

Peter Hujar – Time Between

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Reticent is not enough, and inner distance lags in describing the firmly austere and nearly skeptical attitude of American photographer Peter Hujar's work. Its intimate aloneness, gloaming toughness, and chic yet always gripping vitality is by turns heart-breaking, often bruising, occasionally witty, and night and day seductive. Relentlessly so. Now, his portraits are on view in Venice, in the exhibition *Portraits in Life and Death*.

Peter Hujar's (1934-1987) medium format, black-and-white universe has a deceptive quietude and pull that doesn't leave you, once familiar. As Hujar himself once told a friend: 'I wanted to be discussed in hushed tones. When people talk about me, I want them to be whispering.' It's fair to say reverent tones have been there all along, even as reception and understanding of his work was limited by Hujar having only a handful of gallery shows and one book published during his lifetime, cut short as it was by his death from AIDS-related pneumonia in 1987, at age 53. Long framed as an 'artist's artist' known for photographing various versions of New York's art scenes from the early 1960s through the mid-1980s, in particular his portraits capturing queer life and downtown aesthetics, exposure to the range of Hujar's vision has grown, and with it his belated reception as one of the great American photographers of the late twentieth century.

And now, Hujar and his work are passing into something else, achieving a concentric ripple effect, moving through overdue art world reception to international attention and wider cultural awareness: a well-received pre-pandemic survey of his work, *Peter Hujar: Speed of Life*, traveled from the Morgan Library & Museum to Fundación MAPFRE, Barcelona, and the Jeu de Paume, Paris; newly presented images, taken from thousands of photos Hujar seems to have designated works – he was a master printer himself – are increasingly the focus of stellar solo shows, including recent entries *Backstage* at Maureen Paley Gallery, London, and *Peter Hujar: Echoes* at Pace Gallery's 125 Newbury space in New York. Ira Sachs, director of the acclaimed film *Passages*, released last year, is set to shoot a feature film, *Peter Hujar's Day*, starring Ben Winshaw as the artist; at least one biographical book on Hujar is rumored to be in the works; and, *Portraits in Life and Death*, the only book to appear during his lifetime – in limited run in 1976 – opens this summer in exhibition format concurrent with the opening of the Venice Biennale. *Portraits* will have the added poignancy of an overdue homecoming as it features, in part, a sequence of images Hujar took in Italy in 1963, of mummified corpses in the Capuchin catacombs of Palermo, Sicily.

Recline and repose

Adept at and working in various familiar photographic genres – portraiture, landscape, still life, nudes, and cityscape – Hujar achieves an enigmatic allure in how he brings things together, a tension in adjacency that is distinctly his. It proves the crux to *Portraits in Life and Death* with its cover image of sunlight and shadow falling across a skeleton, bits of flesh and cloth hanging on, the number 22 painted beside. Prodding us forward into uneasy company, the almost talismanic catacomb images only appear at the end of the book, preceded by portraits taken primarily in 1974-75. That Hujar held this image sequence so close for over a decade – he took the photos during a visit undertaken with fellow artist and then-boyfriend Paul Thek to the burial passages beneath Palermo's Capuchin monastery in 1963 – speaks to a revealing, confessional starkness alongside the enduring vibrancy of the portraits. A jarring approach, ahead of its time, the book came and went, largely unnoticed, even as it eventually proved highly influential and collectible.

Made up of a series of 29 portraits of friends and acquaintances from Hujar's mix of brilliant New York artists, filmmakers, writers and performers – in various angles of recline and repose, the book's conceit is not exactly open arms, as the quick succession of centuries-old corpses enigmatically closes the book. Seductive and tough, it exudes a 'here and elsewhere' kind of invitation that typifies how Hujar sees things. And yet, from its nervy first image of filmmaker John Waters lying down but ready to rise – mid-sentence, cigarette burning, searching look – the portraits radiate life and a kind of implicit back-and-forth off camera. The setting and attire is simple, mostly shot on or in Hujar's bed, with sitters holding gestures that are painterly in quotation. Whether from stage, film set, or in the practiced charm of an author's asides, all the sitters have experience with audience expectations. This abets Hujar's interest in gradual momentum. And what emerges is a kind of negotiation, traces of persona letting go, unguarded vulnerability peeking out, an untethering of fixed looks traded in for what become encounters with interiority. It's easy to get lost here.

The portraits underscore the loss of any emphatic social gesture, rehearsing instead renewal through hesitation and hovering, a falling slightly in and out of character, a channeling that gradually becomes Hujar's aesthetic, every portrait a kind of meditation and time between: novelist William S. Burroughs equivocates and relents; artist Paul Thek demurs and sees through; dancer T.C. almost smiles in retreat; poet and critic Edwin Denby dwells and appears to levitate. All approach a skeptical fissure and elongation within Hujar's pacing. An exception might be the now iconic image of writer Susan Sontag, lying down, hands behind head, gazing upward, languidly and assuredly dreaming the world. Rather staid in comparison to the rest, this is perhaps Hujar's nod to Sontag having penned the introduction. But the averted gaze of drag performer Divine, John Waters' muse, is more piercing and resonant. Pictured in a white jumpsuit coverall, propped on his elbow, a dark velour blanket gathered for support, Divine's pale eyes burn forward. It's a transporting image. Likewise, Charles Ludlum, founder and star of The Ridiculous Theater Company, reclines in a corner, looking downward, fingers partially clasped. A striped shirt distracts as dust and dirt rise up

