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doi: <https://doi.org/10.57709/1062154>

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DOUGLAS COUPLAND: TEXT AS ART

by

SARAH L. HOUSTON

Under the Direction of Dr. Susan Richmond

ABSTRACT

This thesis discusses the art of contemporary Canadian artist Douglas Coupland and his use of textual art. It will explore his combinations of text and art through four major themes that are recurrent in both his writings and visual art: abundance, advertising, technology and translation and draw conclusions on the various reasons that text has become such an important component of his body of work. Overall, the thesis seeks to show Coupland's unique use of text to create a modern take on Pop art that is able to highlight issues in society.

INDEX WORDS: Douglas Coupland, Microserfs, Jpod, Text as art, Abundance, Advertising, Technology, Translation

DOUGLAS COUPLAND: TEXT AS ART

by

Sarah L. Houston

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

In the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2008

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2008

DOUGLAS COUPLAND: TEXT AS ART

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Electronic Version Approved:

Office of Graduate Studies
College of Arts and Sciences
Georgia State University
May 2008

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Susan Richmond for her continued support throughout the (sometimes grueling) thesis process and through the graduate school process in general. She always offered wise advice, and found ways to make criticism seem a little less harsh. I would also like to thank Dr. Maria Gindhart and Dr. Glenn Gunhouse for being on my committee and offering helpful ideas on getting this thesis finished. I have been very fortunate to be able to learn from these professors, and they made my experience at Georgia State highly rewarding.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iv
LIST OF FIGURES	vi
CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION	1
Figures	11
2 ABUNDANCE	13
Figures	28
3 ADVERTISING	35
Figures	45
3 TECHNOLOGY	52
Figures	63
4 TRANSLATION	70
Figures	81
5 CONCLUSION	88
BIBLIOGRAPHY	91

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.1 James Rosenquist, <i>F-111</i> , 1965	11
Figure 1.2 Douglas Coupland, <i>Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture</i>	12
Figure 2.1 Douglas Coupland, <i>money</i> , from <i>Microserfs</i> , 1995	28
Figure 2.2 Andy Warhol, <i>Dollar Sign</i> , 1982	29
Figure 2.3 Douglas Coupland, <i>Prime Numbers</i> , from <i>JPod</i> , 2006	30
Figure 2.4 Douglas Coupland, <i>Scrabble</i> , from <i>JPod</i> , 2006	31
Figure 2.5 Chinese lettering, <i>Play Again Y/N?</i> , The Rooms Gallery, 2006	32
Figure 2.6 Random numbers, <i>Play Again Y/N?</i> , The Rooms Gallery, 2006	33
Figure 2.7 Stream of consciousness writing, <i>Play Again Y/N?</i> , The Rooms Gallery, 2006	34
Figure 3.1 Douglas Coupland, <i>21</i> , from <i>Microserfs</i> , 1995	45
Figure 3.2 Douglas Coupland, <i>Lawry's Garlic Salt</i> , from <i>Microserfs</i> , 1995	46
Figure 3.3 Douglas Coupland, <i>Oriental Noodle Soup</i> , from <i>JPod</i> , 2006	47
Figure 3.4 Douglas Coupland, <i>Doritos</i> , from <i>JPod</i> , 2006	48
Figure 3.5 Douglas Coupland, <i>Corporate Safety Blanket No. 1</i> , 2008	49

Figure 3.6 Douglas Coupland, <i>Corporate Safety Blanket No. 2</i> , 2008	50
Figure 3.7 Douglas Coupland, Absolut Vodka advertisement, 1992	51
Figure 4.1 Douglas Coupland, <i>Binary Code</i> , from <i>Microserfs</i> , 1995	63
Figure 4.2 Douglas Coupland, <i>Texture diffuse</i> from <i>JPod</i> , 2006	64
Figure 4.3 Douglas Coupland, <i>Programming Code</i> , from <i>JPod</i> , 2006	65
Figure 4.4 Douglas Coupland, <i>Click here</i> , from <i>JPod</i> , 2006	66
Figure 4.5 Douglas Coupland, <i>...pause</i> , from <i>JPod</i> , 2006	67
Figure 4.6 Douglas Coupland, <i>Play again? Y/N</i> , from <i>JPod</i> , 2006	68
Figure 4.7 Douglas Coupland, <i>happycamper</i> , from <i>JPod</i> , 2006	69
Figure 5.1 Douglas Coupland, <i>Patty Hearst Page 1</i> , from <i>Microserfs</i> , 1995	81
Figure 5.2 Douglas Coupland, <i>Patty Hearst Page 2</i> , from <i>Microserfs</i> , 1995	82
Figure 5.3 Douglas Coupland, <i>Motherfucker</i> , from <i>JPod</i> , 2006	83
Figure 5.4 Douglas Coupland, <i>Retranslation</i> , Monte Clark Gallery, 2005	84
Figure 5.5 Jenny Holzer, <i>Inflammatory Essays</i> , 1979-82	85

Figure 5.6 Douglas Coupland, *Fight Club*, 2005

86

Figure 5.7 Douglas Coupland, *Generation X*, 2004

87

INTRODUCTION

Imagine that you inhabit a world with no history and no ideology. Imagine then attending this elementary school on the edge of the world and opening a copy of the encyclopedia and finding under Art, a long, thin panel of a certain painting: *F-111* (pronounced eff-one-eleven). It contains, among others, images of an angel food cake, tinned spaghetti and the words “U.S. AIR FORCE.” A nuclear explosion, and a Firestone tire, all splashed across the length of an F-111 fighter plane. All of these images are painted in shocking, bright colors– all of these images that flow daily inside your head– images now all recontextualized in a seductive, validated World Book-ified context... There is even a young girl, roughly your own age underneath a hair dryer. In all probability, she has her own *ABC Afterschool Special*.
Epiphany.¹

This was the response of a young Douglas Coupland after his eyes had been opened to the world of Pop art via James Rosenquist’s *F-111* (Figure 1.1) in a *World Book* encyclopedia. This moment led him to embark upon a life in the world of visual arts. Shortly after his discovery of Pop, Coupland started one of his favorite childhood crafts, cutting pictures out of old *Life* magazines and putting them together to form his own Rosenquist–style collages.² Of this he says, “It struck me then, how sexy that is, viewing mass culture as an aesthetic.”³

Douglas Coupland was born on a Canadian air force base near Baden-Baden, Germany in 1961. At the age of four, his family returned to Vancouver, Canada, and Coupland has made Vancouver his permanent home since then, except for brief relocations for schooling.⁴ His interest in art remained throughout his childhood, and he chose to go to art school after high school graduation. He chose to attend The Emily Carr

¹ Douglas Coupland, *Polaroids from the Dead* (New York: Regan Books, 1996), 122.

² *Polaroids from the Dead*, 122.

³ Deborah Campell, “The World According to Doug,” *Canadian Art*, Fall, 2006.

⁴ “Biography,” Coupland.com, [Http://www.coupland.com/coupland_bio.html](http://www.coupland.com/coupland_bio.html).

School of Art and Design in Vancouver and there he made sculpture his focus. He continued his art studies at the Hokkaido College of Art and Design and Instituto Europeo di Design.⁵ His sculpture was well enough received in the mid-eighties that he was given a show at the Vancouver Art Gallery.

Into his twenties, Coupland considered himself a sculptor, but he became unhappy with this path, and he began a writing career that would eventually become as important to his life as visual art.⁶ Douglas Coupland “the author” occurred mainly by chance. The editor of *Vancouver Magazine* saw a postcard that Coupland had sent to a mutual friend and was impressed by his writing, so he offered him assignments, mainly about scandals in the art world, like art thefts,⁷ which Coupland accepted in a bid to further his career as an artist. His intentions were simply to use the money he received from writing as funding for art supplies. It turned out that he had skill as a writer, and he ended up receiving a book deal, and effectively quit producing art in 1989.⁸ His first novel was *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* (1991), which he created in response to his feeling that the new generation of young adults, to whom he gave the title Generation X, grew up quite differently than the generations before them, that they warranted their own generation classification, as their “baby boomer” parents were given. He received this book deal based on a comic strip with the same title that he co-produced.⁹

⁵ Robert Birnbaum, “Birnbaum v. Douglas Coupland,” *The Morning News*, 4 September 2003.

⁶ Conan Tobias, “Fifteen Mumbling Minutes with Douglas Coupland,” *University of Toronto Varsity*, September 28, 1995.

⁷ Steve Lohr, “No More McJobs for MR. X,” *New York Times*, May 29, 1994.

⁸ “Douglas Coupland, *West Coast*,” *Artists for Kids*,
http://www.artists4kids.com/artist.php?artist_id=COUPLAND.

⁹ Nicole Brodeur, “Taking His Angst a Step Further,” *The Fresno Bee*, June 5, 1994.

According to Coupland, the main difference that separated Generation X from previous generations is what he calls “denarration.” As said in a later novel, *Polaroid’s from the Dead* (1996):

Up until recently, no matter where or when one was born on earth, one’s culture provided one with all components essential for the forging of identity. These components included: religion, family, ideology, class strata, a geography, politics and a sense of living within a historic continuum... Suddenly, around ten years ago, with the deluge of electronic and information media into our lives, these stencils within which we trace our lives began to vanish, almost overnight, particularly on the West Coast. It became possible to be alive, yet have no religion, no family connections, no ideology, no sense of class location, no politics and no sense of history. Denarrated.¹⁰

This sense of denarration permeates the lives of his characters in *Generation X*. In addition to its fictional narrative, the book also contains insertions such as cartoons, slogans and vocabulary words and definitions, all placed in the margins, which gives it the feeling of a handbook for this new generation. Coupland subsequently became the voice of the group he named, and he has at times felt held back by his status as “the generation X guy.” Several years after the publishing of the book, he came to the point where he would no longer even discuss it in interviews. As early as 1994, he referred to it as “beyond a cliché by now.”¹¹ He has even wryly referred to it as his “Campbell’s soup can,” in a nod to one of his heroes, Andy Warhol.¹²

¹⁰ Coupland, *Polaroids from the Dead*, 180.

¹¹ Lohr.

¹² Frank Mohler, “The X Factor,” *Saturday Night*, December 1, 1999.

Coupland wrote for several years while still considering himself primarily an artist. He said of this in a 1992 interview with the *Ottawa Citizen*: “It wasn’t even until about two (or three) years ago that I even thought of myself as a writer and made the commitment and decided not to do (visual) art anymore.”¹³ One reason for this decision could be his theory that “People don’t respect you if you want to do more than one thing.”¹⁴ Clearly, Coupland has changed his view since saying that. He began to produce visual art again in 2000, and the myriad tasks and projects in which he is currently involved in are ever growing and changing.¹⁵ Beyond writing and creating art in a wide variety of media, he has produced his own films, written and acted in plays, been a furniture designer and worked as a consultant for high-budget Hollywood films, such as Steven Spielberg’s *Minority Report*, for which Coupland was consulted on the idea of what the future would actually look like.¹⁶ He has written twelve works of fiction and several nonfiction books.

The most appealing art works created by Coupland combine his two main professions, that of an artist, and that of a writer. During the period in which he moved away from visual art, Coupland began to find new ways to insert art into his novels. This began as simply as Coupland taking a special interest in the covers of his novels, and then in including artistic elements such as cartoon panels based on the comic strip paintings of Roy Lichtenstein in *Generation X* (Figure 1.2). His interest in art continued to manifest itself in his novels until it moved to a highly abstract level, in which basic usages of

¹³ Francis Dube, “Grouchy, Lens-Shy, Talented Douglas Coupland,” *Ottawa Citizen*, September 25, 1992.

¹⁴ Tobias.

¹⁵ “Douglas Coupland, *West Coast*,” *Artists for Kids*.

¹⁶ Birnbaum.

numbers, letters and basic phrases are turned into highly abstract images that have been inserted in the pages of what is otherwise a conventional fictional novel.

The two books that Coupland places his most interesting examples of text-based visual art are in the 1995 novel *Microserfs* and the 2006 novel *JPod*. In *Microserfs*, Coupland explores the lives of a group of computer programmers who work at Microsoft through the eyes of his main character, Daniel. Daniel and his group of friends decide to leave Microsoft and create their own software design company where they design a game called *Oop!*, which is essentially a computerized version of a box of Legos. Throughout the novel, the characters express feelings of loneliness and self-consciously reveal aspects of their self-identities through their computer interactions. Readers are given samples of some of Daniel's computer entries; which as supplements to the primary narrative can be viewed as intriguing pieces of textual art.

The novel *JPod* has a similar premise to that of *Microserfs*. In *JPod*, the story is told through the computer diary of the main character Ethan. Ethan works at a company that designs video games and *JPod* follows his story as well as that of a strange assortment of family members and workmates. In this novel, Coupland takes the basic premise of *Microserfs*, and takes it further into the computer age. When *Microserfs* was written, computers were not as abundant as they currently are and the culture of computer programmers and hackers had never been discussed, but with *JPod*, Coupland recognizes that his audience is more educated in computer technology, so he adds a litany of textual art related to computer programming, search engines and eBay.

None of Coupland's other novels have the same level of artistic elements as found in *Microserfs* and *JPod*. His other ten fictional novels are filled with a wide variety of

characters and settings, from astronauts to normal middle-aged women, to victims of high school shootings. However, overarching themes are found in virtually all of Coupland's fictional novels. Regardless of setting and other plot elements, the characters in Coupland's novels always seem to be trying to find their own identities, working their way through the loneliness that can occur so easily in the modern world. They typically have to break away from their lives in some way to find themselves. Coupland's novels do not always have happy endings, but the author still manages to insert his own form of truth and beauty into even heartbreaking situations, like the end of a relationship, or a father searching for his missing son. Though it may just be describing an everyday situation or scene, Coupland's writing is characterized by simple but effective observations and a subtle use of humor. While this thesis will not discuss this topic, it has often been mentioned that Coupland's style of describing things has its own visually artistic quality.¹⁷

Despite his success as a novelist, Coupland returned to the art world in 2001. As a visual artist, Coupland has produced ready-mades, photographs, paintings and videos. Much of the art that he has created since returning to the art world incorporates text, for which there is no precedent in his early visual practice. Clearly his work as an author has influenced his output as an artist. While Coupland's whole body of work is appealing, examining his art that incorporates text, both from his novels and his exhibited works, shows his art at its best and most interesting, in my opinion.

This thesis will discuss Coupland's use of text as art by focusing on four themes: abundance, advertising, technology and translation. Each theme will be explored in an

¹⁷ Scott Lawrence, "King of Hip," *Montreal Gazette*, September 20, 1992.

individual chapter. These themes are important because they offer insight not only into Coupland's use of image-text combinations, but also his own take on the society in which we live and through which we communicate. The final section of this thesis will summarize the various ways in which Coupland has linked text and art in his creations, and the possible reasons that he has chosen to make text such a prominent component in his art.

Coupland's art will be analyzed formally. In addition, connections that can be found in Coupland's own writings and the information that he has given in interviews will also form part of my thesis. Given that his art is still rarely written about (besides by the galleries that exhibit it), Coupland's work has never been studied in any real depth. My analyses will provide the first substantial critical examinations of the art of Douglas Coupland. Coupland's visual art is important to explore, because he is creating an artistic style that is essentially a contemporary take on Pop art, and through combining text with Pop, he has found the ideal format through which to reflect on new modes of social communication and interaction in contemporary society.

Before moving into the themes and particular works of art that exemplify them, it is important to look at the artists who have been the most influential to Coupland's own works. The three artists that he speaks the most of, and whose influences can be most readily seen in his works are James Rosenquist, Andy Warhol and Jenny Holzer. These artists and their influences will be mentioned briefly here, and will be later discussed in further depth in relation to a particular theme or work of art.

As the epigraph to this introduction reveals, James Rosenquist was the first artist to truly catch Coupland's attention. Rosenquist's explosive style of combining multiple

images of popular culture in one painting as a way to comment on government and society prove to be highly influential to Coupland's textual art. As we will later see, Coupland adapts the basic ideals of Rosenquist's paintings into a format that is comprised solely of text.

While the first work he mentions being drawn to was Rosenquist's large work *F-111*, the art of Warhol captured Coupland's attention soon afterwards. The reason for this seems to be that while Coupland liked Rosenquist's take on popular culture, Warhol's works comment on popular culture in a way that is much simpler than what is found in Rosenquist's large, image-filled paintings. Coupland's style of art and his influences have always been closely related to Pop art, but Warhol seems most to encapsulate Pop for the younger artist.

Whenever Coupland discusses influences, Warhol's name is usually the first mentioned. According to Coupland, "Warhol (another discovery that I made shortly after I discovered Rosenquist) said that once you saw the world as Pop, you could never look at it the same way ever again."¹⁸ Elsewhere he has claimed: "Warhol has influenced my life more than any other artist. I was reading his books at the age of nine and have never stopped re-reading them since. He is a genius and a god, and I can't conceive of the 20th century without him."¹⁹ Coupland has on many occasions created art with a Warholian feel to it, and he commonly inserts references to Andy in his works, particularly in his textual creations.

Coupland's most contemporary influence is artist Jenny Holzer. While Warhol is a more prevalent influence in Coupland's general body of work, in this discussion of

¹⁸ Coupland, *Polaroids from the Dead*, 122.

¹⁹ Douglas Coupland, "Douglas Coupland's Ten Recommended Books," *Jane Magazine*, September, 1998.

