InVisible Culture • Issue 33: After Douglas Crimp

After Douglas Crimp Questionnaire Response: Nicholas Baume

Nicholas Baume

Published on: Jan 05, 2022

DOI: 10.47761/494a02f6.c3bbc720

License: [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License \(CC-BY 4.0\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

Douglas

Douglas's loving friendship over the past 25 years has helped to shape the person I am today. In 1994 I was a junior curator at the newly established Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney. We'd decided to program around the annual Sydney Gay & Lesbian Mardi Gras Festival, which had become the most notable event on the city's cultural calendar.

I proposed that we present a keynote lecture and was charged with inviting an international luminary. Douglas represented the nexus of contemporary art and activism like nobody else – an epoch defining critic, curator, and writer who had brought to the AIDS crisis the full force of his moral courage, extraordinary intellect, and profound compassion. As a young man who'd lost some of my closest family and friends to the disease, which hit Sydney's gay community hard, and as a curator inspired by the clarity and conceptual insight of his art writing, he was already a profoundly influential figure.

Out of the blue, I wrote Douglas inviting him to lecture at the MCA. I didn't have high hopes – but figured what the hell. To my astonishment and delight, he replied saying he was interested, but that given the very long flight he'd need business class (he was, after all, 6'5"). Qantas was our sponsor, so I immediately wrote back – no problem!

Thus our friendship began in a way that I came to understand wasn't that unusual for Douglas. He loved being invited to interesting places by people interested in him and his work. He didn't really take vacations, he went places he was invited. For me it was a huge thrill. *The Douglas Crimp*, my guest for his first time in Australia. It was a charmed visit from beginning to end. Douglas was blown away by the extent to which queer culture was center stage, celebrated and accepted by the city. He lectured brilliantly, was widely interviewed, and wore the mantle of visiting gay dignitary with bemused relish. A wonderful guest, he was appreciative, enthusiastic, undemanding. During his stay we got to know each other and bonded in a way I could never have expected. I know many of us have experienced the wonderful romance of friendship with Douglas.

The festival culminated in a big evening parade and dance party. He wondered what to wear. Remember, this was Sydney at the height of summer where tanned skin, tight muscles and sparing amounts of lycra, leather, feathers or rubber might fit the bill. Douglas had assumed his New York gay uniform of t-shirt and jeans would be fine. But

I pushed him to find something fun and sexy, so we went shopping for an outfit. We had a hilarious time, with Douglas – against his better judgment – trying on items of clothing he'd never wear in a million years. And I must confess, leather hot pants just weren't his thing. After a series of dance party fashion misfires, he finally settled on a black fishnet fitted sleeveless muscle top, worn with his Wrangler jeans. It was just the right amount of festive.

Mardi Gras was a powerful experience for Douglas, immersed as he'd been in dealing with the devastation, suffering and repression of his own community. To see the entertaining creativity, satirical wit and openly expressed sexuality of thousands of queers celebrated and affirmed was deeply moving. He loved it.

Sydney and NY could scarcely be further apart, but I learned that Douglas took friendship seriously. He kept in touch. I also learned that he was an amazing travel companion. We met up in LA when he was teaching a semester at UCLA. He loved driving, but not the freeways. Exploring modernist architecture with Douglas in and around the Hollywood Hills was an unforgettable experience. Not to mention the Japanese meals.

I later came to New York for a residency at NYU's Grey Gallery. Since he was out of town, Douglas let me sublet his apartment on Fulton Street. I can't tell you what it meant to me to live there: the breathtaking wall of books, the music collection, the works of art that traced his personal and professional connections with artists like Louise, Cindy, and Jim. I had to pinch myself as I began sleeping in the eponymous bedroom of Douglas's extraordinary essay, "The Boys in my Bedroom."

But Douglas did everything he could to help me not feel like the interloper I feared I was. He believed in his friends, no matter their age or credentials. He was supportive in so many ways, seeing in me potential I hadn't seen in myself.

A few years later and with Douglas's encouragement I moved to the US, where he became my oldest friend. I loved those conversations where a subject or a name would come up that I didn't recognize and he'd ask – do you know the work of X? Then he'd describe with the most vivid and precise language the subject at hand. Generous in sharing his world, he introduced me to people, places, ideas, and artworks that have become vitally important to me. There was nothing better than sharing a cultural experience: meals, concerts, operas, exhibitions, films, dance. Conversations during and after would always reveal his acute sensitivity and insight; Douglas was a connoisseur in the best sense. The sheer joy of listening to the cadence of his speech,

of watching his characteristic gestures, the articulation of those long elegant hands, and hearing his laugh, are things I will always miss.

Among Douglas's inspiring attributes was honesty, which inevitably also meant being vulnerable. On his 1998 visit to Australia, he gave a lecture in which he spoke publicly for the first time about his sero-conversion. That wasn't easy to do, but he also understood how important it was both for himself and countless other people.

A deeply caring man, his thoughtfulness was particularly moving during the final period of his illness. Shortly before he died, Douglas invited me for dinner on my birthday, just the two of us. He'd always been a terrific cook, conjuring delicious meals and baking irresistible pies in that tiny kitchen. He could no longer cook but his devoted carer, Alan, prepared a meal to Douglas's recipe. He surprised me with a roast rack of lamb, knowing it was my favorite home-cooked meal. Weak and exhausted, Douglas's pain was barely controlled – but he remained the most wonderful dinner companion. He was thrilled to have the beautifully designed mock-up of his dance book in hand. Despite everything, he wasn't self-absorbed, and as always, asked after my mother Brigid, who he'd gotten to know when we stayed at her place on the coast south of Sydney. Her death a matter of weeks after Douglas's has made my sense of parental loss all the more acute. I never really thought of Douglas as a father figure when he was alive – he was my dear friend. But I've come to realize that he was a special kind of father to me, perhaps to many of us. He accepted me without judgment, shared his knowledge and his wisdom, nurtured my mind and spirit, gave me opportunities, supported and encouraged me, inspired by his example, and most of all, showed me the meaning of loving friendship.

Death may be an ending but it isn't *the* end. Right now it is confusing, painful and still fresh – but I know for certain on a deep level, Douglas will always be here.

[Author's note: I wrote and read this text for Douglas's memorial in New York City on 11/2/19.]

Nicholas Baume is Artistic & Executive Director at Public Art Fund.

[Click here to return to the other questionnaire responses.](#)