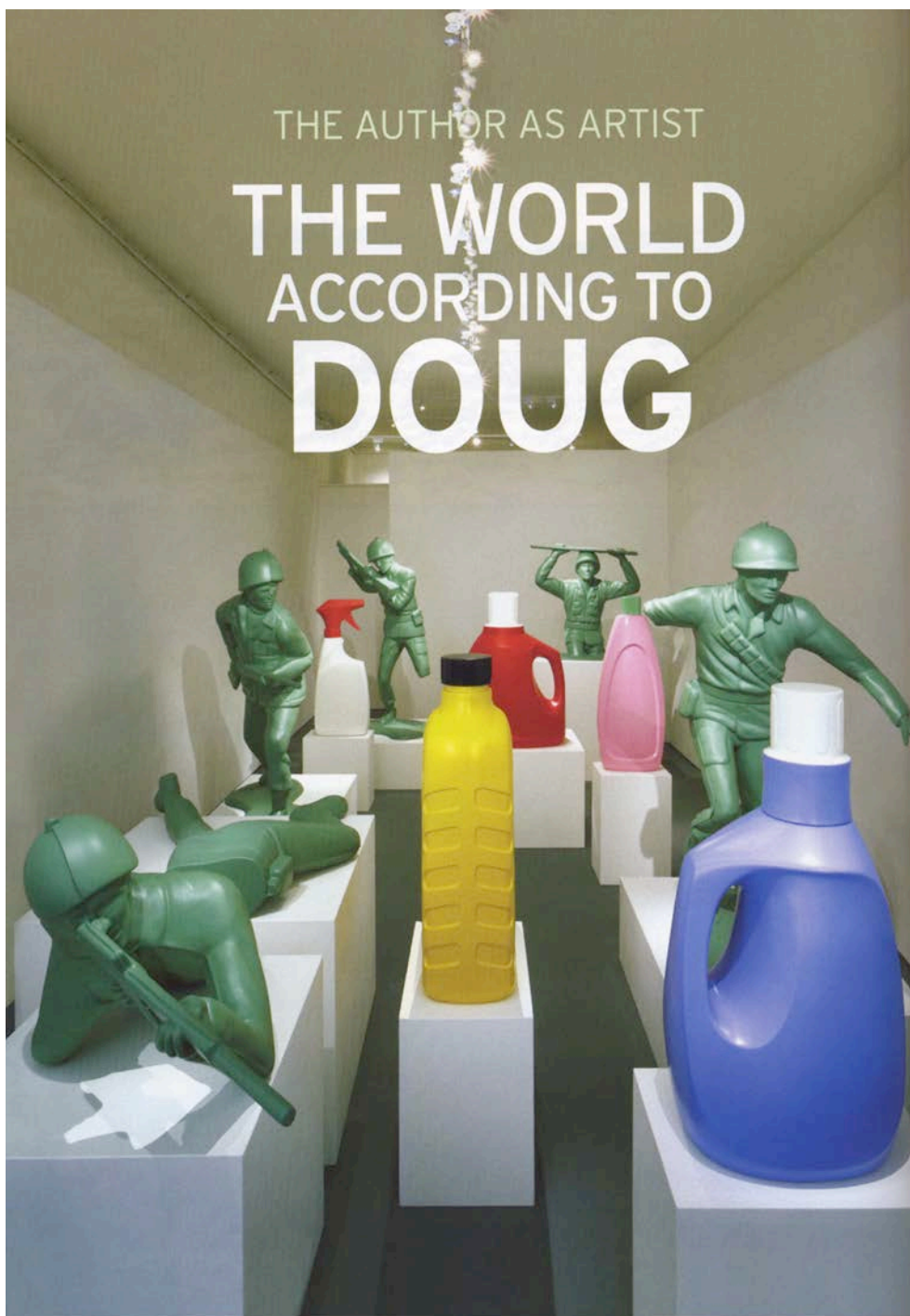


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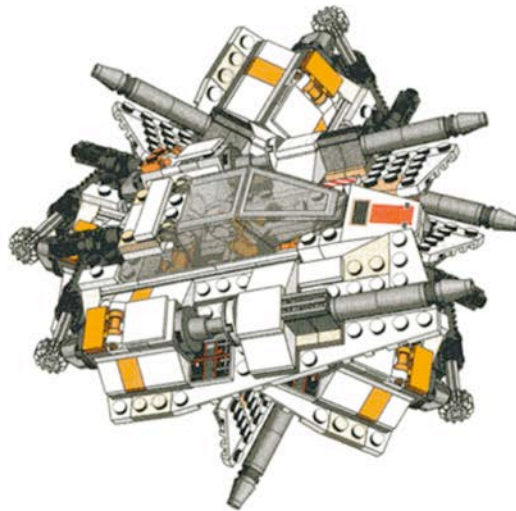


by DEBORAH CAMPBELL

IF, AS DOUGLAS COUPLAND once told an interviewer, "The interior of a person's house is the closest you're going to get to the interior of that person's brain," then the interior of Coupland's brain is a pop-culture wonderland set into a rainforest enclave. Designed by the Canadian modernist architect Ron Thom in 1960, the year before Coupland was born, his Vancouver-area house is a reflection of the Pop aesthetic of his artwork, which is a kind of physical manifestation of his books.