Coupland's textual art, Holzer's importance is obvious. Holzer's series of "Truisms" (1979-1982) which she placed on scrolling LED screens, benches, t-shirts and posters, to name a few sites, are among the first instances in contemporary art where text can be found to such a visible degree. Though textual art was central to Conceptual art practices as early as the 1960s, Holzer's interest in placing it in the public domain gave her work broader exposure. Coupland regularly mentions Holzer as an influence, both on his writing and his art. Coupland says of Holzer,

I began writing because I fell in love with Pop Art at the age of 10. I've always thought that words are sexy. Words are art objects even by themselves, even without being inserted into a narrative. I discovered Jenny Holzer's text work in art school in the early 1980's. After that, it now seems, a lifetime spent working with words was unavoidable.²⁰

It appears that Holzer bridges an interesting gap in Coupland's career. Because she was an artist who worked solely with text, Coupland found it acceptable to be a writer, but conversely, because she used text in her art, it would appear that Coupland was inspired to create text-based art. Holzer's influence will be discussed more specifically in relation to particular works created by Coupland, but it is readily apparent that her groundbreaking uses of text were the impetus to Coupland's text-based art.

Throughout this thesis, Coupland's creations will be compared to those of the artists just mentioned. Through examining his own works, and their influences, Coupland's works will be seen to exhibit a contemporary take on Pop art. While Coupland's art doesn't have the vibrant colors traditionally seen in Pop art from the 50's

²⁰ Douglas Coupland, "Why Write Modern Fiction?" *New York Times*, August 14, 2006.

and 60's, he tackles the same goals of exploring what is popular in society in the current age. Through using text in his creations, he is able to achieve works that capture the feel of modern times, and also draw the attention of the viewer to the affects of the things that are encountered daily in a modern society driven by advertising and technology. This thesis will also be shown how Coupland commonly uses a conceptual approach to creation, such as extensive translation processes, or producing abundances of text, that have the end result of works that can be seen as decorative. As will be seen, Coupland's extensive experimentation with text produces works that are both visually appealing and thought provoking.



Figure 1.1
James Rosenquist
F-111
(broken into two sections)
1965
Guggenheim Museum



Figure 1.2
Douglas Coupland
Roy Lichtenstein style cartoon
from *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture*
Page 142

ABUNDANCE

This section explores Coupland's use of art and text combinations that highlight the subject of abundance in modern society. Abundance is one of the most common themes that can be found in both Coupland's writings and art. When he is discussing abundance, Coupland is speaking of advertisements, and of the media saturation of the modern world. When he translates this idea of abundance into art, he exhibits a visual abundance (by creating works containing a plethora of numbers and words) and uses this to make the viewer think of the general profusion of ads, shows, books, and products surrounding him. Coupland, unlike many of the artists of his generation, is not necessarily critiquing abundance or showing the problems that consumption may cause to the human mind or to the natural world. Instead, he claims to adore abundance, though his works sometimes give a different interpretation. The most likely interpretation of this contradiction is that Coupland both appreciates media bombardment, but is also wary of it.

The first works in which Coupland can be seen playing with the idea of abundance are his fictional novels. Coupland's explorations of text-as-art can first be found in his novels. As mentioned in the introduction, when Coupland was working only as a writer, he found ways to put artistic additions into his novels. While he began this in his first novel, *Generation X*, only two of his novels can truly be found to embrace the idea of text as art. These fictional works are *Microserfs* and *JPod*. Both of these novels are set in technological environments and it would seem that Coupland developed much of his textual art in response to computer culture. This idea will be further discussed in the chapter on technology, but here it is important to note that *Microserfs* and *JPod* contain

the best examples of textual art found in any of Coupland's novels. By textual art or textual additions (as I will commonly refer to the artistic elements that Coupland places into his fictional novels) I am referring to things that have been added to the novel that generally function independently of the story line, and solely as visual elements.

Sometimes these additions are in a small way related to the story line, but the novel does not require them to function narratively or to provide cohesion. These elements are composed entirely of words or numbers. In this chapter, all of the textual additions discussed underscore the idea of abundance.

Coupland first began to conceive of the idea of text as an art in *Microserfs*. The visual art elements placed into this story are explained to the viewer as the computer files of the main character of the novel, Daniel. In one of his first "entries" into his computer, he decides to create a file composed entirely of the word "money." This occurs when Daniel is discussing money with one of his business partners in the software design company started by the group of friends in the novel. The partner, Ethan, has been involved with several computer ventures previous to *Oop!* and has gone through alternating periods of being either extremely wealthy or extremely broke. Daniel is asking him how he can so cavalierly make and lose money. Ethan's only real advice on the subject is not to think of it as getting and spending money, but to think of money in terms of it replicating itself and building up. The end result of this suggestion leads Daniel to create *money* in his computer file: two facing pages of the novel in which the lowercase word money is repeated in the same font in even rows as if Daniel has taken the word and continuously copied and pasted it into a word processing page (Figure 2.1).

Looking at *money*, a viewer is supposed to consider abundance, and given the general tendencies of Coupland, the author does not necessarily want the reader to consider it in terms of the specific meaning of the word “money.” He is playing instead with visual abundance and exhibiting the excessiveness that he loves about the modern world. He likes the shapes that the words make and the patterns that are made within the repeated words, and he uses the main character’s computer entry to express this idea. In *Microserfs* Daniel says of his completed document:

I stared at an entire screen full of these words and they dissolved and lost their meaning, the way words do when you repeat them over and over– the way anything loses meaning when the context is removed– the way we can quickly enter the world of the immaterial using the simplest of devices, like multiplication.²¹

Through Daniel’s observation about the effects of multiplication, Coupland is also invoking the Pop art tradition, in particular the work of Andy Warhol. Warhol commonly worked with grids of repeated images, and actually created several works very similar to the idea that Coupland is working with here. Warhol’s *192 One Dollar Bills* (1962) and *Dollar Sign* (1982) both exhibit the same idea of repetition of money as found in Coupland’s *money*.

Coupland has said that this is his own tribute to Warhol. Warhol created his money repetition by printing rows of dollar bills onto a canvas (Figure 2.2.) Coupland’s version has more in common with Warhol’s works than just subject matter. The simple printing process used by Warhol, in which any number of prints can be made, is in a way very

²¹ Douglas Coupland, *Microserfs* (New York: Regan Books, 1995), 134.

similar to the way in which Coupland would have created his version using a word processor, by copying and pasting the text. Coupland says of *money*, and of another page that repeats the word “machine”:

This embittered reviewer said that they were nothing more than a “craven autobiography,” and attempts to fill space, but I thought that it was simply a nice Warhol tribute to have people see the words and think of Andy and of a fresh new way of seeing and loving the culture we live in.²²

Coupland’s response to his reviewer indicates that his text pieces serve as an homage to Warhol and to contemporary culture, but Coupland could have been thinking even deeper when making *money*. As Warhol did with his own references to money, Coupland could be speaking of art as a commodity, or he could be making a more ironic, autobiographical reference, though not in the cowardly way in which the critic accuses him. Coupland began writing as a way to pay for art supplies, essentially writing for the money, and then he ended up working solely as a writer and pushing his gallery–exhibited visual art to the back of his mind.

The use of a repeated word filling one or more pages is common in Coupland’s novels. Another example in *Microserfs* involves the word *machine*. The *machine* page is identical to *money* in that it is filled with even rows of the repeated word. In this case the impetus for the page is Daniel considering the word “machine” and how odd it sounds if you say it repeatedly until it loses all meaning. He is also considering how outdated the word machine sounds in a world driven by computer technology. It is obvious that Coupland is almost obsessed with the appearance and sounds of words. One of the most

²² Bloomsbury Author Information, *Interview: Douglas Coupland on JPod*, <http://www.bloomsbury.com/Authors/microsite.asp?id=1080§ion=1&aid=1581>.

telling statements of this was when he was discussing the look of words in an interview. He said, “Egg is a beautiful word, with the G’s capitalized. Zulu is a beautiful word.”²³ He is thinking of words and letters outside of their normal context. He is not considering meaning, but instead he is considering appearance.

The idea of a repeated word filling a page or pages also shows up in *JPod*, Coupland’s only other novel containing highly abstract textual additions. *JPod* deals with a similar technological backdrop as *Microserfs*. Into *JPod*, Coupland inserts more artistic textual elements that once again highlight the idea of abundance. While in *Microserfs* there were many textual additions, Coupland takes the idea much farther in *JPod* and ends up adding a massive number of pages to the book that function as art. As with *money* in *Microserfs*, Coupland includes pages like *ramen noodles* and \$ which work with the same idea of abundance by placing either the repeated words “ramen noodles” or the symbol for a dollar in even rows. As the basic idea of this has already been discussed with *Microserfs*, we will move on to how Coupland takes the idea of exhibiting visual abundance much farther in *JPod*.

In *JPod*, Coupland includes large sections of pages containing either number or letters. One of these numeric sections includes the 8,363 prime numbers between 10,000 and 100,000, which takes up a total of sixteen pages (Figure 2.3.) The second use of numbering pages is based on the first 10,000 digits of pi and takes up 22 pages. Another addition similar to the numeric pages are a series of twenty-two pages that list the 972 three-letter words allowed in Scrabble, with one fake word added (Figure 2.4.).

²³ Campbell.

In the storyline of the novel, these pages make up activities that are played by the members of a section of the software design company. They comprise such activities as finding the false prime number or finding the mistake in the digits of pi. Some journalists have suggested that these additions are meant to serve as activities for the reader²⁴, to make the reader use his or her brain in the same way as this group of highly intellectual people does in the novel. But it seems unlikely that the average reader would participate in this. Most people do not know all of the three letter words in Scrabble, or have pi memorized to the first 10,00 digits. It is illogical that the general reader would put down *JPod* in the midst of reading it and start to research these things to “play along” with the characters. While some of Coupland’s fans probably have done this sort of thing, the general population would not go through all of this. I would propose that Coupland did not intend these additions as a fun game. He was using them as a way to incorporate visual art into his fictional novel, and as a way to highlight visual abundance.

When just reading the novel, a reader encounters these pages and, regardless of whether he is thinking of them as an artistic statement, he will at least be amazed by the abundance of pages, and possibly shocked that the author would just include this in the book. The abundance of pages forces the reader to consider the *reasons* behind these pages. What is the average reader supposed to make of these?

Even if the reader does not take the idea far enough to think of these as a statement of abundance by an *artist*, at the very least she would have some thought as to why the author of the book included all of these seemingly senseless pages. The reader would at least have to recognize the sheer volume, or abundance, of the pages put before her.

Coupland said specifically of his additions to *JPod*:

I expect them to look at the number and words the way they might look at a Warhol canvas, just enjoy the multiplicity and the *muchness* of it all. I love abundance. Words don't just have to be words, and images don't just have to be images. I love replication, I love mass culture. Enjoy it! The world's a fucking brilliant place to live in.²⁵

In his fictional novels, Coupland was able to play with the idea of text as art, and to explore many different ways of working with text and using it as a reflection of different themes, like abundance. As Coupland returned to creating visual art that would be exhibited in a gallery, text once again became a component. While Coupland had always worked in a wide variety of media and techniques in his artistic practice, the incorporation of text was new. I propose that Coupland envisioned text as just another instrument in his artistic toolbox, as something else to use just as one would use paint, clay or a camera.

From creating textual art in his novels, Coupland began to apply his text as art approach to gallery work as well. And the similarities between works in the novels and those exhibited in galleries can sometimes be surprisingly similar. The works that best exhibit Coupland's visual use of text as a means to highlight the idea of abundance formed part of his 2006 exhibition *Play Again?* at The Rooms Gallery in St. Johns, Newfoundland. For this show, Coupland took sections of number- and text-based art created for *JPod* and placed them over the walls of three adjoining rooms of the gallery.

In two of the rooms, plain black letters on white walls form a rambling mass of text.

²⁵ Bloomsbury Author Information.

In a stream-of-consciousness fashion, the writing covers such topics such as how to succeed in business, the outsourcing of work to other countries, and odd advice on how to act at work such as. This abundance of text seems to come from several different points of view and switches topics quickly and not quite coherently. Some parts of it have an almost angry tone, but the general tone of this is frantic. The sentences and phrases make more sense than any use of text as art that has been seen in Coupland's novels, but are extremely hard to read. The stream of consciousness form had by the text, proves, without careful attention, hard for a viewer to follow or even remain interested in for longer than a few lines. For example, this brief section from the first pages of the *JPod*, which then formed the main body for *Play Again?* read:

People who use the phrase, "In these changing times, when the only thing certain is change itself" are idiots. Think about it and read the following sentence: "In these static days, when the only guarantee is stasis itself..." You see what I mean.

Sometime when you're all alone in a room, ask yourself if what you do for a living can be done by someone in India. If there's even a flicker of doubt, then you have to admit that you're doomed. Which is more humiliating: losing your job to a robot, or losing your job to someone who lives in a country whose standards of living you consider inferior? You can't fake creativity, competence or sexual arousal. If you have none of these three attributes, then pack it in right now. Go sell roadside corn in India. Your call is important to us.

While Coupland uses punctuation in these pages in *JPod*, he does not format this text in any way. The text is smaller than in the rest of the novel, and Coupland does not divide

the mass of words into any sections. There are no paragraphs to break up the block of words.

In the exhibit *Play Again?*, this abundance of text has been taken straight from *JPod* and placed directly onto the walls of the gallery in Helvetica font. Coupland leaves the walls otherwise unadorned. Only one area in the three rooms of the gallery has any coloration. This is found in a few walls painted in a dark red with Chinese symbols painted in gold (Figure 2.5.) The final of the three rooms has white numbers placed onto black walls (Figure 2.6.) In the center of each room is a low, long table filled with either stacks of blank white paper or symmetrically arranged rolls of toilet paper, almost like words have been released from paper, where they would usually be found, onto the gallery walls.

All of the text, with the exception of the Chinese, is unadorned. It is simple black text on a white background (Figure 2.7.) This use of a foreign text could be perceived as a way to add a decorative element to the exhibition, or as a comment on the perceived “exotic-ness” of non-Western cultures. Coupland could also be drawing attention to the high Asian population in Canada and the way that Chinese and Japanese lettering are seen more in ads and business signs as the population of non-English or French speaking citizens move to Canada. Coupland used this same idea in *JPod* in several pages where he showed a Chinese character along with its English translation. These pages simply had a large character with an English translation in parentheses directly under it. In the gallery setting we do not get a translation. Unless the viewer could read Chinese, these would just look like interesting symbols exotically colored. From the lack of translation it seems evident that the viewer should see these strictly as design elements, or maybe as an

abundance of characters on a sign for a Chinese business, or an advertisement, that is incomprehensible to the viewer. Like many of Coupland's works, many of the elements in *Play Again?* can be read in multiple ways. Coupland leaves much of his text-based work open to a plethora of interpretations. He rarely draws only one conclusion; his work is more about presenting facets of the modern world, and letting a viewer draw his or her own conclusions.

The final room to be discussed is the black room filled with white numbers. This number-filled room created a curious, and unintended, effect on those who entered it, that of relaxation. As the artist states:

When you're looking at nothing but numbers– a numerical field painting of sorts– an interesting thing happens in your brain. Its numerical center (wherever it is located) hums into operation, while your verbal and linguistic center shuts down. But the thing is, because you're looking at numbers but not doing anything with them, your brain is essentially in idle mode, and hence the relaxation.²⁷

In *Play Again?*, Coupland explores several ideas such as freeing words from paper and the importance that we place on the written word, but the idea that is most prominent is abundance, which, as Coupland's statement suggests, is also linked to relaxation.

Curator of *Play Again?* Shauna McCabe says, "Conceiving a space solely of text, Coupland offers a fresh new way of seeing the replication of mass culture and the abundance of the world around us."²⁸ Walls filled with letters and numbers quickly draw the mind to the idea of abundance and the role that abundance plays in modern culture, in

²⁷ Douglas Coupland, "I Luv Helvetica," *New York Times*, August 27, 2006.

²⁸ "Artist, writer and cultural commentator Douglas Coupland to open new contemporary art exhibition at The Rooms on May 19," *Government of Newfoundland and Labrador News Releases*, <http://www.releases.gov.nl.ca/releases/2006/tcr/0512n04.htm>.

particular the abundance of advertisements the average citizen encounters daily. Here Coupland is highlighting advertising abundance and possibly the way that we deal with its constant intrusion into our lives. After a while, all of the ads turn into a big blur of abundance. They just turn into a part of the scenery or the background. Unless an advertisement is very different, its content becomes fairly easy to ignore. They form a “field” of words and text that we zoom past in our cars or flip past in a magazine. Advertisements have just become a part of almost every landscape that one encounters. Rather than irritate the passer-by, Coupland suggests that they can inspire a sense of relaxation.

By using textual art as a way to highlight abundance, and the supposed positive aspects of abundance, Coupland has chosen the perfect visual format. In the *Play Again?* exhibition he took the theme of abundance that he was trying to show in his textual art in his fictional novels and finally put it in a setting where it receives the proper consideration as “art.” The abundance that could be misunderstood by a reader of one of his novels (as either being some sort of activity or as a useless filler of pages) can be considered in an artistic context. Coupland always wanted it to be thought of in this manner, but it seems unlikely that many readers of his novels fully thought about his intent. So, while he is working with the same concept of highlighting abundance with textual elements, the impact is very different in *Play Again?*.

