

Art, Art, Art, Everywhere All the Time

Douglas Coupland

I remember visiting Amsterdam in the early 1990s and staying at the Pulitzer Hotel. What particularly surprised me about the hotel was that almost all of the walls were covered with pretty good art, largely abstract—some definite Cobra influences—yet none of this art was brand name. I asked someone from the hotel if they had a program for the sorts of work they display and they said, “Oh, it’s Holland. Everyone here makes art. You can’t avoid it. There’s frankly too much of it.” They said it the way a prisoner might complain about prison food. This complaint actually took me by surprise. *Too much art?* Maybe this complaint was being put forth by someone who had never been to a place where there was no art. I wonder if they would say that after having visited most of North America.

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In North America, growing up, there was a TV news show, *60 Minutes*, that aired every Sunday night on the CBS network. This was before cable TV, let alone the Internet, and so if something was on *60 Minutes*, it meant that *everybody* saw it. One episode in particular seemed to have really stuck in the collective North American mind. This was an episode in which Dutch society was analyzed and put forth as both miraculous and monstrous. The urban legend that emerged from this episode was: Dutch people stay in free universities studying useless things until they are forty. After that they work three days a week until they retire at fifty-five. The final tone of the show was, *Yes, this is utopia, but who’d want to live in utopia?* The episode was envious and dismissive, and regardless of its oddly self-conflicted agenda, it predisposed over one hundred million people to be suspicious of Nordic and Benelux cultures, as if there had to be a toxic core at the center of their cultural candy. The episode also made me very curious as to what it must be like to live in a society where everybody made art. How would that even be possible?

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In 1969, Vancouver installed one of its first pieces of public art of the conceptual era. It was a large Minimalist sculpture titled *Cumbria*, by Vancouver artist Robert Murray, and was placed at the entryway to Vancouver's then newly renovated airport. The work was made of sheets of welded CorTen steel painted a monochrome yellow. Like much Minimalist public art of that era, it evoked public fury, particularly in my mother who went crazy every time we had to go to the airport, incensed that the city had spent \$40,000 on something so... well, to my mother, *un-art-like*. It got to the point where my brothers and I would be in the back seat of the car and cringe into our bodies as we neared the airport, just waiting for my mother's anti-art rant to begin—and it always did. I compare and contrast 1969 to thirty-six years later, a point where when, after decades of training, most people, when thinking of public art (if they think of it at all) automatically envision a slab of this or a chunk of that, and think of it as blunt emotionless parsley adorning public spaces outside of huge buildings. How far we have come.

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When I think of a society where everybody makes art, I obviously think of Holland, and I also think of Iceland, where I visited three years ago for a literary festival. There I learned that not only is Iceland the world's most literate culture, but also that one in ten Icelanders will write one or more novels in their lifetime. The local punch line of course, is that each novel only has nine readers.

The Netherlands' overproduction of art, and Iceland's overproduction of novels, seem to both be pre-Internet manifestations of Warhol's fifteen minutes of fame creed, but thanks to the Internet, it is not just paintings and novels that are being overproduced, and not just in Holland and Iceland—it is everything everywhere. For example, take photography. We have all become familiar with the ritual of people in restaurants photographing their food and posting the images online, salads in particular, as salads seem to be where many restaurant chefs choose to exhibit their artistic style. *Hang on just a second. I'm going to post this on Instagram. Look at the orange nasturtium petals on top of the blue plate.*

People in restaurants now brandish their iPhones with the same cavalier insouciance they once displayed with packs of cigarettes. Smart restaurants know that

food photography can drive dining traffic enormously and the salad-Internet-salad loop becomes self-sustaining. But I have a motto that would be gibberish to someone from 1995, and it is this: “When you photograph your salad, you turn it into a ghost.” This is to say when you photograph your food in order to post it online, you are already looking at your food in the past tense. And you are also branding yourself by the food photos you put out into the world. Your salad is your proxy, your avatar. Photographing your food is an indirect form of selfie, a still-life selfie. (Yes, selfies—but I am not here to selfie-bash.)

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I think that in a world of 7.7 billion human beings in which 3 billion are now online, establishing a sense of authentic public self is much more difficult than it was before, say, 2000. Many people now blog, but back when the numbers were smaller, having a hit blog was a genuine possibility. These days the numbers are too large. Your blog is doomed. The world’s turned into one great big Iceland now: too much content and not enough eyeballs.

Within this new reality, selfies, it seems, are attempts, successful or not, to try to create an authentic sense of self in the face of a logarithmically accelerating population numbers game—a game in which being an autonomous individual with a singular life is becoming evermore difficult—and a game in which a nostalgic stance may prove to be useless if not fatal.

Look! I ate salad! It was unique! It was *my* salad!

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I think accepting logarithmic change is like finding religion. Once you get it, you can never go backward.

