction, Coupland made a decisive return to visual art, which he'd studied at the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design, among other places. Here he discusses his first major survey exhibition, "everywhere is anywhere is anything is everything," which is curated by Daina Augaitis and is on view through September 1, 2014 at the Vancouver Art Gallery.*

**BY FAR THE MOST COMMON REMARK** I get from people seeing my VAG survey is, "I don't know what I was expecting, but I wasn't expecting *that*." People know me from writing, but when confronted with fifteen years of visual work covering ten thousand square feet, they may have to rethink who I might be as a creator. Younger people find the show sexy and dense and something that offers hope; older people find it confusing and sort of homeworky and wish it would go away because life would somehow be easier if it didn't exist. Also, because I'm from Vancouver people assume I'm part of its Photoconceptual orthodoxy, but I'm not.

There's an enormous amount of *stuff* in the show. Density and strategies for accumulation are very important to me. I largely try to locate an area of the world halfway between words and objects, and Pop artists and their legacy are profound, as are (and this surprised me) Minimalist artists of the 1970s. I began

art school in 1980 and immediately gravitated to the installation as my preferred art form; I was too green to realize that as an art form it was barely a decade old. So in the show there are canvases, pieces of theoretical furniture, radioactive tsunami debris, ultraslick Pop works, and assemblages that feel almost Dalíesque.

I guess I began to feel disaffected from the literary world around 2000 because it's largely full of nonvisual thinkers—I mean these are people who clinically, medically are unable to think visually. For ten years I had people saying, "Doug, your writing is so... visual." But what they were really saying is, "Doug, I'm not a visual thinker." But then the opposite thing happens in the art world: You have visual people who can't verbalize. Honestly, I think only about one human being in five is both visual and verbal, which is maybe why Apple only has a 20 percent market share.

Lately I'm following a number of intellectual threads, such as the rise of nonhumanist atheism in France. There's a remarkable book on the subject by Stephanos Geroulanos. It chillingly describes the rise of nihilism as though it were a virus ravaging Matt Damon's America. Yet there's also a tiny afterbite of *How hard can it possibly be to be even just a tiny bit better than we already are?* I think Geroulanos would be appalled to think someone registered something sentimental in his writing.

I'm also interested in revisiting Institutional critique. Joshua Decter's *Art Is a Problem* is a seminal text on the topic, but it's *Infinite Jest* in length, and a real time commitment. I think reading about institutional critique can feel sort of like being on a one-way trip to Mars: incredibly expensive, fantastically time-consuming, and difficult, and then once you get there you're (quite possibly) marooned—but I think that the Internet is reinventing criticism, and even recent critical texts, viewed in a rearview mirror, can offer clues to criticism's future. The only writing that feels truly alive to me right now is work that confronts previous critical hegemonies head-on from the Internet point of view. I've read Omar Kholeif's compilation called *You Are Here: Art After the Internet*. It's the smartest book I've yet read on this topic.

I grew up being told I'd have six different careers in my lifetime. We all did, and the media got that right, but the thing is, we now have all of our six careers at once. We all do a bit of everything to get along. That's partially what the show's title references: the hyperdemocracy of information access; the ongoing seesawing war between the Enlightenment's individual and the mob of McLuhan's global village; the secular versus the numinous; skill versus charisma; shocking financial and power imbalances. I've always been deeply concerned with documenting what I call the "extreme present tense": What is it like to be alive on earth right *now*. For five years Shumon Basar and Hans Ulrich Obrist have been pushing me to take this to some sort of extreme. I think that's evident in a body of works in the show.

People ask me what the biggest difference is between the art world and the literary world and I think it's probably this: In the literary world, if you take on someone's style, it's called plagiarism and it's discouraged. In the art world, if you do this, it's called referencing and it's expected, if not demanded, behavior. But both the literary and visual realms seem equally clubbed by the Internet and its systematic depletion of various modes of analysis. There's a whistling in the dark thing going on right now along the lines of, *Maybe things won't change too, too much, and if everyone can just continue being politically correct à la 1995, maybe we can ride out this Internet thing*. Young people must look at the art world as this grim, puritanistic prison where everyone receives a daily tin cup of ideological smoothie. I think there are so many new ways of seeing and being awaiting discovery. We live in a very exciting time that's somehow been disguised as a coma.

— As told to David Velasco