Research Article

Julia Polyck-O'Neill*

The Hyperobject and the White Cube: The "Strange Stranger" in Douglas Coupland's *Canada House*

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Abstract: Douglas Coupland's site-specific installation *Canada House*, temporarily erected in 2004 in a house deemed by locals to be a "tear down" in a Vancouver suburb, unwittingly captured the zeitgeist of the era eco-critics and theorists have named the Anthropocene, the age where the future of the climate and the environment are most influenced by human activity. In my article, I examine Coupland's work from the perspective of new materialist philosophy, with particular attention to what Timothy Morton calls the "hyperobject." In so doing, I attend to the specific dynamics of the installation as a phenomenon in real time and space, as well as its enduring reality as an artifact that translates specific dynamics of interconnectivity between aesthetic, linguistic, and ecocritical discourse as they relate to space and human/nonhuman relationships.

Keywords: visual art, Douglas Coupland, new materialism, Anthropocene

In 2003, Canadian artist and author Douglas Coupland created *Canada House*, a short-term, site-specific art installation that brought together a series of disparate objects as a means to encounter the material entanglements of humankind. In his book *Souvenir of Canada 2* (2004), the second in his *Souvenir of Canada* series, Coupland explains, in his usual unassuming prose, details about the site of the sculpture installation, *Canada House*: "In November of 2003, I was given two weeks to do whatever I wanted to a sprawling, 1950s flat-roofer clunker of a house in Vancouver." He notes that the house had been long unoccupied and was slated for demolition, and was only technically "open," as an art installation for private viewing, for a five-day period. Significantly, he describes the fluctuating state of the house, the exterior wrapped in black industrial plastic and largely vulnerable to the elements, including torrential rain atypical of Vancouver in November, which he describes as "record rainfalls," noting how the rain "created spontaneous lakes in the middle of rooms." He also expounds on the affect of the aura created by a space deemed disposable, observing how notes would be jotted directly onto walls and trash slipped nonchalantly into cupboards. The overall state of decay, given the excessive moisture, contributed to this atmosphere. He observes, "Because the house was slated for wrecking, it was technically as much a piece of scrap as any of the driftwood, castoffs and leftovers I'd gathered over the years," referring to the materials with which he would furnish the space (42). Most notable about his descriptions and spatial analysis is the *immanent state* created by the fact of the structure's slated destruction and its tangible deterioration as a result of its prolonged and disproportionate head-on confrontation with the elements. In a matter of less than a week, the austere (if humid) ambience of an art installation would become ground zero for one of Vancouver's most infamously prized commodities: a single custom home within city limits.

Examined through the lens of speculative realist philosophy and theoretical schemas relating to the history of art, the conative value of *Canada House* is revealed as a more useful mechanism for translating

***Corresponding author: Julia Polyck-O'Neill,** Brock University, E-mail: j.polyckoneill@brocku.ca

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metaphysical conditions of the contemporary age than conventional modes of thought: read according to Timothy Morton's object-oriented notion of the "hyperobject," the intervention of global warming in Coupland's artwork demonstrates how, by simultaneously inverting and building upon Brian O'Doherty's canonical observation that the spatial dynamics of the ritualistic space of the gallery invert relations between content and context, as well as the logistics embedded in post-studio art praxis, the aesthetic interplay of Coupland's installation awakens us to the often-naturalized realities of the Anthropocene: our present era, an epoch predicated in what Donna Haraway calls the "planetary effects" of "anthropogenic processes" (159). As such, and taken as an interdisciplinary case study that can be translated to other similarly-conceived artworks, the examination of the components of Coupland's work also validates the claims about art advanced by both Morton and Graham Harman: that the vicarious aesthetic relations inherent to the experience of art best represent the flat, radically egalitarian ontology they posit within their materialist, object-oriented philosophies (Morton, *Hyperobjects* 14). This reading advances that such modes of analysis engender new, specialized methods for approaching, accessing, and rethinking issues that occur at such vast scales as to be unimaginable or overwhelming, while also recasting the aesthetic, non-linguistic experience, whether in-situ or by means of the contemplation of photo documentation, as emancipatory, and of renewed social and cultural importance.

The Hyperobject and Douglas Coupland

Canada House initially consisted of the renovation of a "tear-down"—the colloquial term used in Vancouver real-estate circles for a house about to be demolished—into neutral white space, similar to the "white cube" interior of most art galleries. The all-white space was then furnished with *objets d'art* and handcrafted furniture, created in the distinct style of hyper-"Canadiana," drawing from a lexicon of globally recognisable national stereotypes. Of some significance to the analysis of this work is the acknowledgement that the work is disseminated almost entirely by means of photographic documentation and a first-person narrative account of the work,[1] as it is here where present-time viewers will encounter the narratological records of the installation's intersections with the effects of unusual weather.

