

# New Constellations

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UBC archivist SARAH ROMKEY gazes on  
a Canadian literary star's archive.

ONE OF CANADA'S MOST RENOWNED authors, an internationally recognized visual artist and a cultural icon who popularized the term "Generation X," recently gifted his archive to the University of British Columbia Library, a move that opens 30 years of records dating as far back as 1980 to scholars' and collectors' investigation.

Douglas Coupland—famous for his novel *Generation X* (1991) and more recently *Hey Nostradamus!* (2003) and visual art such as the two *Souvenir of Canada* volumes—officially donated his papers to UBC in December 2008, a gift recognized at his receipt of an honorary doctorate at the university's spring convocation on May 27, 2010. At the ceremony he was hailed as a "writer and artist whose work speaks of ourselves and our times."

Describing the donation as an act that made him "feel old and yet young at the same time," Coupland said in a statement at the time that he hoped his archive—manuscripts, photos, visual art, fan mail, correspondence, press clippings, audiovisual material and more—would fuel people's imaginations.

The enigmatic comment was typical of an artist who has been the subject of much scholarly and popular discussion throughout his career, with analyses ranging from the social to the nationalist to the religious. Until now, most of the chatter has been on his published works, but now that his archive is available, a richer trove exists for those wishing to better understand his creative process, publication and reception.

"I hope that within them, people in the future will find patterns and constellations that can't be apparent to me or to anyone simply because they are there, and we are here," he said.

## COUPLAND FONDS CROSSES DISCIPLINES

Access to an author's archive (or fonds, the word archivists use to describe the documents naturally created and received by a person or organization) provides special insight into their work. Archivists have long recognized the value to scholarship of the documentation that leads to the finished book. Archival institutions across Canada preserve not only the archives of authors, but also of publishers, printing houses and literary agents.

Many of the "big names" in Canadian literature have their archives preserved at Library and Archives Canada in Ottawa, such as Carol Shields, Robertson Davies and Timothy Findley, while other authors may deposit in or bequeath their archives to an institution closer to their own home, or a university which they attended. Because Douglas Coupland is a figure of provincial importance as well as national importance, it is appropriate for his archive to be preserved in British Columbia.

Common to many authors' fonds are manuscripts and drafts of work as well as notes and jottings recording their ideas. Personal and business correspondence often enjoys high usage by researchers because of its illustration of the creative and editing processes, and of the networks and influences that exist between writers.

From the Coupland fonds, English and communications scholars will be particularly interested in drafts of manuscripts, notes, and communications with editors, which will show the creative and intellectual processes that led to Coupland's novels, films, and journalistic and theatrical pieces (the finding aid includes a list



A promotional card for *Generation X*. This is not only evidence of the promotion and marketing of the book, but also an example of Coupland ephemera for collectors to examine. Courtesy of the University of British Columbia Library, Rare Books and Special Collections, Douglas Coupland fonds, box 19 folder 8.

of drafts of major works). As one might predict based on Coupland's diverse and interdisciplinary work, the Douglas Coupland fonds contains many elements that one would perhaps not expect in an author's archive. The documentation is equally reflective of Coupland as an artist and designer as it is of Coupland as an author.

#### BUT IS IT CANADIAN?

Coupland's place in the canon of Canadian literature has been a point of interest among scholars and critics. Some projects cannot be described as anything but Canadian, such as Coupland's two *Souvenir of Canada* coffee-table-style books, and his related 2003 art installation *Canada House* in a soon-to-be-demolished Vancouver Special house (itself a local icon, though the display was subsequently recreated at a Toronto venue and the government's Canada House in London).

Both the books and the art installation explored everyday Canadian images and iconography that Canadians take for granted: Eaton's catalogues, Canada geese, inukshuks and the like. In addition to mock-ups and notes related to these projects, the archive contains other residual documentation, such as Kraft Dinner boxes used as invitations to Canada House (Kraft Dinner is a uniquely Canadian product; Americans call it macaroni and cheese), wine bottles used in *Canada House*, and Polaroid photographs Coupland took of his mother's kitchen cabinets in preparation for *Souvenir of Canada 2* (Coupland wrote in *Souvenir* that his mother's cupboard "could easily win a Most Canadian Shelves award").

The archive also contains evidence of Coupland's aesthetic preferences in regards to font and layout in his book design. Fans and collectors of Coupland's work will be familiar with

his preferred layout of large, sans serif headings introducing each paragraph of text in his coffee-table books such as *City of Glass*, *Souvenir of Canada* and *Terry*. Drafts for *Souvenir of Canada* and other texts use the same format, even in early draft form before mock-ups are complete.

