

A photograph of a workshop. In the upper right, a sculpture of a face is mounted on a rectangular block of light-colored material. The face has a slightly open mouth and is looking upwards. In the lower right, a sculpture of a hand is resting on a white, textured cloth. The background is a dark, cluttered workshop with various tools and materials.

Art in America

INTERNATIONAL ● REVIEW

**PETER HUJAR
& PAUL THEK**

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FINDING THEK'S *TOMB*

The author recounts the discovery of a trove of slides, shot by Peter Hujar, showing Paul Thek working on an iconic installation—now lost—in the 1960s.

BY MATTHEW ISRAEL

IT WAS THE SPRING OF 2009. Ever since I had begun to work at the Peter Hujar Archive three years earlier I had been suggesting to Peter's good friend Stephen Koch, director of the archive, that we retrieve what Stephen referred to as "The Trunk" from his New York apartment's basement and bring it to the archive's office. (The archive administers the estate of the late photographer [1934-1987], who is best known for his sensitive, classical, black-and-white portraits of artists and intellectuals from the downtown New York avant-garde community of the 1970s and early 1980s.)

Stephen had told me that Peter's trunk was filled with contact sheets, and that it had been kept in storage since his death. I expounded on what I felt was the art historical importance of contact sheets, but the archive possessed limited office space. As well, the archive's primary holdings—the more than 4,000 vintage gelatin silver prints by Hujar—had yet to be completely inventoried. (This was my primary job at the archive.) Furthermore, Stephen explained that while Peter did look at contact sheets a good deal to determine which shot to enlarge, he never exhibited them or considered them to be even close in importance to his (characteristically 16-by-20-inch) prints. Accordingly, the unspoken agreement between Stephen and me was that when I finished my inventory of the prints, we'd go and get the trunk.

This was far from how things turned out. Well before I had completed the inventory, Elisabeth Sussman, a



Left, Peter Hujar: *Thek Adjusting Tomb Figure*, 1967, color slide.

Right, Paul Thek (*in hooded sweatshirt*), 1975, gelatin silver print, 17 by 14 inches.

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CURRENTLY ON VIEW

"Paul Thek: Diver, a Retrospective" at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, through Jan. 9, 2011. "Paul Thek: cityscapes and other ideas" and "Peter Hujar: Thek's studio, 1967" at Alexander and Bonin, New York, through Nov. 27.