Despite the playful, accessible nature of much of the body of his creative work, Coupland, an academically trained artist, frequently addresses serious social and cultural issues by means of a multiplicity of disciplinary methods. He has alluded to an interest in material-conceptual methods for overcoming the shortcomings of humanist conceptions of subjectivity in his novels,[2] but these are arguably best manifest in his artistic practice, where he finds the freedom to deal with larger, less definable issues. Here, his expressive strategies often overcome anthropocentric modes of thought, akin to those embedded in the architectures implicit to speculative realist philosophies, including the framework of object-oriented ontology. This subset of speculative realism includes the ecological ideas of Timothy Morton, who, in his 2013 text *Hyperobjects*, conceives of global warming and capitalism as complex assemblages, or "hyperobjects," that predicate a form of geophilosophical inquiry that extends beyond the anthropocentric bounds of conventional humanism. He introduces his particular terminology by means of a simple definition: "I coined the term *hyperobjects* to refer to things that are massively distributed to time and space relative to humans. . . . Hyperobjects . . . are 'hyper' in relation to some other entity, whether they are directly manufactured by humans of not" (1). He explains that his concept speaks to the non-anthropocentrism and realism typical of the philosophical discourse of object-oriented ontology, and that, relatedly, "hyperobjects force us to acknowledge the immanence of thinking to the physical" (2). Understanding the challenge inherent to conceiving of the hyperobject by purely epistemological means, he gestures to the potentialities

1 The photographs, taken by commercial photographer Martin Tessler, were commissioned and art directed by Coupland. It is not unusual for an artist to commission a photographer to document site-specific (post-studio) artworks.

2 For example, his novel *Player One* (2010) deals in notions of the posthuman (particularly in terms of the transhuman), as per Kit Dobson's argument in "Examining the Rach(a)els in *Automaton Biographies* and *Player One*," *Blast, Corrupt, Dismantle, Erase: Contemporary North American Dystopian Literature*, ed. Brett Josef Grubisic, Tara Lee, and Gisèle M. Baxter, Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2014, pp. 393-408.

of contemporary art as a means to access a less elusive plane of thought. Although contemporary art might remain beguiling for many, it is accessible to most by means of varying levels of aesthetic and intellectual engagement, whereas epistemological inquiry remains largely inaccessible to the layperson.

Morton thoughtfully turns over the state and current modalities of contemporary art and advances the contentious assessment that, "We need art that does not make people think . . . but rather that walks them through an inner space that is hard to traverse," advancing the idea that art helps build an affective realm that can conceivably connect to our unconscious. He bases this claim in the frustrating realities of the contemporary age, when humans use ideological constructs ("Reasoning on and on") to cordon themselves off from troubling conceptual spaces (184), such as when mass culture points to mathematical or scientific abstraction as a means to address the global ecological crisis. It follows, then, that the issues Morton categorises as hyperobjects are, most significantly, the dystopic and all-encompassing multifarious conditions imported by global warming and capitalism, and the broad unfolding of evolution. He perceives that art, by means of its simultaneous array of conceptual and ontological affordances (see, for example, the ways that *Canada House* addresses issues of both materiality and spatiotemporal, sociocultural, economic context through being a site-specific, assemblage-based work). These qualities can address the urgency of our situation more effectively than the means provided by the emphasis on logos in philosophy.

Diverging from the sphere of speculative realism and into the complementary realm of what might best be called "libidinal aesthetics," Allen S. Weiss' *The Aesthetics of Excess* (1989), ostensibly inspired by Jean-François Lyotard's ideas in his *Libidinal Economy* (1974; 1993), is premised in a related observation of the problematic of language as inscribed in the linguistic turn, demonstrating elements of the longstanding and stratified nature of contentions within philosophy regarding the limitations of language and discourse. Weiss argues that "language is the space of excess of our speech," noting how we can trace tensions of either mastery or dispossession in both writing and speech, and that "the linguistic system far surpasses the limits of our expression" (ix). He locates spaces of contention within a linguistic discourse that function to subvert the use-value of language. Recalling Nietzsche's well-known statement from his letter to Jacob Burckhardt in 1889, "I am every name in history," Weiss notes how this statement speaks to the 'program' embedded in reading and writing. He observes that "every text is potentially a supplement of all other texts, a fragment of an infinite, universal text that unfolds with every moment of every discursive act" (xii), noting the circuitous nature of hermeneutics. Observing this, he invokes the potential of silence, or non-speech, to subvert this paradigm and to engage with reality. He posits that the *actio* of rhetoric is to be reassessed as a mode of disengagement from "the other" (xiii), an idea connecting his critique with what is essentially the foundation of the theoretical framework of a generation of speculative realist thinkers. Language acts are here perceived as insufficient means of entering into dialogue with issues, events, or complex phenomena of a seemingly aporetic nature, such as those too immense and all-encompassing to adequately grasp, much less master.

