

Douglas Coupland Shiny

01/06

In early December of 2012 I was in the middle of a severe seasonal depression, a condition I'm more than familiar with. On December 6 I needed to fly to Stockholm, and I was distressed at the prospect of having to do so while depressed. To be honest, I didn't think it was even going to be possible. In a last-minute act of desperation, on December 2 I bought a light box for \$199 at a local drugstore – 150 bright, light blue LEDs arranged in a grid. I plugged it in, looked at it for three seconds and ... *ping*, my depression was gone. Completely. Like that. Over. Push-button. Three seconds. These three seconds remain the single oddest medical moment of my life. I carried that light in my carry-on luggage for years, superstitiously waiting for the depression to reappear, and it has yet to do so.

* * *

A friend of mine sells hotels in California. If he's having a slow time moving a property he has a three-point program to speed up a sale. First, he surrounds the property with a planted mixture of annual flowers – petunias work best – in a color proportion of one-to-one white-to-color. It makes a property look both lived in and loved. Second, he has a tow truck drop off Rolls-Royces around the property. These are dead Rolls-Royces, sold for a few thousand bucks by Los Angeles car-hire companies. Basically, they're husks, but if you park one out front they become real estate and the property's price instantly rises. Third, he invents affairs between movie stars that took place on the property. A room is a room is a room, but not if Grace Kelly and William Holden spent a lost week there in 1955. It's a strange trait we human beings have, but we seem to love imagining celebrity ghosts having sex.

* * *

I remember this past February 21 being in an airport lounge watching CNN footage of Dubai's seventy-four-story Torch skyscraper in flames. Bits of burning debris from the fiftieth floor drifted down and set other floors on fire. Like most fires, the burning Torch made for gripping TV, and I remember the guy at the table behind me saying, "It's going to take more than just a pressure washer to get that thing looking brand new again."

* * *

A favorite video of mine from 1983 was for a song called "Shiny Shiny" by the now long-defunct group, Haysi Fantayzee. One of its vocalists was Kate Garner, who sang and danced

e-flux journal #65 SUPERCOMMUNITY — may–august 2015 [Douglas Coupland Shiny](#)

02/06



Much of the debris from the 2011 tsunami in Japan landed on Haida Gwaii's Rose Spit in British Columbia. Photo: Julia Bendtsen.

in a high-tech Barbarella-style outfit. It's out on YouTube; give it a look. In 1995 I was living in Palo Alto and a photographer showed up to do some shots, and the photographer was Kate Garner (!), which was a fan moment for me but not for her. She'd moved into photography and was now a serious person and really didn't want to discuss her former life as a New Wave pop star. She had glasses on and was dressed down and I guess I can see her point, but I did keep waiting for that moment where she took off her glasses, unbundled her hair and shook it loose – at which point everyone would say, "By God, Kate Garner ... you're beautiful!"

* * *

A friend of mine does window displays for Cartier in North America, and he told me this interesting fact: if you place two or three or more objects in a display case, people will always read the object on the left as being the most valuable, even if it isn't. I would have thought the center object would be perceived as the most valuable, but apparently not, and if anybody knows the laws and rules of luxury and desire, it's Cartier.

* * *

What all these anecdotes have in common is that in some form, they help us decode notions of value and beauty that are hardwired into our DNA. Shiny is youth. Shiny is fertility. Shiny is uncorrupted. Shiny smells like the interior of a new car. Shiny is sixty-five golf courses in Palm Springs in the middle of the worst drought in a century. I love shiny, because the moment you see something shiny, you know there's going to be something rotten or scary nearby – like the Japanese notion of *honnē* and *tatemai*: the public face and the private face. I don't like it when people show me something rotten without first giving me something shiny to compare it to. It's like people who deconstruct music without first learning how to play it in the first place.

* * *

In the mid-1980s I attended a Japanese institute on the Hawaiian island of Oahu where the temperature was 75 degrees and slightly breezy pretty much every day of the year – but I was in my mild goth phase and with a few similarly minded locals, we were the only people in Hawaii wearing black sweaters while we cursed the sun. Evil, evil sun.