One of the most important differences to consider when discussing Coupland’s text that was removed from JPod and placed on gallery walls, is in how the situation into which the text is placed affects the reader/viewer. In the novel, someone would not necessarily stop to think about why there are pages filled with numbers or repeated

phrases; they would probably just disregard the strange pages and move forward into the fictional narrative. However, if a person willfully went to see his textual installation, it is implied that she would spend some quantity of time absorbing the work and thinking about it. The gallery viewer seems more likely to happen upon the idea that Coupland is illustrating a visual abundance to make her think about the media abundance of modern society. Not that readers of one of the fictional novels could not come to the same conclusion, but Coupland is effectively interrupting the story for them.

Another important difference between encountering Coupland's textual art in a novel versus a gallery is the feeling gained by the viewer's experience of these pieces. While Coupland's plethora of pages containing the digits of pi, for example, exhibit abundance, they are just pages in a book that are easily flipped through. As with seeing an image in an art textbook versus actually seeing the piece in a gallery, there is definitely more of an impact seeing something in person. While the textual additions in his novels aren't reproductions, they are not the same as viewing a piece in a gallery. Granted, the pieces in the fictional novels do have advantages: they are portable and can be viewed for as long as one desires. There is no one blocking a view or any gallery hours that have to be adhered to, but when seeing viewing *Play Again?* at the gallery, the viewer is completely surrounded by the words and numbers. They have no choice but to acknowledge them and consider them. They are totally inundated. A different affect is caused to the senses than by just seeing a page in a book.

The words and numbers that are placed on these walls cannot be processed into any complete statement. They do not offer any real information. While we know that these words are from the novel *JPod*, they could really be from virtually anything; it wouldn't

make a difference. There is no information that gives references to characters or a story line. The viewer is simply given walls filled with stream of consciousness statements that were difficult enough to read when contained in a book, Chinese words that most are incapable of reading and numbers that require no processing. They all become the same blur that advertisements, signs and the prices contained in those advertisements and signs become to the people that are inundated with them everyday. In *Pop Art: A Continuing Tradition*, Marco Livingstone makes several statements about Pop artists, in particular Andy Warhol and abundance that could be directly applied to Coupland and his own desires for abundance. Given Coupland's hero worship of Warhol, it is clear that Coupland has modeled his own artistic intents after Warhol. Livingstone says of Warhol:

Warhol had an uncanny gift for selecting motifs from the glut of visual information characteristic of a modern industrial society overwhelmed by consumer products, newspapers, magazines, photography, television and the cinema. He was particularly astute in realizing that our over-exposure to images in the public domain, whether of famous faces or horrific events, gradually divests them of any apparent emotion and at the same time gives them iconic power by engraving them in our memory through the force of repetition.²⁹

While Coupland is working with text instead of iconic faces, the same principle seems applicable. Coupland could also be commenting that the abundant advertisements really contain no important information. Even when we are drawn into reading an ad or paying attention to a commercial, how often are we truly told anything important or life changing as these ads would want us to believe.

²⁹ Marco Livingstone, *Pop Art: A Continuing History* (New York: H.N Abrams, 1990), 118.

The abundance Coupland gives us could also be related to Internet search engines. Since in his stream of consciousness he is frequently referencing business and computer technology, maybe he is emulating in a way the random information that is commonly received from Internet searches or in spam emails. Most people familiar with computers have learned simply to glance at those and realize the information is not useful, much as a reader of *JPod* or a gallery viewer would quickly realize the abundance of text is not particularly useful to them for the content it conveys. Coupland has taken all of these things that we move past everyday and put them back into our face to draw our attention to this abundance of text that inundates us daily, much as Warhol did when he presented viewers with the familiar faces and products of popular culture.

But, it would be incorrect to say that Coupland is trying to draw attention to the evils of this abundance. Given earlier statements by Coupland (“I love abundance. I love mass culture”) Coupland would have us infer that he is commenting on abundance, but not totally damning it. He has taken the abundance that he considers to be beautiful, and the text that he considers beautiful as well, and placed them into a gallery setting to make more people see things the way that he does. He is elevating text as a visual element and also highlighting these issues of abundance and the importance we place on the written word.

Coupland’s statements about the joys of abundance cannot be taken only face value. While Coupland never says anything that really counters his love of abundance, he has made statements about advertising that are not entirely positive. This will be further discussed in the next section, but essentially, he expresses concern about all of the space that is taken up in his brain with “memories” that are actually advertisements and about

how these affect his personality. Given the connections between abundance and advertising, these concerns put a slight dent into his supposed love of all forms of abundance. The best way to think of Coupland's relationship to abundance could be to consider it a love-hate relationship. By presenting abundance in these mixed terms, he is also linking himself to the Pop art tradition. Livingstone says of Pop artists:

However pressing their desire to bring the 'real world' back into their art as blatantly and with as little ambiguity as possible, Pop artists remained acutely conscious of the historical context in which they did so. Their characteristic detachment enabled them to address themselves to the imagery they saw everywhere around them without completely submitting themselves to it.³⁰

When applied to Coupland, this statement makes sense. While he in some ways appreciates the abundance that inspires his art, he is trying to put it out there and see how viewers respond. By making only positive comments about abundance, he is not immediately putting a viewer in the place of taking a position on it, as would happen if he flat out stated its evils. He is removing himself from the situation, as Pop artists did, and allowing a viewer to consider the myriad of ways that they encounter and perceive the abundance that they encounter.

³⁰ Livingstone, 13.

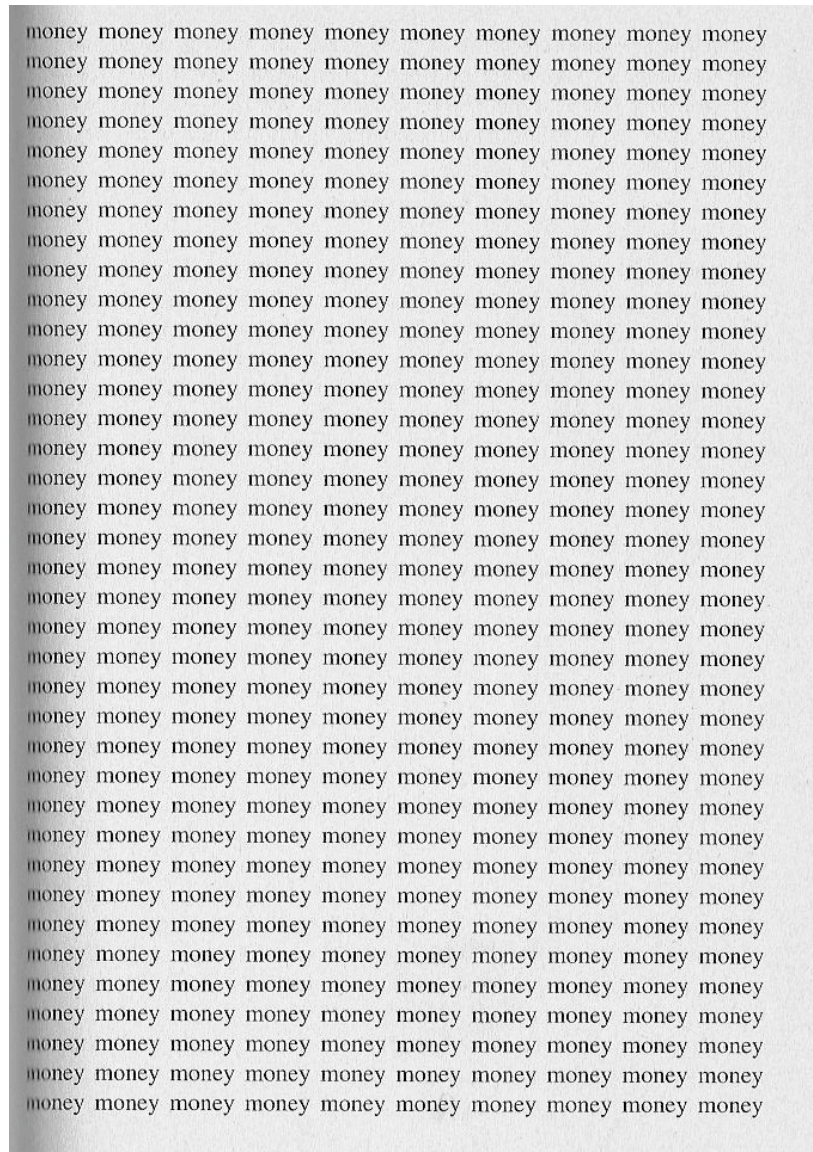


Figure 2.1
Douglas Coupland
money
(One page of two identical facing pages)
from *Microserfs*, 1995
Page 132



Figure 2.2
Andy Warhol
Dollar Sign
1982
Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh

10007 10009 10037 10039 10061 10067 10069 10079 10091 10093 10099
 10103 10111 10133 10139 10141 10151 10159 10163 10169 10177 10181
 10193 10211 10223 10243 10247 10253 10259 10267 10271 10273 10289
 10301 10303 10313 10321 10331 10333 10337 10343 10357 10369 10391
 10399 10427 10429 10433 10453 10457 10459 10463 10477 10487 10499
 10501 10513 10529 10531 10559 10567 10589 10597 10601 10607 10613
 10627 10631 10639 10651 10657 10663 10667 10687 10691 10709 10711
 10723 10729 10733 10739 10753 10771 10781 10789 10799 10831 10837
 10847 10853 10859 10861 10867 10883 10889 10891 10903 10909 10937
 10939 10949 10957 10973 10979 10987 10993 11003 11027 11047 11057
 11059 11069 11071 11083 11087 11093 11113 11117 11119 11131 11149
 11159 11161 11171 11173 11177 11197 11213 11239 11243 11251 11257
 11261 11273 11279 11287 11299 11311 11317 11321 11329 11351 11353
 11369 11383 11393 11399 11411 11423 11437 11443 11447 11467 11471
 11483 11489 11491 11497 11503 11519 11527 11549 11551 11579 11587
 11593 11597 11617 11621 11633 11657 11677 11681 11689 11699 11701
 11717 11719 11731 11743 11777 11779 11783 11789 11801 11807 11813
 11821 11827 11831 11833 11839 11863 11867 11887 11897 11903 11909
 11923 11927 11933 11939 11941 11953 11959 11969 11971 11981 11987
 12007 12011 12037 12041 12043 12049 12071 12073 12097 12101 12107
 12109 12113 12119 12143 12149 12157 12161 12163 12197 12203 12211
 12227 12239 12241 12251 12253 12263 12269 12277 12281 12289 12301
 12323 12329 12343 12347 12373 12377 12379 12391 12401 12409 12413
 12421 12433 12437 12451 12457 12473 12479 12487 12491 12497 12503
 12511 12517 12527 12539 12541 12547 12553 12569 12577 12583 12589
 12601 12611 12613 12619 12637 12641 12647 12653 12659 12671 12689
 12697 12703 12713 12721 12739 12743 12757 12763 12781 12791 12799
 12809 12821 12823 12829 12841 12853 12889 12893 12899 12907 12911
 12917 12919 12923 12941 12953 12959 12967 12973 12979 12983 13001
 13003 13007 13009 13033 13037 13043 13049 13063 13093 13099 13103
 13109 13121 13127 13147 13151 13159 13163 13171 13177 13183 13187
 13217 13219 13229 13241 13249 13259 13267 13291 13297 13309 13313
 13327 13331 13337 13339 13367 13381 13397 13399 13411 13417 13421
 13441 13451 13457 13463 13469 13477 13487 13499 13513 13523 13537
 13553 13567 13577 13591 13597 13613 13619 13627 13633 13649 13669
 13679 13681 13687 13691 13693 13697 13709 13711 13721 13723 13729
 13751 13757 13759 13763 13781 13789 13799 13807 13829 13831 13841
 13859 13873 13877 13879 13883 13901 13903 13907 13913 13921 13931
 13933 13963 13967 13997 13999 14009 14011 14029 14033 14051 14057
 14071 14081 14083 14087 14107 14143 14149 14153 14159 14173 14177
 14197 14207 14221 14243 14249 14251 14281 14293 14303 14321 14323
 14327 14341 14347 14369 14387 14389 14401 14407 14411 14419 14423
 14431 14437 14447 14449 14461 14479 14489 14503 14519 14533 14537
 14543 14549 14551 14557 14561 14563 14591 14593 14621 14627 14629
 14633 14639 14653 14657 14669 14683 14699 14713 14717 14723 14731
 14737 14741 14747 14753 14759 14767 14771 14779 14783 14797 14813
 14821 14827 14831 14843 14851 14867 14869 14879 14887 14891 14897
 14923 14929 14939 14947 14951 14957 14969 14983 15013 15017 15031
 15053 15061 15073 15077 15083 15091 15101 15107 15121 15131 15137

Douglas Coupland JPod 213

Figure 2.3
 Douglas Coupland
Prime Numbers
 (One of sixteen pages)
 From *JPod*, 2006
 Page 213

EFT EGG EGO EKE ELD ELF ELK ELL ELM
 ELS EME EMF EMS EMU END ENG ENS EON
 ERA ERE ERG ERN ERR ERS ESS ETA ETH
 EVE EWE EYE FAD FAG FAN FAR FAS FAT
 FAX FAY FED FEE FEH FEM FEN FER FET
 FEU FEW FEY FEZ FIB FID FIE FIG FIL
 FIN FIR FIT FIX FIZ FLU FLY FOB FOE
 FOG FOH FON FOP FOR FOU FOX FOY FRO
 FRY FUB FUD FUG FUN FUR GAB GAD GAE
 GAG GAL GAM GAN GAP GAR GAS GAT GAY
 GED GEE GEL GEM GEN GET GEY GHI GIB
 GID GIE GIG GIN GIP GIT GNU GOA GOB
 GOD GOO GOR GOT GOX GOY GUL GUM GUN
 GUT GUV GUY GYM GYP HAD HAE HAG HAH
 HAJ HAM HAO HAP HAS HAT HAW HAY HEH
 HEM HEN HEP HER HES HET HEW HEX HEY
 HIC HID HIE HIM HIN HIP HIS HIT HMM
 HOB HOD HOE HOG HON HOP HOT HOW HOY
 HUB HUE HUG HUH HUM HUN HUP HUT HYP
 ICE ICH ICK ICY IDS IFF IFS ILK ILL
 IMP INK INN INS ION IRE IRK ISM ITS
 IVY JAB JAG JAM JAR JAW JAY JEE JET
 JEU JEW JIB JIG JIN JOB JOE JOG JOT
 JOW JOY JUG JUN JUS JUT KAB KAE KAF
 KAS KAT KAY KEA KEF KEG KEN KEP KEX
 KEY KHI KID KIF KIN KIP KIR KIT KOA
 KOB KOI KOP KOR KOS KUE LAB LAC LAD
 LAG LAM LAP LAR LAS LAT LAV LAW LAX
 LAY LEA LED LEE LEG LEI LEK LET LEU
 LEV LEX LEY LEZ LIB LID LIE LIN LIP
 LIS LIT LOB LOG LOO LOP LOT LOW LOX
 LUG LUM LUV LUX LYE MAC MAD MAE MAG
 MAN MAP MAR MAS MAT MAW MAX MAY MED
 MEL MEM MEN MET MEW MHO MIB MID MIG
 MIL MIM MIR MIS MIX MOA MOB MOC MOD
 MOG MOL MOM MON MOO MOP MOR MOS MOT

Douglas Coupland JPod 239

Figure 2.4
 Douglas Coupland
Scrabble
 (One of four pages)
 From *JPod*, 2006
 Page 239



Figure 2.5
Chinese lettering
Play Again Y/N?
The Rooms Gallery, 2006
www.coupland.com



Figure 2.6
Random numbers
Play Again Y/N?
The Rooms Gallery, 2006
www.coupland.com

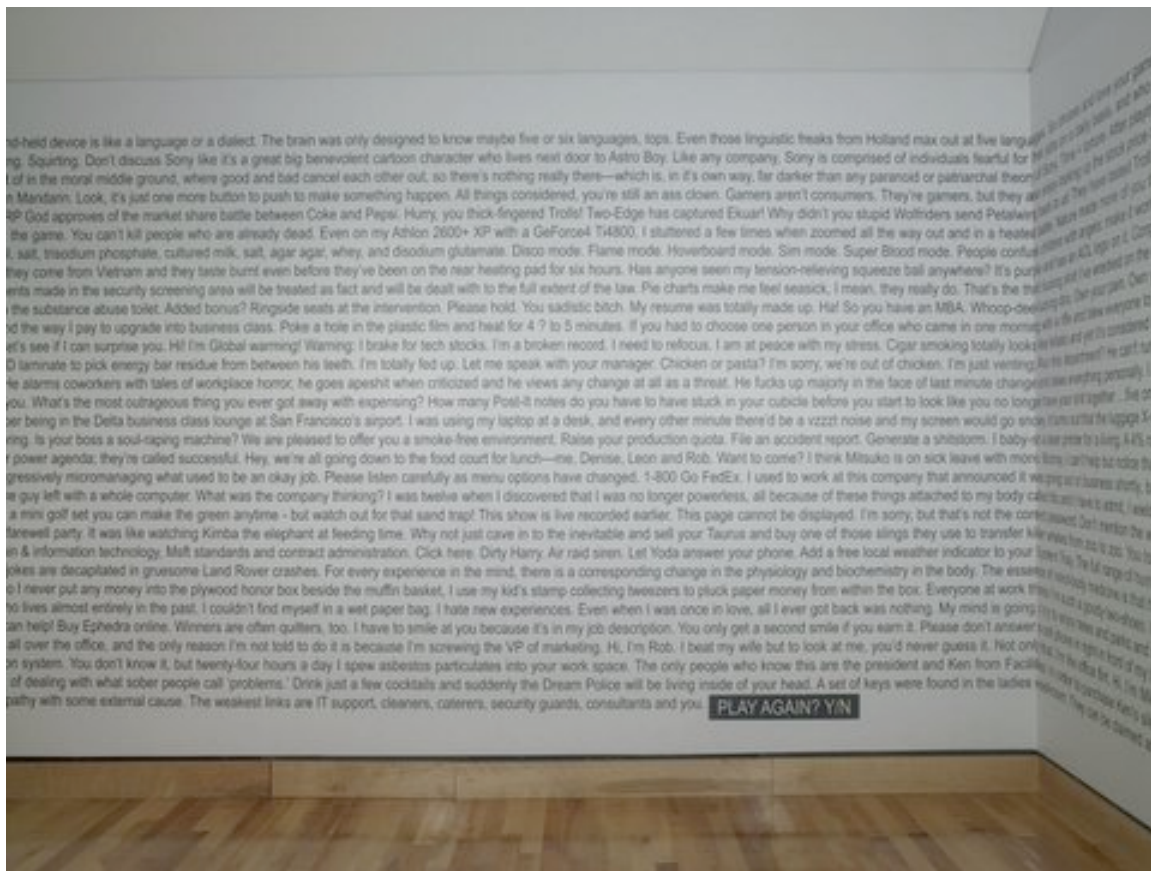


Figure 2.7
Stream of consciousness writing
Play Again Y/N?
The Rooms Gallery, 2006
www.coupland.com

ADVERTISING

The prevalence of advertising is one of the major themes that can be found in both Coupland's art and writings. This idea was exhibited in the last section, as Coupland uses visual abundance as a way to highlight the plethora of advertisements found daily in modern culture. Mentions of, and textual art that shows products and advertisements are constants in Coupland's novels and exhibited art. The use of advertisements and branding in Coupland's art also reflects the importance of Pop art to him and his artistic creations. Everyday products were a common subject in Pop art, particularly in the compositions of Warhol and Rosenquist. Coupland has found a unique way to use text to mimic advertisements and comment on the effect of advertising.