Weiss' ideas connect to Morton's line of thought in several ways, one of which being that his arguments stage a debate within theory reminiscent of the project of Graham Harman, one of Morton's main sources of influence. Harman also perceives a weakness inherent to a theoretical prioritisation of language, contending that, "[t]he ostensibly revolutionary transition from consciousness to language still leaves humans in absolute command at the center of philosophy" ("Object-Oriented Philosophy" 94). While Harman nods to the utility of a language as a mode of expression and as a means to "make present without making present," he concedes that it is most frequently used in an "anti-realist way to reduce things to their accessibility to us" (Gratton 92-3).

If conventional language is an insufficient means by which to engage with "things," then how to proceed? How can we begin to approach these ideas, so entangled with our *habitus* and embedded in our psyche that we can scarcely perceive them anymore—they have no detectable beginning, nor end. Morton's strategy of reconceiving such "others" as hyperobjects, accessed by means of such tactics as "interobjectivity" and the notion of "viscosity" or adhesiveness, instilling them with a sense of ontic interconnectedness, circumvents such shortcomings without attempting to reduce or compartmentalise them. What is relevant work such as *Canada House* is that Morton recognises the revolutionary potential for aesthetics. He evinces that hyperobjects "exhibit their effects *interobjectively*; that is, they can be detected

in a space that consists of interrelationships between aesthetic properties of objects. The hyperobject is not a function of our knowledge: it's *hyper* relative to worms, lemons, and ultraviolet rays, as well as humans" (1-2; italics original). Morton here links the hyperobject in relational terms, proposing that interobjective relationships develop organically, as a result of spatio-chronological relationships, but are so naturalised as to be imperceptible.

The idea of accessing a concept that is inaccessible by discursive conventions can seem challenging, but Morton assures us that we are already in what he names the "Age of Asymmetry," a new aesthetic epoch defined by global environmental crisis, locating his definition in the linguistic and phenomenological conditions of contemporaneity. Such factors as the non-existence of a metalanguage and the precarity of existence are elemental of the contemporary epoch, which Morton characterises as "the end of the world" (2). While he draws parallels between this age and the Romantic era, he makes several explicit points of differentiation, such as, notably, the role of nonhumans in the contemporary timeframe. Here, he makes several useful distinctions:

> It's called the Age of Asymmetry because within human understanding humans and nonhumans face one another equally matched. But this equality is not like the
> Classical phase. [...] The feeling is rather of the nonhuman out of control, withdrawn from total human access. We have stopped calling nonhumans "materials." We know very well that they are not just materials-for (human production). We have stopped calling humans Spirit. Sure, humans have infinite inner space. But so do nonhumans. (172)

Similarly, Harman, driven primarily by his rereading of Heidegger's concept of "tool analysis" in *Being and Time*, contends that objects are ontological entities in their own right, noting how objects exert "some sort of reality in the cosmos, altering the landscape of being in some distinct way" ("Object-Oriented Philosophy" 98). Arguably, then, the dynamic tensions between the nonhuman "objects" that make up *Canada House*, including the record rainfalls, are granted a new form of agency that is worth examining.

The Hyperobject and *Canada House*

Both Morton and Harman agree that art, in particular, has the capacity to translate the interconnectivity that exists between objects, human and nonhuman, on varying levels. Morton notes, "art becomes a collaboration between humans and nonhumans" (174). Harman, meanwhile, observes how an artwork's qualities "fuse" with the "real" object, despite its absence ("Graham Harman"). Such traits resonate with Coupland's installation in four different ways. By drawing out the material and conceptual contexts of the work, materially manifesting Latour's notion of the "litany" of objects, foregrounding the encounter with Morton's notion of the "mesh," and inverting the dynamics of the gallery space, or "white cube," the installation illustrates how art can exemplify this complex, interconnected and ontologically-resonant assemblage. Significantly, certain intersections between the work and the architecture of object-oriented ontology are notably less conspicuous but of greater consequence, philosophically, than others.

The first and most pronounced element of *Canada House* speaking to the notion of interconnection embedded in object-oriented ontology is the dual context of the work; it occupies a position, conceptually and symbolically, within the discourses of both capitalism and global warming, pointing to how these discourses are themselves circular and intertwined. Spatiotemporally, the installation speaks to the Vancouver market, which points to global capitalism as well as to coastal northern British Columbia and Vancouver's ecology, which also occupies a position within the expansive flows of global warming, which is, in turn, related to capitalism. Its components, or "sculptures," positioned according to the artist's tacit intention, also recall such ideas in their material form, as well as their relational and geographic situatedness. It points to different manifestations of the hyperobject simultaneously.