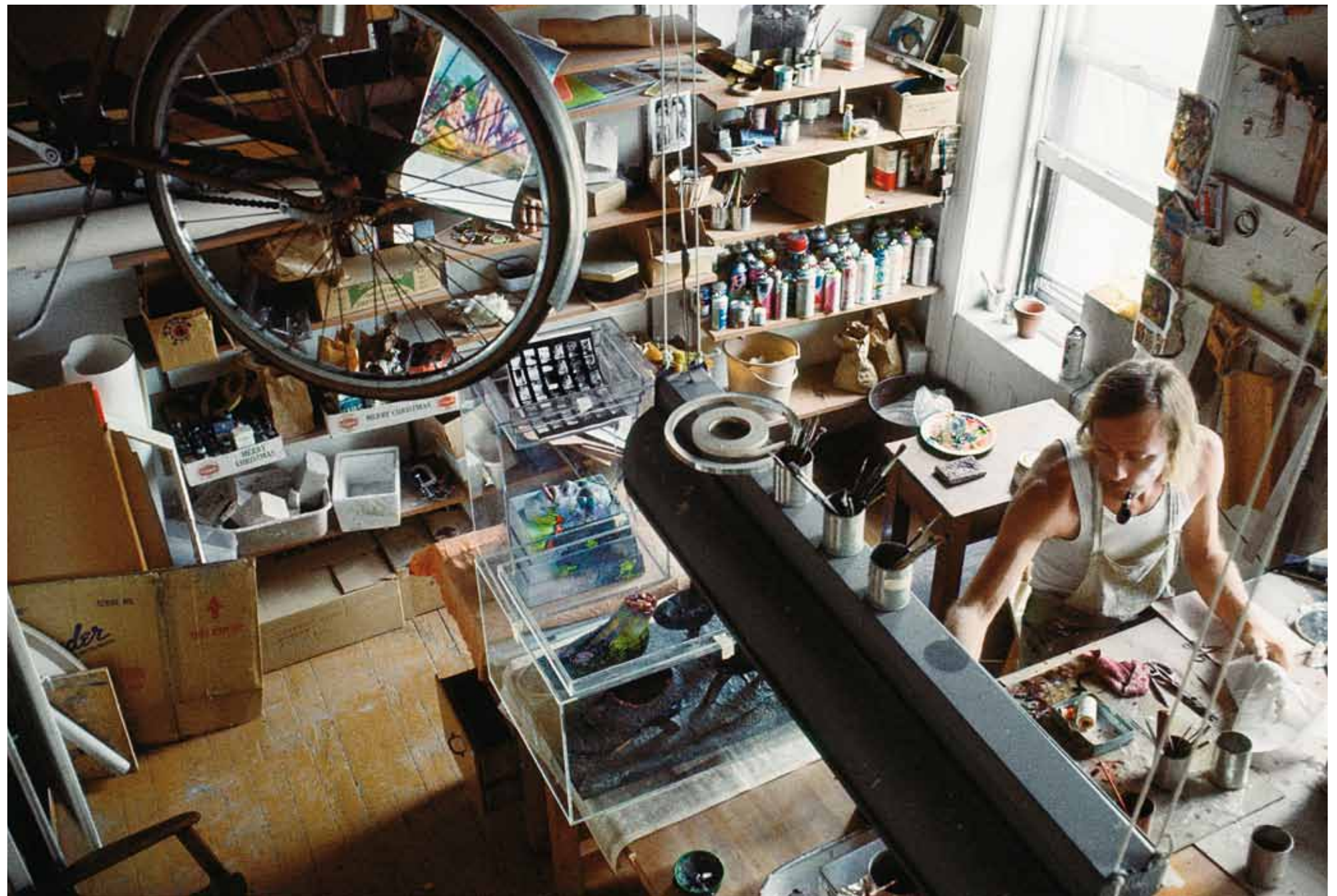
curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art, contacted Stephen to request prints of the roughly 20 photographs Hujar had made of the artist Paul Thek (1933-1988). Sussman wanted to see them as part of her research for the Thek retrospective she was co-organizing with Lynn Zelevansky, director of the Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, which would open at the Whitney in fall 2010. The retrospective would be the most significant effort yet to reintegrate Thek's work into the art history of the 1960s and 1970s, which has consistently disregarded his production. Even though Thek's work was frequently exhibited and well-received by critics between the years 1964 and 1976, it was an anomaly within the Pop- and Minimalism-dominated New York art world.

Early on, at the moment of Minimalism's ascendance, Thek was exhibiting meticulously rendered "meat pieces," which later became known as "Technological Reliquaries." Initially, from 1963 to 1966, these works were wax hunks that looked like human flesh in some instances and sea-creature or alien

ONE BOX IN THE TRUNK CONTAINED IMAGES FROM HUJAR'S SHOOT OF CANDY DARLING STRIKING POSES IN HER HOSPITAL BED JUST A FEW DAYS BEFORE SHE DIED AT 29.

meat in others. Beginning in 1966, Thek fashioned futuristic warrior relics out of hyperrealistic casts of his own arms and legs. Both the meat works and the "relics" were encased in (often fluorescent-yellow) Plexiglas and glass. The housing of meticulously crafted simulations of flesh within transparent cubes sharply contradicted the cool detachment of Minimalism and Pop.

In 1967, Thek stopped making art objects for the market (though later in his career he returned to the object). He moved to Europe and embarked on the creation of groundbreaking, large-scale, richly detailed immersive environments, stylistically removed from the much more Conceptual tendencies then coming to the fore in both Europe and the U.S. In 1996 art historian Stefan Germer, cofounder of the journal *Texte zur Kunst*, proposed that these installations could be seen as a precursor to certain artistic inclinations coming into vogue in the mid-1990s, such as institutional critique and col-



Above, *Thek 254 East 3rd Street Studio*, 1967, printed 2010 by Gary Schneider, pigmented ink print, 12½ by 18½ inches.

