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by [Robin Laurence](#) on May 28, 2014 at 11:33 am



Douglas Coupland is sitting in a room on the first floor of the Vancouver Art Gallery. He's pausing in the final phases of constructing his new sculpture, *The Brain*, and considering my question about whether he was more inclined to be a writer or an artist when he was a kid.

"I used to make magazines," he replies. His laughter ensures that I understand he's always been a multidisciplinary—artist, writer, and designer. These entwined impulses became clear when he was a student at what was then the Emily Carr College of Art and Design in the early 1980s. "Eighty-three was the perfect year, when I did the school newspaper," he says.

When he says "did", he means he produced it all himself—text, art, graphic design. "No one else wanted to do it," he explains. He names some of his favourite courses—typography in the pre-Mac days, 3-D, interdisciplinary studies—then adds, "I think the school paper was actually the best."

So, let's backtrack a little. Let's examine this assertion: Douglas Coupland is the closest thing we have to a Renaissance man. In the early 1990s, straight out of the gate, he won international fame and acclaim for his era-defining novel *Generation X: Tales for an*

Accelerated Culture. And he has sustained that success, producing 15 more books of fiction, 10 of nonfiction, seven screenplays, and a seemingly boundless number of articles, essays, opinion pieces, columns, and lectures for audiences around the world.

His writing has inspired legions of devoted fans, all of them looking to him to interpret their relationship to technology, religion, the environment, love, death, work, play, violence, and popular culture.

As if being a literary phenomenon weren't enough, Coupland has also, over the past decade, designed an array of products and environments, including furniture for SwitzerCultCreative, clothing, accessories, and pop-up boutiques for Roots Canada, and a privately funded park in Toronto. In 2012, he won the inaugural Gamechanger Award from Toronto's Design Exchange, honouring him as an internationally acclaimed designer "who effortlessly moves between creative disciplines".

And then there's the visual art, to which Coupland directed his attention and ambition around the turn of the millennium—and not in a single medium, either. He is a sculptor with an array of important public-art commissions to his credit, a painter, a photographer, a collagist, an assemblagist, and an installation artist. He is represented by a prestigious dealer in Toronto and his work is avidly collected here and abroad.

And yes, it is his visual production that is being celebrated this summer at the VAG. *Douglas Coupland: everywhere is anywhere is anything is everything*, a 15-year survey, opens to the public on Saturday (May 31) and runs through September 1.



The subtitle is a quote from Coupland's most recent book, *The Age of Earthquakes* (a collaboration with Shumon Basar and Hans Ulrich Obrist). I was mulling over what it says about globalization and ubiquitous digital culture as the VAG's chief curator, Daina Augaitis, escorted me through the show, toward a scheduled interview with the artist.

It's a big and ambitious undertaking, still being installed on the weekday afternoon of my visit. Preparators were mounting two-dimensional works on walls and assembling the

multiple components of three-dimensional works on shelves, tables, platforms—and ceilings.

As we made our way past them, Augaitis pointed out some of the themes Coupland addresses in his art. “He looks at the nature of Canadian identity, the rise of utopian ideas, the power of words, the presence of digital technologies, and the significance of the everyday,” she said. Dystopia, terrorism, and environmental degradation are also subjects here, she continued, then remarked on Coupland’s capacity for mirroring back to us the tropes and trends of contemporary life. “One of Doug’s strengths is that he is an amazing social commentator. He’s able to really articulate the world that we live in, and he does that in his visual art as well as his writing.”

Yes, I was thinking, he certainly brings a sharp eye and satirical sensibility to our postmodern condition, but what struck me repeatedly was that all of his installations and many of his sculptures are composed of hundreds, if not thousands, of found objects. Some of these objects are vintage, others are new, some banal, others collectible, and all of them fall somewhere between pop art’s fondness for the everyday items of consumerism and Marcel Duchamp’s provocative readymades.