The second aspect of Coupland's work that intersects with concepts of object-oriented ontology that is worth scrutinizing is the idea that the installation space suggests a "flat ontology," primarily by means of what Harman and Morton call "Latour Litanies": "random lists of objects" that are "the hallmark trope of OOO" (Morton, "Here Comes Everything" 173). The seemingly unrelated groupings of objects and conditions,

assembled under the auspice of ironised representations of Canada (or tongue-in-cheek "Canadiana"), speak to what Harman calls the Latourian "carnival of things" (qtd. in Morton 173). Morton explains, "Latour Litanies are metonymic," noting, "they are open about their rhetorical status. They hamper the arrival of a (positive, independent) Nature or Non-Nature" (174). Coupland's groupings seem almost nonsensical, but point, in a rhetorical sense, to diverse ideas and concepts in political, philosophical, and social realms. Additionally, the palpable irony speaks to a philosophical inversion of the irony, or "inner life," of Hegel's Romantic period. Coupland's work touches upon this Romantic discourse in that the work speaks to a radical decentering of art and prioritisation of interpretation, dislocating it from direct experience in the Hegelian sense (Morton, *Hyperobjects* 164). As mentioned above, the installation speaks, by the function of metonymy, to specific but inextricably entangled hyperobjects.

The third element of Coupland's work that is relevant to the project of object-oriented ontology, and is also of greater consequence, is that during its five days of existence as an installation, the physical structure of the house, as assemblage of actants, was in a state of flux, calling attention to a (somewhat Deleuzian) plane of immanence, within which all objects exist and interact, as well as both the geophysical force of human actions and the reciprocal, or symbiotic, nature of such actions. The house is deteriorating as a result of the sustained forces of nature, most clearly according to the meteorological conditions of its locus, manifesting, in physical and conceptual means, the interobjective domain. Claire Colebrook discusses such conditions as our primary means of contact with global warming (which she calls "climate change," a term Morton rejects), explaining

> [w]e can only think of climate change in the meteorological sense—as humans now bound to volatile ecologies that they are at once harming and ignoring— if we have already altered the ways in which we think about the relations between time, space, and species. This expansive sense of climate change encompasses a mutation of cognitive, political, disciplinary, media and social climates. (52)

The moisture from the excessive rains penetrates the outer membrane of the house, and despite the layer of plastic, water pools on the floor, and mud is tracked through the pristine white space by visitors' boots. The "sacred" space of the "white cube" is marred by the reality of the hyperobject; nature and culture, organic and synthetic intermingle in a way that is messy and unsettling. Such brushes with the forces of nature, which we understand as "weather," are the moments in which we encounter that which Morton calls the "mesh." In "Here Comes Everything: The Promise of Object-Oriented Ontology" (2011), Morton explains his notion of "the strange stranger" by means of "a mesh of strange strangeness—uncanny, open-ended, vast: existence is (ecological) coexistence. The life-nonlife boundary is far from thin and rigid" (165-6). The nonhuman nature and near-chaotic interactions of the house and its various components, the precipitation, and the black plastic barrier remind the viewer that the artwork is interconnected to its context and that this context is fluid. Morton maintains that "Not only do [we] fail to access hyperobjects at a distance, but it also becomes clearer with every passing day that "distance" is only a psychic and ideological construct designed to protect [us] from the nearest of things" (*Hyperobjects* 27). He proposes that "distance" might be merely a "defence mechanism against a threatening proximity" (27-8). The presence of pooling water and excessive moisture within an art installation is disquieting; it interrupts the austere stillness that the viewer anticipates within the "white cube," and inverts its dynamic. Indeed, these conditions, as well as the foreknowledge of the house's imminent demise, manifest a layer of tension within the space.

Intimately connected to Morton's renovation of Hegelian Romanticism, the fourth and final major consideration of Coupland's five-day installation that speaks to ideas present in the discourse of object-oriented ontology concerns the dynamics of the white cube itself. The white cube, the ubiquitous museological space that, in theory, foregrounds objects on the premise that their context recedes, or speaks to an absence of distracting elements, brackets the objects—in the case of an installation, the ontological experience—as aesthetic "things." The space is therefore meditative and disconnected from the rest of the world; the objects and space can be experienced without the intrusion of the outside world. These ideas are entirely problematic for object-oriented philosophy, as human perception of the objects is privileged, and, in Morton's view, the interconnection of the foregrounded objects (including the human viewer) to

hyperobjects can easily be minimised or suppressed. The gallery experience cannot be one that centres on human transcendence, rather than "to acknowledge the immanence of thinking to the physical" (*Hyperobjects* 2).