Left, *Contact sheet for Candy Darling on her Deathbed*, 1974, 11 by 8½ inches.

Next spread: Left, *Shelf with Hand*, 1967, printed 2010 by Schneider, pigmented ink print, 18½ by 12½ inches.

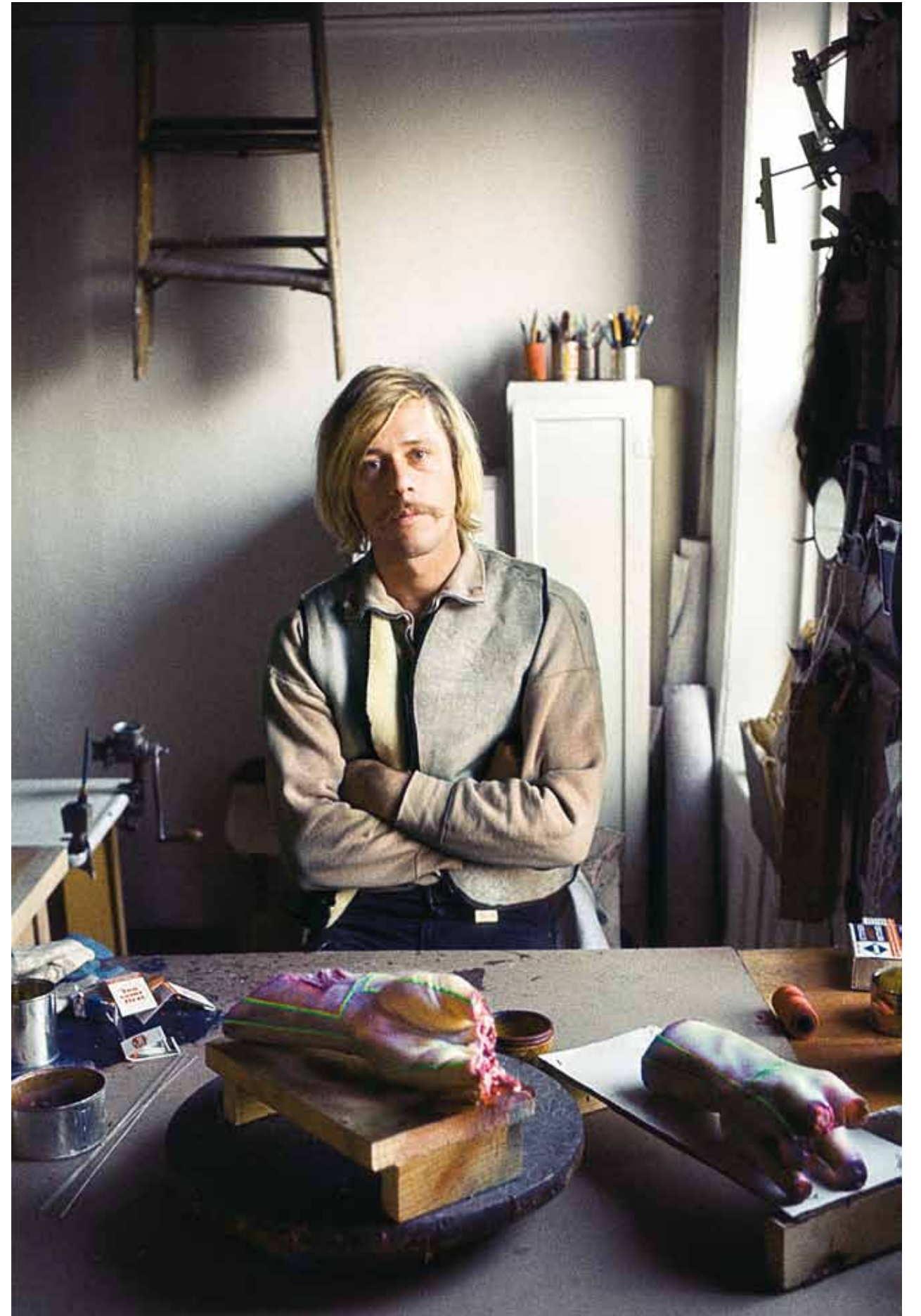
Right, *Paul Thek with Hand Sculptures*, 1967, printed 2010 by Schneider, pigmented ink print, 18½ by 12½ inches.

