

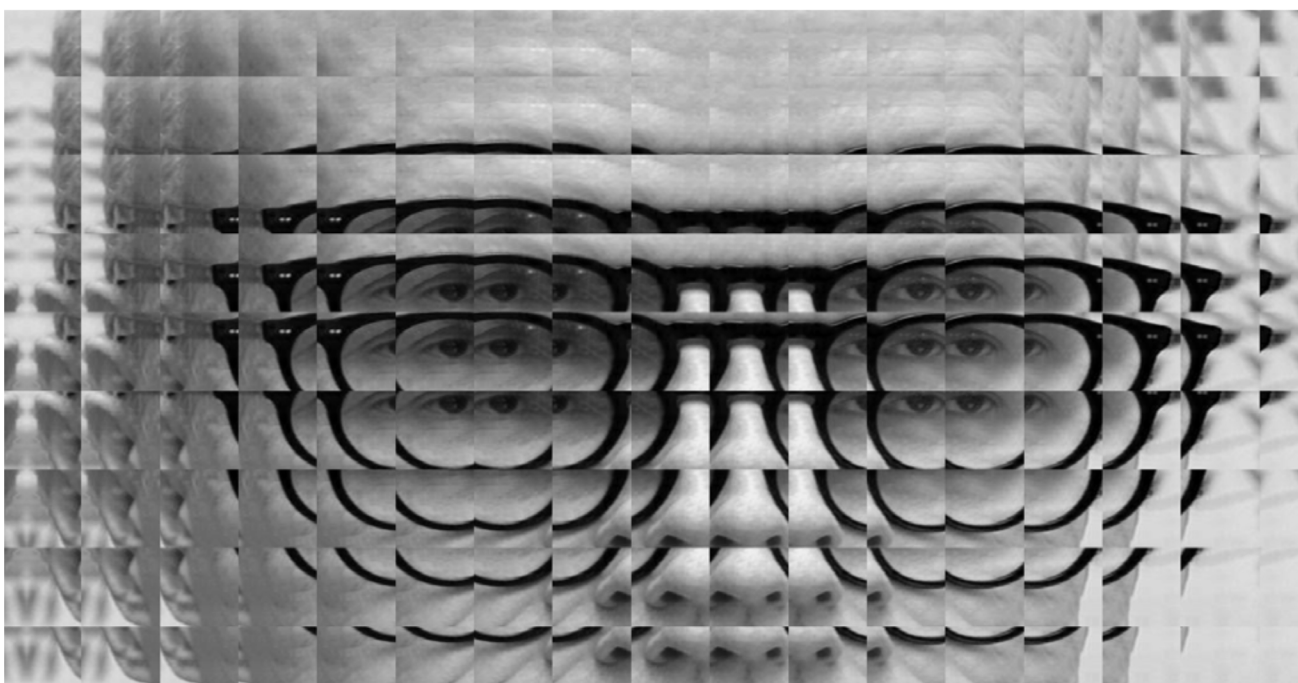
@DouglasCoupland

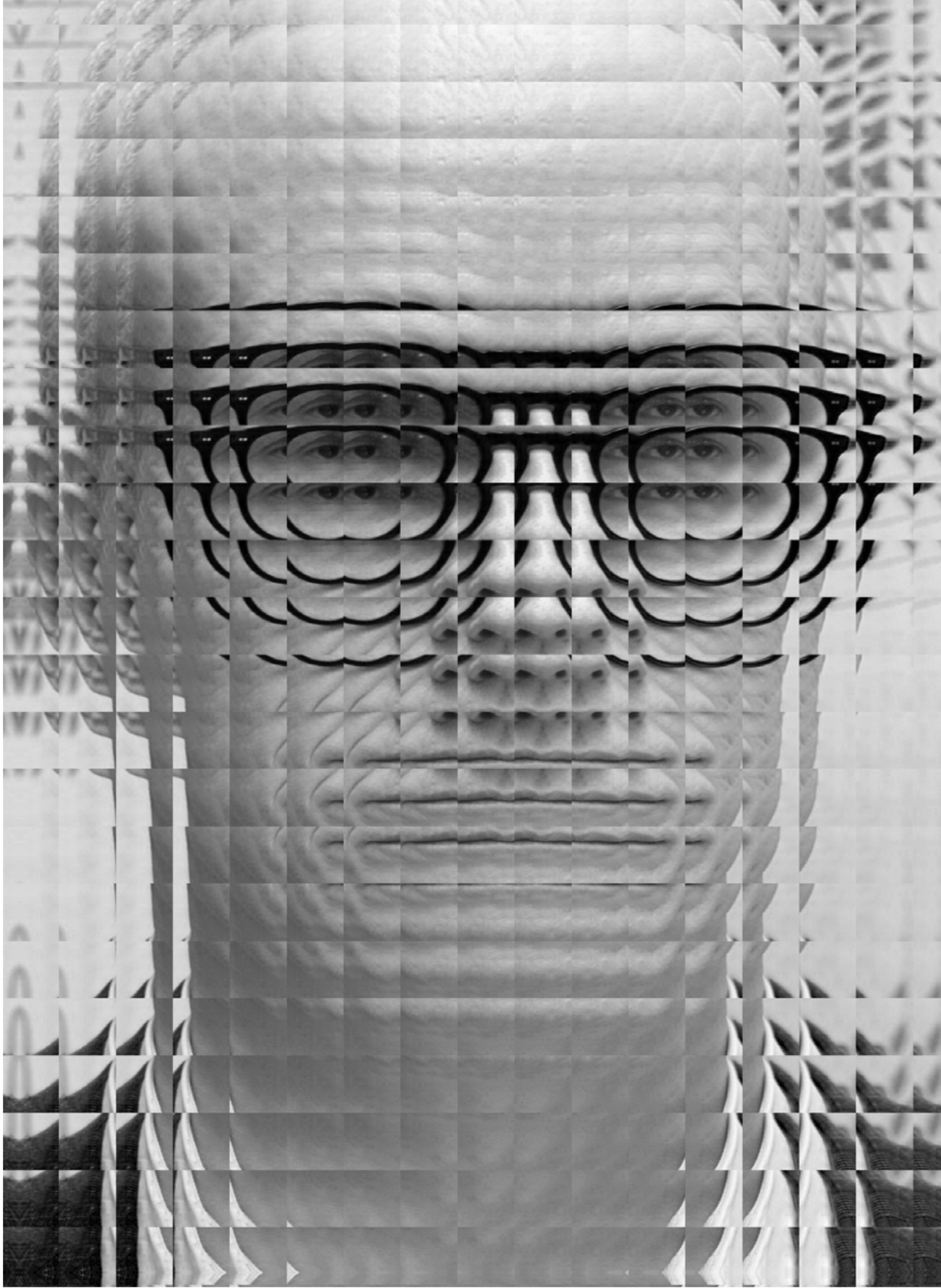
@HansUlrichObrist #IMissMyPreInternetBrain

#EverythingOffendsMe #IMissNews #DontComeNearMe

#TheFutureIsAPetShopBoysSong #BagsFullOfBags

In this year of lockdowns, when everyone's eyes have been glued to their screens, virality has gone into hyperdrive—and this techno-explosion is up-ending the art experience too. The current hysteria around Non Fungible Tokens (NFTs) is the ultimate demonstration of virality in contemporary art. These artworks are snapped up by early-adopter crypto collectors in online auctions for headline-grabbing sums. NFTs are cryptocurrency with pixels attached and are being used as an incredible marketing ploy to increase the value of different coins, especially Ethereum.





This year, there's been a new NFT release or concept almost every day. Ja Rule selling NFTs of his Fyre Festival logo painting. Jeremy Deller minting an NFT about the climate crisis to highlight the ecological fall-out of these digital works. Beeple selling digital animations for tens of millions of dollars. Tweets are being sold as NFTs, such as Bret Easton Ellis minting his 2012 statement, "Come over at do bring coke now." In art terms, this dematerialisation of the artwork is almost old-fashioned—see: the whole of conceptual art in the 1970s and the legacy of Duchamp's *Fountain* over a century ago.

Twitter, not Instagram, has become the art-crypto space of choice (alongside the hellish cacophony of Clubhouse). This spread and reproduction of image and idea, opinion and comment has transformed art forever. Douglas Coupland's slogan statement artworks also demonstrate how well text works in this viral moment (and would make fantastic NFTs themselves). He's been making the works for almost a decade now, and they've become an ongoing public art project by the artist-author. The black text works on bold-coloured backgrounds were originally posters pasted around Vancouver in Knockout—a font that emerged from boxing adverts. Many of them question shifts in technology, without which cultural virality would be snail-like in speed.

Artists either intentionally resist the speed of the contemporary cultural tsunami with enforced slowness, or like Coupland with his statements, strap themselves to the raft of the moment and ride the digital flow.