Canada House and/as the White Cube

The precise spatial context of *Canada House* merits in-depth inquiry mainly because it contributes to the identification of important tensions between the genealogy of anthropocentrism and the emergent ideas of object-oriented ontology, while also advancing the significance and cultural relevance of the installation—and of Coupland's interdisciplinary practice. The meaning and function of the white cube crystallised with the publication of Brian O'Doherty's serial articles, "Inside the White Cube," in *Artforum* in 1976. In the more recent expanded edition, now in book form, O'Doherty argues that the white cube, a modernist trope within the discourse of fine art, enables context to overcome the object. He explains, "We have now reached a point where we see not the art but the *space* first" (14; italics original), and that,

> The ideal gallery subtracts from the artwork all cues that interfere with the fact that it is "art." The work is isolated from everything that would detract from its own evaluation of itself. This gives the space a presence possessed by other spaces where conventions are preserved through the repetition of a closed system of values. Some of the sanctity of the church, the formality of the courtroom, the mystique of the experimental laboratory joins with chic design to produce a unique chamber of esthetics. So powerful are the perceptual fields of force within this chamber that once outside it, art can lapse into secular status- and conversely. Things become art in a space where powerful ideas about art focus on them. Indeed *the object frequently becomes the medium through which these ideas are manifested and proffered for discussion*—a popular form of late modernist academicism ("ideas are more interesting than art"). (14; italics mine)

While it is conceivable that Coupland planned his project under the assumption that the 1950s house would function as a basic white cube hybridized with a domestic space, still functioning according to the specific dynamics of the modernist gallery space O'Doherty describes, the hyperobject of global warming, by means of the climate, intervenes and renders the space the white cube's "other." Weather intervenes; climate, and thus the effects of global warming, announces itself, intruding upon best-laid plans and changing the course of the future.

Morton posits that such an instance speaks to the Husserlian concept of the dark, inaccessible side of objects, related to the "Kantian gap between phenomenon and thing" within his concept of "intentional objects" (*Hyperobjects* 11). He draws upon Kant's allegory of the raindrop in *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781; 1787), which he paraphrases as "you can feel them on your head—but you can't perceive the actual raindrop in itself," as a means to evince how the subjective experience of rain connects to the less-accessible situation of the global climate, thus calling attention to the relative incomprehensibility and general inaccessibility of the hyperobject (12).

In the case of *Canada House*, weather and the structural integrity of the house operate symbiotically as a Heideggerian "broken tool," according to Harman's rereading: "[I]t is only when a tool is broken that it seems to become present-at-hand (*vorhanden*)" (Morton, *Hyperobjects* 14). As Harman himself clarifies, "On the whole, we tend to notice objects only when they somehow malfunction . . . Heidegger actually treats all conscious awareness as a variant of broken equipment" ("The Revival of Metaphysics" 111). Perhaps the aesthetic elements alone would have recalled global warming by the function of the aforementioned mechanisms of metonymy, but the intervention of torrential rain, manifesting flood-like conditions within the space, has a more profound affect on the viewer and is thus more effective as the assertion of a hyperobject.

The unplanned intervention of the conditions of reality aside, it is worth asking if a *purely* aesthetic reading of Coupland's work is an evocative means of grasping the enterprise of object-oriented ontology, and of Morton's theories of the hyperobject specifically. Moreover, what does such an intervention say about Coupland's intentions, if the intentionality or sense of creative autonomy embedded in his work can be overcome by powers beyond his, or any human's, control? In fact, it is of significance to both queries that the artist's work *can*, indeed, be overwhelmed by the unplanned consequences of a hyperobject's

intervention, and that this, in and of itself, speaks to the nature of object-oriented ontology's use value as an interpretive mode. The artist's position, as an intentional subject, is no more important than the position of all nonhuman actants, or objects, and the work becomes more philosophically poignant as a result.

The Hyperobject and Location: Reevaluating Coupland

The conceptual vein running throughout Coupland's work is genealogically interconnected to his biographical origins. Although born to Canadian parents on a military base in Germany, he spent the majority of his life in Vancouver, eventually attending Emily Carr to study studio art. From there, he went on to continue his studies in Tokyo, Japan, a decision that also connects explicitly to the micro-cultures of Vancouver. Such factors are intrinsic to his creative practices, and support an argument for the complex and multimodal conceptual nature of his praxis, while also pointing to the presence of a regional avant-garde inheritance within the sociocultural fabric of Vancouver.

Vancouver artist and art historian Ian Wallace traces this inheritance back to a group of artists teaching and studying in the art history department of the University of British Columbia in the 1960s, describing the group, an "alternative avant-garde," as being "more intellectual, socially critical and well-informed about recent theory as well as art." He explains that they were at once cognizant of the activity of international avant-gardes as well as "focused on a critical commentary of the social landscape" (54). While the best-known discourse of Vancouver's avant-garde artistic movements is that of its internationally renowned photo-conceptualist movement, largely inspired by the activist documentary practices of artists Dan Graham and Robert Smithson (56), the essence of Vancouver's avant-garde culture, which was not medium-specific (in fact, much of Vancouver art today is post-medium), is in its response to issues impacting the region's social imaginary. Ostensibly, the social landscape of the 1960s was shaped by the development of local ecological awareness and anxieties about the rise of localized industrial activity, as expressed explicitly by the formation of such activist organizations like Greenpeace: it is widely acknowledged that Vancouver's economy was driven by its location as a major international marine port as well as its region's rich natural resources.

