

How Beautiful This Living Thing Is

April 22 – May 30, 2026

Sheyla Baykal, Susan Brockman, Peter Hujar, Ray Johnson, Greer Lankton, Joseph Raffael, Gary Schneider, Paul Thek, Ann Wilson, David Wojnarowicz

curated by Andrew Durbin

Peter Hujar was fascinated by kinship. As a man who only partly knew his own origins, who was abandoned by his father and neglected by his mother, deep defining relationships held a certain mystery. In his photographs, especially his portraiture, Hujar is often thinking about the connections inside and outside the frame of the photograph. Who we are, and to whom we belong. Beneath the surface, under the skin.

In July 1968, Hujar and Steve Lawrence published the first issue of *Newspaper* out of their apartment on Second Avenue. Unusually, this zine was printed without stories or words, just pictures. Many of Hujar's friends would appear in its pages, including his former boyfriend, the painter Joseph Raffael; the collage artist Ray Johnson; his mentor Richard Avedon; the photographer Sheyla Baykal, whom Hujar nurtured in the mid- 1960s; and of course, his friend and lover Paul Thek, who shared a fascination with newspapers. What associates them was their friendship with Hujar, which flows under the surface of the paper, more a feeling than a coherent aesthetic program.

Inspired by Steve Lawrence and Hujar's approach to *Newspaper*, this exhibition gathers works by nine of Hujar's friends; Sheyla Baykal, Susan Brockman, Ray Johnson, Greer Lankton, Joseph Raffael, Gary Schneider, Paul Thek, Ann Wilson, and David Wojnarowicz. They were all artists whom Peter admired; he photographed and loved them; he grew alongside them. Of this group, Baykal, Brockman, Johnson, Raffael, Thek, and Wilson are his near contemporaries. He met all of them between the late-fifties and mid-sixties, when he was still discovering himself as a photographer, and their work and camaraderie influenced his own artistic development. The rest of this group—Lankton, Schneider, and Wojnarowicz—represent a younger generation of artists whom Hujar befriended and mentored. Wojnarowicz would center Hujar's image and life in his painting and writing while Gary Schneider, influenced by Hujar's approach to portraiture, was to become his printer later in life and posthumously. Lankton posed for Hujar, and her eerie dolls resonate with one of Hujar's most famous bodies of work, his 1963 photographs of the Capuchin catacombs in Palermo.

"Peter gave degrees to a lot of people," Sheyla Baykal remembered. This was not your typical education; he always touched something in you, and everyone who had a close relationship with Hujar was transformed by it. As the performer John Heys once wrote of their relationship, "He was my teacher: a mentor, a father, brother, mother, and sister."

"How Beautiful This Living Thing Is"—the title is taken from one of Thek's letters to Hujar—explores several impressionistic themes shared across Peter's work and the work of those included here. Life, death, urbanity, collage, collaboration, shared intimacy. At times, you'll notice that the dialogue between the artists and their works is obvious; most of the time, it's not. While curating the show, I kept thinking about the writing of Julie Ault. In her essay "Ever Ephemeral," Ault argues against our impulse to neatly organize the past: "It is difficult to identify where an association of ideas or interests begins, and it is just as complicated to pinpoint an ending." This sounds a lot like friendship. Ault continues: "Chronology is not much help. A chronology can start or end anywhere. It can extend in either direction indefinitely, depending on the scope of its frame(s) of reference. Storyline. Lifeline. Timeline. History. All open to reformulation. The linear appearance of chronology is deceptive, as is the perception that time flows from one direction to another. Physicists and philosophers widely agree that 'the flow of time' is a creation of consciousness that we rely on for order."

When I was researching my new book about Hujar and Thek, *The Wonderful World That Almost Was*, I sometimes struggled to find the precise moment either man met a close friend, like Ann Wilson, an artist who would become especially important to them as a confidant and collaborator. Who introduced them? Where? It was hard to say. But then I would remember that most close relationships are like this; it is difficult to know when it begins. Friendship—what defines this show—abhors order. Its moves backwards and forwards, across time. When you love someone, as these artists loved Hujar, doesn't it feel like you've loved them forever? It's hard to remember the time when you didn't and they weren't in your life; the thought is even a little unbearable. Perhaps that time, the time without them, ceases to exist, and even death loses some of its power to separate you from them. You meet again. They are everywhere around you.