Coupland is also highly preoccupied with thoughts of how this constant bombardment with advertisement affects people. He has repeatedly mentioned his shock at the thought of how much of his own memory is filled advertisements, and how having these memories might affect him as a person:

The other day I saw a Shake 'N Bake TV commercial, one I had not seen in twenty years, and in a flash, the whole commercial came back to me, as though I had just seen it five minutes ago. So I guess my head is stuffed with an almost-endless series of corporation-sponsored consumer tableaux of various lengths. These "other" commercialized memories are all in my head, somewhere, and this is indeed something worth considering. What would it be like to have never had these commercialized images in my head? What if I had grown up in the past or in

a nonmedia culture? Would I still be “me”? Would my personality be “different”?³¹

Clearly, concern over the ramifications of a mind filled with advertisements weigh heavily on Coupland’s mind. In both *Microserfs* and *JPod* are filled with textual art related to advertising. The first instance of this can be found in *Microserfs*. As mentioned in the previous section, the main character of the novel, Daniel, creates files on his computer that become part of the novel. After he and some friends have a discussion about the surrealist artists’ interest in the subconscious, Daniel decided to create word banks of the random words and phrases that pass through his head during the day. From this topic, Daniel and his friends then wondered whether computers have a subconscious. If they do, what it would look like? In Daniel’s words: “I’m creating a file of random words that pop into my head, and am feeding these words into a desktop file labeled SUBCONSCIOUS.”³² The words placed into this “file” are typically unrelated to one another and are mainly words straight out of popular culture, such as tabloid topics and advertisements for food, drinks and other products. Sometimes they are like truisms or phrases. For example, in the first illustration here, the sample contains a jumble of words, like “calling card,” “three lemons,” and “stolen watches,” and the truisms “Subjected to the random, you acknowledge your inability to comprehend logic and linear systems” and “We generate stories for you because you don’t save the ones that are yours.” These subconscious files (Figures 3.1 and 3.2) seem to hold elements from the frenzy of thoughts that run through the mind, and further seem to be a direct reflection of

³¹ Coupland, *Polaroids from the Dead*, 112.

³² Coupland, *Microserfs*, 45.

Coupland's worries about the information in his mind, and how much space advertisements actually occupy inside of his head.

These textual additions are interspersed into the novel and commonly appear at the beginning and end of chapters. While these are a manifestation of the main character's mind, rarely do the things that are mentioned in these subconscious pages relate to anything in the storyline. Rather, Coupland is using these additions as a way to insert his new form of textual art into the novel.

When examining these examples from *Microserfs*, it is clear that while Coupland uses the same font, he changes the font size and spacing throughout these pages, almost as if he is trying to make textual illustration out of the words from his own subconscious. These types of textual additions are related to Coupland's early fascination with James Rosenquist.³³ A young Coupland liked to create his own Rosenquist-style creations with images from *Life* magazine. He connected his creations with Rosenquist's painting *F-111* because it depicted "all these images that flow daily inside your head."³⁴ Clearly, a similar idea is at work here, given that these phrases are things that are supposed to be floating around in the head of the main character of the novel. Coupland seems to be creating the textual equivalent of a Rosenquist collage. When thinking of Coupland's word banks in terms of Rosenquist's collage-style paintings, the word banks become easier to conceive of as art, particularly as Pop art. When looking at one of the word banks from *Microserfs* (Figure 3.2) you can imagine the elements here as brightly colored images crashing together: plane flight numbers, a big bowl of oatmeal and a Big Gulp

³³ See Marsha Tucker, *James Rosenquist* (New York: Whitney Museum of Art, 1972).

³⁴ Coupland, *Polaroids from the Dead*, 122.

drink among other things. Like Rosenquist, he is taking the mundane images from magazines and televisions advertisements and placing them into the arena of high art.

In *JPod*, Coupland also uses textual art related to advertising, but in a much more blatant way. While there are pages in *JPod* that appear similar to those in *Microserfs*, there are also several textual additions that function purely as advertisements; they are simply product labels.

The first example of these can be found in a page that just contains information about *oriental noodle soup* (Figure 3.3). It contains the name of the soup company, Nissin, the product number, size information and the information that the flavor of this particular noodle soup is chicken. As in the “subconscious” pages of *Microserfs*, here Coupland has played with the font size and made some of the lettering bold. He also changed the justification from right at the top of the page and left at the lower portion of the page. *Oriental noodle soup* seems to be bridging the gap between the subconscious pages and more straightforward advertising of the next piece, *Doritos*.

The most obvious example of product placement, *Doritos* (Figure 3.4) looks like the back of a package of Doritos Rollitos. We are given product numbers, calorie and nutritional information and the ingredient list. There is no evidence that Coupland has altered this information in any way with the exception of the missing serving size information. He is not arranging the information or playing with font sizing as was done in the subconscious pages or in *oriental noodle soup*. He has reproduced the product in its most basic form.

While the subconscious files in *Microserfs* seem more related to the works of Rosenquist, these examples from *JPod* seem more closely linked to Warhol. Coupland is

constantly quoting Warhol's art in one way or another, and these JPod advertisements seem like just another take on Andy as *money* was in *Microserfs*. *oriental noodle soup* and *Doritos* are just the next level of Warhol's Campbell's soup cans. This example shows the core of Coupland's reconception of the Pop art movement. Instead of showing a basic can of soup, Coupland is showing basic, textual, product information. He didn't create these facts, but rather he copied them from a label. Also, there is no apparent change in the formatting as he did in the subconscious pages in *Microserfs*. This is a clear imitation of Warhol's original Campbell's soup can paintings that were left in the original colors. The fact that Coupland did not alter this label information raises an important reason as to why Coupland uses only text when drawing the attention of the viewer/reader to advertisements. When the images are stripped away from advertisements, they seem much less appealing and much more ridiculous. In *Doritos*, viewers are given the information "nacho cheesier" but no image to connect this too. They are forced to connect those words with the nutritional information and the ingredient list that contains disodium phosphate and artificial colors. The product that is being described, when stripped of alluring packaging and a bright image of the chips, does not sound appealing in any way. If a person had never experienced this product, the basic facts given here do not inspire one to purchase Doritos, although this page could be viewed as a cue to run to the fridge and get a snack, as a person would do during a commercial break. Or, Coupland could be displaying products that relate to the lives of the programmers in the novel. They all work long hours and have inactive social lives; Ramen noodles and Doritos are probably some of the foods that are quick and easy to eat when home alone or working long hours making computer programs.

As is evident in everyday life, advertisements pop up in more and more spaces daily. We do not just see them in magazines or on television. They are virtually everywhere we look. Branding is even occurring in movies now, with the characters using or mentioning certain products, like Herbal Essences shampoo or Coca-Cola. Any sports event has product endorsements placed in every direction. There are few experiences now that are completely advertising free. It would appear that Coupland is suggesting that advertisements could work their way into books. Someday we could be looking at an ad in between chapters of a novel we are trying to read. So here we can see that Coupland is considering the massive quantity of advertisements that we encounter daily, but also the future of advertising and how far it could possibly spread into every aspect of daily life.

To further prove this idea, Coupland includes examples of advertising on computers, for example a penis enlargement spam email and eBay style advertisements that the characters in the novel crafted to sell themselves. By using these computer advertisements, he is showing us how quickly computers have become inundated with ads. Maybe books aren't far behind. Given Coupland's concerns over how advertisements have already affected his mind, it seems unlikely that he wants them to invade books as well. By creating *oriental noodle soup* and *Doritos*, he is leading his audience to think about how prevalent product placement is, and to draw its own conclusions about how it can affect their lives, or how it can affect their reading.

Outside of his novels, one of the few examples of Coupland's artworks that incorporates text and advertisements is *Corporate Safety Blankets*, 2007, which is made up of two simply woven, silk-edged cotton blankets entitled *Blanket No. 1* and *Blanket*

No. 2 (Figures 3.5 and 3.6.) These blankets are similar in that they are both off-white and completely covered in product logos arranged in evenly spaced rows. The logos appear as either a picture, text or the combination of the two. Coupland has exactly copied the logos, from their signature illustrations to their signature fonts and colors. The product logos range from Hello Kitty to Frosted Flakes to Xerox. Coupland is exhibiting both the abundance of advertisements we encounter daily and also our virtually infantile connection to certain products. By making these blankets and giving them the title *Corporate Safety Blankets*, Coupland is showing our connection to products and the way that we identify with specific brands. Do we think of ourselves as safe or trendy because of our connections to these certain products? Do we feel safe using these products because of the level of advertising that they have as opposed to a new, unknown brand? What does our use of these things say about us as individuals and as consumers? Further, do these logos and signature fonts become the design elements of our everyday lives? Once again, Coupland seems to be tackling the idea of how the abundance of advertisements, which we cannot avoid, affects us visually as well as psychologically.

Another example related to advertising and text can also be seen in *Play Again?*. Comprised of rooms filled with rambling text, Chinese lettering and numbers, this installation, as discussed in the previous chapter, encourages the viewer to think of the abundance found in modern society. More specifically, Coupland indicates that one of the components of that abundance involves advertisements. The use of the rambling text, indecipherable numbers and foreign lettering lead one to think of the advertisements that inundate us daily, but that we often ignore by flipping through a magazine page or changing the TV channel. Or, they could simply be an illustration of the plethora and

constant bombardment of advertisements given that the walls of the rooms are totally filled with text.

Coupland uses text to illustrate the prevalence of advertising for many reasons: to show the abundance of advertising, to relate to the Pop art tradition, to strip advertising of its allure and to attempt to come to terms with the effects that advertising has on the mind and personality. Coupland, like Warhol, never makes statements that would lead us to believe that he is harshly against the prevalence of advertisements. He has only commented on how great he believes abundance to be. But, considering how prevalent his references to advertisements are, they must be something that weighs heavily on his mind.

Two final examples reveal the ambivalence Coupland has for advertising. The first, from 1992, is an actual ad for Absolut vodka (Figure 3.7) that Coupland created. Presented in a collage format, it features a story about two friends remembering their trip to the 2003 World's Fair.³⁵ This ad was part of a series of advertisements created by writers. The fee they received for creating their ads was donated to charity (in Coupland's case a wildlife fund.) Coupland's second foray into advertising occurred in 2007 when he was a spokesperson for Blackberry Pearl. He was featured in commercials, the webs site for the product and in print ads. This time the money he received was donated to an art gallery in Vancouver. Coupland was involved in these projects as a way to give money to others, but he received much backlash from his own fans via the Internet for these decisions. Coupland's art and writings are always much discussed by his hardcore base of fans. As the spokesperson of Generation X, some people have come to feel that he has to

³⁵ "Absolut Coupland," *Absolut Gallery: Literary Ads*, [Http://www.absolutad.com/absolut_gallery/literary/](http://www.absolutad.com/absolut_gallery/literary/).

be a certain way and act a certain way, and apparently these ads made people consider him a sell-out to the group that he named. Coupland, either in response to these people, or as a way to validate the advertising of himself, placed explanations in the bibliography section of his own website entitled “The Vodka Thing,” in which he explained his motives, saying:

People can forget that as a writer your ways of fundraising for charity are extremely limited. Painters can donate paintings to auctions, but writers?

Donating books is one option, but it won't raise much. To raise a meaningful sum

I think you really have to put yourself out there.³⁶

Coupland is both supporting advertising by being involved in the process and simultaneously making being involved with advertising seem shameful. Clearly, Coupland has a confused relationship with advertising, which could be something else that he took directly from Warhol.

Warhol brought into his work an outlook and values absorbed through his successful commercial art practices and through mass media. He and his painting seemed egoless, deadpan, impersonal, unemotional, inauthentic, contradictory.³⁷

Could it be that Coupland, knowing that we must endure advertising bombardment, whether we approve of it or not, is sending a message about how to turn what appears to be a negative into something positive? Through his artistic reworking, he is essentially subverting products and logos and advertisements by taking things meant to make us desire and remember products and turning them into a conceptual rendering of visual

³⁶ Douglas Coupland, “The Vodka Thing,” [Http://www.coupland.com/coupland_bio.html](http://www.coupland.com/coupland_bio.html).

³⁷ Michele Bogart, *Artists, Advertising and the Borders of Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 301.

decoration, something pleasing to look at, but not something that makes us want to purchase a product. Coupland, in both his writings and his art, has a way of taking the everyday and turning it into something aesthetically appealing.

Sands

stolen watches abandoned wedding rings

**buried cinderblocks full
of \$100 bills.**

You want to surrender.

Subjected to the random, you acknowledge your inability to comprehend logic and linear systems.