laborative work as social praxis. Thus, Germer proffered Thek as the Duchamp of the 1990s.¹

Thek's most-discussed work was his sculptural installation *The Tomb* (1967), which chronologically and stylistically bridged his body-part relics and immersive environments. *The Tomb* consisted of a one-story-high, pale pink structure reminiscent of a Sumerian ziggurat, within which lay a full-size, painstakingly crafted effigy of Thek himself. Painted pale pink, the replicant featured long hair and a moustache like Thek's own, and wore a double-breasted suit and a necklace made of human hair, as well as other jewelry. Its tongue was sticking out of its mouth, and the fingers on its right hand—Thek's working hand—were cut off, leaving bloody stumps. The fingers hung inside a pouch near the figure. (The artist was thus symbolically "silenced," unable to do his work.) In the first presentation of *The Tomb*, at New York's Stable Gallery in

1967, Thek surrounded the figure with pink goblets, a funerary bowl, personal letters and some of his previous reliclike work, making *The Tomb* resemble an archeological dig.² On the outside of the ziggurat, Thek posted a sign that detailed the structure's measurements, medium and fabricator, mocking the literalness of Minimalism while suggesting scientific precision. (The piece is now considered one of the great lost works of the 1960s. The figure disappeared after Thek refused to accept it from a shipping company in 1982, apparently because of damage the piece had incurred in transit.)

In a review of the Stable exhibition of *The Tomb* (which eventually also became known as *Death of a Hippie*), Robert Pincus-Witten described the work as "a monument which may easily prove to be one of the unanticipated yet representative masterworks of American sculpture of the sixties."³ *The Tomb* cemented Thek's reputation—but only for a time.





THE 20 OR SO HUJAR PHOTOGRAPHS of Thek that interested Sussman were taken during the more than 20 years of the artists' friendship. The two became friends in the late 1950s and were a couple between roughly 1964 and 1967, when their relationship ended and Thek left New York to live in Europe. By 1974, Thek had disassociated himself from Hujar and much of his New York community. Early on, however, he and Hujar were inseparable. Susan Sontag's '60s circle—of which they were a part—knowingly linked them in conversation as “Peter and Paul.” Peter and Paul’s trip to visit the Capuchin catacombs near Palermo, Sicily, was one of the main inspirations for Thek’s meat pieces and *The Tomb*. (The trip was also a significant turning point for Hujar; his photographs from the catacombs comprise almost a third of his only book, *Portraits in Life and Death*, a landmark of 1970s photography.)