the walls behind, a painterly scumble of everyday detail fading away before the practiced perfection of Ludlum's eyes, antic melodrama glimmering in his gaze. Hujar once described this approach as making 'uncomplicated, direct photographs of complicated and difficult subjects', while novelist and critic, Gary Indiana, a repeat sitter for Hujar, playfully counters this description: 'He worked very, very consciously. You can't mistake any of his photographs for anyone else's. He had his own planet.' That seems right. After all, the enjambling images taken more than a decade apart are all purely Hujar, which speaks to a re-combinatory poetics constantly at play. Hujar slams the door on his pantheon, returning us to the catacombs, our inexorable thingness, no evasion allowed.

Disrupt, entertain, disturb

As with many things Hujar, a more full picture is desired, especially given that he was there in Italy in 1963, spending most of the year in Rome and the summer in Sicily with Thek, on a Fulbright scholarship that Hujar received to study filmmaking in Rome. Indeed, the year has the feeling of a kind of *künstlerroman* for both Hujar and Thek, a time of pivotal artistic growth and maturation, that still awaits further scholarship and telling.¹ Suffice to say, a quality of eclipse in Portraits elucidates Hujar's constellating impulses and cultivated interest in abrupt, filmic cuts, an aesthetic that evolves to become a kind of signature. This is further attested to in the welcome appearance last year of *Newspaper*, a reprint of a nearly forgotten artist publication founded and published by artist Steve Lawrence and co-edited by Hujar, while also featuring a wide range of Hujar's own work. With fourteen issues released between 1968 and 1971, *Newspaper* falls short of its monthly aspiration, appearing rather in the fits and starts of an artist project meant to disrupt, entertain, and even disturb a distinctly New York target audience of downtown, uptown, and queer art scenes. In fact, it takes its name only in the fourth issue, settling into its image-only, black-and-white, large fold-out format. Each issue features artist contributions amid anonymous collaged photos, a few image-only ads for gallery shows and music label band releases, and what Lawrence dubbed his signature 'Environments', two-page spreads arranging a cacophony of appropriated images from gay and straight pornography, mainstream and counterculture news photos, celebrity promos, exotica, and snapshots.

While there's much to parse regarding *Newspaper* as a whole, and Lawrence's particular brand of transgressive, surfeit iconophilia – including what seems a likely nod of inspiration from Thek's more focused photo-collage against newspaper backdrop experiments at the time – the role of *Newspaper* as an alternative exhibition platform for art, photography in particular, stands out. The list of more than forty artist contributors again belies Hujar's expansive social circle and curatorial reach, including, among many others, Diane Arbus, Richard Avedon, Ray Johnson, Andy Warhol, Yayoi Kusama, Lucas Samaras, Peter Beard, Dorothea Lange and, in each issue, Hujar himself. Like Pictures, Hujar's company makes an impressive list, especially given the on and off again printing of *Newspaper*. Hujar's own

images set the tone for artist contributions, and the project was clearly an important outlet for Hujar to show his own work and explore his sensibility, including by association and editorial attitude.

By the second untitled issue, a two-page spread of Hujar's reveals a formal approach that would continue through to his final gallery show in 1986, namely a penchant to jump-cut that is nearly montage, sequencing his motifs. Here, an image from behind of a woman entering the ocean – waist high, arms out, just ahead of diving in – is paired left with the strewn aftermath of a group dinner at a Chinese restaurant, shot from above, a still life in disarray of plates, glasses, tea cups and ashtrays. A gap-filled kind of narrative logic exists that makes room for a mood of flashback and aporia. Taking on before and after qualities, Hujar's cut includes the softening of the left image alongside accentuated, hard shadows in the table scene. This propulsive diptych approach extends to other Hujar spreads over the run of *Newspaper*, including that of a beautiful young man (gay-rights activist and then-boyfriend Jim Fouratt) eyes closed, hair falling into place, alongside a highly formal Italianate hedged garden. Elsewhere, another Hujar swimmer enters the ocean, next to a country road unspooling ahead, trailing off into a mountain ridge.

Similarly evocative cuts arise in Hujar's editorial approach to other artist photographers held in high regard, including stunning *Newspaper* contributions from Lilo Raymond, Ann Douglas and Stephen Paley. Inclusions from Hujar's commercial work also appear, treated quite differently, often with two takes or formally repetitive images making up a spread – including great shots of Iggy Pop, Tuli Kupferberg of the Fugs, and trailblazing sculptor Louise Nevelson. Andy Warhol's promos for his film *Lonesome Cowboys*, and two magazine portraits of a babyfaced Bob Dylan from Richard Avedon, get the same treatment. The distinction speaks to Hujar's varying relationship to photos, especially his own, as he moves toward rotating motifs in the work he privileges as art, a procedural aesthetic that is up and running, even here. It positions his desire to order and re-order, looking to rotate and contrast motifs, as with so much of his later work. And so the joyful images of cruising the Chelsea piers, but also the amazing night portraits of searching desire. And so the much loved portraits of animals, shot after long chats, often in their habitat, but also the smashed, abandoned cars, ruined industrial buildings, empty parking lots, and erasures of New York and its boroughs at night. And so the stark island volcano of Stromboli, but also the tuft of dune grass at Port Jefferson.