Coupland's conscious inclusion, as an interdisciplinary artist documenting his own work, of an account of the meteorological conditions alters the discourse of the work. By all intents and purposes, *without* the local climate's intervention, Coupland's project would have unobtrusively found its projected place within the trajectory of post-studio art premised in social critique, as mentioned at the beginning of this critical examination. Like his precedents Graham and Smithson, his time- and location-based installation would have drawn from its material and conceptual surroundings, turning over the rather conventional notions of environmental impact and regional and national politics while drawing clever connections to pop culture and referencing art history. The recognisable framing structure of a Vancouver "tear down" would have contributed a layer of meaning, bracketing the space in the sense of a distinct local vernacular. The work would have been successful but *different*. It would be archivally preserved, as it is now, in the pages of his book and as an exhibition of amusing curiosities at the Canadian Embassy in London, UK, where, as its entry on *Wikipedia* explains, it is now permanently housed. It is notable that in the photographic documentation of the installation, the space shows no signs of water damage, and it is only through Coupland's narrative intervention that the effects (and overall affect) of the house's external conditions are known.

The interplay between Coupland's installation and the local real estate market, notorious for its links to overseas markets, makes the work particularly poignant. Given Coupland's near-obsession with the theme of suburban nostalgia in his fiction, it is understandable that most critical responses to his work go no further than to link his visual art, including *Canada House*, to his literary motifs, observing undeniable thematic parallels between the seemingly opportunistic nationalistic spatio-visual piece and his nods to his childhood spent in the hilly residential neighbourhoods of Vancouver. Such observations fail to note the critique embedded in such a work, as well as its greater exegesis of the Vancouver situation, to which he alludes in his nonfiction book about his hometown, *City of Glass* (2002).

In *City of Glass*, written around the same time as *Canada House* was installed, Coupland explains the phenomenon of "see-throughs," empty residences generally found in the innumerable condo towers that line Vancouver's maritime boundaries. These empty condos signal to the economic fluctuations characteristic of the shift from the twentieth to the twenty-first century—Coupland notes, in particular, the transition of Hong Kong to Chinese rule (126)—and to the nature of global financial markets in general. Coupland's postulations on Vancouver real estate are reminiscent of Henri Lefebvre's discussion of the "truth of prices" in *The Production of Space* (1991) (337), wherein Lefebvre deduces that, in contemporary economic spheres, the economic value of real estate no longer adheres to "classical political economy" (335). Lefebvre expounds:

> Exchange value . . . is expressed in terms of money. In the past one bought or rented land. Today what is bought (and, less frequently, rented) are volumes of space: rooms, floors, flats, apartments, balconies . . . Each exchangeable place enters the chain of commercial transactions––of supply and demand, and of prices. The connection of prices with 'production costs' . . . is an increasingly elastic one, moreover. This relationship, like others, is disturbed and complicated by a variety of other factors, notably by speculation. The 'truth of prices' tends to lose its validity: prices are more and more independent of value and of production costs, while the operation of economic laws––the law of value and the law of supply and demand . . . is compromised. Fraud itself now becomes a law, a rule of the game, and accepted tactic. (337)

Lefebvre's ideas call attention to the interplay of mechanisms of capitalism present within transactions of real estate. Indeed, in producing a work premised in Vancouver's real estate market, which Coupland characterises as "the power of global history to affect our lives, and the average citizen's alienation from the civic political processes" (*City of Glass* 126), he speaks not to kitsch or Canadiana, but to the affect (and aesthetic) of the nefarious forces of global capitalism.

The ebb and flow of the markets, as exemplified in the performative metaphoric capacities of the now-razed house that once accommodated the installation *Canada House*, is not the only superstructure to which Coupland points in this complex installation. The material details of the décor and furnishings displayed within its rooms speak to another nefarious force: global warming. At times, economic systems are also represented as being intertwined with issues of ecology, rendering the analysis of the components of the work both practical, as such issues are topical and immediately identifiable, and ever more complex, as the knowledge that these systems are interrelated and oftentimes ill-addressed is a renowned controversy within contemporary discourse.

