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Generation Objects, Icons, Architecture and Collections: Object lessons from the work of Douglas Coupland[1]

Introduction

In a complex and rapidly changing world, Douglas Coupland has recorded, described and narrated his way around multiple different creative disciplines. The dominant theme of his works appears to be related to 'accelerated culture' and the increasing rate of change, which is itself clearly within the post-modern tradition (Forshaw, 2000) of culturally self-referencing, concentration, exaggeration and ironically reinventing ideas. His writing and his artwork have always been full of slogans and references to this sort of popular culture, or more accurately, popular consumer culture. However, in addition to these zeitgeist references are the appearance of artefacts and objects throughout his work that are representative of this type of consumerism.

This interest in artefacts relates to their selection, organisation and representation. This become apparent to me in the introduction to Souvenir of Canada, where Coupland uses the "nearly extinct visual mode of the still life" (2002), to photograph 'stuff' that he considers more significant than just mass-produced objects and that are in some way representative of a national sensibility and identity. This post-modern method is repeated and made explicit in his detailed conversions with Madelon Vriesendorp (2008) about the memorability of 'collections of stuff' and the pathology of how they are organised and displayed. This appears to be a common method of representation and organisation of 'stuff' as collective 'icons' used within his writing where the consideration of post-industrial age media and objects all represent something bigger that just their substantive value. He is using iconic or representative objects that have wider shared understanding to ironically enrich or exaggerate. It has even been suggested that he uses the novel as a form of literary museum, to host a series of personally or nationally significant objects within a storyline (Greenberg, 2013). As a result, Coupland has been described as "an accomplished lifestyle taxonomist" (Anthony, 2003), and as he also admitted directly, he is looking for meaning "all the time" (2010) in patterns, just like an artist, "… who looks at information overload with the goal of pattern recognition, to see things before anyone else" (Coupland, 2009 p143).

As part of an investigative inquiry into this idea of the process of collecting, organising and representing objects, this paper uses examples of 'selected objects' from both his fiction and non-fiction works. Albeit with a particular focus on his views on explicit architectural objects, the paper explores this idea of Coupland's writing as a collection of notable objects as much as a collection of ideas. In addition to the selection of objects, is the significance in his ontological approach to classifying and organising these in a combination of tacit and explicit ways. A formal, McLuhan's medium inspired, ontological framework is developed and visualised for these selected objects to test the notion that there is some sort of underlying pattern to this process. The paper suggests that throughout his writing and visual art, Coupland follows a similar curatorial approach and process to the inclusion of significant objects that are representative of zeitgeist and in his selections, he is in part helping to define the era, time, place or generation.

Coding and classification

The working criteria for the selection of objects is based on specific inclusion in his writing or artwork together with an accompanying direct and explicit quotation within

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[1] Introduction title and slide is inspired by Coupland's 'Word Clouds' series 1993-2013.

Coupland's own words. Albeit in practice this has proven to be quite a fluid definition as partial remembrances and new discoveries of artefacts and objects has caused revisions and iterations of different selections as the body of work has been reviewed.

In setting out to super-impose some sort of classification system on what is essentially a personally biased sample of objects that have been referenced in a single author's writing, I'm well aware of the limitations of what is possible. Yet best practice dictates it is better to be explicit about this, rather than keep my criterion invisible (Bowker & Star, 1999). It could best be described as an emergent ontology, as there are no current international standards for classifying Douglas Coupland's work. Thus, the approach to classification is based on *Nomenclature* (Bourcier *et al*, 2015), an updated version of Robert G. Chenhall's system (1978) for documenting and describing artifacts, selected as it has scope to include 'born-digital' or digital derivatives artefacts. In short, this is a classification system based on people, places, technology and generations.