* * *

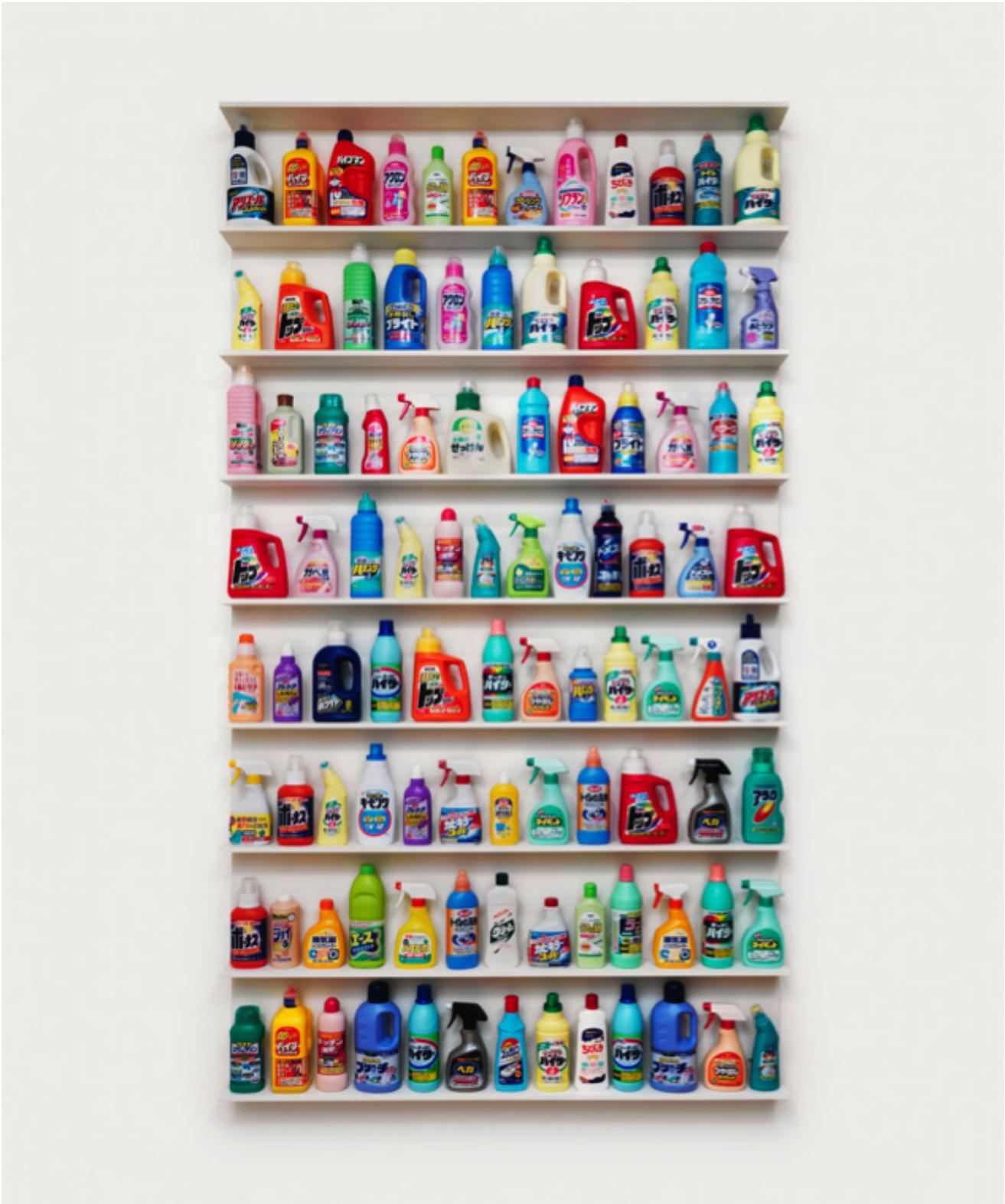
In 1999 I was in a Daiei department store in Tokyo and I had an epiphany in the cleaning-products aisle. Fifty brands of bleach and toilet-bowl cleaners and window sprays were all duking it out for my attention, but of course they all canceled each other out, creating an optical-field effect. The sensation of standing in the aisle and soaking in these bright Japanese pinks and turquoises and baby blues and reds, with all of their noisy katakana labels, was sort of like an experience you might have in front of an Olafur Eliasson piece. It transcended culture and became a biology project. Similarly, aisle seventeen in my local Michaels crafts store is a ribbon aisle, with shelves on both sides filled with shiny, blingy ribbon spools. The floor is white. To stand there in the middle is not unlike staring at white and colored petunias planted together in a one-to-one ratio. Standing there makes me feel like I'm engaged in some sort of universal constant, like pi or the Avogadro constant.

In any event, I bought around one hundred of the Japanese cleaning-product bottles and took them back to the hotel room and flushed their contents down the toilet, an act that horrifies most people but, if you think about it, it was all going there anyway. And what's the difference if there's a bit of hand dirt or spaghetti sauce residue mixed in with it? That gets you off the ecological hook, morally? These emptied bottles all came back home and went into a dedicated shelving unit, and it became an installation I titled *Tokyo Harbour*. To look at *Tokyo Harbour* is to be seduced by its candy-colored cheerfulness, except suddenly you start thinking about what was inside the bottles and cheerfulness becomes toxicity.

In 2011 Japan had the Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami. Millions of tons of debris were swept off the eastern coast of Honshu and into the Pacific where, years later, the refuse began washing up on a remote beach off northern British Columbia's coast: the north tip of the northernmost island that composes the Queen Charlotte Islands, islands now known in BC only by the name Haida Gwaii. This spit of land was the one place on earth I head to every year to recharge and escape from technology and homogenized time, and now it had become (and still remains) a graveyard for plastic Japanese products. For the past two summers, what would have been quiet retreats instead became debris clean-up missions. On one of my first afternoons there I found a turquoise-and-pink bottle of Japanese cleaning product and my mind was blown. I felt like the villain on the receiving end of an ecological folktale about the dangers of engaging with seductive sheen.