Remarkable components of the installation include a room full of distinctively Canadian domestic detritus, and large-scale "sculptures" created from debris harvested from the shores of Graham Island in northern Haida Gwaii—the Queen Charlotte Islands off the coast of northern British Columbia. The items used to create these sculptures include discarded fishing floats, of which Coupland found more than a hundred, and numerous Japanese and Korean shampoo and whiskey bottles (*Souvenir of Canada 2* 45). There are also monolithic structures crafted of blocks of industrial Styrofoam, shaped to recall Inuit *inuksuit*. He explains that these foam elements, which ostensibly gesture to the country's colonialist legacy, were found on the tidal flats under Vancouver's Lions Gate Bridge. Of such materials, he expounds: "Canada is a northern country, and because of this, plastics can take tens of thousands of time longer to decompose than they might at the Equator with all its heat, sunlight and bacteria. Plastics discarded in the far Arctic will remain intact until, *scientifically, mathematically, our universe ends*" (49; italics mine). The final sentence of Coupland's explanation, positing that the ending of the universe can be effectively conceptualised as a scientific and mathematical process, demonstrates how textual description can interfere in the critical reception of art, as it can shift the dialogic relation between work and viewer from an open to a closed dynamic. According to traditional approaches, prosaic language, unlike other media such as visual art or film, proffers a closed interpretive schema. Such a statement gestures to the limitations of the textual format, and the wording is of particular significance because it ambivalently calls attention to humankind's programmatic and notably liberal humanist approach to large-scale and complex problems: the deferral to the scientific paradigm. At once, such a deferral functions in opposition of the aesthetic methodologies embodied by *Canada House*, while introducing discourse that contributes to its aesthetic and ontological capacities as a mechanism of metaphysical translation; it is worth considering that Coupland may intend

for this reference to function in ironic tension with the other elements of his work, as his aesthetic makes no discernable connection to science. Indeed, such tension becomes increasingly manifest when contemplated alongside the visual and conceptual qualities of the work itself.

A reference to science and math, writ large, generally implies that such disciplines are analogous to truth-value and universality, notions largely challenged in contemporary critical thought; such references are particularly problematized in light of the Sokal affair, as the linguistic turn in philosophy, along with its correlations to the scientific method (Lynch 1). The Sokal affair,[3] as a quasi-spectacle, blew open problematics within the relationship between representational systems of language and hermeneutics and "truth value." Theorist of science Bruno Latour, for example, has based the entirety of his project in an attempt to overcome the divide between science (which he calls "Nature") and society, as demonstrated in *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993) and *Politics of Nature* (2004). In an effort to challenge the authority of science, he introduces the notion of a network of mediation between actors, promoting a sense of productive interlocution that effectively dissolves the autonomous position of the sciences; his dedication to formulating a methodology to collapse this order as a sovereign domain speaks to its privileged designation in the hegemonic order, the shared, neoliberalist imaginary of the globalized world.

With regard to such philosophical positions, Coupland's casual reference to liberal humanist frameworks remains both emblematic and precarious within the context of contemporaneity and points to customary modes of rationalising global ecological and economic issues as a means of addressing accepted forms of authority within liberal humanist discourse. He calls attention to the hegemonic order, drawing out the anthropocentric ways contemporary global issues are commonly addressed within conventional forums. While there are identifiable reasons for such lines of thought, as they are not only accepted, but also inscribed within liberal humanist cultures, such gestures to authority are counter-productive in many ways in the context of contemporary theory, which points to alternative and possibly more effectual means of making sense of, or simply encountering, complex problems, including the predicaments of global warming and capitalism. Certainly, conventional politics and economics, in a shared state of flux, as well as subject- or human-centred modes of philosophy, evince how liberal humanist forms (including the linguistic turn) do little to arrest, much less attenuate, the slippery predicament of global reality. It is worth considering alternative modes of accessing these concepts—alternatives that are simultaneously embodied and conceptual, and as such, potentially more conative and affective in their capacity to connect subject and object.

Indisputably, without Coupland's literary inclusion, *Canada House* would have maintained, and, according to its legacy as shown in the photographic images proffered in *Souvenir of Canada 2* and at the Canadian Embassy in London, does maintain, a certain level of integrity without the factors that contribute to the more profound and impactful reading accessed by its more *direct* interactions with hyperobjects. It still borrows from certain inscriptions of the avant-garde, on a both regional and transnational scale, as it still speaks to "the autonomy of the aesthetic," bridging the world external to the work with the work itself, with little consideration of what Hegel calls "the artist's subjective skill" (qtd. in Bürger 92). But something is lost without Coupland's narrative contribution. The work becomes atrophied and detached from its mythology; its power is located only in its complete form, and it can only be assessed according to the collective effect of the sum of its parts, including Coupland's anecdotal descriptions. As problematized as language, as a communicative mode, has become within the discourse of philosophies fleeing the linguistic turn, in this case, literary inscription (as with the legacy of text-based art) is part of Coupland's expansive assemblage that is *Canada House*.