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Here is an odd thing I have noticed over the years: if you raised your children to be creative, they do not reproduce, or if they do, it is late, and with hesitation. I look at

Japan with its negative birthrate and I am not the least bit surprised. Half a century ago Japan was the embodiment of corporate conformity; these days everyone under thirty-five is a freelancer, and in the subway it can feel like everyone wears expensive handmade designer Halloween costumes 365 days a year. If Japan wants a higher birth rate, they might consider bulldozing Naoshima and installing in its place a skeet shooting range and a bowling alley. But you have to hand it to Japan when it comes to the integration of art into all aspects of everyday life. It could well represent one kind of acme of creative culture in human history.

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The problem, and the thrill of driving through the United States is that it has no government-funded arts culture. What you see in its landscape exists almost 100 percent because of politics, capitalism, or the largesse of someone who made it big through capitalism. You go to a place like Scottsdale, or Phoenix, for example (and I pulled those places out of a hat), where there is pots of money, yet a visit through the gallery district yields hundreds of faux-distressed rusty metal silhouettes of howling coyotes wearing bandanas around their necks. An hour later, you can visit the Barrett-Jackson car auction which is a vibrant display of car culture and genuine appreciation of the beauty of industrially made objects—and after that you can visit Taliesin West, built by Frank Lloyd Wright as an escape from coyote silhouettes and cars, but which is being so encroached upon by overdevelopment and infrastructure that it feels more like a bunker than a retreat. Nearby you can also visit majestic mountains filled with hunters and deafening ATVs and snowmobiles. You can visit magnificent lakes filled with deafening pleasure crafts. You can visit more cities and ear-splitting freeways glutted with car-choked shopping areas. But you will not find art in any of these places, or so little that in the midst of such noisy vitality, you can almost say to yourself, “Hey, maybe art is actually useless and to hell with it. Look at the vitality of a place that has no need for unique items on its walls or unique objects in its public spaces.”

This is the world I was raised in.

Are there alternatives? Of course. You can go to areas of conflict where the making of art will not happen until one is out of conflict’s reach. Or you can go to capital-sparse countries where people are focused on survival, not art—or you can go

to Holland, where art is everywhere. My mother would probably freak out in Holland, especially in a city like Rotterdam, essentially built from scratch after World War II, where public art exists on all corners and is considered integral to a civilized forward-looking existence—Rotterdam, a place where 1970s TV would have us believe people attend school until they are forty, after which point they graduate and then smoke cigarettes and dream three days a week as a career path—or at least they did until recently, I hear, as the government has pulled the funding rug out from underneath the country’s creative community. Artists are wily devils—the new ‘other’. Was this neo-demonization of artists a culture-bashing meme created by American TV news documentaries in the 1970s that was finally activated in Holland?

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I live in Canada. For the past four decades I have read only cyclical news headlines along the theme of, “ARTS FUNDING TO BE CUT YET AGAIN.” We all know the headlines. It is like a war that never ends, and it makes me daydream of some magical historical Valhalla preceding my reading of newspapers where headlines once read, “NEW GOVERNMENT ARTS FUNDING TO BE IMPLIMENTED,” and, “ARTS FUNDING TO BE INCREASED.” What sort of fabled society once implemented arts funding in the first place? Who created it? What happened to it? Why does its funding now only ever shrink, and only ever erode? Should Netflix be doing a series based on the rise and fall of public arts funding?

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I think any developed city without stable arts funding is basically nothing more than a parking lot. You can visit it and walk and drive around, but so what? It is the same as any other place, and capitalism’s invisible bland hand ensures that the Subway restaurant is exactly the same as the one back home, that the price of gasoline is constant, and that every bit of data you send or receive is monetized up the ying-yang. And that is all there is. You can look around for other things to do, but good luck.
Maybe I’ll go shopping today.

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In art school my friends called me Dougall. Dougall rhymes with Google and also with frugal. Because of this I thought that being cheap might be a funny personality characteristic, so, why not? For a few years I thought I was being amusing and loveable with cheapness until my friend Angela took me aside one day and said, “Dougall, you have to stop being cheap. It is incredibly unattractive and it makes it almost impossible to like you.” I heard this, thought it over, and realized she was correct and I stopped being cheap then and have never since been willfully cheap. It was good advice.

Angela ended up marrying a Dutch guy, and this became my introduction to Dutch culture. She told me a joke about the Dutch: Q: How did copper wire get invented? A: Two Dutch men found a penny at the same time.

LOL!

Not really.

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The Dutch are always ready to tell me they pride themselves on being cheap. I have never understood the dichotomy between Dutch people being cheap yet at the same time they inhabit an artistic and cultural utopia. How did they swing that? How did they get their cake and eat it, too? It is like magic. Was it ever even true?

