

Looking Everywhere for You

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A new collection of photographs and letters between Peter Hujar and Paul Thek traces their tender, playful, and restless bond.

Words by

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“A photograph of happy persons, except me, I am seen looking everywhere for you,” [Paul Thek](#) wrote to [Peter Hujar](#) on the back of a postcard of a Northport, New York beach in August of 1960. The shore stretches out under a cloudy summer sky, sunbathers sprawled across towels while waves lap gently at the shore. Near the edge, a lone boy—circled in black ink, with an arrow pointing at him—turns away from the crowd, as if searching for something just beyond the frame. One of the many correspondences Hujar kept, the missive now reappears in [Stay away from nothing](#), a collection of photographs and writings that chart the arc of their relationship over two decades.

The book opens with a scene from Coral Gables, Florida in the winter of 1956 when the two first met: Hujar had traveled south with his lover, the painter [Joseph Raffael](#), and stayed with Thek and his then-partner, the set designer [Peter Harvey](#). Picture Hujar—cropped at the waist, slightly off-center, awkwardly angled—among a grove of sparse, wispy pines. Taken by Thek, the composition is clumsy, unpracticed but tender in its uncertainty. One can imagine Thek crouching low, camera in hand, coaxing his friend into a pose. Or, in the photograph on the next page, Hujar pointing to a patch of sunlight on the forest floor and asking Thek to lie down there. In these moments, it is as if it were just the two of them in the world.

Soon after, a deep infatuation unfurled. Their romance bloomed in New York, in a private but vibrant queer 1960s avant-garde, among friends like [Eva Hesse](#), [Susan Sontag](#), and [Andy Warhol](#)—before any of them had *made it*. Hujar was emerging as the portraitist of the downtown milieu, while Thek’s budding art practice only encompassed drawing and painting. The two were of an echelon that spent summers on Fire Island, a recurring backdrop for Hujar’s portraits of Thek, like a 1961 contact sheet in the volume that shows the artist on the docks, late afternoon sun framing his silhouette. In another shot, by Thek, Hujar reclines on a boat. [The Pines](#) was a private enclave

where they could watch the tide, smoke cigarettes in the sun, sketch, take photos, have sex, or talk long into the evening, laying the groundwork for the relationship that, by 1962, fully blossomed into love.

That July, Thek made his first trip to Europe, sending letters across the Atlantic, each carrying the same playful, attentive tone of their early days together. “Hello to Petezo,” he begins in an October dispatch, his voice buoyed by youthful longing. “Finally... I was beginning to worry about sinking ships, etc., and I was the last to know... no word from you in so long... but there is no reason my letter should have taken six days to reach you, dolce far niente after all.” The distance did little to cool their intimacy; if anything, it heightened it. They met in Perugia, Italy later that month, a reunion enshrined in a photograph of the two gazing into each other’s eyes, Thek wearing a dainty turtleneck, Hujar in a tweed suit and tie.

The following year, on Hujar’s Fulbright, they traveled to Palermo and photographed the city’s catacombs. For Hujar, the images would become central to his only book published in his lifetime, [*Portraits in Life and Death*](#), 1976. For Thek, the experience was also a catalyst: The corpses became material for his “Technological Reliquaries,” his so-called “meat pieces,” including 1967’s *The Tomb*, a ziggurat containing a wax effigy of his own body. *Stay away from nothing* is full of these instances where the personal and the artistic collapse into one another, revealing emotional truths inside periods that have long been historicized. Because Thek didn’t save Hujar’s letters, the photographs do the work of filling the gaps.

One of the most disarming entries in the volume is a letter Thek wrote in 1975, long after their romance had begun to dissolve, though their creative entanglement had not. “I liked when you said that perhaps all this while you’ve just been trying to find your father, useing[sic] your camera,” he tells Hujar—a line that distills, with startling clarity, a confession the photographer would never have written himself: that beneath the immaculate prints and his so-called difficult temperament was a boy searching, relentlessly, for a kind of truth he could only approach through other people’s faces. These are the entry points where the book excels, humanizing figures who, in their lifetimes and since, have become almost mythic.

Here is a record of two artists who saw each other, fully, urgently, sometimes maddeningly, and kept looking, even as life grew complicated. Thek and Hujar emerge not as icons or cautionary tales, but as people whose work and relationship prefigured the transformations of the decade that followed. The book allows the reader to join them in the moment, before the upheavals of that later era would claim so many of their peers, and them too: Hujar died in 1987 at 53 years old of

AIDS-related pneumonia; They died of AIDS the following year at 54. *Stay away from nothing* dawdles in that interval before everything changed, as if the years to come could never touch them.