Within the discourse of the post-war avant-garde, the relationship between a work of art and, to borrow a term from Marcel Duchamp, its "coefficient[s]," is central to both the work's significance and its reception (qtd. in Buskirk 90). Martha Buskirk contends,

3 The Sokal affair, or Sokal hoax, is a well-known academic publishing hoax that took place in 1996, wherein New York University/University College London physics professor Alan Sokal submitted a nonsense article to the journal *Social Text*. The article, a parodically conceived paper written to appeal to the editors' beliefs, initiated debates around institutional and/or theoretical insularity, particularly as in terms of ideological conversations around language.

> For ephemeral activities or environments, a diverse array of information may be employed in the retrospective reading of the work by an audience not present for the initial gesture. Such material might include plans for the work, supplementary data prepared for the initial audience, photographs, and other audio or visual records of ephemeral events or arrangements, retained physical elements . . . the artist's own statements, and accounts . . . recollecting the experience. (79-80)

She points to O'Doherty's observations of the dynamics of reception, that "avant-garde gestures have two audiences: one which was there and one—the rest of us—which wasn't," noting that the original audience often is "restless and bored by its forced tenancy of a moment it cannot fully perceive" and as such, constructs a relation to work by means of rumour, memory, and photographic documentation (80). For Coupland's *Canada House*, then, the original site-specific work exists in isolation of the more sterile contemporary manifestation of the work as it is reconstructed in London. Buskirk's argument that photographs and other documentary forms record, isolate, and fix a moment in history (94), and that ephemeral forms of art are generally interpreted by means of a purely retrospective and indirect approach (79; 81), speak to the way *Canada House* itself can be understood as an assemblage, both physically and conceptually. Indeed, as a case study of sorts, it demonstrates that the discourse of avant-garde art forms are lateral to the discourse of the hyperobject, similarly occupying a position both "viscous" and "nonlocal" (Morton, *Hyperobjects* 1), thus intensifying and adding dimension to Morton's and Harman's frequent references to avant-gardist aesthetics.

It might seem precarious to pair as an assemblage of seemingly anthropocentric forms, such as those that form Coupland's multimodal art installation, with a philosophical architecture that appears to invert or negate them. However, Morton posits that the Age of Asymmetry, marked by the advent of philosophical modes that "oppose the correlationist circle that emerged at the time of the Anthropocene" (*Hyperobjects* 199), can still support inner depth and reflection—it is simply necessary that such inner depth be massively distributed to nonhumans as well. If *Canada House* exists primarily in the form of an assemblage of objects, including documentation, memory, and sculptures, it is thus gesturing to nuanced aspects of object-oriented ontology: we must include hyperobjects within the discourse and flatten our ontological reading to collapse hierarchies between humans and nonhumans (Morton; "Here Comes Everything" 173-4). O'Doherty's interpretation that according to the analytic dynamics of the gallery, "context becomes content," intersects with Harman's and Morton's philosophical framework, as it suggests a non-hierarchical and increasingly flexible approach to time and space, recalling Morton's analysis of the Kantian gap between thing and phenomenon (*Hyperobjects* 12).

Such observations evince how the function of installation art in many ways informs the paradigm of the hyperobject. Consider Simon Sheikh's rereading of O'Doherty's canonical essay:

> Not only in the context of art institutions and gallery spaces, but also in broader territorial and political senses, the dichotomy between inside and outside has become a cornerstone of what we would now call installation art. Thus, we should not only read "Inside the White Cube" as the vital document of the [1960s and] 1970s post-studio art scene that it undoubtedly is, but also as a nodal point that connects in two directions: backwards to the modern history of art, and forwards to contemporary spatial practices.

The foregrounding of inside/outside and backward/forward ontological and temporal relations in installation work calls attention to the binary function of human consciousness in the conditions of contemporaneity, thereby enabling the viewer to access modalities of consciousness that are generally too naturalised, thus withdrawn, to observe. The objecthood of the work affords a focalization of our experience of phenomena, both in the sense of how we experience objects as art, and, in turn, in how we conceptualize our experience *vis-à-vis* objects in general; these effects are compounded by the ways in which Coupland's work is presented retrospectively, in book form—as with the ways in which photographs and discourse, as objects in themselves—convey information divorced from the original objects represented, thus making the original objects secondary to their images. The meditative space of the white cube "vitalizes" (to borrow a term from Morton's and Harman's new materialist colleague, Jane Bennett) the encounter in such a way as to posit both immanence and immediacy.

In the case of *Canada House*, the physical and conceptual interventions of the hyperobject are bracketed by this state of heightened awareness. The confrontation between viewer and object(s), in both

immediate terms and in the space of contemplative retrospection produced by photographic records, connects consciousness to the "real," to profound, even revolutionary, effect, in a way that circumvents the shortcomings of the linguistic turn and other anthropocentric modes: by the lateral means of aesthetic experience. Coupland's *Canada House*, as a collective object formed of innumerable other objects, draws out the diagonal lines between viewer and art, activating the viewer's position within the lateral human/nonhuman dynamics of the hyperobject.

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