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There are so many layers of contempt and nastiness built into the defunding of the arts. The thing I hate the most about arts defunding is that oftentimes public institutions, forced to do more with less, end up doing what they always did with their new lowered funding—which plays right into the hands of the defunders who scream, “See! You were faking it! You didn’t actually need all that money in the first place! And to punish you for lying we’re going to defund you even further!”

I guess if you are an institution in the middle of being defunded, your fiscal crisis is what it is, and you have to deal with it. But I think the one thing your

institution cannot do is the exact same thing it was doing before, because if nothing else, this sends a fuck you to defunders, and it also forces you into a state of existential intensity that may prove to be enlightening or cathartic or wake you up from bad habits. Who knows... maybe you really *did* need a change. Imagine if institutions were run the exact same way they were run in, say, 1957. Stasis is not always the best choice.

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In the 1980s I lived and worked in Japan during the ascension years of Issey Miyake and Rei Kawakubo. Japan had found its own voice, which was a voice that emerged from the rubble of World War II. I remember an interview with Miyake where he said that the only way he could work was to go forward, that as a child he had seen the world go up in flames and he wanted nothing to do with a world that would do that to itself. That always struck me as smart. The past is always going to be there, but the reason we have the future is to make sure that we can do better than the past.

My North American situation is not one of emerging from rubble. Instead I come from a place where there is no real past. Just nature. So you can either go hippie and back to nature, or you can go to the only other direction, which is the future. It is not a moral imperative. It is simply the only open door; the default point of view.

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We now live in an age where older individuals are stripped of preexisting romantic notions of identity, and are then more or less involuntarily reconfigured as ‘atomized people units’. Young people, on the other hand, become atomized people units from the cradle onward. This sounds dark, but it need not be so. It is simply new, and for most people in the world—Africa, the Indian subcontinent, Laos—electronically joining the rest of humanity is a major upgrade. *Wow... I never globally counted before, but now I do! Maybe not in the way people used to count—but at least my voice is part of the discussion.*

But it is not just people that are being retooled and reformatted. All forms of collectivity are being atomized and relinked in new modes: countries, religions, Tintin

memorabilia collectors, universities, and, yes, art institutions. To pretend this is not happening is just stupid.

The atomization of individuals as well as their neural reformatting which occurs along the way does offer hope to institutions wishing to remain viable within a world of extreme defunding. Rather than reiterate the past, collectives might instead consider becoming institutional *corpse exquisites*. Instead of perpetuating the myth of less money for the same amount of work and reinforcing corporate dialog and its ridiculous set of short-term metrics (*We can make a new Silicon Valley that cranks out Pixar quality web animations!*), the hybridizing of creative modes within departments can allow for relevant (and possibly do-or-die) shape-shifting.

This sounds like interdisciplinary studies. How 1970. (I basically distrust almost everything that happened in the 1970s. It was a dark age.) But it is not. Remember: now is an interesting moment in creative history when many teachers are jealous of the quantity and quality of skills their students are bringing to the classroom. It takes courage to admit that you barely know what Adobe Illustrator is, and that you know you will never be bothered to learn it. Now is an interesting moment in creative history when the metrics for success are ‘likes’ rather than grades. Who is the servant? Who is in charge? Where is it going? What is going to be kept and what is going to be lost? And does a strategy of willful infra-departmental diversification dirty sacrosanct turf? Possibly, but it is obvious that older ways of structuring are not working and probably never will because they come from a time when our brains, our interconnections, and our needs, were very, *very* different.

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There is a reality show I am watching right now, and one of its characters wears a T-shirt that says, “THERE’S NO CURE FOR BEING CHEAP.” This slogan is total crap. The cure for being cheap is to simply stop being cheap. It works.

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It makes me sad that the Netherlands is taking the one utopia they actually had—a world where creativity and experimental thinking and living are as important to daily life as bread—and are instead going to turn themselves into the most banal and

generic corporate office park, like something on the outskirts of Rockville Maryland. The Netherlands has declared a holy war on its soul thinking it is smart and thrifty. It is just depressing, and once it is gone it is not coming back, all because a few smart politicians leveraged a fear of globalized capitalism in order to get themselves reelected. Good for them, but such a loss for the Dutch.

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So there is Rotterdam, a New World city coexisting with an Old World continent. Wait—a New World city is inaccurate; a *Brave New World* city is more precise. Rotterdam, the laboratory for new modes of thinking and socializing and making art. Rotterdam, which I hope has enough velocity to escape the gravity of the old, from the gravity of regressive politics and from the fear of the new. Rotterdam, which can take the inevitable and transmute it into something willful, something gold.

This essay was written by Douglas Coupland in the run up to the [Futurocity Summit](#), the two-day focus point of the *Futurocity* project organized by Kunstblock, Rotterdam. *Futurocity* is part of Rotterdam celebrates the city! (for the complete program go to: www.rotterdamcelebratesthecity.nl) and is kindly supported by The Art of Impact.