

Generation X-Wear: An Interview with Douglas Coupland

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Douglas Coupland is the best-selling author of the novel that gave a post-baby boom epoch its name—Generation X—and its recent sequel, *Generation A*. He’s also written *Life After God*, *Microserfs* and *JPod*, among others. What his legions of followers might not realize is that he first trained to be an artist and designer. Therefore, it shouldn’t seem out of character that Coupland is now the creator of a fashion line, produced by the Canadian outdoors company Roots. That he collaborated with filmmaker Chris Nanos adds yet another page-turning twist. The Roots x Douglas Coupland collection ranges from apparel and accessories to furniture and original artwork. Launching on July 8, Coupland’s line celebrates the Vancouver-based artist’s homeland, as well as early TV test patterns, pixels and computer circuitry. I connected with Coupland to discuss how his most recent “art/design experiment” has taken the form of arm warmers, patterned leggings and club jackets.

Heller: I suppose the most obvious question to ask is, why have you started a fashion line?

Coupland: It’s not so much a line as an art/design experiment. I’ve been doing art, design and book projects since 2000 that explore new ways of perceiving “being Canadian.” Roots, a large Canadian clothing company, has been doing it since 1973. A friend in common said, “You two really ought to be doing something together.” It was a good idea, and wonderfully free of cynicism.

Heller: Is this a passion you’ve been sitting on until now?

Coupland: Clothing? My passion is taking these things in my head called ideas and making them magically appear in the real world. Ideas can crystallize in the form of books, art, design objects, photography... and in this case, clothing. Clothing has its own language and (huge) set of challenges. And as an art supply, instead of paint and canvas, I get to use factories.

Heller: Were you thinking of it in the way that Shepard Fairey has a clothing line, to both exploit and satirize your personal “brand”?

Coupland: This is embarrassing, but up until now I thought his name was *Farley*, not Fairey.

Heller: Back to the question...

Coupland: This project certainly exploits my willingness to say yes to new mediums.

Heller: What about exploiting and satirizing yourself?

Coupland: It's summer-wear! It's young and of a moment and very very *Pop*. So you can't expect it to do what a book does. It tingles a different region of the brain where books don't dare go—a region I enjoying having tingled. So it's almost an urge more than anything else.

Heller: Satire too?

Coupland: Yes—but also note that it's beautifully made, and the leather, especially, will last for decades.

And you have to look at my background, Steve... wait, can I call you Steven? Steve sounds too informal.

Heller: Steven is fine. The name came with an “n” so I kept it.

Coupland: *Steven*, I went to art school plus a bit more* and then in the mid-1980s I went on to do magazine design in Tokyo (for *Brutus* and *Popeye*) and then began writing only after having established myself as a member of visual culture first. I have an almost total Venn overlap with people who bought the DVD version of the *Helvetica* documentary. I don't think I have one reader whose living room has crown molding.

**Fun fact: I have a degree in Japanese business science, and my thesis was on the rise of Rei Kawakubo and the avant-garde designers of the late 1970s and early 1980s. She used to go in and screw with the looms to generate more organic looking fabric—controlled accidents. I always thought that was so wonderful.*

Heller: What else did you do besides design the clothing?

Coupland: It'd be so nice to swan in and take a check and run. But the project's genesis is the exploration of Canadian identity (earnest!). And I love making things, so everything from vague sketches right up to selecting the music to play in pop-up stores can only be a treat that I'd be brain-dead to miss. It's been a really wonderful nine months.

Heller: Tell us more about Roots.

Coupland: Canadians who know the brand, Roots, associate it with a kind of outdoorsy Crew/Fitch/Bauer feel.

Heller: That doesn't strike me as very Doug (if I may call you that).

Coupland: And you are correct. But in April I published a biography of Marshall McLuhan (it publishes in the United States in November, with James Atlas) and it showed me a different dimension of Canadian identity, one embodied by the distance between humans and a good-natured sense of curiosity about the machines that allow us to cross that distance. So in a very broad sense, the theme reflects joy through communication (which sounds like a North Korean parade-float slogan.) The collection is called “Canada Goes Electric.”

Heller: You’re best known as a novelist, and quite well known as helping to define a generation with a single letter. Are these clothes an extension of your fundamental narratives?

Coupland: With me it’s more like, “There’s something out there that so obviously needs saying/making/doing and nobody else seems to be doing it, so why not do it myself?” This clothing represents a touch of that.

I’m not patient, Steven, but I am disciplined. And my strongest point has always been not allowing myself succumb to doubts that psych myself out of starting a project or putting ideas into motion. I’m not sure if I answered your question here.