Coupland is well-known for his presence not only in the print world but also in the digital. His coupland.com Web site was considered by some to be one of the first blog projects undertaken by a major writer or artist because of the integration of journal-like entries and imagery that he employed. Contained in the archive are printed copies of digital collages that Coupland posted to the Web site. Featuring a wide variety of imagery from popular culture, history and consumerism, the collages are reminiscent of some of Coupland's book covers (see, for example, the juxtaposition of one digital collage next to the cover for *Miss Wyoming*).

One of Coupland's recent projects is to help Penguin Books celebrate their 75th anniversary, called *Speaking to the Past* ([www.speakingtothepast.com](http://www.speakingtothepast.com)). In this online art project/collaboration, Coupland created Penguin-styled book covers to speak to someone in 1935 from 2010 (one cover states: "The Moon. We stopped going there 30 years ago"). Online visitors can also design book covers and contribute to the site.

Although this project is not yet reflected in the archive at UBC (Coupland hopes to continue contributing material to his archive well into the future), the archive does contain collages that were studies for Coupland's exhibit *The Penguins* at Monte Clark Gallery in Toronto, which used Penguin covers in combination with bold and graphical words. Book artists and collectors might be interested in comparing the collage studies to the finished artworks, or examining the relationships between the two projects and Coupland's interest in Penguin books.

In addition to providing evidence of projects past, the archive offers a glimpse of projects to come. One example is a collection of small handmade books used for Coupland's upcoming television production *Extinction Event*. Interspersed in several

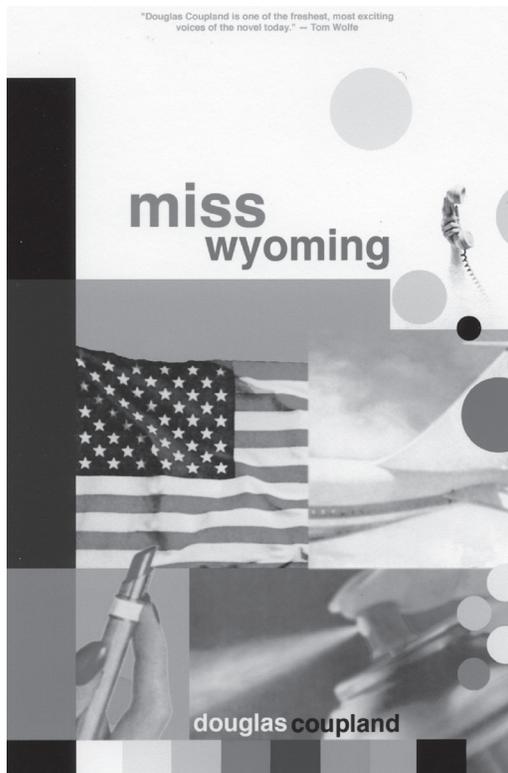
places throughout the archive are calligraphy experimentations. Coupland told the *Globe and Mail* newspaper he was just "testing out new brushes," but who knows what might come of them in the future? One might watch for a calligraphy-based art or book project.

#### UBC ANTICIPATES DIGITAL ADDITIONS

The Douglas Coupland fonds is a relatively extensive and comprehensive archive in comparison to many private archival collections. Contained in 120 boxes, the fonds contains 30 metres of textual records, more than 1,400 photographs and visual pieces, 40 audiovisual works and 30 objects. Coupland's donation also included copies of his publications, including foreign editions and books on tape. While the books reside in the library catalogue, the archive is catalogued in a finding aid, a document which describes the content, context and organization of the collection. (The finding aid is available to all researchers online: [www.library.ubc.ca/spcoll/AZ/PDF/C/Coupland\\_Douglas.pdf](http://www.library.ubc.ca/spcoll/AZ/PDF/C/Coupland_Douglas.pdf).)

Archivists face challenges in the description of an author's archive, so will take opportunities when possible to better understand the creator and the material being described. Such was the case with the acquisition of the Coupland fonds; student archivist Stephen Russo, then a student in the Master of Archival Studies program at UBC's School of Library, Archival and Information Studies, worked with Coupland to understand this diverse group of material and the connections between one document and another.