- *Classification based on people or a personal name* is a great classification method that is commonly used throughout society, at virtually every governmental level and function. The ontology records both the creator or maker and the named subject or any eminent figure or organisation directly associated with the object through use and / or possession, thus providing a rich potential for sematic connections to be made.
- *Place based classification* records the location of the object or artefact and the place of manufacture, including the district, city and country if applicable.
- *Technological classification* as a criterion for the classification of objects seems essential, especially given Coupland's (2010) overlapping interests with Marshall McLuhan and the post-telegraph electronic age where the technological "medium is the massage", but also an extension of our existing human senses (McLuhan & Quentin, 1967). The key decision is whether it's classified as 'media' or as the dominant or mixed 'sense' receptors. Indeed, the distinction between technologic change and aesthetic (for 'aesthetic' read 'human', 'organisational' or 'procedural' interaction with the technology) perspectives was one used by Marshall McLuhan (with Powers, 1989) to describe and postulate possible futures. Technology is also a useful indicator of, and alternative to recording, any given time-period. Toffler famously questioned the ability to keep up with the rapid pace of change and the danger that "… the future will have arrived to soon" (1970 p39), as new technology has a positive feedback on the pace of innovation that further accelerates the rate of change. In describing the structural impact of technologies on society, Marshall McLuhan suggested that "The city no longer exists, except as a cultural ghost for tourists", in the sense that "… any highway eatery with a TV set, newspaper, and magazine is as cosmopolitan as New York or Paris" (1967), so it is an important criterion if only for its undermining of the fundamental purpose and functionality of cities (and the place-based classification mentioned above) … even if we are blindly tumbling towards an electronic, digital and robotic future that is being shaped by the soft power of the media and forces of globalisation (McLuhan & Quentin, 1967).
- *Generational classification* is more contentious. "The whole generation thing is silly in the first place. If you have to assign a psychographic to someone who is 'x' and 'n', if you like the Clash, the Talking Heads and Depeche Mode then you're "X', its that's simple … and if you're like 'Depeche who?', you're not" (Coupland quote from Book Club, 2010). Yet, it has also been suggested that Coupland's writing and objects have been organised by chorology and nostalgia (Connell, 2017) and you'll still find him using timelines to reconstruct lives of biographees. Hence, it remains a useful mechanism for classification around date, historical or cultural period when the artefact is representative of type, form or style of a distinctive period.

Sampling Artefacts

This investigative inquiry into objects follows a broadly chronological sequence through Coupland's own timeline rather than his sequence of published works. One key decision has been to restrict the sample size to 30, in part an acknowledgement of the 30th anniversary of the publication of Generation X. What becomes apparent going through this process is the repetitive and self-referential nature of the objects and themes

The place to start is the **World Book Encyclopaedia** which was the 1970's source material that introduced Coupland to pop art, specifically Warhol's '**Campbells Tomato Soup'** (1968) and an image of '**Blam**' by Roy Lichtenstein (1962). Both works clearly making the association between words and objects. He said, "(i)t was the first time I had looked at words and the word itself 'Blam" became an art object … (m)y sensibility is very 'pop' and I look at words as more than just a word, I look at them as art supplies, but I also look at them as objects as well". In part, I share this personal history of being brought up in a household with World Book. This was clearly the internet of the pre-internet era with regard to organising knowledge in a mix of text and images. My childhood using World Book as it was slightly less expensive and less Anglo-centric choice than the Encyclopaedia Britannica. In one of the earliest references to his experiences with 'organised' information, Coupland is enthralled by words as objects.

The **Fax Meme, Marshall McLuhan's Memorial, Thornhill, Ontario**, is an example of an analogue meme based on words on an object. The concept of the 'meme' as a unit of information was first introduced as a metaphor by Richard Dawkins in his book 'The Selfish Gene' (1976) and developed further by Susan Blackmore (1999) into a unit or element of culture that is passed on by imitation and duplication. It is the 'pop' cultural and social media applications, due to common recognition, that have dominated our current understanding of how memes are used within public conversations with a result that the origins have become obscured over time. The characteristic of a digital meme is now intertextuality or referencing self and / or other popular memes. To understand these layers of cultural references it requires us to look beyond the trivial and understand the utility of the meme and the ability to communicate this meme (Shifman, 2014).

The reason this 'fax meme' resonates is that in the introduction to Blackmore's book (1999), Richard Dawkins speculates on a research method around the spread of a meme, in his example, a visual representation of Chinese whispers where a series of children are asked to draw a Chinese Junk and pass on their drawing for the next child to copy, potentially demonstrating inaccuracy in replication (non-digital) potentially being a problem with the ultimate success of the meme. This is surprising similar to Douglas Coupland's (2009) example of 'mutation' of information as evidenced from his exercise while working as a copywriter, in a forgotten trade publication called **Vista,** a business magazine, in sequentially faxing a rubbing of the Marshall McLuhan's grave maker from one business fax number to another. The object being rubbed was created in 1981 by the sculptor / designer Sorel Etrog and takes the form of a flat copper plate engraved with the words "The Truth shall make you free" in mix of futuristic fonts. This rubbing was the subject of "celebrity fax of the month", that was adapted and degraded through an extended sequence of technological Chinese whispers between different fax machines. Whether the replicator of the meme is a child / student, or a bored advertising professional, or the medium is an analogue hand drawn sketch or a fax or a digital document scan, the comparative exercises, share a common experience regarding progression and mutation, where new versions are, in part, based on the adaptation of earlier versions. The study of 'memes'; memetics or memology; is now a legitimate research area and has implications for evolutionary epistemology (Kantorovich, 2014), cultural genetics or the spread of information. The visual includes a digital reproduction of this degraded fax. It is also worth acknowledging that Vista magazine

also hosted the ***Generation X comic strip*** as a collaboration with Toronto based illustrator Paul Rivoche, himself a significant figure in new wave comics.