21

royal flush
barbecue sauce
garage door openers
antenna
La Quinta

three lemons
plastic bucket
woofer
touch-tone
calling card

**We generate stories for you because you don't
save the ones that are yours.**

Figure 3.1
Douglas Coupland
21
from *Microserfs*, 1995
Page 349

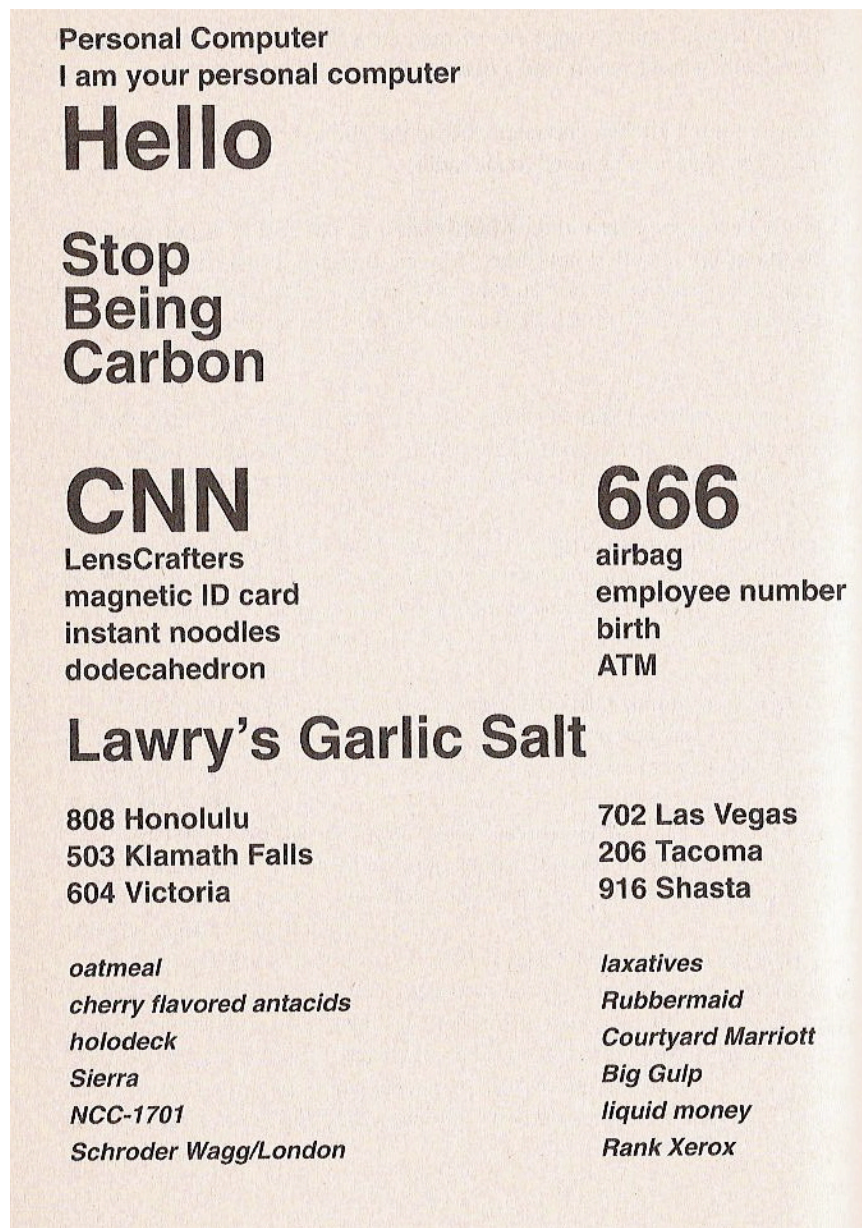


Figure 3.2
Douglas Coupland
Lawry's Garlic Salt
from *Microserfs*, 1995
Page 46

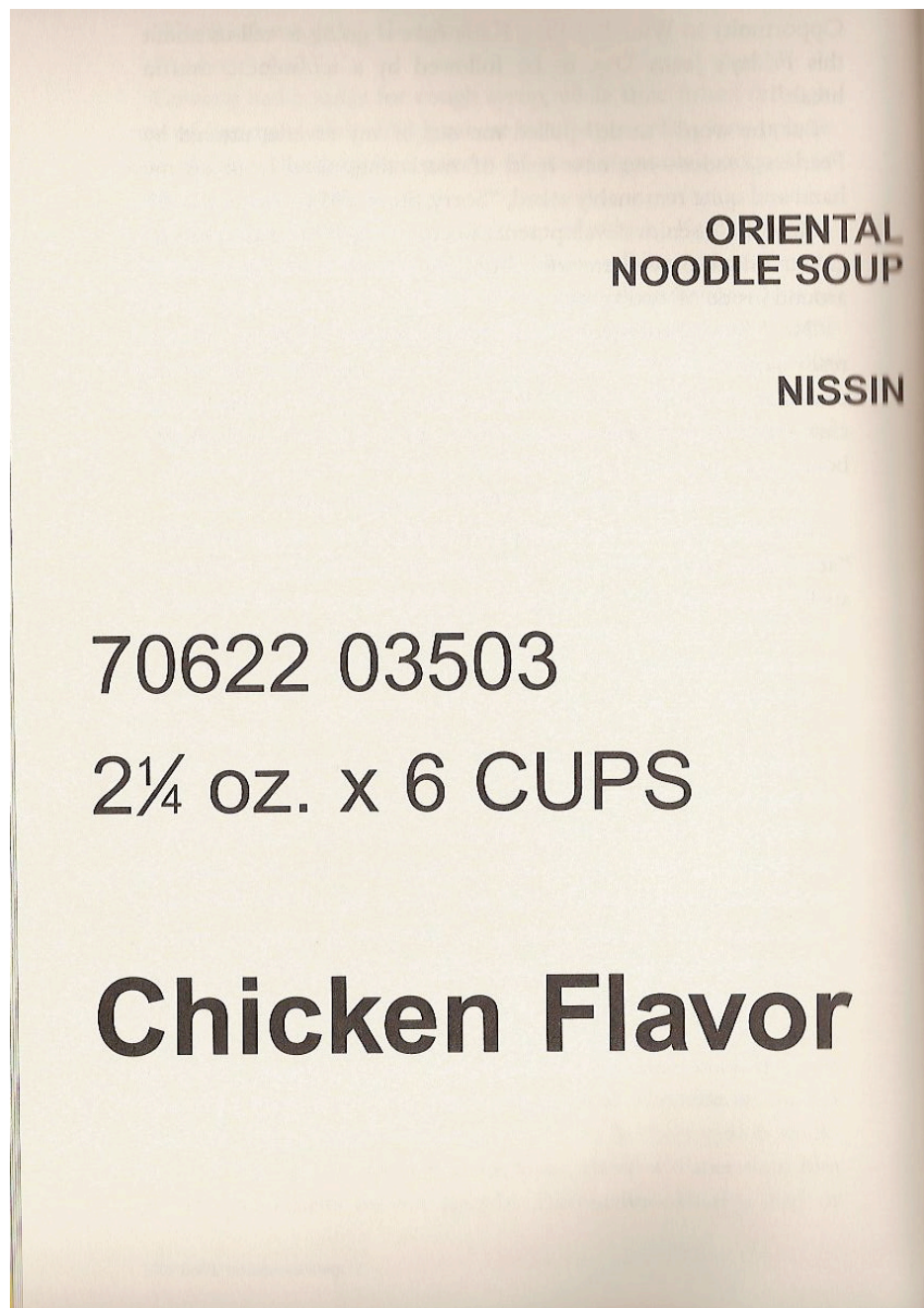


Figure 3.3
Douglas Coupland
Oriental Noodle Soup
From *JPod*, 2006
Page 18

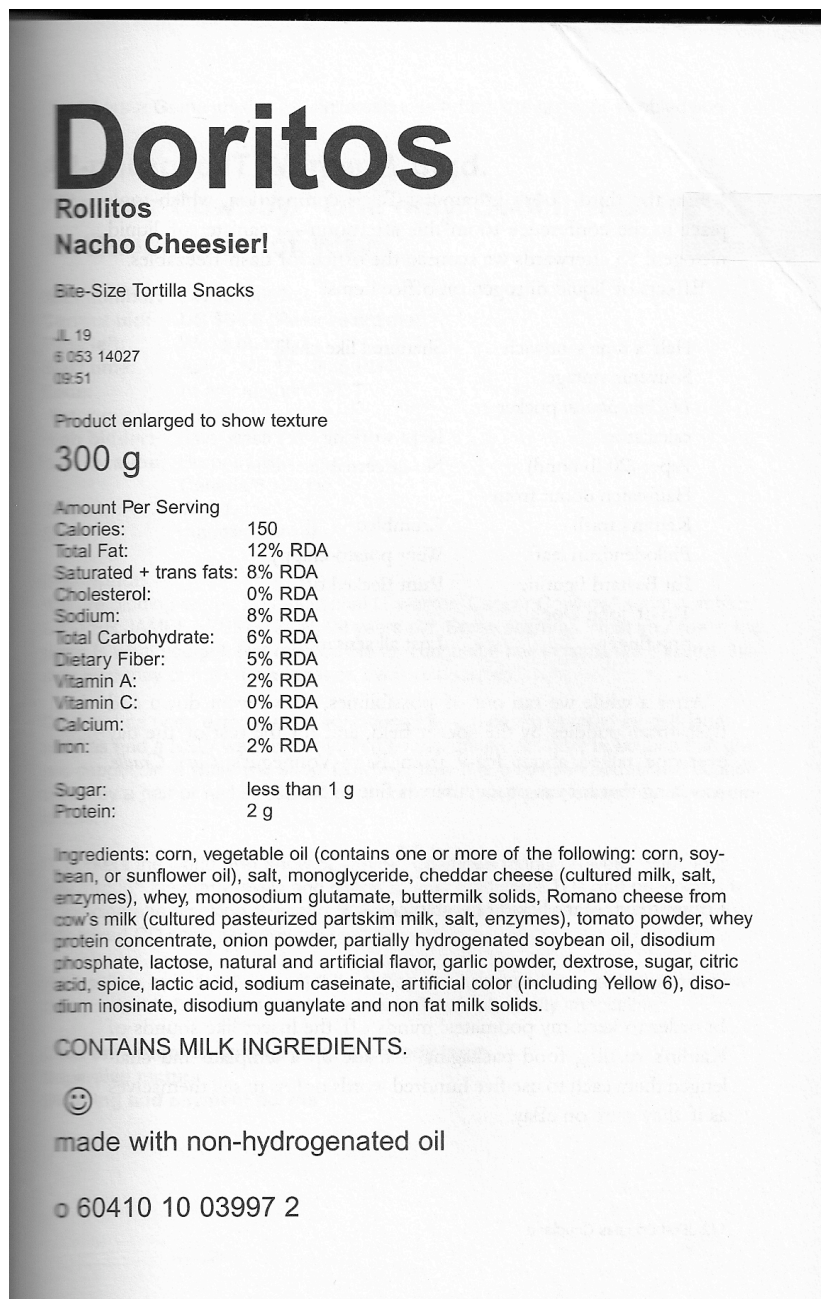


Figure 3.4
Douglas Coupland
Doritos
From *JPod*, 2006
Page 141



Figure 3.5
 Douglas Coupland
Corporate Safety Blanket No. 1, 2008
www.coupland.com



Figure 3.6
 Douglas Coupland
Corporate Safety Blanket No. 2, 2008
www.coupland.com

www.absolut.com/literaryads

TECHNOLOGY

Technology, specifically computer technology, forms the third major theme that can be found in Coupland's novels and visual art. Coupland does touch on other aspects of technology in his novels and non-textual visual art, but in his text-based art, computers are the technology most commonly discussed. This is most evident when looking at his novels *Microserfs* and *JPod*. These are the only two of Coupland's novels that have artistic textual additions, and they are also his only two novels that deal with technology. In both of these novels the characters work at technology companies: in the former, Microsoft, and in the latter, a knock-off of video game makers EA Games. Both of these novels seek to explore the inside lives of programmers. The settings and characters of these two books seem to move Coupland into thinking of text in a different way, not just as the means of writing a book and producing a storyline.

When exploring technology-related textual art in Coupland's novels, the first place to look is in *Microserfs*. It is evident that the relation of the book to computer programming had an impact on Coupland. Coupland tends to draw on what is around him in his creation, as was clear when examining his art in terms of the themes of abundance and advertising. He feels that his training as an artist (in which you are able to use any materials) differs greatly from training in literature or training as a writer, in which you only have words to work with.³⁸ The art that he puts into his books is working with his artistic toolbox more than his literary one. At some point while creating this novel, he

³⁸ Phil Patton, "A Night Out with Douglas Coupland," *New York Times*, September 9, 2001.

realized that text could serve as simply another tool, just like paint, canvases or clay would.

While researching *Microserfs*, Coupland immersed himself in the lives of computer programmers actually working at Microsoft in order to fully capture the experience of being young and in the field of software design. This period of research must have inspired him artistically. Possibly, he began to think how the lines of code involved in computer programming came to look like art to the people who were working with them everyday. In the novel he references this idea by describing strings of computer code as beautiful. For example, when Daniel, from whose perspective the story is being told, describes one of his roommates he says, “He lives to assemble elegant streams of code instructions. He’s like Mozart to everyone else’s Salieri.”³⁹ A reference that compares computer programming to composers shows us how even the ones and zeroes that make binary code can take on an artistic element to those who work with them. Maybe Coupland caught this zeal from the programmers and started to see numbers and letters differently in the process.

Since the culture around Microsoft was little analyzed up until the point this book was created, it is peculiar that Coupland chose this company and the previously little-discussed computer culture. But Coupland is commonly ahead of the curve when it comes to spotting new trends. It is known that Coupland has said that he considers Bill Gates to be an artist, as he has stated, “He takes bits and pieces from here and there and converts them into entities that compel and make you see the world in a new way.”⁴⁰ The

³⁹ Coupland, *Microserfs*, 13.

⁴⁰ P.J. Huffstutter, “From Gen X to Microsoft,” *San-Diego Union Tribune*, June 6, 1995.

quote about Gates further develops the idea that Coupland began to see things differently and conceive of art differently. It is easy to imagine how Coupland could see these programmers and their own creativity being unleashed onto a computer, which led him to think rethink about the things he could do as he was writing his novel on a computer.

Regardless of a definitive source, with the artistic elements in *Microserfs*, Coupland combines technology with artistic creativity. He shows that even binary code, a repeated word, or tabloid phrases can become beautiful and visually interesting beyond their original text– or numeric–based meanings, though some critics of the book simply refer to them as “all kinds of typeface experiments and word games.”⁴¹ Coupland is showing an appreciation for this text and numeric based production that happens in the computer world, and is also showing how easily the same material can be transferred to the art world.

The connection between art and technology once again links Coupland to Pop artists. Technology was a major of a concern to Pop art as it is to Coupland’s own art, though the kinds of technology available to artists has drastically changed since the 60’s. Warhol’s artistic techniques have been discussed by Livingstone, who notes:

Warhol suggested the possibility that art could be made by anybody or as a collaborative venture along the lines of commercial mass production... Warhol proposed an art that revealed nothing of its maker and that presented the process of mark-making not as a creative act but as a purely mechanical operation.⁴²

Along these same lines, both Rosenquist’s and Lichtenstein’s art also evokes mass production, which was an important aspect of consumer culture and technology during

⁴¹ William F. Powers, “Douglas Coupland’s New Phrase,” *Washington Post*, July 13, 1995.

⁴² Livingstone, 78.

that period. Rosenquist commonly included objects in his paintings that evoked production and Lichtenstein based his characteristic look (the Benday dots that gave his paintings the feeling of a printed comic strip) on mass printing. Mass production, printing and screenprinting were the elements that affected the Pop artists in the sixties, but in the period Coupland is working, the computer is the most important technological development that has changed society. Through his own explorations into creating art on computers, Coupland actually found that Pop art was very easy to manufacture through this new technology. As he noted:

American Pop artist James Rosenquist has always been one of my favorite painters. So when I really got into Photoshop in 1998, I used his visual techniques as my training guide on how to use this new software. Using Pop imagery from all over the place I was able to learn about layering and gradation and cutting and pasting and ... in the end I came to the conclusion that the 1960's Pop artists were merely dry runs for year 2000 imaging software. For example, Andy Warhol's work was about cutting, pasting and cloning, while that of Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns was about opacity, layering and filtering.⁴³

Much as he was able to create Pop art, Coupland's own textual art would be simple to recreate. Computers allow anyone to reproduce the textual art that Coupland is placing in his novels. All of the examples that have been looked at from his novels thus far would take very little time to recreate in any word processing program. Coupland is essentially democratizing the creation of art with his textual style.

⁴³ Douglas Coupland, "Photoshop= Pop Art," *New York Times*, August 13, 2006.

An example of Coupland connecting textual art to technology can be found in the pages of *Microserfs*. Here several pages are filled with seemingly random repetitions of ones and zeros (Figure 4.1.) This is actually binary code, a language of computer programming in which ones and zeros replace all other numbers and letters. Coupland claims that these pages actually do mean something when converted from binary, though he will not reveal the actual decoded message.⁴⁴ So, while there is actual meaning here, what are the chances of the reader, besides computer programmers or experts, actually being able to understand what this means? Some readers might not even be familiar with binary code and its function, much less be able to decode this string of numbers. Furthermore, there is nothing really interesting for the average reader to gain from this inclusion. For a computer expert, this line of binary code could serve as an activity, but it is unlikely that Coupland's novel, which generally discusses any technological data in an accessible way, would include something that was intended to cater only to an extremely small segment of its readers. The only way that the author could have intended this to function was as a purely visual element. When viewing these pages from an artistic standpoint, there is an overwhelming feeling of a decorative pattern. These ones and zeroes could easily translate into patterned wallpaper or fabric.

According to an article on Wikipedia, the decoded text is based on the Rifleman's Creed, a part of the United States Marine Corps doctrine, and reads:

I heart LiSA Computers

This is my computer. There are many like it, but this one is mine. My computer is my best friend. It is my life. I must master it, as I must master my life. Without

⁴⁴ Huffstutter.

me, my computer is useless. Without my computer, I am useless. I must use my computer true. I true. I must compute faster than my enemy who is trying to kill me. I must outcompute him before he outcomputes me. I will. Before God, I swear this creed. My computer and myself are defenders of this country. We are masters of our enemy. We are the saviours of my life. So be it until there is no enemy, but peace. Amen.⁴⁵

This military creed has been adapted as the creed of computer programmers. Coupland is relating the relationship that riflemen have to their weapons to the way that computer users, or even hackers, feel powerful when using their own weapon, the computer. This creed also serves to invoke the idea of an enemy. Considering that Coupland placed this message into a language that was unreadable by the vast majority of the population, maybe this creed was intended as an inside joke to the programmers who helped him research the novel, while the rest of his readers can just take it as a piece of visual art and enjoy it for its decorative elements.

JPod also has many examples of technologically-related textual additions. In the same vein as the binary code pages in *Microserfs* are pages placed into *JPod* that replicate the language of a software design language. The first example is in a page that looks very similar to the stream-of-consciousness pages found in *Microserfs*. The page gives technical information about a computer program's texture and lighting (Figure 4.2.)

The second example (Figure 4.3) is more elaborate and contains a full page of left-justified text that is smaller than the font in the actual storyline of the novel. This is a long strand of programming language that Coupland could not have intended for the

⁴⁵ "Microserfs," Wikipedia. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Microserfs>.

average reader to understand. This pages works on two levels: on the one hand, it is a piece of textual art for Coupland, and on the other it allows the reader of the novel to have a visual representation of what these programmers actually do and what their work, which they mention throughout the novel, actually looks like. Much as in *Microserfs*, Coupland could be showing us what beauty is to these programmers. To a software designer, this would mean something. Coupland is using his textual art to show the reader/viewer something new and something that can be seen as beautiful in its own right.