The 10 works he discusses here with Hans Ulrich Obrist were largely created in the context of the pandemic, or have been recontextualised for now. Their immediacy makes them the perfect expression of the viral art experience. They're funny, heart-breaking, fearful, wry comments on our current global upheaval. Coupland breaks down the slogans, which cover everything from the future to nostalgia, isolation to togetherness and DVDs to Valhalla-esque data centres.

Words by FRANCESCA GAVIN, Portraits by ADAM FERRISS

<<FOLLOW BACK>>

IT'S ALL HAPPENING WAY FASTER THAN WE THOUGHT

DOUGLAS COUPLAND: I'm neither shocked nor surprised at the speed at which both viral media culture and biological viruses overtook our culture.

People forget that viruses are called viruses for a very good reason: they strike when unsuspected and do major damage—if not killing their hosts outright.

Growing up, there were all these science fiction movies like *The Andromeda*, *Strain* or *The Omega Man*, which had a recurring storyline: there was always a plague and it always happened very quickly, and suddenly, there's four people left. Once COVID started up—an actual viral epidemic—it seemed to happen a little bit in slow motion while being in some senses very fast. In publishing, whenever someone's marketing a book, they say, "We'll do this, and then it'll go viral." But making something go viral is an art and a science. Hans, why is it certain things go so viral so quickly?

HANS ULRICH OBRIST: I found an interview I did with Félix González-Torres around 1996. It was about the idea of acceleration, virus and infiltration. He discussed the idea of working as a virus within an institution. "The virus is our worst enemy, but it should also be our model in terms of not being the opposition anymore, not being very easily defined. So that way, we can attach ourselves to institutions, which are always going to be there." When did you have the epiphany for your slogans? Because they bring together in an interesting way your work in visual art and your work in literature. The slogans migrate beyond Instagram. They can be on Instagram. They can be artist books. They can be limited in editions and galleries. They seem to migrate.

DOUGLAS: They began nine years ago. I was doing a thing called YouTube Night at a local bar here in Vancouver. We had to put posters up around the city to get people to come in, but everyone drives in Vancouver, so they had to be big enough that people could see from the car. I just made up 10 original slogans. The very first one was, "I miss my pre-internet brain." I pasted them all over the city. The idea is: what makes sense now would have made no sense 10, 15 or 20 years ago. When COVID came, the existential horror of something that was very small and minimal in one situation exploded in another. A virus particle floating through the area is an idea as much as anything. It wants to multiply.

HANS ULRICH: Doug as you once told me, "It used to be the elders who would get easily offended but today it's the younger generations." Can you talk a little bit about the genesis of that slogan?

DOUGLAS: I realised that everybody has their own personal theory about COVID, like where it came from, what fixes it, what they're going to do, what you should be doing. Then it ended up being hyper-politicised

with the US election. I just realised that in a society that is entirely bipolar, with no centre, everyone is offended by everything, but it's offended-lite. Fake news equals fake outrage. If everything's outrageous, then nothing is outrageous. Everything is permitted.

In the old days, if you wrote a letter to the editor of a newspaper, you had to get a paper and a pen. You had to write it; you had to put a stamp on it and put it in the mailbox. That's actually a lot more work than just going, "Blegh, send."

The whole currency of moral outrage has just been so devalued. I just wish we had a new way of reclassifying what offensiveness is, because the old words just don't work anymore.

EVERYTHING OFFENDS ME

DOING NOTHING IS VERY DIFFERENT FROM HAVING NOTHING TO DO

DOUGLAS: There's this wonderful story by JG Ballard where these people go out to New York for a holiday and there's a problem: the planes can't take off and then you realise this holiday's going to go on forever and, of course, there's a darkness that comes from that.

HANS ULRICH: It's interesting you mention JG Ballard because this slogan also has to do with what happens to time in a viral culture. When I interviewed JG Ballard towards the end of his life he talked a lot about time. He also wrote this fantastic book called *The Voices of Time*. The story has little or no obvious plot. One follows a neurosurgeon in a state of decline who works at this clinic in the California countryside and he finds the wakefulness hours are getting shorter and shorter. Everybody seems to fall into this coma from which they cannot be roused. The clinic is full of these sleepers and somehow I find an interesting relation to what we are discussing here.

DOUGLAS: What is boredom? Boredom is disconnection. I think everyone's life now happens through this rectangle thing in front of you called a screen. If you work with a screen and then you go home and you spend your social life on a screen, at the end of the day, you really haven't had much actual

organic memory of being in the world. I think that sense of time collapse comes in when doing something on a screen. You get dopamine hits but nothing happens. That's what's sort of happening in the real world right now. Nothing happens anymore. There are no concerts, there are no more exhibitions really and everything's sort of stopped. I guess that ties in with Ballard, doesn't it? You might as well be in a country house with enforced nothingness and your days getting shorter and shorter until you are comatose.

