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Questionnaire Response:

Peter Christensen

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Share an anecdote or memory you have of Douglas. Or, if you had the opportunity to share anything with Douglas now, what would it be?

In late August 2015 Douglas sent me a text message asking if I was back in Rochester from our summer recess. Douglas had begun to regularly inform me of when he was on his way up from New York to Rochester as our friendship had grown. My impression was that he wanted to line up social events so that he could be as enriched as possible in his stays upstate. Taking the cue, and excited to hear from him, I invited him over to mine to barbecue. He liked barbecuing a simple piece of meat and vegetables a great deal and early Fall in Rochester is a terrific time to do it. He obliged to the barbecue but he said he needed my help with something as well. Douglas was not one to ask for help so I was intrigued, perhaps even also a bit concerned.

Douglas said that he wanted to buy a new car and needed my assistance. He said he had never purchased a new car in his life but felt that it was time – indicating to me that at 71 he felt he had finally arrived, at least enough to merit ownership of an unused vehicle. He mentioned that he had recently received his honorarium for curating the Greater New York exhibition (with Peter Eeley, Thomas Lax and Mia Locks) at PS1 and wanted to spend his money on something useful. But he told me that he had no idea what buying a new car involved. To be honest, I didn't really know what kind of skills he thought he needed for this task that I had and he didn't. I pictured him kicking the tires, reclining the seat, running the wipers. Of course I would help him, even if it meant just being there to help him feel assured of himself (which as a second year Assistant Professor felt like a strange position to be in with my most senior and illustrious colleague).

One thing Douglas did know is that he wanted a Volkswagen. He liked German cars and he knew I had been spending lots of time in Germany and owned a Volkswagen myself. So I suggested Dick Ide's Volkswagen of East Rochester, where I had purchased my Jetta Sport Wagon the year before. I picked him up at his place near Mount Hope Cemetery and we drove to the dealership. Dick Ide's of East Rochester is the kind of place that is pretty easy for anyone familiar with the American suburban landscape to imagine. It sits in a low-lying boxy building next to a major road. Rows of new cars mark the separation between the road and the tinted glass envelope of the building. Inside there are about 5 cars primed for closer inspection, set within the overly air-conditioned interior where eager men in branded polo shirts eagerly await you.

Knowing a little bit about Volkswagen's fleet, I asked Douglas a few questions on our way over to help make the decision easier. He did not want an SUV or a station wagon. He did want a sedan. He did want the car to have four doors (at his height it was hard to imagine how anyone could comfortably wiggle their way into a backseat). He didn't want color; the car needed to be white, gray, or black. I told him that this made things pretty he easy: he would be looking at a four door Jetta or Passat in one of those three colors.

As I expected, we were swiftly greeted by a salesman when we arrived at the dealership. The eager young clerk asked us how we could assist us. Douglas, who was only shy in very particular situations, demurred and directed the man's gaze to me. "He's looking for a new Jetta or Passat." The clerk showed us to the lot and mentioned that he had a year old unused black Jetta at a discounted rate. We got in and I helped to orient Douglas to all of the features. Of tantamount importance to him was that he could get enough space for his legs, which the Jetta did provide when the driver's seat was fully pulled back. We then went for a test drive around East Rochester, past Home Depot, a gym supply store, Breugger's Bagels and Subway. Inside I was laughing at the hilarity of being in the passenger seat of this situation, watching a man I so admired for his activism and independence, something I always associated with urbanity, doing something as quotidian as driving around the suburbs of Rochester.

When we got back to the dealer's lot, Douglas kind of shrugged at me as if to say that there was nothing wrong with the vehicle. It did not excite him in the least but it did fulfill his expectations for what a car ought to do. I asked him if he wanted to try another vehicle - maybe the Passat or a white vehicle or a vehicle with leather upholstery. "This seems fine" was his answer. So we went back in the store and Douglas quietly informed the clerk of his decision. "That's terrific," the clerk said, "Let's discuss financing." "I am going to pay for this today," Douglas said, fully unaware of how unusual this would be for the clerk. Douglas went through the paperwork and got the keys to his new car. As we prepared to part ways, Douglas seemed confused by where we were and wasn't sure how to get himself home. I gave him some directions and went on my own way back home.

About an hour later I texted him again to make sure he had arrived safely home. He told me he had and followed that with another message: "Thanks for your help. I am happy." I knew what he meant. The task had daunted him but now that he was home, now that the car was paid for and he had the keys, now that he could stretch his legs and enjoy the smell of new car that I am pretty sure everyone must like, he was indeed

happy. And I was happy too, simply to have been there. Simply to have seen Douglas give himself something, shyly acknowledging that he had indeed arrived.

Peter Christensen is Associate Professor of Art History and Visual and Cultural Studies at the University of Rochester.

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