The most interesting of the textual additions that invoke technology in *JPod* are several pages placed throughout the book that evoke the idea of the book as a computer. By this I mean that there are pages that are similar to things that would be found on the Internet, in email or in scenarios encountered when playing a video game. The first example of this is found in the first pages of the novel: the phrase “click here” (Figure 4.4) is justified towards the right and placed into the center of the page. This is the first of the additions to the novel that creates the connection between the book and a computer, or computer game. “Click here” creates the idea of clicking to begin the novel, the way you would click to open an online advertisement, log on to an email account or to start a computer game. By connecting the novel to a computer application, Coupland is connecting the novel to technology. This connection serves two purposes, one related to writing and one related to art. Coupland can give the reader the feel of technology and how pervasive it is, while further connecting them further to the characters and their jobs, but he is also opening the book up as a place in which to insert his textual art. He has said that this book can serve as a sort of time capsule for the year 2006 and what it is like

living in an age where we can use Google and find out any information that we want at any time of day.⁴⁶

The next addition relating the book to a computer is *pause* (Figure 4.5), in which the word “pause” is preceded by an ellipsis to imply a pause. It is also right justified and centered vertically. This relates to a computer game or a video game, which must be physically paused, as a book must be physically put down. The final page of the novel repeats the idea of the book as a game by simply stating *Play Again Y/N?* in the lower right corner of the page (Figure 4.6). Coupland is making the connection that the reader of the novel could choose to read it over again by simply starting back at the beginning.

Coupland continues all of the same computer references and abundance of information on the web page created to promote *JPod* before it was released, which is unlike any of the other promotions he has done for other novels. The website looks like a computer desktop strewn with a plethora of open windows, graphics, video clips and examples of his own textual art from the novel. He is inundating the viewer of the website with the same plethora of computer technology that he references and places into the actual novel.⁴⁷

Other textual additions that can be viewed as relating to a computer or video game are also interspersed throughout the novel. One of the most interesting textual additions from a visual standpoint is found in *happycamper* (Figure 4.7). The page contains the heading “All new company passwords must contain at least one character, integer and symbol.” Underneath this are examples of passwords that a user is trying to create created from the words “happy camper.” The successive tries are marked through with double

⁴⁶ Bloomsbury Author Information. *Interview: Douglas Coupland on JPod*.

⁴⁷ “Very funny...very evil...the website for the latest novel by Douglas Coupland,” [Http://www.jpod.info/](http://www.jpod.info/).

lines until they reach the final password, happycamper*5, which is apparently accepted by the program. Coupland's interest in the visual characteristics of letter and words is evident here. This experiment allows him to play with the visual presentation of the words.

Other examples that evoke the realm of computer information are a spam email for penis enlargement, another insert for some sort of banking scam and a page reading "grind the molten bucket" (which could be a direction in a skateboarding game.) None of these elements are directly connected to the story line. They are randomly placed throughout the novel and do not contain page numbers. Some textual additions, such as the numeric pages in *JPod*, do contain numbers, but in those cases they are activities in which the characters of the novels are engaged. All of the examples that best illustrate technology are left unnumbered, which is another way that Coupland can distance them from the plot.

Many critics consider Coupland to be a conveyor of the futuristic or of the next big thing. He has worked on Hollywood films, in which his job was to add design elements to make the movie sets look futuristic. He seems always to be a step ahead in his writings. For example in *Generation X*, he started a term that now defines a whole group of people, and in *Microserfs*, he explored an industry in which no one else was interested at the time. By placing elements that simultaneously refer to advertising and technology into *JPod* he is trying to comment on the future of novels. He has made statements in the past that show his concern over what will happen to books: "Books are central to the transmission of culture from one generation to the next. At least for now."⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Douglas Coupland, "Insects," *New York Times*, August 31, 2006.

Coupland recognizes that books might not always be in the format that they are now. For example, books for iPods, e-books and Amazon's Kindle wireless reading device are all formats that are trying to replace the bound paper book. In his novels, Coupland envisions the book's eventual move onto computer hard drives or the Internet, where the reader can be interrupted with Pop-up ads, or can stop in the middle of a chapter to read email or check on bids on eBay.

The theme of technology rarely appears in Coupland's exhibited visual art, with the exception of the numeric room in *Play Again Y/N?*. Given his tendency to repeat similar themes and ideas in all area of his artistic production, it seems likely that he has just not produced many works in this theme for the gallery environment. It would appear that he has purposely chosen not to bring as much of his technologically themed art into the gallery space because he feels that it is more related to his novels, and to the future of book reading. Coupland could be creating a connection here between technology and mass-produced art. Given that anyone could recreate his textual pieces in a simple word processing program, Coupland is using technology to create works of art that are easy to replicate endlessly.

Coupland's visual experiments in his novels also show the technological changes that have occurred in how printed materials are created. According to him, "In art school I studied typography for several years. This was pre-Macintosh, and we had to draw fonts by hand using gouache, including numbers and diacritical marks."⁴⁹ Having access to computers has completely changed that. Creating his books on a computer allows him to toy easily with font sizes and word placement to his heart's content. He does not have to

⁴⁹ Douglas Coupland, "I Luv Helvetica."

create a page on a real piece of paper until he has manipulated his words into a placement that is satisfactory to him.

Clearly, Coupland's textual art is indebted to technology. Writing about technology with *Microserfs* seems to be the major impetus that began his textual explorations and led him to think of the appearance of words in addition to their usages. With technology, Coupland is afforded the opportunity to conceive of textual artworks, and is immediately able to create them. Through Coupland's explorations of text-based artworks, he is able to consider Pop art in a new era and also exhibit both the positives and the negatives of a culture that has become entirely dependant on computer technology.

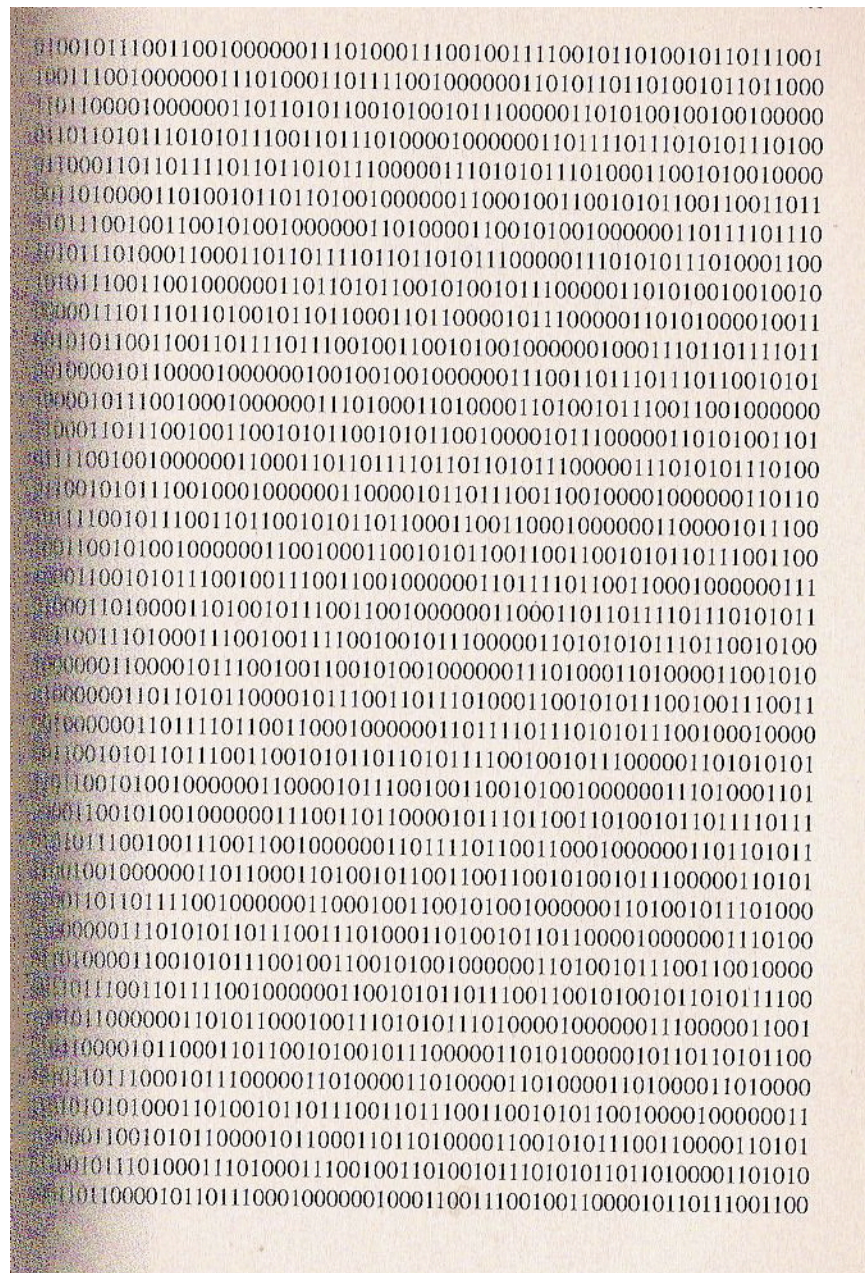


Figure 4.1
 Douglas Coupland
Binary Code
 (One of two facing pages)
 from *Microserfs*, 1995
 Page 105

//

Texture diffuse:

DiffuseMap

Float amount = 3.0i

LightMap

[. . . n_x , n_y , n_z , x, y, z, r, g, b . . .]

Figure 4.2
Douglas Coupland
Texture diffuse
from *JPod*, 2006
Page 90


```

//called each frame and updates camera position based on position of its target and the current camera
cut void GmMsCameraFollow::vUpdate(TReal rTimeDiff)
{
    //      vUpdate2(rTimeDiff);
    //      return;

    GmMsPosKeyFrame *poCurrentDesiredKeyFrame;

    poCurrentDesiredKeyFrame = m_oCurrentCut.poGetCurrentPosKey();

    m_oActiveKeyFrame.vSmoothToKeyFrame(poCurrentDesiredKeyFrame,rTimeDiff);

    //get a pointer to the target GmAcActor *poTarget = m_poGmAcActor->poGetTarget(); ASSERT
    ( poTarget != NULL );

    //get a pointer to the camera actor
    GmAcCamera *poCamera = (GmAcCamera *)m_poGmAcActor;
    ASSERT(poCamera);

    if (
        poPhantom &&
        (RealAbs(poCamera->rGetLookVerticalDesired())< 0.2f) &&
        (RealAbs(poCamera->rGetLookHorizontalDesired())< 0.2f))

        g_bGoToBox = True;
    else
        g_bGoToBox = False;

    m_nUpdatePositionOfCameraDelay++;

    AtMaPos3 oPosTarget,oPosPlayer;
    AtMaVector3 oLookPos;
    TBoolean bUpdateTarget = True;
    //set camera offset from target and look at target
    GmMsPosKeyFrame *poPosKey = &m_oActiveKeyFrame;;

    //get the desired look and at offsets
    poPosKey->poLocationAt()->vGetVector(m_oAtOffset);
    poPosKey->poLocationLook()->vGetVector(m_oLookOffset);

    //update the camera's FOV
    poCamera->vSetFOV(poPosKey->rGetFOV());

    //get the current vectors from the actor
    vGetVectorsFromActor();

    //set our initial destination position to be that of the target
    poTarget->vGetVectors(&oPosPlayer, &m_oFwd1, &m_oUp1, &m_oRight1, NULL);

    // BVOL prediction and Rising
    {AtMaVector3 oTemp;
    oTemp = oPosPlayer;
    oTemp.vSub(m_oState.m_oLastTargetPosition);

    if(ReallsApproxZero(oTemp.m_rZ))
    // If the player's Z position hasn't changed,
    // then slide the box up
    {oTemp.m_rZ = rTimeDiff*400.0f;}
    else
    // If the player's Z position is changing, leave

