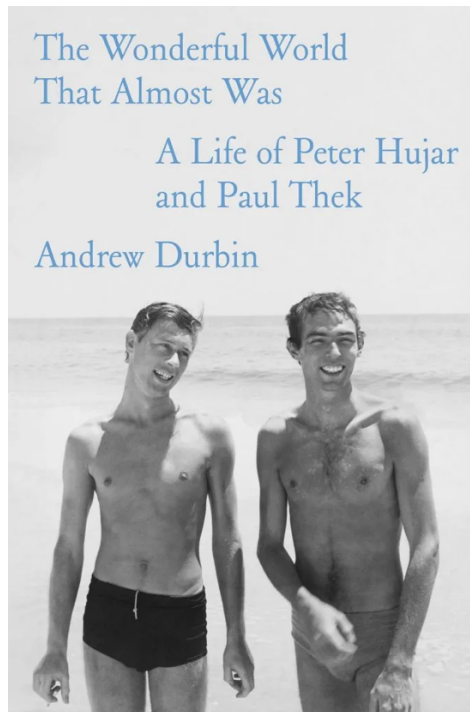


Books

The Untold Story of Peter Hujar and Paul Thek's Intimate—and Complex—Bond

Hujar and Thek's relationship is getting the spotlight in a new book and a series of exhibitions in New York.



Min Chen • April 13, 2026 • [Share This Article](#)

In 1963, **Peter Hujar** descended into the **Capuchin Catacombs** in Palermo, in a visit that roused his photographer's eye. He wasn't alone: with him was fellow artist **Paul Thek**, whose experience of the site illuminated his own contemplation of mortality. Their trip to the catacombs marked a defining moment in their practices, but was just one episode in a deeper bond that was by turns romantic and brotherly, before its rupture.

Hujar and Thek's complex relationship is the subject of a new book, *The Wonderful World That Almost Was: A Life of Peter Hujar and Paul Thek*, by **Andrew Durbin**. The dual biography traces the artists' journeys, while unpacking how their lives and art entwined from their meeting in the late 1950s through their deaths from AIDS-related complications in the 1980s.

"It was unavoidable," Durbin told me about his twin subjects. "For most of their 20s and 30s, they were intimately connected. They shared a world, in New York, in Europe. To write about one always demands you write about the other."

The Makings of a Shared World

When and how Hujar and Thek were first acquainted remains unknown, but the earliest trace of their connection shows up in Hujar's photographs from a Florida trip in 1956. At the time, Thek was living with his partner **Peter Harvey** in Miami, when Hujar visited with **Joseph Raffael**. There, the group dropped by **Villa Vizcaya** in Coral Gables, where Hujar snapped images of the aging architecture and of Thek and Raffael.

"Many of the best photographs from the trip focus on Paul," Durbin wrote in his book, notably a series Hujar captured of Thek casually splayed on a bench in a living room—their first portrait session. "What is most striking in the contact sheets are Paul's eyes," Durbin continued, "which greet Peter's camera as if they were trying to make as sharp a record of the moment as any photograph ever could."



By the time the pair made it to Italy from New York, they were lovers, both dreamers hoping to make it as working artists. Their journeys across Europe electrified them—Hujar arrived to study filmmaking, Thek to paint—while their shared deprivations (they briefly occupied a cramped studio in Rome) bonded them. Thek was practically delirious: “I smile and laugh a bit to think that I am here and that it is so terribly beautiful,” he told Hujar.

The catacombs, housing thousands of mummies, provided a frisson of inspiration and “clarified a lot of ideas lurking behind the work they were already doing,” Durbin said over email. Hujar’s images of the catacombs, taken illicitly as photography is barred, bore out his sensitivity to the human form and later anchored his 1976 book *Portraits of Life and Death*. Thek, meanwhile, channeled the experience into his famed “meat pieces” and his seminal *The Tomb* (1967), a pyramidal installation that encased a prone wax effigy in his likeness.



From there, Hujar and Thek's creative paths would diverge, though they remain joined by a fond—and sometimes tense—friendship. Hujar would find steady commercial work, before he turned toward creating personal and intimate portraits, becoming a fixture in the downtown art scene from the late '60s. A restless Thek devised far more unwieldy creations such as his notorious wax flesh sculptures, at once fascinating and repulsive, that attracted few buyers.

Both found a shared sanctuary in a rental home on New York's Fire Island for brief spells through the '60s. When apart, they kept up a correspondence. Hujar continued to photograph Thek, famously capturing the artist naked and playfully astride a stuffed zebra and more infamously, in the act of masturbation.

The ever-shifting emotional terrain of their relationship, however, remains elusive. While Durbin has charted the ebb and flow of their entanglement through letters, photographs, and recollections, he concedes there is much we cannot know about “two young men alone in a room together.” Still, he added, “that allowed me to preserve some of the mystery of their relationship, which is as important as what we do know.”



After the Break

One of Hujar and Thek's final meetings was for an early 1970s photo session for the *Portraits*. It was a difficult sitting—Thek protested the “critical scrutiny, that lens” in his notebook—the pair's relationship having frayed over years of spats and rows. Thek's unraveling mental health further saw him oscillate between paranoia and tenderness toward Hujar, who had grown wary of his friend of 20 years. Hujar died in 1987 and Thek in 1988, without reconciling, it seems.

Today, Hujar and Thek are remembered very differently—the former has seen posthumous fame (and made it to the big screen) and the latter is largely overlooked. Hujar's photographs, after all, lend themselves to circulation in ways that Thek's fragile “meat pieces” and ephemeral installations do not. Their distinct legacies also meant Durbin could readily access Hujar's archive at the **Morgan Library**, while research into Thek relied on material at the **Watermill Center** (the artist left his estate to its founder **Robert Wilson**) and collections across Europe.



The release of *The Wonderful World That Almost Was* is being heralded by a spate of exhibitions on the artists. Later this month, New York's **Museum of Modern Art** will host a four-day film program, "A Hard Stare," which will screen footage of Hujar, Thek, and their contemporaries, as well as the photographer's only film. Over at the Morgan Library, "Hujar:Contact" will spotlight more than 110 of his contact sheets centered on the likes of **Susan Sontag**, **Candy Darling**, and **Marsha P. Johnson**.

In May, solo presentations of Thek works will open at **Galerie Buchholz** and **Pace Gallery**, before the Watermill Center presents "The Disappearance of Landscape: Oakleyville, 1964–2022," tracing the practices of four artists—Thek, Hujar, **Sheyla Baykal**, and **Matthew Leifheit**—who lived and worked in the Fire Island community of Oakleyville.



Durbin, not least, is guest-curating the group show "How Beautiful This Living Thing Is" at **Ortuzar** gallery, featuring works by artists in Hujar's circle, including Raffael, Thek, **Ann Wilson**, and **David Wojnarowicz** (it coincides with the gallery's exhibition of 70 Hujar photographs, recreating his final show at Gracie Mansion in 1986). Durbin is taking an evocative hand to the subject.

"I'm trying to approach the show sensitively, lyrically," he said. "I don't want to be too literal in curating and pairing these works; this isn't meant to be a comprehensive historical show built around a timeline. It's more of a meditation on the mysteries of artistic kinship."

The Wonderful World That Almost Was: A Life of Peter Hujar and Paul Thek is published by FSG on April 14.