Moving from one magazine to another, ***Western Living magazine*** was a regional lifestyle where Coupland worked for a short time around 1987, with a lasting impact regarding the idealism and optimism of suburban or edge living. So much so that the design featured on the cover, the ***Ron-Thom designed house***[2] dating from 1962, was purchased by Coupland in 1994 and was considered so Canadian and so 'pure Vancouver' in its modernist rigid geometry (Shadbolt, 1995) and that it featured in his Souvenir of Canada collection (2002). The geometry seems to be similarly significant as, in an bloggers review of his home, Coupland commented that "I collect shapes" (Ounodesign, 2009) and seems to have collected the building, which was at risk of demolition, to be added to this collection of shapes with the house become a domestic gallery next door to his primary residence.

The edge city reappears in 'Postcard for Los Alamos', where Coupland references a group of "***Chevy Suburbans*** with blacked-out windows" (1996 p125) as an introduction to a suburban environment, one of several included in this collection. With the most notable being Brentwood and all of which attempt to capture ideas of utopia or the embodiment of an idealised American urban culture, or a portrait that "… can be viewed as an ontology of the present … an ontology of our moment in history that simultaneously reflects and ontology of ourselves" (Hamers, 2001 p2109-2110) or postmodernity as a place. It seems there is an argument that postmodern and postsuburbanism are being connected and addressed here and within several other parts of his fiction and non-fictional writing. This 'postsuburbanism' is a term that planners and architects are mostly unaware of, in that the dominant subculture of the place is of a 'edge city' or an edgy frontier-like environment, rather than the social hierarchical culture of post-war suburbanism (Foster, 2011). Yet the form and identity of the post suburban place is central to the edginess of his ideas about place.

Lego is a repeating theme in a lot of Coupland's work and so clearly is the ***Lego Modern House No.345*** where it formed the centre piece of a reproduced retro assembly of 100 kits. It smacks of associations in growing up utopian, with mass production and social betterment being an overtly modernist and low-density suburban architectural form. In reflecting on the associations, Coupland felt that "12-year-old boys use of the product goes into dormancy … (it) reminded me of the house I live in … it was my first and last Lego kit" (or the alpha and omega of Lego) and was repeated in format when describing "***Legotowers*** as an experimental timecode for a period in (his) life (Long Now Foundation, 2016). This later project was a 'crowd sourced' clusters of Lego blocks that have been randomly attached to each other. In addition, plastic figures came boxed with the first (and signed) edition of ***JPod*** (Coupland, 2006) that included a Lego cover design of the main characters, possibly an extremely unsubtle way of say that the book and the tech industry is populated by plastic characters.

Super City is a similar installation as a combination of plastic architectural toys inspired by the 1967 kit created by Ideal Toys that is clearly modernism and with a modular construction method that is reportedly better than Lego (CCA 2005). The style has associations with the California Modern ***Case Study House 16***[3] by architect Craig Ellwood (Jackson 2002) and with Will Alsop's also contemporaneous exhibition and installation (2004) that reimagines the scale of the Los Angeles conurbation stretching across the M62 corridor in northern England.

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[2] Images of the mid-century modernist house are from *New York Times* and include Douglas Coupland and his partner, architect David Weir.

[3] Part of a series of Case Study Homes that were commercial and experimental, commissioned by the owner of *Art & Architecture Magazine*.

Paramus Park Mall, New Jersey appears in Shampoo Planet where the most attractive idea running throughout the novel is the idea of a personal shampoo museum with the plastic bottle of choice being purchased from "Paramus Park Mall, New Jersey – one of Earth's four great mall fortresses along with the Sherman Oaks Galleria, the West Edmonton Mall, and the Ala Moana Shopping Center of Honolulu, Hamaii" (Coupland 1992, p132). It is interesting in passing to note that there is in fact a ***shampoo museum***, or museum section, at the Smithsonian which makes the link between beauty products and the culture of consumerism.