```

Figure 4.3
 Douglas Coupland
Programming Code
 from *JPod*, 2006
 Page 379

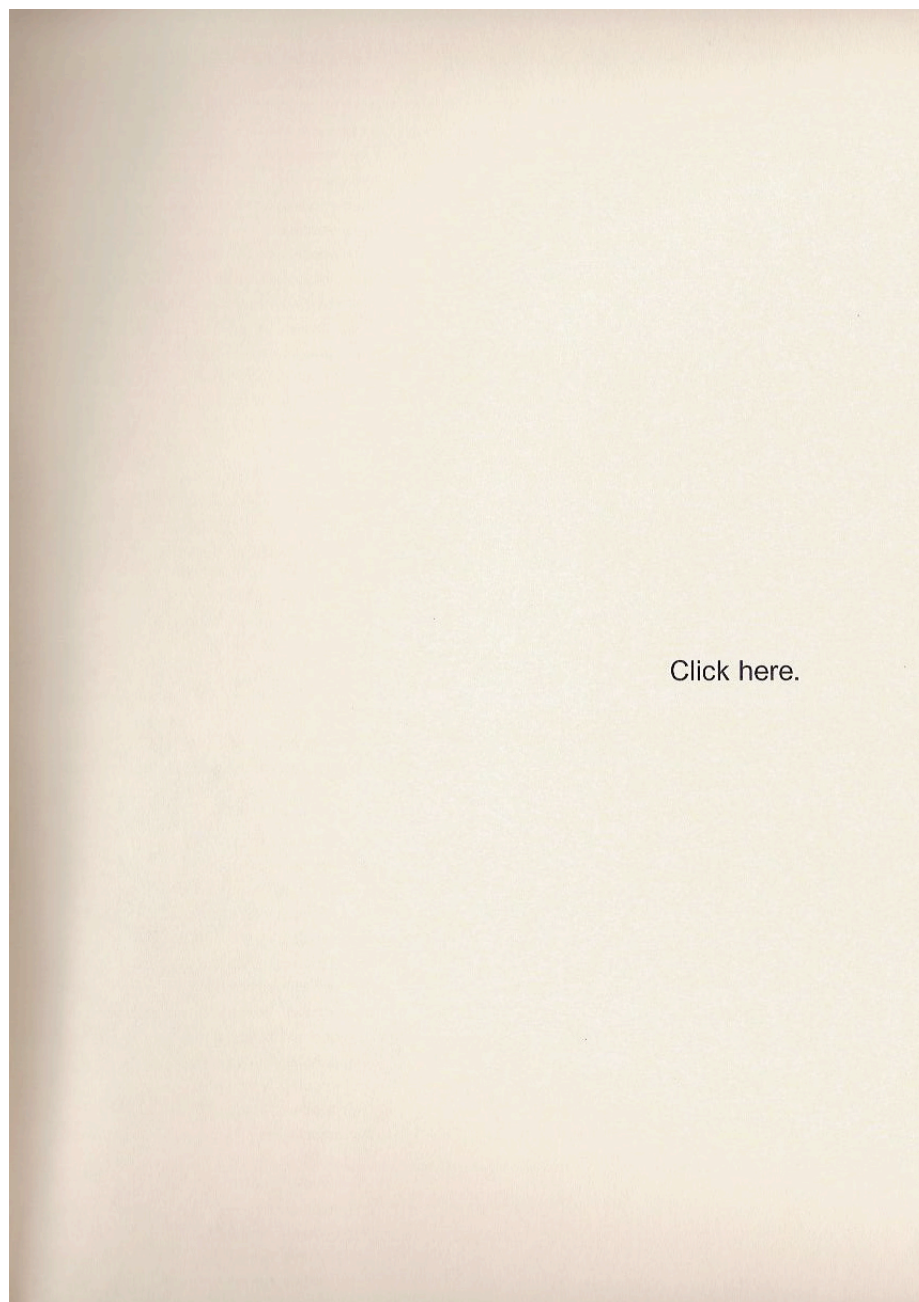


Figure 4.4
Douglas Coupland
Click here.
from *JPod*, 2006
Page 11

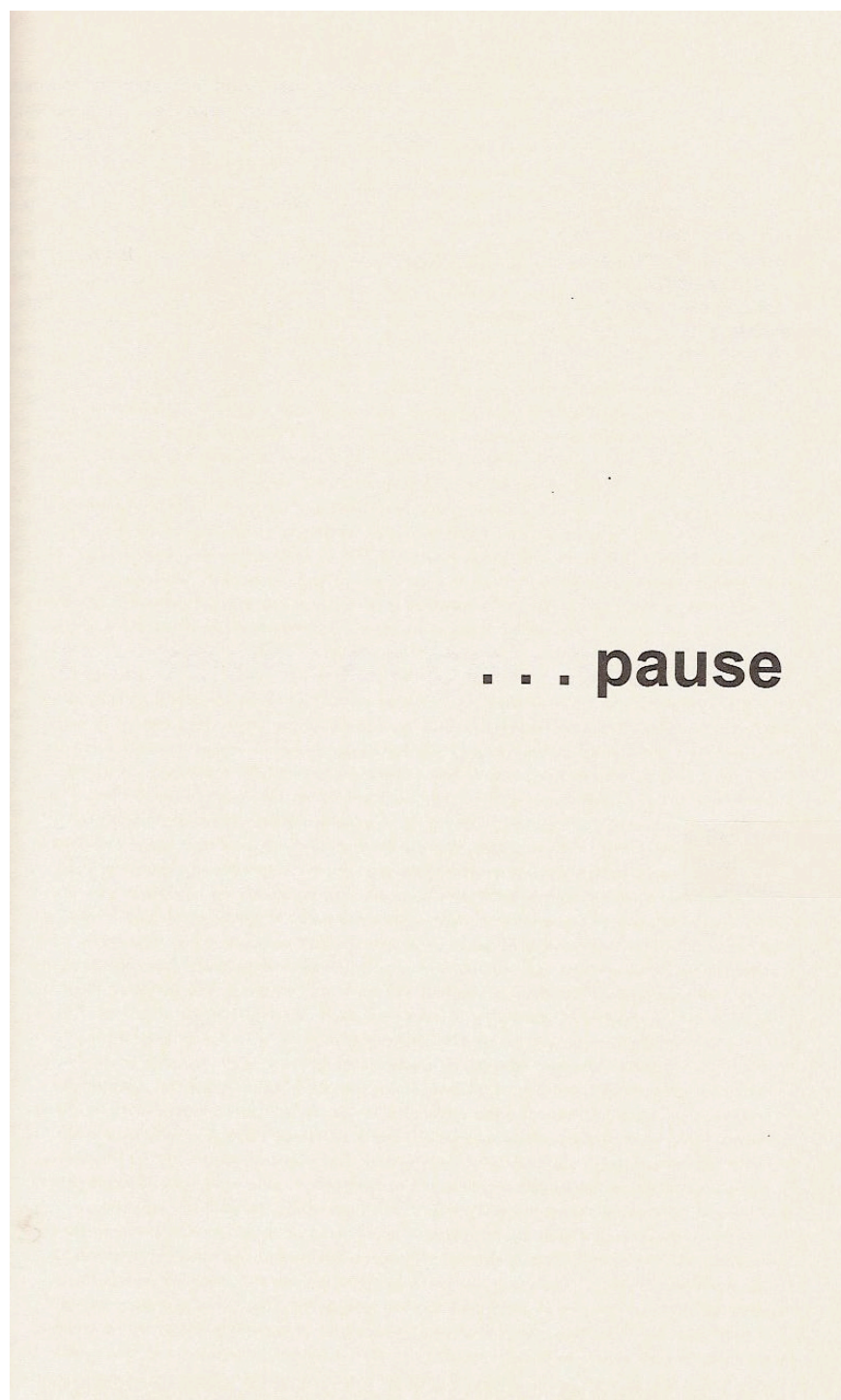


Figure 4.5
Douglas Coupland
...pause
from *JPod*, 2006
Page 281



Figure 4.6
Douglas Coupland
Play again? Y/N
from *JPod*, 2006
Page 449

**All new company
passwords must contain
at least one character,
integer and symbol:**

~~happycamper~~

~~happycamper5~~

~~happycamper*~~

happycamper*5 ✓

Figure 4.7
Douglas Coupland
happycamper
from *JPod*, 2006
Page 87

TRANSLATION

A final theme in Coupland's work is that of translation. Coupland is fascinated by translation and the results that translations can yield, particularly when using computer translations, so this section can be seen as closely related to the previous chapter on technology. This section will further explore Coupland's take on Pop art in the current era and explore his conceptual text-based creations.

As with the other themes explored thus far, the best place to start looking at Coupland's interest in translation is in his novels. One of the first examples of translation that Coupland creates can be found in *binary code* (Figure 4.1.), a piece first mentioned in the technology section. This is the best example of a piece that reflects Coupland's fascination with both technology and translation. Technology provides Coupland with easy translation tools. However, while the binary example would not be simple for the average user to execute, most of Coupland's works with translation involve simple computer applications, like the search and replace function in Microsoft Word or the translation tools available in a search engine like Google.

An example of these simpler types of translations can also be found in *Microserfs* (Figures 5.1 and 5.2) in two facing pages that at first glance seem to be filled with randomly chosen and spaced letters. On one page consonants appear, with vowels on the other, vowels. Closer examination leads the viewer to conclude that both are from the same piece of text, and, if placed together, the two pages of letters would create a cohesive statement. But what are the chances that the average reader would just go through and put all of this together to discover what the two pages read? While a zealous reader might try to determine the meaning of these two pages, after the first few

sentences, he or she would realize that it has nothing to do with the plot of the novel. With a little more information, the reader would come to the realization that the pages are actually a recording sent by Patty Hearst to her parents when she was kidnapped by the Symbionese Liberation Army.⁵⁰ There is no evidence in the novel as to why this content related to Patty Hearst was chosen for a textual experimentation.

These two pages were supposedly created by Daniel, the main character of *Microserfs*, after he says:

During dinner we discussed encryption. I got to wondering what a paragraph with no vowels would look like, remembering that when Ethan first met Michael, at a Chili's restaurant, Michael was busy deleting vowels on the menu. So later on I'm going to experiment with this.⁵¹

This is the only reference to these pages discussed in the novel. The Hearst reference, however, comes from Coupland's own interest in the topic. He has repeatedly mentioned her whenever discussing the important events of his childhood, has read excerpts from this recording by Hearst at his book readings⁵² and has even written a short story about her captivity. The short story can be found in Coupland's 1994 book *Life After God*, a collection of fictional short stories. In a section entitled "Patty Hearst," the narrator, Louie, relates a story of his missing sister Laurie, who disappeared from the family after problems with drugs. One of her favorite games was pretending to be Patty Hearst. Louie says,

⁵⁰ Nathan Helgren, "Microserfs Mystery Messages," *The Easter Egg Archive*, [Http://www.eeggs.com/items/33319.html](http://www.eeggs.com/items/33319.html).

⁵¹ *Microserfs*, 305.

⁵² Alexander Laurence, "Interview with Douglas Coupland," *The Write Stuff [Interviews]*, 1994, [Http://www.altx.com/int2/douglas.coupland.html](http://www.altx.com/int2/douglas.coupland.html).

“I think Laurie liked the idea of total transformation that Patty Hearst embodied after she became Tania and began robbing banks for a brief period. I suppose Laurie sensed unstoppable changes happening inside herself and found the Hearst story compatible with those internal changes.”⁵³

Choosing the Hearst passage can be seen as a very symbolic choice for translation, as Patty Hearst herself went through a transformation, from normal college student Patty to gun-toting SLA member Tania.⁵⁴

Once again, and as with other examples discussed in this thesis, Coupland is using this source text to play with the appearance of letters: he is making these letters decorative. He is turning them into an embellishment, like a pattern on paper, and hiding their original intent, as words that are meant to convey an idea. He is using the letters in a manner similar to a design motif. Coupland has mentioned on occasions his interest in negative spaces that can be made by the removal of letters.

In *Microserfs*, we are seeing the beginning of Coupland’s forays into translating. A strange element of this inclusion, however, is that it does not appear that Coupland has much interest in his works being translated back into their original source. It appears that he has never revealed the sources of either of the translations in *Microserfs*. Through his translations, he is making a comment about the havoc that can be done to a source once it goes through a bad translation. We can see from his Patty Hearst pages. Coupland clearly chose a source that was important to him, but rendered it so that it remains incomprehensible unless the reader goes through a lengthy process of putting it back together properly. Coupland is showing that translation can take the importance out of

⁵³ Douglas Coupland, *Life After God* (New York: Pocket Books, 1994), 242.

⁵⁴ Kathy Ramsland, “The Claiming of Patty Hearst,”
[Http://www.crimelibrary.com/terrorists_spies/terrorists/hearst/1.html](http://www.crimelibrary.com/terrorists_spies/terrorists/hearst/1.html).

words and turn them into something else entirely, something that nonetheless has aesthetic appeal. From an artistic standpoint, he is creating visual art in the process. If the reader/viewer were aware of the original source, it would take away from the visual impact of these pieces. She would be more intent on meaning than on seeing these combinations of letters or numbers as beautiful in their own right.

In *JPod*, Coupland inserted a section that looks similar to the *Patty Hearst* pages in *Microserfs*, but to a more humorous end. Derived from what was supposedly once a full page of text, the phrase “mother fucker” emerges from the random letters that remain after the process of translation (Figure 5.3). It is unknown what translation process Coupland used to create this, or if he even did actually make this from an original full page of text, but given Coupland’s lengthy experimentations with text, it seems likely that he did run this through some form of translation, possibly a search and replace function as was probably done in the *Patty Hearst* pages.

From these examples, it would appear that Coupland is using text to make the viewer think of letters as abstract entities, to look at them as one would look at lines made by a pencil on a piece of paper or shapes made on a canvas by a paintbrush. These are ideas that have been previously discussed here, but there is also another idea that Coupland would like a viewer to consider when seeing these letters or numbers that he has rendered the source meaningless: he wants the viewer to consider the effect that translation can have on a text, and how translation drastically changes a text’s appearance, and thus the reader’s ability to understand its source. In our modern world, textual information is constantly translated from one language to another at a rapid speed. Whereas articles and books used to be painstakingly translated to reflect the nuances of

different languages, now documents rapidly move from one language to another, or from one format to another, and anyone can translate a web page using Google and other search engines, though their end result may not be in any way accurate. While Coupland is generally a fan of technology and the rapid spread of information, he seems skeptical of translation, although he does use it to meet his artistic ends. From “mother fucker,” we can see that Coupland is also playing with humor, to show the funny and strange results that can be gained from computer-aided translation processes.

That Coupland is sometimes wary of translation is evident from the artworks that he creates and also from his own writing career. Whereas most of his books have been translated into several languages, one of his novels, *God Hates Japan*, written in Tokyo in 2001, was never translated into English. Coupland has said that he would only agree to have the novel translated into English if the translator were unskilled and the novel had a weird “Japanglish” feel to it.⁵⁵ Though Coupland says that he would allow such a translation, it seems strange that it has not happened in the years since the novel was written. Maybe since the book is about Japanese culture, he feels that it would not have the same effect in English.

Coupland’s first gallery works to incorporate the theme of translation are a series of grid-style paintings that were displayed at the Monte Clark Gallery in Vancouver in 2005. As part of the larger show *Retranslation*, this series is comprised of several paintings decorated with a multicolored grid pattern (Figure 5.4), with some of the boxes of the grid featuring letters, while others are left blank. Coupland claims that his exhibition *Retranslation* “investigates the new meaning of translation in a world of file sharing,

⁵⁵ Douglas Coupland, “God Hates Japan,” *New York Times*, August 17, 2006.

search engine translations, and endless digital replication of text-based work.”⁵⁶ The paintings further illustrate his observation.

The concept for these paintings is based on an art piece originally proposed by Coupland for Hans Obrist’s 1994 *do it* exhibitions, and is included in the accompanying book. For *do it*, a wide variety of artists proposed ideas for visual art or performance art that any person could feasibly create. For the exhibitions of this show, different galleries picked a selection of these ideas and had someone follow the instructions as proposed by the original artist. Coupland’s contribution to *do it* is similar to the concept and process that he shows in these paintings from *Retranslation*.⁵⁷ He suggests that the at-home artist take a paragraph from one of his or her favorite novels and run it through a series of translations and print each translation on a different piece of colored paper and then grid those pages together. He wants the translations done using a translation function on a search engine (which are notoriously incorrect on translations.) These translation functions typically leave the reader with a document that gets some of the main ideas across, but has strange grammar and phrasing, due to the hardships of moving words accurately from one language to another.

In the *Retranslation* grid paintings, Coupland takes passages from popular books and novels and then runs them through a series of translations, starting with English and moving through several different languages before finally translating them back into the original English. The blank squares are a by-product of the translation leaving the original text with “missing bytes and blips.”⁵⁸

⁵⁶ “The Thousand Year Plan,” Coupland.com, [Http://www.coupland.com/art/essay.html](http://www.coupland.com/art/essay.html).

⁵⁷ Hans Ulrich Obrist, ed., *do it* (New York: e flux, 2004), 66.

⁵⁸ Sarah Milroy, “Coupland’s literary lunch,” *Globe and Mail*, September 6, 2005.

The main influence for Coupland's *Retranslation* series is Jenny Holzer⁵⁹. While Pop art led Coupland to art, and gave him many of his ideas, Jenny Holzer's text based works could be said to have opened the door for the types of works that Coupland creates for the gallery. While her influence can be seen throughout his writings and art, these grid paintings seem directly inspired by Holzer's 1979- 82 project *Inflammatory Essays* (Figure 5.5) in which she took writings by revolutionaries like Lenin, Chairman Mao and Hitler and placed them on brightly colored copy paper. These were also translated into English and Spanish from a variety of source languages.⁶⁰ The connection between Holzer's works and Coupland's grid painting here is compelling. Coupland uses popular source material in his grid paintings, has them translated into other languages and then back to English. Like Holzer, he works with brightly colored panels, though in a slightly different format than Holzer's colored paper. Given that Coupland claims Holzer was the main impetus that led him to attempt writing, it would seem that his *Retranslation* series is both inspired by Holzer and also an homage to her work with text. Coupland's use of text, in general, serves a different purpose than Holzer's, though. Holzer typically uses "inflammatory" statements that are meant to evoke strong reactions, whereas Coupland works with text either to reveal its decorative qualities or to highlight more conceptual issues, like abundance or translation. It seems that Coupland is not trying to emulate the work created by Holzer as much as trying to embrace the same use of text as a tool for making art that she helped pioneer.

In all of these paintings, he uses popular source material, like well-known books and songs that are his favorites as well as those Generation X. The use of popular source

⁵⁹ See Jenny Holzer, *Jenny Holzer* (New York: Phaidon Press, 1998).

⁶⁰ Tim Ivison, "Jenny Holzer's Inflammatory Essays," *For Your Art*, February 8, 2008, <http://losangeles.foryourart.com/?s=enjoy&item=15>.

material can be seen as a way to highlight the effects of translation and how it can drastically change the original source. This section will only explore one of Coupland's *Retranslation* paintings, *Fight Club*, in depth as all of the paintings are similar and work with the same concept. In this painting (Figure 5.6), Coupland has taken a passage from the novel *Fight Club* by Chuck Palahniuk and run it through his series of language translations.

The first impression of *Fight Club* is that it resembles an unfinished crossword puzzle. Upon realizing that the text only runs vertically, the viewer begins to try to fill in the missing letters, to determine what the text would read if completed. However this task proves to be impossible without careful study of the source novel, which is indicated to the viewer by the painting's title. For viewers familiar with the novel, the first unfinished word in the grid, Tyler, refers to the main character of *Fight Club*. Thus Coupland is not trying to be entirely obscure with his reference. He has picked a very popular source material, but due to the translation process, the viewer is left with something unintelligible. It seems here that Coupland is using text as he has before, as a design element to create an abstract composition. But he is also commenting on the nature of translation, particularly when technology is involved, and the ways in which it can affect the written word. The exclusion of letters appears random, as do the color choices relegated to certain squares. While we do know the reason that some squares are blank (due to translation), there is no apparent color scheme. This randomness further emphasizes the letters as decorative elements, as Coupland has done before with his translations. But further investigation reveals that there is hidden meaning in this painting.

According to Coupland, “Any paragraph pumped through massive translations ends up with a huge amount of chaff (strands of numbers, etc.) However, once removed, the remains are often a chilling reductive haiku of the initial text.”⁶¹ It is interesting to note the few words that do make it through the translation in their entirety: gun, job and die. These are what Coupland could be referring to with his statement about “a chilling reductive haiku.” When combined with the only colors outside of pastels that Coupland leaves (red and black), adds a sinister aspect to the composition.

In his grid series, Coupland is draws on sources that are familiar to his generation. Through the series, which all have a similar appearance to *Fight Club*, Coupland uses popular songs and novels. Through this, we can see another example of Coupland’s interest in Pop. These novels and songs are easily relatable to the Brillo pads or Campbell’s soup cans used by Warhol; it is popular material that is known by the majority of the population, not just by the art world elite. He is taking content that is familiar to his core audience and reworking it, but whereas Warhol kept his brands recognizable, Coupland is subverting them through translation.

Further, he is commenting on technology, in particular the search engines and the tools that they have for translating that were mentioned previously. The original source information loses much of its meaning, and usually becomes practically unintelligible, with only the most basic information left behind, which is reflected in Coupland’s paintings.

The final and most radical example of Coupland’s experimentation with translation can be found in the same show as his grid paintings (*Retranslation*) and were

⁶¹ “The Thousand Year Plan,” Coupland.com.

actually displayed in the same space, so as to be seen simultaneously (Figure 5.4). This series is comprised of six nests created out of the pages of books (mostly Coupland's own) and one made of money. Here I will briefly discuss one of these nests, *Generation X* (Figure 5.7), made out of the pages of Coupland's 1991 novel. He created these pieces by soaking the pages in water, making them pulp and then chewing them and forming them into nests. Coupland's nests are his only works that combine art and text and have dimensionality. In his multimedia works, he does large-scale three-dimensional pieces, but generally only places text on flat surfaces.

Along with the other nests, *Generation X* shows the culmination of Coupland's combinations of art and text. He has moved beyond his more literal uses of the combination of the two creative forms. In his other works he is seen using the text of other people, whereas in these pieces we see Coupland using his own texts and own ideas more fully than in the works previously discussed. Through these nests he is able to comment on the role that paper plays in our society, whether in fictional works, currency or a sacred text. According to Coupland, "The crux of these pieces lie in the ongoing dialogue on whether they are still the books, or whether they are entirely a nest, or whether they are something in-between; perhaps just an idea that lives in ether."⁶²

The nests serve as the pinnacle of Coupland's work with translation. He is working in a different vein here. He is translating words on paper; translating material instead of text. No longer is he relating translation to decoration or humor, he is transforming words into the three dimensional, and finally removing them from all context. He is creating something entirely new, and radically different looking from the

⁶² "The Thousand Year Plan," Coupland.com.

works of art that have been examined before. Finally, Coupland is translating his own words. This is not a take on Warhol, Rosenquist, Holzer or on a song from popular culture. He is working with his own previous creation. He is also removing technology, namely computers, from the translation process. Creating these nests required him to manually create an object, not use computer technology to manipulate words as he had done before. Could this be a final comment by Coupland on the effects of translation, and how far they can remove a material from its source, and also a commentary on the future of the printed book– that it will be rendered obsolete? Given Coupland's use of technology in *JPod*, and the relation he created between the book and the computer, it would seem that Coupland sees the demise of the printed paper book, and envisions books to move solely to a computer related format.

