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ARTFORUM

TO MY FRIENDS | By David Velasco | December 2019



Pins from Douglas Crimp's memorial at Danspace Project, 2019.

I SENT MY LAST EMAIL to Douglas Crimp on the evening of July 4, 2019:

Hi Douglas,
How are you?

I'm writing from Desert Hot Springs, just outside of Palm Springs, in the Coachella Valley. I'm staying at a place called Hope Springs, a simple, vintage collection of bungalows. It's July, so low season here, and cheap. It's beautiful, though also terrible. I decided to come suddenly, to get a little distance from things, some clarity. So it's peaceful, but the lack of distractions means I just get to feel as awful as I want, which is very.

But anyway I miss you. I saw Morgan on Saturday night at their performance at the Inferno party. They said they'd had dinner with you earlier that night. The performance was really perfect. I know you've seen iterations, but it really fit in so magically in a Park Slope dungeon on the eve of World Pride. Everyone naked or in their underwear, crowded around Morgan and their fellow performers in a small section around a back wall. They asked me to read first, and I was honored. They led everyone in a chorus of "Keep Each Other Alive." I don't think I've been happier seeing a performance in years.

There's so much more to talk about, when I'm back. What are you reading right now? Have you had any interesting visitors? Keep me in the loop.

Love,
David

Douglas couldn't answer. He died a few hours after the email was sent. He had been preparing for his death since he stopped treatment for refractory multiple myeloma, a cancer of plasma cells that had been terrorizing his body for two years. He settled his archives with the Fales Library and finished his final book, *Dance Dance Film* (forthcoming from Dancing Foxes Press). His preparation was accompanied by, as his friend and caregiver Rosalyn Deutsche eloquently put it, a "spiritual turn." He began to meditate. With our friend Morgan Bassichis, he began to read the Bible. With our friend Gregg Bordowitz and others, he read Japanese death haikus. He talked to me about Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche's *In Love with the World: What a Buddhist Monk Can Teach You About Living from Nearly Dying* (2019), a book coauthored by Douglas's friend Helen Tworikov. I like to think he was ready for his death, though when I heard

the news, early the next morning, I was completely unprepared. Maybe we can't prepare for other people's fates. Or maybe preparation is delusional. You prepare for something so you can do it well or land uninjured. But what if there's no other side?

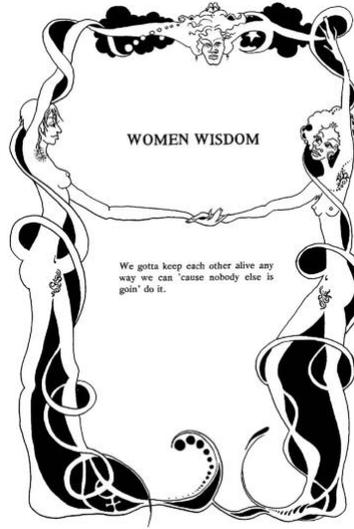


Morgan Bassichis, *The Faggots and Their Friends Between Revolutions*, 2017. Performance view, NYC Inferno, New York, June 29, 2019. Michi Ilona Osato, Morgan Bassichis, DonChristian Jones. Photo: Matt Grubb.

The work of Morgan's that I wrote to Douglas about is *The Faggots and Their Friends Between Revolutions*. It is a hymn to Larry Mitchell and Ned Asta's 1977 illustrated book of the same name, reprinted this summer by Nightboat Books in time for the celebrations around Stonewall's fiftieth anniversary. The performance is a collaboration with Morgan's friends TM Davy, DonChristian Jones, Michi Ilona Osato, and Una Aya Osato. I had seen an early version in 2017, sitting on a burst of pillows in the New Museum's Sky Room. But it wasn't until I sat down to watch it on a basement floor during a sex party surrounded by shameless and enthusiastic faggots and friends that the words and their feelings came together.

Mitchell and Asta's book is a fable about motley life in Ramrod, a disintegrating empire ruled by a man named Warren-And-His-Fuckpole. "Warren wants to know who the leader of the faggots is so he can rationalize with him," goes the story. "But the faggots have no leader. They only have dead heroes." Morgan's performance is a reading of the book with the audience, including songs, cowritten with TM, such as this one that got stuck in my head for the rest of the summer and beyond:

*We've got to
We've got to
We've got to
Keep each other ali-i-i-ve.
Cause no one else
No one else is
Cause no one else is . . .
Gon-n-n-na do it.
Keep each other alive
Keep each other ali-i-i-ve
Keep each other al-i-i-i-ive. . .*



Page from Larry Mitchell and Ned Asta's *The Faggots & Their Friends Between Revolutions* (Calamus Books, 1977).