The view from his house, which is surrounded by dense foliage and flocks of wild pigeons and Steller's jays, renders the city invisible. Entering by the front door, one is greeted by a dazzling technicolour display of empty plastic household-cleaning bottles from Japan. On the floor below them sits a sculpture of the two-headed Canada goose that appears on the cover of his second book of essays and photographs on Canadiana, *Souvenir of Canada 2*. Settling into the sunken living room by the giant fireplace, one gazes up at two prints of impossibly complex Lego designs that Coupland made for an exhibition at JFK airport in New York in 2005. On the coffee table are more of the kind of pop-culture symbols that must inhabit the folds of his brain: Japanese magazines splayed out beside a pristine all-white jigsaw puzzle and a copy of the *New York Times* from September 12, 2001.

In the early 1980s, Coupland was an unknown twentysomething sculptor wondering whether he'd sold his future "for three beans" by studying art at Emily Carr in Vancouver rather than seeking a dependable "job job" like his more practical friends. That was before he'd returned from studying art in Italy and Japan and worked for a while designing, of all things, baby



Installation view of Douglas Coupland's "Spike" at Monte Clark Gallery, Vancouver 2001. All photos courtesy Monte Clark Gallery, Vancouver/Toronto.

Asteroid No. 2 2004
Ink-jet print 1.85 x 1.85 m

furniture. Then he wrote his first novel, *Generation X*. "It wasn't until I was around 29 or 30 that I realized there was this trickle-down that takes a while to get down to the soil and hit the taproot," he says. Published in 1991, *Gen X* became an international best-seller and established his reputation as a conduit for his generation's *Zeitgeist*. In the ensuing years he has written eight more novels and several works of non-fiction.

Handing me a BC Ferries coffee mug, Coupland settles into a comfortable armchair next to a street sculpture of a Japanime schoolboy. Despite his grey beard, polo shirt and loafers worn with socks, he has not outgrown his boyish intensity and sense of wonder. Although he only recently returned to exhibiting visual art, it has always permeated his writing. "You can pick up any book I did in the '90s and there's an idea for an art installation on just about every other page," he says. Case in point: in *Microserfs*, his 1995 novel about the geek subculture behind the software revolution, a character fills up a grocery cart with food flat enough to fit under doors. Coupland's latest novel, *jPod*, billed as a *Microserfs 2.0* for the age of Google (and, like most sequels, not quite as good as the original) has been physically transformed into an art installation named for the book's final words: "Play Again?" Each page of the 517-page tome appeared on the walls of The Rooms gallery in St. John's, Newfoundland.

Walking over to the adjoining room, he points out several chest-high sculptures of plastic bottles modelled after recognizable household-cleaning products. These sculptures, and the larger-than-life green toy soldier crouching behind Coupland's chair in the living room, were made for an exhibition in 2001 called "Spike." Though he had returned to designing furniture the year before—making the memorable Hockey Night in Canada coffee tables for the now-defunct Edmonton-based company Pure Design—this was his first public art show since 1987, when Willard Holmes organized his first solo exhibition at the Vancouver Art Gallery.

The series was triggered by his niece, who, like two dozen other babies in North Vancouver in 1999, was born missing a limb. Not quite an epidemic, was the professional verdict, but a "spike." Welcome to Adventures In Toxicity. He began looking askance at the inviting packaging of household chemicals. The attractive bottles, arranged with an army of oversized toy soldiers (some of which were missing limbs), call to mind Agent Orange and the enduring effects of chemical warfare on future generations.

Coupland's own childhood was steeped in the uneasy contradictions of the 1960s: neatly groomed suburbs and their bright promise of factory-made perfection juxtaposed with Walter Cronkite's evening newscasts of the latest death tolls from Vietnam. Born on a Canadian Air Force base in Germany, Coupland grew up on a Vancouver street that had one of the city's last functioning air-raid sirens. His father kept an emergency supply of baked beans next to his shotgun shells, in case all hell broke loose. (To this day, Coupland cannot even look at baked beans.)

This was the setting for a precocious Doug, who experienced his "first great eureka moment" at around age seven, while poring through the *World Book Encyclopedia*. Under P for Pop art, he came upon illustrations of Andy Warhol's tomato-soup cans and Roy Lichtenstein's explosive cartoon-style *Whaam!* "It struck me then, how sexy that is, viewing mass culture as an aesthetic."