Computer technology has led to a drastic increase in the ease of translation and of transforming a base piece of text into something entirely different. Coupland seems to enjoy the speed with which he can translate from one language to another that is afforded him by technology, but he also seems to be cautioning the viewer not to place too much faith in the end result of the translation, though the visual result may be appealing.

Mm Dd m K h d f w s c r p s n d s t f f b t t h y w s h d t h m p n d t h y r g
 t t n g K n d c g h t c l d b t t h y r g v n g m p l l s f r t n d s t f f
 m n t b n g s t r v d r b t n r n n c s s r l y f r g h t n d v h r d s m p r s s r p
 r t s n d s k n w t h t S t v n d l l t h n g h b r s r K n d t h t n n w s r l l y h r t
 n d l s k n w t h t t h S L m m b r s h r r v r y p s t b t p r s s d s t r t n s f w h
 t s b n h p p n n g T h y h v n t b n s h t n g d w n h l c p t r s r s h t n g d w n n n c
 n t p p l n t h s t r t s
 m k p t b l n d f l d d m n t g g g d r n y t h n g n d m c m f r t b l
 n d t h n k y c n t l l t h t m n t r l l y t r f d r n y t h n g n d t h t m K
 w s v r y p s t t h g h t h r t h t p l c r s h d n n t h t h s n k l n d n d w
 s r l l y g l d t h t w s n t t h r n d w l d p p r e t t f v r y n w l d j s t c l m d w n
 n d t r y n t t f n d m n d n t b m k n g d n t f c t n s b c s t h y r n t n l y n d n g r
 n g m b t n d n g r n g t h m s l v s
 m w t h c m b t n t h t s r m d w t h t m t c w p n s n d t h r s l s m d e l
 t m h r n d t h r s n w y w l l b r l s d n t l t h y l t m g s t w n t d n y g d
 f r s m b d y t c m n h r n d g t m t b y f r c
 T h s p p l r n t j s t b n c h f n t s T h y v b n r l l y h n s t w t h m b t t h y
 r p f c t l y w l l n g t d f r w h t t h y r d n g
 n d w n t t g t t f h r b t h n l y w y m g n g t s f w d t t h r w y n d
 j s t h p t h y l l d w h t t h y s y D d n d j s t d t q c k l y
 v b n s t p p n g n d s t r t n g t h s t p m y s l f s t h t c n c l l c t m y t h g h a
 T h t s w h y t h r r s m n y s t p s n t
 m n t b n g f r e d t s y n y f t h s t h n k t s r l l y m p r t n t t h y t k t h r
 r q s t s v r y s r s l y b t n t r r s t n g n y t h r S L m m b r s n d b t f l l w n g t h r
 g d f t h r q s t t t h l t r
 j s t w n t t g t t f h r n d s v r y n g n n d b b c k w t h S t v
 T h S L s v r y n t r s t d n s n g h w y r t k n g t h s D d n d t h y w n t t
 m k s r t h y r r l l y s r s n d l s t n n g t w h t t h y r s y n g
 n d t h y t h n k t h y v b n t k n g t h s w h l t h n g l t m r s r s l y t h n t h p
 l c n d t h F B n d t h r p p l r t l s t m
 t s r l l y p t y t m k s r t h t t h s p p l d n t j p r d z m y l f b y c h r g n g
 n n d d n g s t p d t h n g s n d h p t h y w l l m k s r t h y d n t d n y t h n g h
 l k t h t k l n d h s b s n s s
 T h S L p p l r l l y h v b n h n s t w t h m n d r l l y m n f l p r t t y s r t h
 t m g n g t g t t f h r f v r y t h n g g s t h w y t h y w n t t t
 n d t h n k t h y s h l d f l t h t w y t n d t r y n t t w r r y s m c h m n
 k n w t s h r d b t h r d M m w s r l l y p s t n d t h t v r y b d y w s t h m h p

Figure 5.1
 Douglas Coupland
Patty Hearst Page 1
 From, *Microserfs*, 1995
 Page 308

o a I O I a a e a e a u u e a e e u a e e e i O A I
 u a o u e e i i e i o i a u
 I o e i a e o e a e o u e e a i i e e l e a o e e e o a o
 l o a e e a a e e i o a e O a a o o e a e a u
 A l a o o a e A e e e e a e e u e a o u e i o i o o a e e
 a e i e a e o e e o o i o e i o e o o o i o i o e e o e i e e e
 I e i o e I o a e o a i a I o o a e
 A l i o u a e a l o e a e i i e o a i a a l O
 I a e u e o u o e a a o i e u e i o a o u e i O a a a I a e a
 a a l a e e a I o u a e i a e i i e e o e o u u a o a o o i e
 a o e a i e i i a i o e a u e e e o o e a e i e u e a e i e e e
 I i a o a u i a a e i a u o a i e a o a e e a o a e i a e a e e a
 e e o a l i e e e a e u i e e e o o i o o a o o o o e o o e i
 e e a e e o u o e
 e e e o e a e u a u o u e e e e a o e i e u e a e e e
 l i o i e o a e a e o i
 A l a o e o u o e e u e o a l o i o i i e o i e i a A l u
 o e a o u o a e a a a u o i u i
 I e e e o i a a i i a e e o a l a o e o u a e e
 a e o a o i i
 I o e i o e o a a o i l i i e a i o a a o u a e e i e u e
 e e i o u a o u o a e i a o e A e e a a o u o o i e i o o a i e u e
 o e e e
 I u a o e o u o e e a e e e o e a i a e a i e e
 e A i e i e e e i e e i o u e a i i a a e a o a e u e a
 o u a e e a e i o u a i e i o a e a e a i
 A e i a o u e e e a i i o e i a o o e e i o u a e o i e a
 e l a o e e o e O a e a l a
 I e a u o o u o a e u e a e e e o e o e a i e i e a i i a
 o i u i i a l o e a o u i a e u e e o o a i e e i e a O a a
 o u e u i e
 e A e o e e a a e e e o e i e a l e a e a l e e e u e a l o i
 o e o u o e e i e e i o e e a e a i o
 A l i a o u o u e e a a o o a o o o u l e a l o i
 a u l e a o a e a u e a a e e o a a o e l o e a i u o u a i
 e i a e a e o a o u o a l e a a a i
 I u o e a l a e a o e e o e a o o

Figure 5.2
 Douglas Coupland
Patty Hearst Page 2
 From, *Microserfs*, 1995
 Page 309

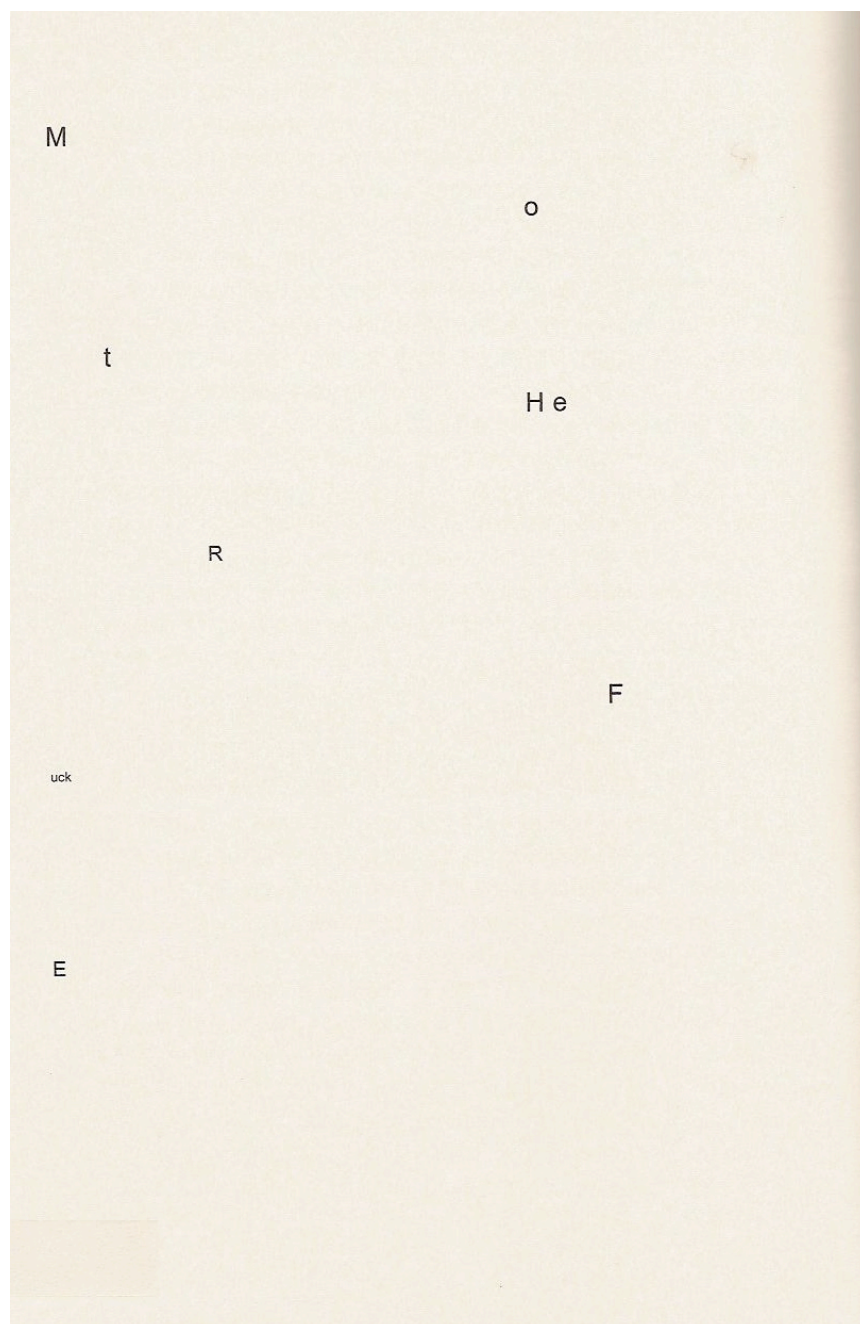


Figure 5.3
Douglas Coupland
Motherfucker
From *JPod*, 2006
Page 412



Figure 5.4
Douglas Coupland
Retranslation
Monte Clark Gallery, 2005
www.coupland.com



Figure 5.5
Jenny Holzer
Inflammatory Essays, 1979-82
Tate Collection

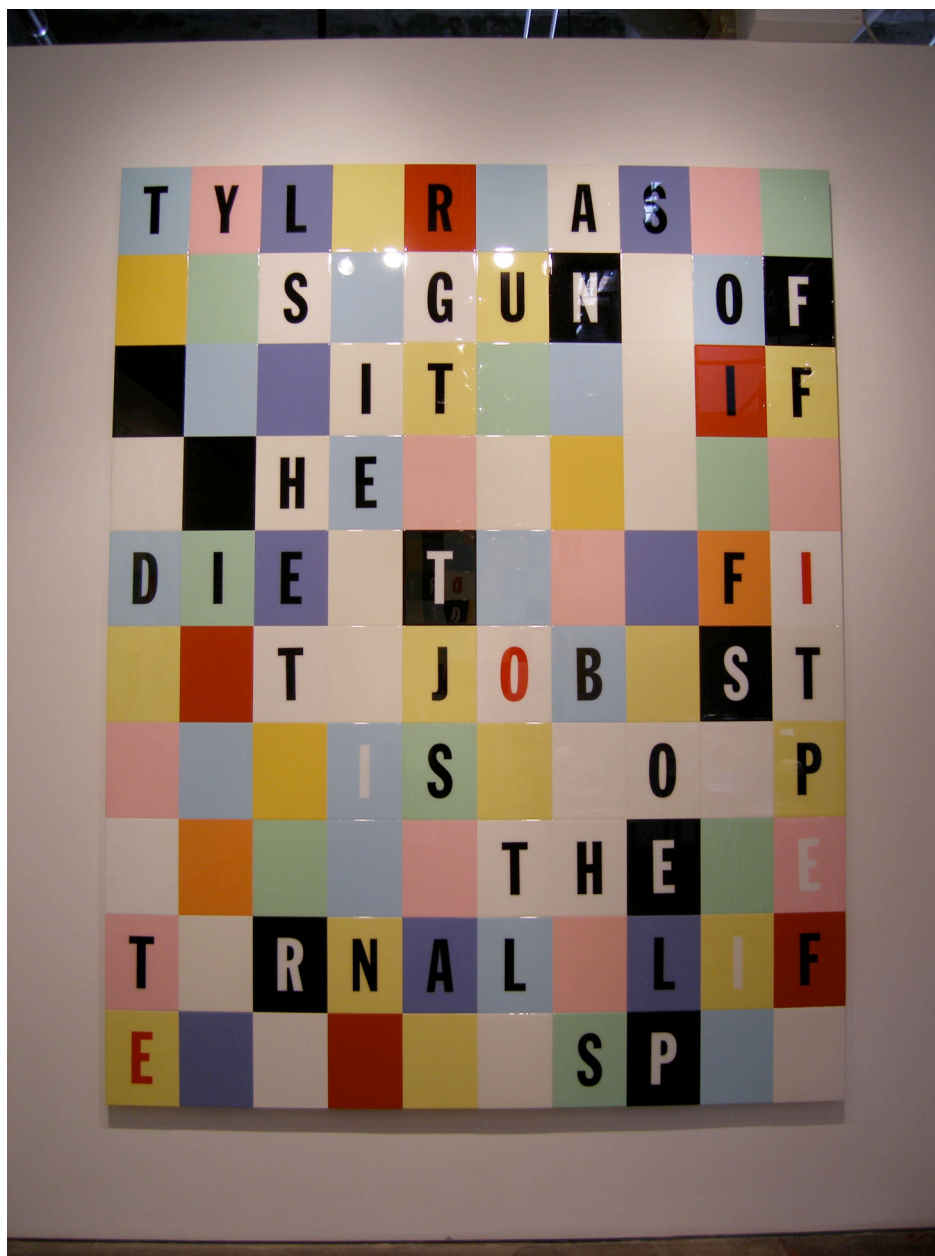


Figure 5.6
Douglas Coupland
Fight Club, 2005
www.coupland.com



Figure 5.7
Douglas Coupland
Generation X, 2004
www.coupland.com

CONCLUSION

Coupland's text-based art is an intriguing topic to explore because Coupland has a tendency to repeat himself and highlight the same ideas again and again. Analyzing this repetition offers insights into Coupland's mind, and how the influences that this author-artist encounters daily directly inspire his creative process. Due to his dual status as both a writer and an artist, there are more places to look for his inspirations and also several venues where his artistic statements on popular culture are bound to appear.

Working in two fields opened up new doors in Coupland's creations that may have never occurred to him otherwise. When he grew tired of the art world and moved away from visual art production, his artistic mind began to function on a new level. It is true that Coupland had inserted art into his novels from the beginning in different forms, from cartoons in *Generation X* to his own line drawings in *Life After God*. He was also highly involved in the cover design of all of his novels, but it was not until *Microserfs* that Coupland took his visual art in his books to a higher, more exciting level, when he began to think of text as its own form of art, as art. His introduction to the world of computer technology sparked this shift, but the jumping off point for much of Coupland's textual art has been his Pop art icons, like Warhol, Lichtenstein and Rosenquist, as well as modern artists, like Jenny Holzer.

Through text, Coupland has found the ideal form of visual expression to exhibit the aspects of modern society that interest him. As has been shown from various examples of both his gallery-exhibited works and his works in novels, he has found ways to make text highlight the themes of abundance, advertising, technology and translation, among others not discussed here. Text gives him the freedom to create art that is both

visually appealing and easily recreated in printed form. By placing textual art into his novels, he is bringing high art directly to people that may not regularly attend galleries or museums, and adding an element that is not commonly found in works of fiction.

The combination of text and a Pop art influence has led Coupland's art to be particularly evocative. Many artists comment on modern society, but through Coupland's use of Pop, his works have an added dimension, and add to an artistic discourse that started in the 1950's. His works touch on many of the same ideas as Pop, and as an artist he tends to put images of popular culture forward, though he rarely makes definitive statements as to his own views.

Through examining his works, and the themes that Coupland continually touches on, we can see the interesting dualities reflected in Coupland's works and own statements. He claims to relish all of the facets of modern culture from its abundance of advertisements to its increasing reliance on computer technology, from its proliferation of textual information to the ease with which computers can now aid in the translation and dissemination of information. Yet, Coupland also seems to be sending out warnings about the possible impact of these phenomena on the average person. While it is hard to pin Coupland down about how he feels about the world around him, this ambiguity ultimately reflects broader social opinion. For example, while many people may complain about how much advertising has invaded our landscape, most of them will still know jokes from the funny new commercials and are aware of the new products recently released. Coupland is aware that while some of these elements are not always desirable, they are the things that define us as a culture, and he makes it his job to create art that

reflects the current state of the modern world. The contradictory aspect of his work may be sometimes hard to reconcile, but it reflects the conflicted nature of society at large.

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