The association between plastics and places starts to find form here to be repeated in different works, including a *Guardian* article where he tells a story of shopping in a Tokyo department store in 1999 … "walking down a household cleaning products aisle and had what you might call an ecstatic moment when the plastic-tinted plastic bottles on both sides of the aisle temporarily froze my reptile cortex: pink, yellow, baby blue, turquoise – so many cute-looking bottles filled with so many toxic substances, all labelled with bold katakana lettering. I bought 125 bottles and took them back to my hotel room where I emptied them down the toilet." (Coupland 2018). This collection of plastic trash ultimately took the form of an art installation. These ***108 plastic bottles*** collected from Tokyo Harbour (no word of what happened to the other 17 bottles) were eventually displayed at Vancouver Art Gallery (2000) and seemed to demonstrate to many commentators and reviewers, his fascination with the material culture of our society and indicative of a progression into a more substantial and more politically activist territory for his work.

Linked to this collection of bottles is ***Vortex, Vancouver Aquarium***, the later display of Coupland's collection of marine garbage and is explicitly a reference (Keenlyside, 2018) to the Pacific Trash vortex or the Great Pacific Garbage Patch and its appearance; I would argue being included as a character; in 'Worst. Person. Ever.' the "… continent of plastic trash you've been reading about for decades. … The largest manmade object on the planet. Makes you proud and disgusted about being human, all at the same time". (Coupland, 2013c p108). As is often mentioned and experienced directly, the internet is futile for finding an appropriate image that adequately represents the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, and likewise, Coupland's response to visualising it as an instillation is overwhelming in scale and requiring the selection of a representative object from within it that was made of plastic, came from Japan and floated in the ocean like a buoy.

This repeating fascination with plastic waste has also been evident in the use and abuse of chewing gum, as the subject of a theft where "… (the protagonist of the novel) swiped a pack of ***Wrigley's Orbit White chewing gum*** from the rack up front and then spent the morning chewing every piece, one by one, placing the resulting gum wads underneath the Bic SoftGrip display racks. Talk about life on the edge" (Coupland, 2007 p29). This is virtually the set of instructions for the crowd-sourced creation of ***Gumhead***, a collection of second-hand chewing gum placed over the 2m high resin and polyester head of the artist as an interactive self-portrait that formed part of a major retrospective of his work that Coupland said "Seeing it all together felt like I was walking around in my own brain." (Von Hahn, 2015). Coupland, on discussing waste and the future of garbage said that ... "(t)he moment you declare an object to be garbage, it immediately enters the past tense and it becomes instant archaeology" and the parallel treatment of words as objects "(w)ords are (also) recorded and then they are erased. Occasionally only the fragments survive only the shards, maybe a few stray words here and there, and maybe that's all that's ever required." (Coupland 2013a p15 & 18).

However, perhaps the most significant and least subtle expression of this obsession with collecting and organising stuff is his work ***The Brain,*** a strange assembly of over 5000 objects in a very personal arrangement that suggests how his own brain functions in

response to storing and organising a two-decade longitudinal collection of stuff. Here the organisation is random and unruly.

There are a number of high-profile architectural projects that appear through his work, starting with the **CN Tower, Toronto**, as perhaps the best known of the architectural icons of Canada that are referenced in the 'guide' intended for Canadians. These include the suggestion that any national identity is imbued in the built artefacts such as this CN Tower, some of the innovative designs of the Expo 76 and the 1976 Montreal Olympics.

However, there is a repeated interest in the architect of technology alongside that of national identity. One of these, **the Bell Labs, Murray Hill, NJ**, is known as "The Idea Factory" (Gertner, 2012) and in fact holds a collection of historical technological artefacts in its own right … "(t)he high-ceilinged concrete space is filled with display cases filled with artifacts filled with astonishing significance: the world's first transistor (1947); the world's first laser (1957); a replica of the world's first satellite (1961)" (Coupland, 2014b). Even his writing on the building, as an object, is laced with part of a museum catalogue that is representative of the internet itself and that leads into his reflections on the history of technology and the future challenges around managing the rising tide of omniscience information and not drowning in a sea (or tsunami) of data. There is a physical manifestation to the internet that Coupland has increasingly referred to within the context to energy consumption and one of the triggers for the age of earthquakes. This interest has also been expressed when referencing the **Apple Headquarters, Cupertino, California**, about which Coupland says that this is "the first time I've looked at a building and actually gone 'wow' in quite a while" (Dansk Arkitektur Center, 2020).