03/06

e-flux journal #65 SUPERCOMMUNITY — may–august 2015 Douglas Coupland
Shiny



Douglas Coupland, *Tokyo Harbour*, 2000. 108 plastic bottles. Installation view, Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, Canada.

* * *

The art world is largely mistrustful of shiny things, and on some level, even fearful of them. But if sophistication is the ability to put a smile on one's existential desperation, then the fear of a glossy sheen is actually the fear that the surface is the content. Fear of sheen is the fear that surface equals depth, that banality equals beauty, that shiny objects are merely transient concretizations of the image economy, and proof that Warhol was correct – a fact that still seems to enrage a surprising number of theoreticians.

Fear of shine explains why so much of today's art looks so much like art of today. You have art-fair art, which is very shiny, and the work in it is diminished with the label crapstraction – and it looks like it all could have been made by one person on a really nice drug – and then you have the nearby alternative art fair, where no shininess will be found, and where most of the art looks like it was also made by one person, albeit one who changes their meds every two weeks. In a sense, the existence of art fairs and their independent parallels, anti-fairs, seems to be a precipitation of the ongoing chilly détente between artists, dealers, and institutions. Mistrust on all flanks. Everyone wants to attend the other person's party – and they often do – but nobody feels comfortable no matter where they go. Everyone gets art'ed out and exhausted and feels like they've just walked across ten miles of nonstop casino noise and bling. Everyone just wants to go back to the hotel and sleep and strip their brains of shininess. But instead they freshen up their look and go out for cocktails. And then they do it all over again the next day.

* * *

Do you buy dented cans of food? Do you buy the vegetables and fruits with bird pecks in them? Do you buy misfit produce that doesn't look like clip art? And what's your policy on expired dairy products? Would you feel awkward buying art from a dealer whose space didn't at least aspire to some dimension of New York neutrality? Does it slightly weird you out when you walk from the outside world into a gallery where the inside mood is blank and white to the point of feeling outer-spacey? Have you ever bought a designer garment you thought was real but which turned out to be fake? Have you ever tried to fob off a fake as the real thing? Do you collect art? Do you make art? Do you feel like a nimble outsider free to pass judgment on everything? If you are, does it depress you not to actually be in the game itself? Are you a minimalist? Do you take pride in a reductive life?

05/06

e-flux journal #65 SUPERCOMMUNITY — may–august 2015 Douglas Coupland
Shiny

Minimalists are actually extreme hoarders; they hoard space, and they're just as odd as those people with seven rooms filled with newspapers, dead cats, and margarine tubs. Are you into fashion? Fashion and the art world have always coexisted. Fashion memes are simply faster and you get to do figurative work without having to defend yourself to the 400-level art instructor who lives in your head and judges everything harshly and frequently. Who is this art instructor who lives inside your head? Where did he or she come from? Is their tone invariably mocking and snippy? Does it transmit its biases onto you to the point where you no longer trust your own judgment? Why is it always angry? Why does its point of view reflect that of someone a generation older than you, who, to be honest, you really don't agree with much of the time. Can you kill the internalized art instructor who lives in your head? That would be liberating, but would it destabilize you? Would you still know how to discuss art without sounding small-town? But then, maybe using your own voice instead of the internal professor's voice would make you sound authentic and real instead of making you sound like just another art-world person with the same internalized 400-level professor clouding and poisoning their experiences in the aesthetic realm. Do you think that being quick to judge, and being quick to preemptively please your internal 400-level professor, means you ignore or dismiss things that might actually be interesting? Is it better to be safe than wrong? Do you sometimes see people talking and you can tell it's not even them doing the talking – they're merely channeling their internal professor? Does this activate your own internal professor? Does it annoy you? Do you call them on it? No, you don't. Nobody ever does. It's why things largely don't change, and besides, it's really boring to listen to two people channeling their internal professors as a discussion. Inside their heads they're getting an A+ on a nonexistent essay. They're basically just wanking each other. It's beyond predictable. Meanwhile, who's carrying around the trays of drinks and amuse-bouches? Who's out back loading the trucks and carrying the trash? Those security staff over there. They must be bored out of their minds. God, what a horrible job that must be. At least it's a blessing they don't have an internal 400-level professor in their heads. That would be the worst thing of all – having to be around this stuff eight hours a day, relentlessly, endlessly playing the same monologue over and over inside my head. I'd run off and join ISIS if I had to do that for a living. *ISIS*. *ISIS* has production values. It's waging the first war ever where people look and say, "Wow, I think they're using Final Cut Pro, not just Final Cut." And imagine having an about-to-

be-beheaded prisoner read from a teleprompter.
Those are professional post-production values.
And their weapons and their website, too. Really
tight and clean. Shiny.

x

Douglas Coupland is an author and artist based out of
Vancouver and Paris.

06/06

e-flux journal #65 SUPERCOMMUNITY — may–august 2015 Douglas Coupland
Shiny