In the gallery titled *Secret Handshake*, Coupland’s take on Canadian identity, shelves are lined with dozens of consumer items particular to us. Hockey masks and hockey pucks, cans of Kokanee beer and Pacific evaporated milk, a box of Kraft Dinner, an Ookpik, a plastic polar bear, a miniature snowshoe, a miniature kayak, a curl of birch bark, the jawbone of a buffalo, a purple Crown Royal bag, a tin of ski wax, a Royal Bank of Canada calendar, a couple of Saskatchewan licence plates, a porn tape named *The Mountie*, and on and on. The installation *Growing Up Utopian* is a kind of diorama of 100 identical modernist Lego houses—Lego Kit No. 345, to be exact—laid out in an orderly grid. The artwork *Tokyo Harbour* consists of 108 plastic bottles for Japanese housecleaning products.

There are word sculptures constructed out of stacks and stacks (and stacks) of vintage alphabet blocks, and collages composed of the covers of old Penguin paperbacks. An assemblage, *The Brick Wall*, boasts, well, skidillions of pieces from various toy sets and construction sets, including Duplo, Fiddlestix, Lego, Matador, Playskool, Riviton, Robot-x, and Tinkertoy.

Over time, it has become more and more obvious that Coupland’s well-documented collecting mania has powerfully fuelled his art-making. Still, nothing quite prepared me for the gallery where Augaitis delivered me into the presence of the Renaissance man himself.

Looking like a crowded retail display hub mated with an inside-out cabinet of curiosities, *The Brain* is composed of hundreds of odd and everyday objects that Coupland has collected and collected and collected.

“I think that everyone is a collector to some extent,” he says. “You learn something about yourself from what you collect.” Over the past 15 years, he adds: “Very casually and

trying not to overthink it, I've been finding objects that are interesting to me because of their colour or their shape or their generic-ness. Putting them into boxes, hiding them away, knowing that the day would come when I would have to make some kind of sense of it all."

That day has come, and Coupland recounts how he and his assistants laboured through "multiple layers of reduction to get them down to what we have here". Organized by colour, shape, and, well, generic-ness, as well as by the idea of the bicameral brain, the "reduced" objects are displayed on a structure of shelves and platforms. They include arrangements of plastic fruits and vegetables along with miniature plastic horses, dogs, trees, cars, turds, toilets, ice-cream cones, corncocks, corporate mascots, tepees, and robots. There are also ceramic bowls, vases, seashells, and hillbilly figurines, together with drinking glasses, coloured light bulbs, road signs, underwear mannequins, tatami mats, a Japanese screen, and a makeup mirror.

"What would your brain look like?" Coupland asks me. "What would anyone's brain look like? So it goes back to collecting and aggregation." Among this complex personal aggregation, there are a few generalities: the plastic turds suggest Freudian psychoanalysis and the mirror, the theories of neo-Freudian philosopher Jacques Lacan. Some of *The Brain's* myriad components, painted white, are meant to evoke dreams, Coupland says. Others, painted black, represent nightmares.

A wood duck covered in black epoxy resin conjures up a memory from Coupland's West Vancouver childhood. "In '73, there was an oil spill on Ambleside Beach and they had students—I was 11-and-a-half at the time—down there and we were picking up these poor cormorants, covered in oil." The experience triggered a lasting awareness of environmental issues. "The things you have discomfort with at an early age really go deeply and really affect you in a lot of ways."



The Brain also includes a few pieces of faux-colonial furniture—a surprising style given how closely associated Coupland is with sleek modernist design. They allude to the eight

years of piano lessons he took as a kid. His lessons were in the basement of his teacher's house, he recalls. "She was from Saskatchewan and she had the spinning wheel, she had the rocking chair, and I was down there trying as hard as I could to be musical when what was actually getting lodged was that room with the furniture in it," he says. "That was a wonderful revelation."

In some ways, Coupland observes, his entire retrospective exhibition represents his brain. "It seems strange to walk through it all. It does feel like I'm walking through my own head." Then he adds a remark about the art he's made so far that reveals the anxious human being and the compulsive collector behind the Renaissance-man career. "It's just relentless pathology that keeps on happening over and over and over again," he says.

"My next [project] is to break those pathologies, to get past them." He's thinking he'll take up gestural painting. "I actually can paint and I'm a very good drawer, and I never really explored that. I think that is the next inevitable direction for me."

Coupland stands up, politely takes his leave, and walks off toward his next task. "It will be an experiment. It might be a disaster. I'm really looking forward to it."

Douglas Coupland: everywhere is anywhere is anything is everything is at the Vancouver Art Gallery from Saturday (May 31) until September 1.

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