HANS ULRICH: I asked Ballard about the future, and he came up with this equation which he wrote: "The future equals sexuality multiplied by technology".

DOUGLAS: Marshall McLuhan had this wonderful expression that the future is a bordello without walls. I think that was sort of the metaphor for rampant pornography, but I think both of them were very far-seeing and I think there's maybe an overlap of those two ideas there.

HANS ULRICH: Ballard also summed up the fear about the future in one word: "Boring". He also told another interviewer that his one fear is "that everything has happened. Nothing exciting or new or interesting is ever going to happen again. The future just is going to be a vast, conforming suburb of the soul." I'm also really curious about your definition of the future.

DOUGLAS: I think the future is like a Pet Shop Boys song. That Neil Tennant kind of boredom.

HANS ULRICH: You've given me many definitions of the future, but that's new.



THE FUTURE IS A PET SHOP BOYS SONG

I MISS NEWS

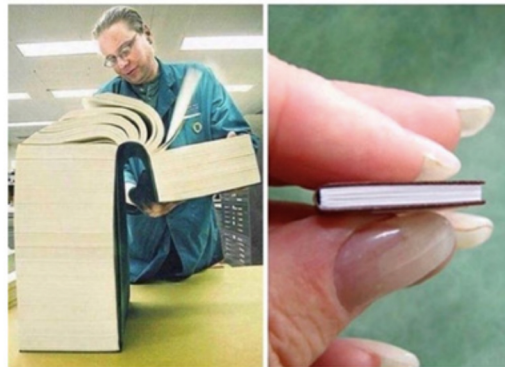
DOUGLAS: A corollary of nostalgia for old-fashioned news is the belief that the news one is currently getting is either false, and/or time-expired. Either way, it's information that was born in the rear-view mirror. With news,

the thing is, there always has to be a front page. On September 12th, 2001, if there had never been a 9/11, the front story on *The New York Times* would've been "Shark Attacks Continue Off the Coast of Florida".

I think we went through this period of news hyper-drive with Trump, and then we threw in COVID, and then we threw in Black Lives Matter, and then we threw in Australia's burning down and we went through this insane news warp. Now, Biden's in charge and it feels inside my head like someone's turned off the fire alarm. But now I look at today's news and it's like, "That's not very interesting. It was really more interesting a year ago." There's this paradox, like it was horrible while you were there, but boy, you miss it when it's gone.

Things i have to say on the internet

Things i have to say IRL



HANS ULRICH: As our guru and dear friend Shumon Bashar notes, intimacy is now regulated by nation states: 3 feet, 1.5 metres, 15 people, 70% capacity. Your statement triggered some thoughts from Ece Temelkuran's new book *Together*. She's a Turkish writer living in exile who also wrote *How to Lose a Country*. In her book, she talks about how social distancing has removed a lot of rituals of togetherness and how there are actual risks of social distancing being implemented even after the vaccinations. This slogan made me think about that. On the one hand, the relationship between distance and disinformation, and on the other, the question about what happens to togetherness in the age of social distancing.

DOUGLAS: In Japan, they have the very large social phenomenon, the *hikikomori*—when people are 22 or 23 and they leave home or come back from university, then they go back into their bedroom and never leave it ever again. Their mothers enable them, they bring them food and do the dishes. There's half a million people doing this and it seems like they were the first to perfect a certain kind of isolation that's now obviously become rampant.

There are going to be a lot of people who isolated themselves during COVID and they're never going to come back. It just validated what their inner psychology wanted to do anyways. It's easier to be a troll if you're all by yourself.

HANS ULRICH: That's yet another slogan!

DOUGLAS: Solitude makes you a troll.

HANS ULRICH: The beauty, of course, of having a conversation with you about slogans is that whilst we have the conversations, you produce new slogans. You're like a slogan machine, Doug!

DON'T COME NEAR ME

THE MAJORITY CAN NO LONGER BE TRUSTED

DOUGLAS: Maybe democracy has a built-in self-destruct switch and we just never realised it.

HANS ULRICH: Ece Temelkuran also talks about the fear of reality, and that fear is the reason we make secret deals with ourselves to keep an optimum

distance from it. The shame provoked by our indifference feels more manageable than the risk of being broken by an encounter with what's real. "Don't come near me" could also be keeping reality away, right?