His second eureka moment occurred in art school, when a friend returned from a trip to New York and brought him a copy of Jenny Holzer's *Truisms*. She had plastered her series of text-art koans on construction sites and inside phone booths, using the element of surprise, of encountering art in unexpected places, to break through to chance observers who would never set foot in an art gallery. Eventually, her potent one-liners would appear on electronic billboards in places like Times Square and Caesar's Palace. For Coupland, who was then single-handedly writing and editing the art school's magazine (as he recalls, no one ever submitted anything), Holzer's work was volcanic. He was enamoured of the notion that words and phrases could themselves be aesthetic objects.

"Egg is a beautiful word," he muses. "With the Gs capitalized. Zulu is a beautiful word. What's that word you just used? Rue?" He imagines the shape it makes. "That's a beautiful word."

His words became an exhibition at Toronto's Monte Clark Gallery last year. Called "Lost and Gained in Translation," the exhibition was partly a commentary on the mangling of his books, which had by then been translated into 35 languages. The Japanese edition of *Microserfs*, for instance, was retitled *Sayonara Bill*, after the mega-rich Microsoft guru, and the Norwegian edition became *Microslaver* (a title Coupland actually prefers).

For the show, he chewed pages from his books into pulp (first English-language editions of *Generation X* and *Girlfriend in a Coma*) and made them into hornet's nests. For a nest entitled *Royalties*, he used American dollar bills, a statement on the global economy in which his work swishes and swirls. Yet another was made from the Gideon Bible—not as a commentary on religion but because the Gideon is the one recurring object in the hotel rooms of every book tour he's ever done.

The nests exude a quiet purity. He found authentic models by placing ads in a local paper ("hornet's nest needed for science project: \$10") and later through eBay. "The nests are collective but they seem like the opposite of culture," he says. By masticating the objects of civilization's—and his own—creations, he was "taking

THE FUTURE
IS LIKE LEGO.
CLEAN. PLASTIC.
STAINLESS.

them out of cultural time and putting them in organic biological time. And birds' nests seemed too sentimental or coy or something. But you don't fuck with a hornet's nest. They've been around for a billion years and they'll be here long after we're gone."

That same year, at Montreal's Canadian Centre for Architecture, he created "Super City," an exploration of the way children's building kits have influenced modern architecture. The exhibition goes on tour this year. The artist's catalogue that accompanied the show is vintage Coupland. An unlikely autobiography composed of short essays and text, it is filled with reminiscences from his Legoholic childhood and iconic images from the 1960s and 1970s—American interstate freeways as convoluted as a plate of spaghetti noodles, space needles, disaster films and the first image he ever remembers photocopying: a photo from *Andy Warhol's Exposures* of Warhol and Catherine Deneuve eating at Windows on the World in the World Trade Center's North Tower. A white Lego sculpture of a human skull has this caption: "I've always thought that Lego was the opposite of death. Everything in the Lego universe is perfect and crisp and anti-death. When I was young I always thought death wasn't heaven or hell but simply a Lego building taken apart and tossed back into the whisky box and rattled around a bit." And another statement that (like Holzer's *Truisms*) seems like a truth that conceals a joke as its dagger: "I also think that the future is like white Lego. Clean. Plastic. Stainless."

When he reflects on the impulse that led him to return to making visual work, Coupland credits a desire for renewed kinship with the art world. More so than the literary world, it is the realm where he still feels most at home. Those three beans have grown into healthy, verdant vines.

Most recently he has been commissioned to co-design (with Greg Smallemberg of Phillips Farevaag Smallemberg) an eight-acre urban park at Concord CityPlace in Toronto that will be populated by pieces suggested by seminal works in Canadian literature. Scheduled to open in 2008, the project involves casting an entire beaver dam in chrome plate and placing two 30-ton stones that will represent Hugh MacLennan's *Two Solitudes*,



Hornet's Nest No. 01
(Generation X) 2004
Magnolia branch and copy
of Generation X hand-
chewed by the artist

a book from 1945 that explores the clash between French and English Canada. Coupland had initially planned to include a toboggan run in the park, but the realities of a warming planet that promises less and less snow forced him to nix the idea.

Now in his mid-forties, Coupland speaks of the way the potential for our lives begins to narrow with the passage of time—at a certain age, you realize you're never going to be a rock star, or even a dentist. So perhaps he is lucky to have found out early enough what he wanted to do, and to have found a way to do it?

"No one has to do art," he says. "Why does anyone do it? Everyone's life is unique and strange and freaky and weird and mine is just freaky and weird and strange in an unusual direction. And visual art is just another way of examining that. My experiences are really esoteric but maybe there's something from that esoteric-ness that can create something new. I can't imagine not doing it now."

Looking out the window at the forest that surrounds us, I imagine the way the letter Gs curl in EGG. Like a set of welcoming armchairs, like a pair of arms curled to receive a gift. ■