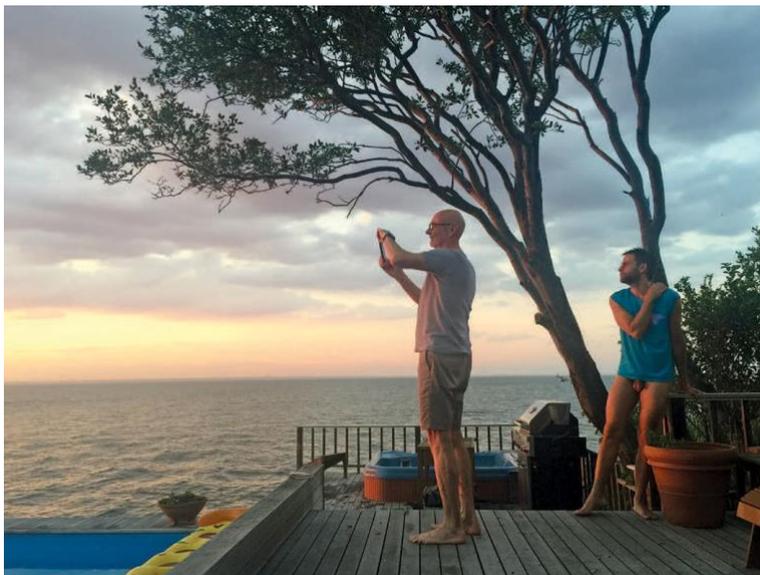
KEEPING EACH OTHER ALIVE is our most important, most impossible, task. One week after Douglas's death I got an email from my friend the writer Tobi Haslett. Attached was a document titled "Tear Gas Biennial." He had written it with his friends Hannah Black and Ciarán Finlayson. It is a powerful, truthful essay, and eight days after its publication the text's target—Warren-And-His-Pingas, CEO of the weapons manufacturer Safariland—stepped down from his role as vice-chair of the Whitney Museum of American Art.

I've heard enough about the waning power of the critic. We have proof that criticism is effective, especially when it involves the surrender of the critic's ego. I wondered how three extraordinary people, each with their own particular habits of mind and style, could come together across the manic solitude of writing to form something so clear and unified. Tobi has said that he feels as though each of them has their solo in the piece, and I think that's part of its force, that it's as much a concerto as an essay. It may be sentimental, but I think they are able to do this because each has a special gift for friendship, which is to say they know how to elicit one another's strengths.



De-installation of Nicole Eisenman's *Procession*, 2019, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 2019. Sam Roeck. Photo: Nicole Eisenman.

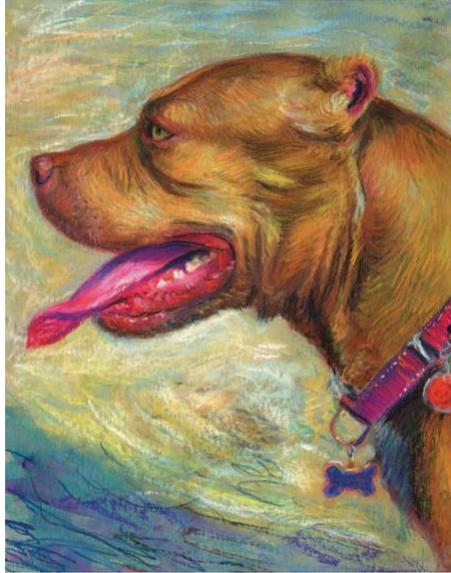
After we published the piece on the website, artists in the Whitney Biennial began to demand their works' removal. The villain departed, détente ensued, the show went on. And so it was a nonevent when, in late October, with the Biennial finally over, they deinstalled the remaining works, including the nine sculptures comprising Nicole Eisenman's Aristophanic *Procession*, 2019, the frozen march of folly that stood sentinel on the Whitney's sixth-floor balcony through the show's whole run, a work that had a gravity I wanted to orbit even before it became a protagonist in the boycott. I picture them dismantling my friend's sculpture, piece by piece, until the ballcap-wearing *Pole Bearer*, 2019, stands alone on the terrace, looking back at the sad, cracked flagpole that has become their burden.



Douglas Crimp and Ryan McNamara, Fire Island Pines, Brookhaven, NY, June 29, 2016. Photo: [David Velasco](#).