An important tenet of archival theory is that of "original order," meaning that archivists will generally leave an archive in the same order it was left by the creator to preserve the relationships between the documents. When order is not clear, archivists will generally arrange material according to the functions of the creator. For example, the Douglas Coupland fonds is arranged into series such as Digital Projects, Literary Projects and Journalism. This is done to bring together documents that are related to the same activities and facilitate access for researchers. The finding aid for the Coupland fonds is unique in that researchers can either view the



*The cover art for Coupland's Miss Wyoming shown in conjunction with one of many digital collages from the archive, many of which appeared on Coupland's website. There are striking similarities between some of Coupland's book covers and these digital collages; similar aesthetics also appear in other works of art. Courtesy of the University of British Columbia Library, Rare Books and Special Collections, Douglas Coupland fonds, BC2121-577 and BC2121-594.*

list of files according to the series arranged by the archivist or in the literal original order as it was physically transferred to the library.

The archive was acquired in the fall of 2008 through the efforts of Rare Books and Special Collections head Ralph Stanton, who identified Coupland's archive as an important acquisition shortly after taking up his post at UBC Library. Recent press and activities have increased interest in the collection, and it has already enjoyed use by scholars from as far away as Toronto. Coupland was the keynote speaker for the recent Media Transatlantic conference at UBC, and in conjunction with this event an exhibition of material from the Douglas Coupland fonds

entitled *Corpus and Collage: Mediating Douglas Coupland in the UBC Library* was mounted in Rare Books and Special Collections by UBC English PhD candidate Karl Persson.

The research value of an author's archive goes beyond the study of literature; there is also value to be had by collectors, bibliographers and print historians. Collectors and sellers of Coupland's work or of Canadian literature in general can use ephemera and manuscripts as examples or points of reference for their own collections. An exploration of the archive may reveal connections and relationships between Coupland's works that were not evident before the availability of these documents.

The relationship between an archive and a living creator is an ongoing one, and UBC Library looks forward to future additions to this important collection. In addition to print, photographic and audiovisual material, we anticipate the acquisition of digital records. Just as e-books have become a factor in the book market, the documents and records that were created in the course of publishing and promoting books have also become digital.

Documents born digital are difficult to preserve and provide access to in the long term, and there is no one preservation software or system that can currently meet this challenge. Those more familiar with printed documents and records may ask, "Why not print the documents to paper?" While paper is still a key element in preservation activities, digital records may only be authentically preserved and understood if preserved in their digital format, especially when considering the interdisciplinary work of someone like Douglas Coupland. For example, if we do not preserve the *Speaking to the Past* project in its original digital form, will the intended experience for the user remain the same? Fortunately there are promising digital preservation research projects and models emerging, such as the recent acquisition of Salman Rushdie's digital archive by Emory University.

In the meantime, much of the documentation that has resulted from Coupland's work over the past 30 years is available for consultation at UBC Library. The possibilities for research and understanding of this important Canadian figure are vast, and we at the library keenly anticipate the resulting scholarship. ♡

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~ Sarah Romkey is Rare Books and Special Collections Archivist with UBC Library.



## Grimsby Soars

At the yearly spring showcase for handmade books, CHESTER GRYSKI finds a paper goose, plenty of small signatures and another ample anthology.

THE 32ND ANNUAL WAYZGOOSE took place in Grimsby, Ontario, April 24 at the Grimsby Public Art Gallery. By my count there were about 35 exhibitors from across Ontario, coming from as far away as Ottawa, plus a few from across the border in New York and Pennsylvania.

Alan Stein of the Church Street Press, book artists George and Michelle Walker, Larry Thompson and Holly Dean of Greyweathers Press, Hugh Barclay of Thee Hellbox Press, Gregory Smith of the Blind Pig Press, the Ottawa Press Gang and members of the Book Arts Guild of Richmond Hill, to name just a few, were there showing off their work. This may have been the first time in 32 years that Will Rueter of the Aliquando Press was not exhibiting. A volcano with an unpronounceable name kept him in Europe beyond his planned departure date.

Alan Stein brought copies of his recent publications *The Golden Lilies, In Venice* and *Home Country*. George Walker had copies of his wordless novel, *The Book of Hours* (2007), *The Raven* (2005) and *In the Valley of the Shadow* (1997) as well as copies of his work with trade publishers on wood engraving and wordless novels. Greyweathers had copies of *The Vampire and the Seventh Daughter* (2008).

Ink Petals Press, of Woodbridge, Ontario, had designed and printed a sheet with instructions for cutting from the sheet and assembling a goose. The sheet also came with instructions to assemble a printer's hat. Their table had some successfully constructed examples.

Like all good family parties, the whole range of relatives was there. People had an opportunity to meet and see the work of Papeterie Saint-Armand, Van Huizen Bookbinding & Finishing,