It seems clear that these ICT companies have informed the settings for Microserfs and JPod, where the TV show was ultimately filmed around the **Academic Quadrangle at Simon Fraser University Campus**, Burnaby, British Columbia. Designed by Arthur Erickson in 1963. This campus is in itself an architectural brutalist icon of that era with a retro futurist or timeless look and feel that has made it a popular choice for science fiction film locations.

Collectively these ICT companies are a manifestation of the wired-brain, and the place where data is ultimately organised, or at least the organisational systems are established. "… I don't think that people at any of these data firms are sitting in their chairs tapping their fingertips together and gleefully cackling form a sense of power. They're mostly just trying to invent new ways of reformatting data. I wish they could use the data to better understand the human soul, and maybe some day that will happen." (Coupland 2016, p37). Beginning the selection of artefacts with an encyclopaedia it makes a symbolic bookend to the selection with the growth of information technology businesses. "When IBM discovered that it was not in the business of making office equipment or business machines – but that it was in the business of processing information, then it began to navigate with clear vision" (Wolfe, 1965 p2). In effect, the future isn't about technology but rather the way we manage information.

Included as a spin-off to the activities of ICT companies is, **Hot Coffee**, a hidden mini game set within the digital San Andreas Grand Theft Auto and something that was semi-scandalous as it visualised the experience of 'going back for a coffee' and the discovery of which required a reassessment of the 'adults only' rating for the main game. This was used as a suggestion for the creation of a red-light district within the 'Board X' game being developed as part of the JPod TV series. Hot coffee is significant as a recurring digital trope that brings with it all of the, in this instance adult themes, associations and extends some of the earlier ideas about adult pixels expressed about **Lara Croft** (Coupland & Ward, 1998) and the love affair with pop culture expressed in video gaming.

And then we are able to find a set of Styrofoam coffee cups preserved from the opening of Canada House exhibition as part of the fonds collection. The ***Coupland Fonds inventory*** of a collection of boxes full of objects, but here represented by saved Styrofoam coffee cups, as one of the most accessible visuals from the collection. In the language of archival science, a fonds is understood as a collection of writings or objects that share the same source, that have grown naturally from the work of an individual or agency. This seems to me to be a great summation of a collection that has stopped short of hording and is lacking in any clear ontological structure; at least initially; other than being able to identify the source of the materials. University of British Columbia Library Rare Books and Special Collections description is "primarily of records created by Coupland from approximately 1980 to 2012. The fonds includes: drafts of Coupland's major literary works, personal and artistic photographs, visual art material (such as collages, paintings, printouts of digital collages and sculpture maquettes), items of clothing and leather goods, technical notes and designs for Coupland's website, conceptual sketches and designs, correspondence, and other records". (RBSC / OSC Archives 2012).

The description of arrangement of this collection is interesting in that "… much of the material had little arrangement, an initial inventory … arrived with the accession. … Each original box contained items related to many aspects of Coupland's activities, and were from a particular time period identified by Coupland. There was no apparent order within each box". (RBSC / OSC Archives 2012). This was organised ultimately by archivists using information gathered via a deposit interview with Coupland directly and the multiple challenges ".. that popped up. The most significant was probably our experimental deployment of the taxonomic subject terms. In the end, we ended up needing to delete, move, and/or modify some of the tags that we had created on the fly in order to make one cohesive taxonomy. This isn't surprising – we were working with a new functionality" (UBC 2012). It seems that to a significant degree, the artefacts and objects associated with Douglas Coupland are unclassifiable without his input, or perhaps even with it. It is perhaps at this point we should give up the attempt.

## The continuing importance of 'things'

The values attached to these cultural Coupland artefacts are much more than economic utility and they are 'consumed' against their implicit values. They have a 'second life' through sharing platforms (Binninger *et al*, 2015), but they give us meaning through materialistic association (ownership and / or access) (Mackay, 2013). The common factors in academic discourse are that we still express our identity through what we own (representative artefacts), what we share (mementos or artefacts representative of experiences) and what we are able to access (representation of artefacts on shared digital platforms). It may also be the case that our attitudes to the inherent value to artefacts are generational, in as much as millennials hold significantly less stock in things compared to experiences, in part due to collaborative consumption and the sharing economy that having 'enough is enough' (Botsman & Rogers, 2010). With this changing generational attitude to artefacts and ownership parallel with the rise in digital sharing platforms (Belk, 2014) and access-based consumption (Lawson *et al*, 2016).