A day in the life of Hujar

That Hujar wrote next to nothing about his recombinant approach to work, and was said to have frozen up with stage fright the one time he attempted an artist talk, is extenuated by further anecdotes of his being 'difficult', and a too often harsh romanticizing, as with Fran Leibowitz's purported funeral quip that 'Peter Hujar has hung up on every important photography dealer in the Western world'. In other words, the myth-making of Hujar as withholding, self-sabotaging and renouncing has been written into the script as a way of explaining his lack of success alongside familiars like Robert Mapplethorpe and Nan Goldin,

even as anecdotes of his warmth, preference for in depth one-on-one conversations, long-lasting friendships, and mentorship to younger artists – notably David Wojnarowicz and Goldin – act as a kind of counterweight. Hujar’s aesthetic includes an understanding of his own experiments in living and a non-essentialism that speaks to the depth of his perception in others. Thankfully, a recent publication brings the latter to life like a still glowing ember in *Peter Hujar’s Day*, a document of a 1974 conversation with Hujar conceived by writer and close friend Linda Rosenkranz.

Akin but also askance to Rosenkranz’s pioneering ‘reality novel’ *Talk*, published in 1968 and comprised of an edited and choreographed text culled from audio recordings of three friends over one summer in 1965, *Peter Hujar’s Day* is a transcript of the artist recounting to Rosenkranz, in detail and at her request, all that he can recall of a typical day he had agreed to ledger ahead of time. It’s a slim but extremely charismatic affair, as Hujar jumps off the page, including what he’s wearing, what he eats, the pace of his work day replete with freelance gig details, and the back-and-forth talk of observation, gossip, questioning, and attitude. The range includes a young intern from *Elle* coming by the loft to pick up the negative of a photo of actress Lauren Hutton for publication, a phone call with Sontag promising to try to see his gallery show downtown (even asking Hujar to describe again where Broome Street is!), and a remarkable monologue regarding his midday encounter with poet and aging counterculture guru Allen Ginsberg, wherein Hujar, on freelance for a *New York Times* profile picture, negotiates a gulf of generational difference and queer sensibility.

Standing there in this burned-out butcher shop window, with his arms crossed, chanting. He kept doing that ummpatumpum. Then we go to the doorway across the street and he sat down in the lotus position, looking very Buddha, right in the doorway, and started to chant. And I really thought well, I can’t interrupt God. (...) OK, so we finish taking pictures out in the street and I don’t know what else to do there. At one point I said you’re talking to me like I’m the New York Times and I’m not. He kept throwing in things about the ownership of the Times’ connections with the oil interests and I couldn’t care less. I mean the details are like a soap opera that’s not very interesting. So he said but you work for the Times and I say no, this is the first job I’ve ever gotten for the Times and suddenly that was much better and I asked if I could take some portraits of him at home for me, and he said sure. (pp. 21-22)

While the conversation between Rosenkranz and Hujar hums along, with detours into asides on other artist friends and cultural figures, the day’s summit with Ginsberg lays bare how distant from Hujar the elder poet’s overt performing of persona and politics lands. Hujar doesn’t play along with Ginsberg’s seeking a dramatic backdrop, and yet they share a lot, including a city on the verge of bankruptcy, a neighborhood in tumult, their artistic vocations, and, in the end, a halting acknowledgment of each other. All of this comes to life through the valuing of conversation that Rosenkranz brings to life. The face-to-face encounter of artist talk, uninterrupted by smartphones, speaks to the vitality of a city, and can cover a lot of

ground. It will no doubt make for an interesting arc, as Sachs has described the soon-to-be shot project as ‘a film about what it is to be an artist among artists in a city where no one was making any money’.

And yet so much more comes across. As a final passage from the book attests, this art of artists talking – and judging – can slip into poetry at any moment, especially in Hujar’s already cinematic vision. After falling asleep at the end of his day, he describes being almost immediately woken up by the loud, familiar talk of sex workers passing on the street below his window.

‘I got up and I looked out the window, I watched them to see what they looked like and one of them was putting on makeup in the mirror of a car, an outside mirror. Actually, it wasn’t a car, it was that blue truck that comes from the junkies’ detention place up the block and it has a small rectangular mirror. And then I went back to bed and fell asleep.
(p. 47)

Fittingly, a day for night sign-off ends things, this time between that is quintessential Hujar – between waking and dream, a moment on and off stage, quotidian but somehow overseen, angelic even. It’s as if Hujar had actually taken the picture for us, details falling into place, acutely adjusted – outside mirror, blue truck not a car, from up the street – and the transformation of the scene, the leaned-in gesture and its slight magic observed, is complete.