Heller: Yes, you did. You’re an artist and designer—do you feel you are now also a trendsetter?

Coupland: I’ve no idea on that score. The big influence here was Fiorucci: I went to the 59th Street flagship store the first day I was in New York in 1979, and it blew my mind, and has continued to do so for 31 years. If there’s any trend here, it’s that the world needs a lot more Fiorucci *ultrapopscandyelectrocolor* style.

Heller: Your book Eleanor Rigby has always struck some notes with me...

Coupland: Thank you. Some books just do that, don’t they? For me, it’s Anita Brookner’s *Hotel du Lac*.

Heller: ...not to mention I’ve always loved that song and the early music video with McCartney riding a horse.

Coupland: Thank you, I just lost 10 minutes of my life YouTubing. Is this the one you meant? No horse, though. The Yellow Submarine version is my fave.

Heller: Oops, I was thinking of “Penny Lane.” But this is a nice video too. He’s so young. Anyway, I see Eleanor Rigby in the clothes. As though you’ve created these items to make Eleanor less lonely and friendless. Am I wacky?

Coupland: No, that’s a really sweet and kind interpretation. The sexiest thing about Canada is that we have a future, and I say this in an era when there’s not too much future going around. So I wanted people who wear these garments to look good, if not better, but also to make themselves feel good about the future—about looking forward

to the next decade. Poor Eleanor (in the book, Liz Dunn). If my clothes (or, for that matter, books, art or design pieces) can make someone feel less lonely or less friendless, that's a really great thing to have achieved.

Heller: Those Motherboard leggings and skirt are incredible.

Coupland: They are pretty awesome. I knew they'd work, but not that they'd turn out so amazingly well.

Heller: How did you think of that?

Coupland: I wanted to find broad patterns that would imbue fabric with that crackling sense of tomorrow.

Heller: So much of this line is rooted in Canada. Notably, the Matrix Beaver.

Coupland: Isn't it great? It's done in a vector-y 1980s arcade-style line, which ended up being a pattern used for the line's black leather products.

Heller: Do you envision an international market, or is this just meant for Canadians?

Coupland: Anyone can wear it. Canada's a pretty globe-friendly country.

Heller: I know, I was headed there in the summer of '68. So much of what you do appears to be a satiric jab at contemporary consumer culture.

Coupland: Well... yeah! And it's interesting to me that (at least, in Canada) with the really quick rise in curated retail—those stores where they sell two mittens, a coffee mug and a sketch—that retail is approaching the level of complexity and diversity I sensed in the Harajuku and Omotesando in 1983. It's all good.

Heller: Isn't making fashion something of a paradox? Or is this like Paul Newman's Own products, with proceeds going to charity?

Coupland: A portion goes to charity —I am not a monster!—but that charity will probably be astonished by how small the check is... the margins in clothing are so laser thin. This is not a project a person does if they want to rake in the dough. I don't know how ready-to-wear or couture designers can make a go of it. It seems we're careening towards a 24/7 Abercrombie & Fitch world punctuated by stores that sell 1950s Pepsi collectibles, four vintage car keys and a hand-knit Sherpa's cap.

Heller: Clothes make the man, they say. Do you wear our own clothes?

Coupland: I do. My clothes are all bespoke now, even khakis. By now I know what works on me, I get it made in a few colors and I don't have to think about it. The only exception is Fred Perry and Ben Sherman polos.

Having said that: all of the guys' stuff from the collection, I wear. The long-sleeve black T with white motherboard square is going to be my casual uniform for the next five years.

Heller: Are there garments you wouldn't touch?

Coupland: There's always something interesting about everything. But for me, I'll stick to my uniform and my Roots stuff.

Heller: And what will you do next?

Coupland: I got kind of addicted to factories on this project. I'd like to work more with furniture and with leather. I think you're like me—you like stuff. What a joy to be able to make it!

About the Author. Steven Heller, co-chair of the Designer as Author MFA and co-founder of the MFA in Design Criticism at School of Visual Arts, is the author of *Merz to Emigre and Beyond: Avant Garde Magazine Design of the Twentieth Century* (Phaidon Press), *Iron Fists: Branding the Totalitarian State* (Phaidon Press) and most recently *Design Disasters: Great Designers, Fabulous Failure, and Lessons Learned* (Allworth Press). He is also the co-author of *New Vintage Type* (Thames & Hudson), *Becoming a Digital Designer* (John Wiley & Co.), *Teaching Motion Design* (Allworth Press) and more. www.hellerbooks.com