

So Almost in Love

PETER'S A PHOTOGRAPHER. Paul's a painter. They both have boyfriends. Let's take some pictures, Peter suggests. Paul is game—he's always game. One seduces with the camera. One seduces with what that camera reveals.

Peter Hujar (1934–1987) is having a moment. The rerelease of his only book published in his lifetime, *Portraits in Life and Death*; a critically acclaimed feature film, *Peter Hujar's Day*; and a surge of international exhibitions testify to his place in the canon. Two new books spotlight an artist closely bound up with him: Paul Thek (1933–1988). Andrew Durbin's meticulously researched biography, *The Wonderful World That Almost Was*, traces Hujar and Thek's relationship. It reads like a novel, uncovering details of how these men lived without bogging down the reader with unnecessary biographical baggage. Durbin, editor-in-chief of *Frieze*, wisely focuses on the stretch of their lives that influenced both men's work.

The beginning of their relationship happens off the page. Suddenly they appear together without explanation. "Neither was very good at being in love, even if they were always seeking it," Durbin writes. Hujar, by his own estimate, "might have had sex with at least fifteen thousand people." Fran Lebowitz remembers: "If he had five minutes, he'd go somewhere to have sex." Thek, conflicted about being gay, imagines that a straight life might offer more stability. He even contemplates having a child with their friend Susan Sontag.

Both artists are ambitious, but it's the contrast between the two that animates the book. Hujar, shaped by early neglect, is guarded and taciturn. Photography becomes his way of establishing intimacy. Thek is expansive and restless. He lives abroad for long stretches of time, walking barefoot and carrying small toys in his pockets to give away to children. His best-known work is grand, even unwieldy: flesh-like wax sculptures and ephemeral installations built from found objects.

A visit to the Palermo catacombs fuels their most famous work. Hujar photographs the preserved bodies that become central to *Portraits*. Thek later creates *The Tomb*, a wax effigy of

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THE WONDERFUL WORLD THAT ALMOST WAS A Life of Peter Hujar and Paul Thek

by Andrew Durbin

Farrar, Straus and Giroux
512 pages, \$24.

PAUL THEK AND PETER HUJAR Stay Away from Nothing

Edited by Francis Schichtel
Primary Information. 192 pages, \$30.

himself laid out in a pink suit. Dubbed by critics "the dead hippie," it comes to symbolize the tensions of the late 1960s, in ways both good and bad.

While Hujar's reputation has soared in the years since his death (both men died of AIDS-related complications), Thek's is only now undergoing a reassessment. He moved around a lot and was careless with what happened to his work, which is one reason his name is less well known. Even in his lifetime, contemporaries called him "a footnote." Durbin's biography makes a compelling case for revisiting that judgment. Yet without visual depictions of the work, the aspect of Paul Thek that comes

through more strongly is the force of his personality.

That personality shines in *Stay Away from Nothing*. Edited by Francis Schichtel, with an afterword by Durbin, the book illustrates the relationship through Thek's letters and Hujar's photographs. Reproductions of the letters show frayed edges, water stains, and scribbled afterthoughts. Type sometimes bleeds through the onionskin paper. Hujar's contact sheets show Thek learning to open himself up to him. Thek, heading abroad for the

first time, writes with enthusiasm and openness. He shows a boyish zest for small pleasures, expressing delight in the things he sees and hears ("waterfalls and cowbells") and cravings for Oreos, raisin toast, and frozen orange juice.

The letters are affectionate, funny, and flirty, especially early on. On one postcard—a color reproduction of people on a beach—he circles a figure and writes: "A photograph of happy persons, except me, I am seen looking everywhere

for you." Later letters reveal a more demanding side, with repeated requests for help with photos, supplies, and living arrangements. Money is a constant concern. The relationship changes shape and then falls apart. In 1972, Thek writes: "I hope we can be friends again. I wonder if we ever really have been." By the mid-1970s, they can barely stand being in the same room.

Even together, these two books don't fully answer what was at the heart of their relationship. These were two very good-looking guys: one light, one dark. Paul is a kite dancing across the sky. Peter is the string holding things in place. That each was a type of person the other wasn't, but admired, might have fueled the attraction. They looked into each other's eyes and saw something they wanted. What they found they made into art. 



Paul Thek and Peter Hujar.

Cover photo from *The Wonderful World That Almost Was*. Courtesy FSG.

Michael Quinn writes about books in a monthly column for the Manhattan newspaper *The Village Star-Review* and on his website, criticalinfluences.com.