DOUGLAS: Yesterday I was driving and on the side of the highway, there was a peacock. This is Vancouver and this was a huge highway and there's this peacock just standing on the side of the road doing its thing. I had to actually stop and go right up to it and it looked at me like, "Fuck you," and just went away. Stopping and going there made that memory more concrete. I got two miles away and there's a police car that was parked for a speed stakeout. I went knock, knock and said, "Just so you know, there's a peacock two miles down the road." They're like, "Is it dead?" No. "Well, the coyote will get it then." And they pulled their window back up. I mention this because it was just something real that happened yesterday and it's so just bizarre that my goal from now on is to make things—it sounds so corny—as real as possible. To not have my memories be artificial and mediated through all these devices. It was so real, it was so weird.

HANS ULRICH: You've said it was shocking yet unsurprising to see democracy thrown under the bus by the election in 2016.

DOUGLAS: The internet just over-validates everyone's sense of self-worth. Biden has been quite smug about what was actually just a 50.1% win. It wasn't a landslide. I can just see democracy evaporating away. Right now, this is as free as we're ever going to be. I don't know if there's the golden absolute age of freedom. Maybe it was 1995 but it's only going to go down and down and down from here, so it's never been more important to be vigilant.

HANS ULRICH: That's different from what Erwin Panofsky said. He said that the future is invented with fragments from the past.

DOUGLAS: The future feels like click bait. James Gleick wrote a book recently on the history of time travel. You grow up with science fiction as a child, but it was only really invented around 1900 as an idea. This sense of time right now is intolerable.

HANS ULRICH: I met Stephen Hawking, only once, and asked him about time travel. He said, "If time travel is possible, where are the tourists from the future?"

DOUGLAS: John Wyndham, a beloved sci-fi writer from the '60s and '70s, did a short story where suddenly people wearing strange clothes were appearing here and there, pointing at things and taking pictures. As the story progressed, they became less and less visible to the point where they were invisible, but everyone knew that they were still there watching. I guess that's almost religious. That's like never-nudes, those people who can never be naked and even wear underwear in the shower.

THE PRESENT AND THE FUTURE ARE NOW THE SAME THING

YOUR BLOG IS FUTILE

DOUGLAS: I wrote this one a long, long time ago. It's a numbers game. Everyone's trying to get more followers, to get sponsors. Then you realise, "Oh god, this is exhausting and I'm never going to become a premium brand," which is a weird thing to want to be anyways. "It's just never going to happen. Fuck it, I'm just going to join QAnon. Fuck that, I'm joining Antifa," or whatever. You just subcontract your identity to this larger thing because you know you're not going to get much traction, but that organisation is, and you can just be part of that experience. Remember blogs? Blogs almost seem old-fashioned now actually.

HANS ULRICH: There is this real thing of accelerated obsolescence.

I was in a house with an architect friend and he had this gigantic archive of DVDs and it looked really like an object from antiquity.

DOUGLAS: They're kind of embarrassing when you see them, like you don't have your shit together.

You still have these things? I haven't had anything you put a CD into for years now. Do you have any disc-driven technologies in your houses?

HANS ULRICH: No, I don't have a CD player.

DOUGLAS: If you look up hoarding on Wikipedia, book collecting is an absolute number one thing. Actually, the number one indicator that you're a hoarder is that you have a bag full of bags. Because you might need them...

HANS ULRICH: That made me think actually of the data centre OVH in Strasbourg, which was one of Europe's biggest data centres and in that sense, kind of a collective brain. Niklas Maak, the great writer of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, wrote a fabulous piece, calling it the Valhalla of our time. It's extremely iconic because Europe's biggest data centre went up in flames. The interesting thing is that we always believe that the cloud is forever. For people who store data there, they could pay an additional amount and then the data is also in another data centre. It's double back-up, but many companies are not going to have paid this extra expense and that data is now gone

forever. There is this tranquilising idea in the internet age that our data is safe in the cloud. They're heavenly secured. We no longer have the fear of water, of floods, of fire, or of losing documents because we think they're on the cloud. But this event, which happened in March, showed us that actually the clouds are not untouchable, that they're not infinite and it's just a metaphor.

DOUGLAS: Once you see the metaphor, you can't un-see the metaphor. I think the most exciting political thing you could do right now is think: what would it take to destroy Google? You'd have to wire missiles into their storage systems in Central Oregon in the States. I think they have data centres in Greenland now. That would almost be one of the few thrilling gestures you could have. You're on Gmail. I think of it as kind of an un-death, that

if you don't use your Gmail account for nine months, it automatically deletes. I don't know if they chose nine months to be poetic or there's a data-based reason for it, but it's the new un-birth. ←
END

THE CLOUD IS THE NEW INFINITY