“THIS IS A BOOK ABOUT BEAUTY. And about my love for my friends.” In 1993, the year after AIDS became the number one cause of death in the US for men ages twenty-five to forty-four, Nan Goldin published *The Other Side*, a photo book devoted to her friends “expressing gender euphoria.”

“This book is a testament to friendship and survival,” Goldin writes in an introduction to the second edition (published by Steidl in September, an event in itself), which also includes new pictures and testimonials and a miraculous interview with one of the book’s riveting cynosures, Joey Gabriel. The photos “are always an extension of my relationships, taken to pay homage and show people as they wish to be seen.” Goldin was an activist, a friend saving or preserving the lives of her friends, long before she and her friends at P.A.I.N. launched their crusade against the Sacklers. This book contains one of my favorite pictures of all time, *Picnic on the esplanade, Boston, 1973*. It is my idyll, both a perfect rejoinder to Manet’s *Le Déjeuner sur l’herbe* and evidence of what life for some outsiders can look like: just five fey friends happy on the grass by the water. I hope it is not a trespass to say it looks like an invitation.



TM Davy, *Sister*, 2019, pastel and gouache on paper, 14 × 11".

Closer to me is TM Davy's show "This Marram," which opened at the beginning of fall at the Van Doren Waxter gallery uptown. Eighty-six pastel drawings on tough, portable fourteen-by-eleven-inch paper, evidence of a single summer on Fire Island, of a queer world of dancers and celestial bodies and lovers and animals charted through one person's friendships, mine among them. It's not the real world at all, but that's fine with me. I can glimpse the gaps between the frames and fathom the tensions and freak-outs, glimpse the man who keeps up his witty raillery to the medic after he breaks his face on a glass table at a charity cocktail or the man who finally returns home after a desperate morning wandering the boardwalks searching for crystals, his skin burnt from exposure to the forenoon sun. That isn't pictured, but I know it's there. I don't dwell on it. All portraits are ideals; that's why they're so desirous. Marram is a beach grass that grows patchily amid the dunes, its roots fastening the loose sand into a berm that protects the barrier island and the shores and life on the other side. There are many beautiful drawings of the grass itself (part of the genus *Ammophila*, "sand friend"), but even the drawings of people have an essential grassiness, as overgrowths of color frame the figures and plume into hair or smiles or asses. I sometimes don't know what to make of art except as some remarkable proof of the existence of some person's relationships, and in this way "This Marram" means quite literally the world to me.



Sarah Michelson, *june2019:/*, 2019. Rehearsal view, 101 Greenwich Street, New York, June 23, 2019. Sarah Michelson. Photo: Paula Court.

THE LAST TIME I saw Douglas Crimp was the week before he died. We went to see Sarah Michelson's *june2019:/*, 2019, an intimate, profane work, not for easy consumption, being staged at an office building on Greenwich and Trinity in Lower Manhattan, not far from the Fulton Street apartment where Douglas had lived for forty-some years. He was in a wheelchair, accompanied by his nurse and friend Alan Subo, and he looked calm and observant, like he always did during a performance, his patience accommodating even a ridiculous mechanical bird, hung from a wire, that flapped noisily around Alan's head. He seemed happy to be there. Michelson was a touchstone for us. Her work, like that of many artists I love, is kindled by her friends and the places they inhabit. She and Merce Cunningham and George Balanchine and Yvonne Rainer represented the crossovers in dance and art that brought Douglas and I together and gave our friendship, along with idle gossip and occasional trips to Fire Island, its enduring rhythms and destinations.

The first time I saw Douglas was in April 2009, near the end of a quiet press preview for "The Pictures Generation, 1974–1984" at the Metropolitan Museum, a show that owed its existence to his 1977 "Pictures" show at Artists Space and the subsequent essay that inaugurated the art world's turn to postmodernism. He was being interviewed by a reporter and I introduced myself and said how much I'd loved his piece on Cunningham for the October issue of this magazine. My first feature was about to appear in these pages, a 1000 Words column with Michelson about her work *Dover Beach*, 2009. Douglas and I rode the train together downtown and talked about dance. He seemed to know about everything, but he kindly opened a space for me to give him the little I knew. I would teach him about the new performances I was excited about. He emailed me shortly after, and we had our first dance date.