Part of any cultural value of these selected objects is then about understanding the post-modern cultural references and associations. "Iconicity and metaphor have become central concepts not only within linguistics and epistemology, but also in other areas of the science of communication and cognition" (Fenk, 2009 p215) and clearly referencing the need for semiotic understandings in addition to any physicality.

To understand the work of Douglas Coupland, we also have to appreciate the postmodern oeuvre. We have to recognise the development of Dadaism techniques applied to his collections of stuff, where there is concentration, mashups and blurring boundaries

between disciplines and where ideas are presented as collections. His books are as much a collection as any grouping of artefacts that use mixed mediums and are full of object / ideas that all have a semantic association or personal significance to the author or artist. Coupland speaks of ontological cul-de-sacs (2013b) in the organisation of the words of Marshall McLuhan and this is part of my response to his collections and methods of organisation. It may be that his brain, his collections of stuff, his tacit ontology just looks like the internet in the sense that it is crowd-sourced, full of semantic hotlinks that are simply subjective and personal.

What is also clear, is the need to visualise this structuring of ideas, and then to share this structure and make it openly visible for analysis. His semantic connections and associations are weighted by influence and chronological in his ***Fifty Books I Have Read More Than Once*** (Simon Fraser University, 2007) sculptural installation in the most visual and open manner.
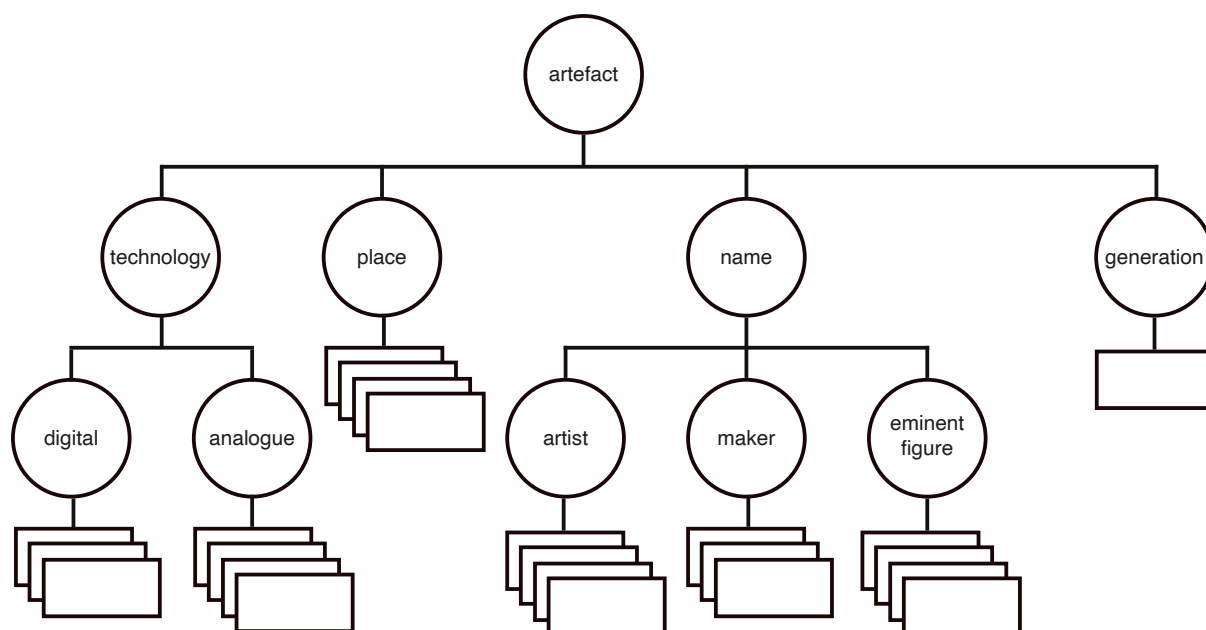
So, one question I had asked myself is it that objects are a replacement for a lack of faith, given that Coupland described 'X' as being the first generation to be raised without religion (Coupland, 1994), albeit this is determinedly not the case for my experiences of Belfast in the 1970s. One final admission is that I've never read ***Generation X*** in spite of obsessing about everything else produced from his hand and brain … saving the best 'from the pre-digital universe' til last where the final artefact is the book itself … "I've deliberately not read the book for some 18 years now because …. I'd be forced to have a relationship with it again" (Coupland quote from Book Club, 2010). The 30 years since the publication of Generation X represents at least the passing and growth of one more generation, and we should expect generational changes in attitudes to artefacts, objects and consumerism, particularly with the rise of digital stuff.

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