

ARTFORUM

Life After Death: Peter Hujar's Last New York Statement

In a downtown restaging of Hujar's final show, connections to fellow artists are "not just seen but felt and forged"

Ortuzar

By David J. Getsy ☒

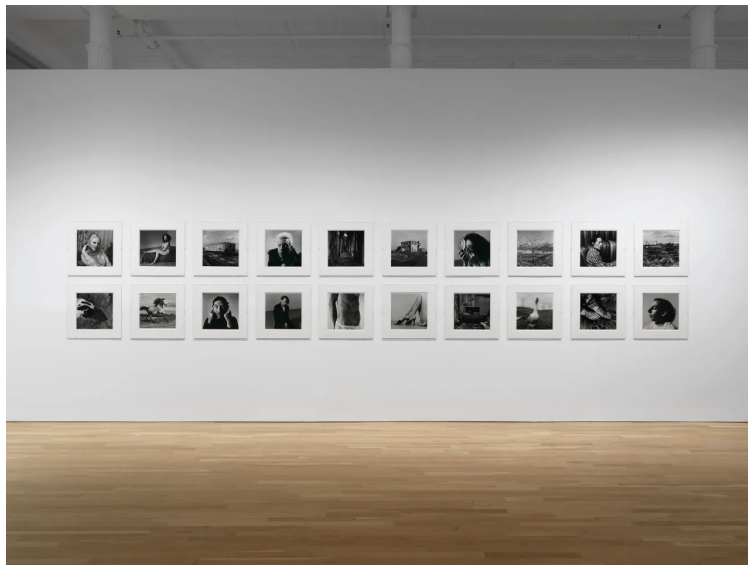
May 4, 2026 4:47 pm



Peter Hujar, *Peggy Lee*, 1974. © 2026 The Peter Hujar Archive, LLC. Photo: Fraenkel Gallery/Ortuzar.

The talismanic name Peter Hujar now seems inextricable from our art histories. Resurging over the past decade, he has come to stand for a lost New York City—from its waterfront sexual culture to the dynamic coterie of outsiders who were the Downtown underground of the postwar decades. More intimately, “Hujar” summons a constellation of intergenerational attachments to artists and writers with whom he shared his life—especially Paul Thek, his partner in the 1950s and ’60s, and David Wojnarowicz, whom he mentored in the 1980s. Recently,

the biographical alchemy of Hujar has been the subject of a 2025 film by Ira Sachs, a facsimile compendium of Hujar/Thek ephemera by the astute publisher Primary Information the same year, and the just-published biography of the two artists by Andrew Durbin, who also curated the group show accompanying Ortuzar's inaugural collaboration with the Peter Hujar Archive: a faithful recreation of the exhibition "Peter Hujar: Recent Photographs," held at Gracie Mansion Gallery in 1986. A major statement by the artist, that exhibition was also his last while he was alive.



View of "Peter Hujar: The Gracie Mansion Show," Ortuzar, New York, 2026. Photo: Dario Lasagni.

Hujar spent days arranging the 1986 exhibition, and Ortuzar restages its eye-level, double-hung frieze of square photographs that span the gallery's walls. The deliberate and hard-won installation of seventy photographs of friends, bodies, birds, animals, buildings, and places cumulatively prompts a process of discerning new bonds across moments, genres, and differences. For instance, sitting below a photograph of a decrepit and condemned hallway of a building on the Canal Street Pier is a close-up photograph of an abdomen with surgical scars, which in turn abuts an image of artist Greer Lankton's long legs and slightly upturned skirt. Together, these three very different images plait themes of transformation: injury, the possibility of repair, and life beyond. The portraits for which Hujar is most remembered are arresting and sometimes confrontational; so are the anthropomorphized

animals to which many of his photographs lend dignity. Death faces these creatures, too, in Hujar's portraits of slaughtered cows and expired cats. The 1986 exhibition was Hujar's first solo in New York for years, and he chose works from the previous ten. The selection harked back to his first major statement: the now-iconic 1976 photobook *Portraits of Life and Death*, which juxtaposed mummified human corpses and portraits of artists and writers. A decade later, the Gracie Mansion show expanded on this dual presentation of life and death, showcasing Hujar's ability to capture singularity and epiphanic clarity—in the form not just of a person but also of a building or animal.



View of "Peter Hujar: Recent Photographs," Gracie Mansion Gallery, New York, 1986. Photo: Adam Fuss.

The difference a decade made—the one that passed between *Portraits of Life and Death* and the Gracie Mansion show—was, of course, the AIDS crisis. By 1986 the epidemic was a daily presence, and a year later Hujar, too, would be claimed by it. But the lyric he composed with his last exhibition was steely-eyed rather than mournful or defeated. Whereas each photograph is compendious in itself, the meticulously choreographed installation is perambulatory, spatial, and temporal. A detail seen across the room comes back to life as a recollection of it is found in the image that we now turn to face. That encounter, perhaps, gives an indication of how Hujar wanted us to see the world again through his photographs.



Joseph Raffael, *Untitled*, 1965, oil and collage on canvas, 55 × 75 1/2". Photo: Matt Grubb.

The intensely focused Gracie Mansion installation is presented in an interior gallery at Ortuzar, and it is encircled by the more open mesh of a sensitive group show of the artist's friends and fellow travelers, curated by Durbin. Thek's enigmatic found-object sculptures hail Ray Johnson's collages with skulls that, in turn, echo a Hujar photograph from the Palermo catacombs that so affected him (and Thek). Two rarely seen quilt paintings by Ann Wilson hold the space tight. Abstract, geometric, homey, and lovingly relentless, they remind us that the circle of artist-friends that she, Hujar, Thek, Johnson, and others shared could find the everyday and the humble to be worthy of something akin to the sublime. Other works offer graphic directness to balance the imposing subtlety of Wilson's quilts, as with a 1982 Wojnarowicz double portrait of Hujar and Joseph Raffael's chilling 1965 painting collage of an exposed eye being inspected as it is simultaneously forced to see. To behold the faces of Hujar and his extended family, there is the magic lantern of Sheyla Baykal's 35-mm color slides, friend and collaborator Gary Schneider's film portrayal of Hujar in *Salters Cottages*, and an ensemble of Lankton's contorted but always graceful doll portraits. Despite the crowd, it's a quiet show. It asks, like the Hujar manifesto it orbits, for connections to be not just seen but felt and forged.

"Peter Hujar: The Gracie Mansion Show" and "How Beautiful This Living Thing Is" are on view through May 30, 2026 at Ortuzar, New York.