I don't remember much about that evening. I remember being nervous. I was intimidated by this thoughtful and warm but reserved older man. It wasn't the knowledge that intimidated me, though the knowledge was formidable. It was his generosity, which seemed somehow of even greater measure. We had dinner at a French café near the Joyce Theater. I had never met anyone so devoted to learning about the world and so unpretentiously devoted to sharing their learning, and I didn't know how I could possibly reciprocate.



Louise

Lawler's *Postcard at 3/4 Scale*, 1982/2016 from her projection *One Minute, for More than One Person* for Douglas Crimp's memorial, November 2, 2019.

THIS WAS A YEAR when I needed my friends more than ever. When I wondered whether friendship could possibly be enough. Despite the maximization of topicality across all my devices, I'm increasingly alienated from the anodyne revelations of headlines; the requisite faith in distance and clarity has evaporated. I suspect other people I know also feel that the contingent ephemera that tie us together in something like a common narrative have escaped their essential conditions and bloomed into news-monsters. I suspect I'm not alone in stopping trying to hold them all in my mind, much less to corral them on the page. I have a lot of suspicions but have lost the trail of facts. The only thing I know for sure is that this was the year that Douglas Crimp died.

On November 2, I went to a memorial for Douglas hosted by Danspace Project at Saint Mark's Church-in-the-Bowery. A line formed an hour before the event, and when the doors opened all the chairs filled up very quickly. Yvonne Rainer watched her adored and adoring dancers do her *Three Satie Spoons*, 1961. Louise Lawler projected a reverie titled *One Minute, for More than One Person*. Douglas's husband Yoshiaki Mochizuki played Wagner's *Elegy* on the piano. Everyone who spoke testified to Douglas's gift of friendship, which was evidenced not simply by the number of friends who spoke and who wanted to speak but by how marvelously each manifested as themselves. Douglas gave the impression that he only needed you to be who you were, or a more unlimited version of who you could be, and he held space for that.

I didn't, or couldn't, speak at the memorial. For months I had wanted to write about him, but couldn't do that either. I've been amazed by his friends' sense of occasion and their ability to rise to it. This is a group that has had more than its good share of bad occasions. Its members know that this is what you do: You show up and speak.

Douglas was a person to me, a friend, but he was also an ideal. How do I explain that he represented the very possibility of a different kind of life? Douglas carried desire's virtues—its small victories against normative fealties—from gay liberation through the reactionary movements that followed. He made room for alien loves and friendships, and in that way, I felt like my own alien loves and friendships were possible. His pivotal 1989 essay "Mourning and Militancy," directly addressed to his "fellow activists and friends," describes being a man who experienced gay liberation before he experienced safe sex. He writes about a young activist and friend expressing how much he wished he could know the taste of another person's cum. "That broke my heart, for two reasons: for him because he didn't know, for me because I do." He writes how the incredible experience of the queer invention of safe sex might, for him and others of his gay-lib generation, also resemble melancholia. "Our pleasures were never tolerated anyway; we took them. And now we must mourn them too."

Douglas was a model friend not only because he knew what friendship is, but because he knew what it isn't. Friendship is not a set of rules or behaviors. It is not a stop on the way to somewhere else. In 1981, at the crossroads of gay liberation and AIDS, Foucault told the French magazine *Gai pied* that we "have to invent, from A to Z, a relationship that is still formless, which is friendship: that is to say, the sum of everything through which [we] can give each other pleasure." Maybe this formless connection could be a nonrelationship, like something charted in Douglas's brilliant 2012 essay "Coming Together to Stay Apart," about Andy Warhol and Ronald Tavel's film collaborations, in which he argues that the two artists' antagonism was the very condition of their practice: Working at cross-purposes, they broke with conventions of dramatic framing—the singular focus on relationships and storyline development—and so multiplied our pleasures across films like *Horse* (1965) and *Space* (1965) and *Hedy* (1966).

Douglas found kinship and pleasure across generational borders and other borders, too. He kept friends almost as easily as he made them, another rare gift in the art world (in any world). There was an equanimity to him, but he didn't shy from antagonism. He went toward his inner conflicts. Those ambivalences became the scenes of his best work. And maybe that was what encouraged this sense, when you went toward him, of profound balance.

Friends came from everywhere. You didn't need to be close to Douglas to be close with him. Now Douglas is gone. He was near until he wasn't. His friends remain. I think distance from the ideal is a myth created by god-fearing men to serve their own hierarchies. Closeness, feeling together, is the only reality. Douglas knew this and knew that you didn't have to put something at arm's length for it to be sacred.

David Velasco is the editor of Artforum.