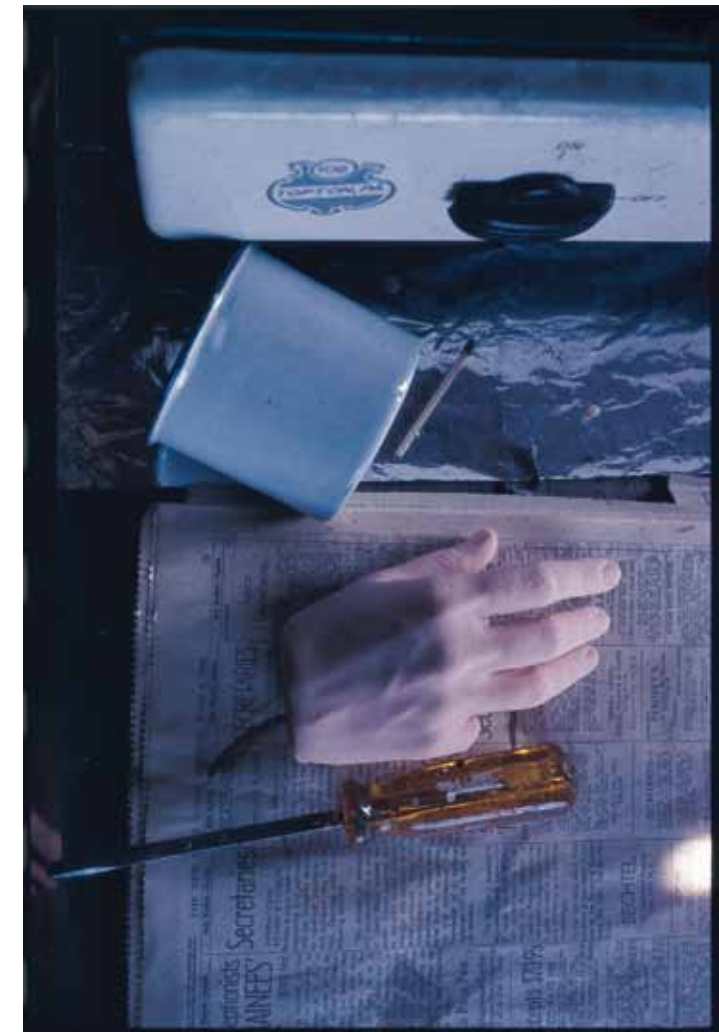
Sussman expressed an interest in seeing the negatives. Stephen speculated that, in the process of locating the negatives, I might unearth the photos Peter shot of Paul at work on *The Tomb*, which Stephen had looked for on various occasions, to no avail. Photography of *The Tomb* would be particularly valuable because there were few extant high-quality images of it.⁴ One such picture, taken by Hujar, of Thek working on *The Tomb* had been used for the poster advertising the 1967 Stable Gallery exhibition, and the Walker Art Center possesses a different view seemingly from the same shoot. Were there others?

Sussman further inquired about the contact sheets of the Thek prints. It was then that Stephen and I decided it was time to get The Trunk. It took about two hours for us to locate it in the basement clutter, and then another half hour to actually open it; lacking a key, we resorted to a crowbar to pop the flimsy lock. Inside we found stacks of 8-by-10 photo paper boxes filled with contact sheets, meticulously organized by shoot. One box in particular floored me: it contained images from Peter’s shoot of Candy Darling on her deathbed. In addition to the two images Peter chose to print, the sheets show Candy striking various poses in her hospital bed, looking incredibly glamorous just a few days before she died of leukemia at 29. Mixed in with the boxes of contact sheets were unmarked boxes that contained numerous 8-by-10 prints. While we had smaller versions of many of these back at the archive, we also found prints Stephen and I had never laid eyes on before.

After carting the trunk back to the office, I next discovered boxes of slides, some from Peter’s fashion shoots (a financial exigency he didn’t enjoy), others images of his own work that he had made for reproduction. Toward the end of the day, a bit bleary-eyed, I came upon some light blue slide boxes, a few of which were bound with a crumbling rubber band. I popped one of these boxes open, took out a slide and held it up to the light. Staring back at me, in full color, was a young Paul Thek, posing next to the figure from *The Tomb*. Behind this slide, in the same box and in the other rubber-banded boxes, were roughly 100 more related images. The lost shoot of Thek working on the figure of *The Tomb* had been unearthed.

Stephen immediately contacted Sussman. In the following weeks, she decided to include a selection of these images in the retrospective as a slide show. Stephen also determined that the archive should produce a small portfolio of them as 16-by-20-inch photographs, which would be printed by the photographer Gary Schneider, who had worked with Peter and is the only person he authorized to make posthumous prints of his work. (Thek’s gallery, Alexander and Bonin, is currently exhibiting Schneider’s portfolio in the exhibition “Peter Hujar: Thek’s Studio, 1967.” There are 14 prints in the show, each from an edition of 10. Hujar stipulated that 10 should be the size of any posthumous edition.)

FOR ONE GROUP OF IMAGES, THEK AND HUJAR ARRANGED SCULPTURES BESIDE THE TOOLS USED TO CREATE THEM, SUCH AS A WAX HAND NEXT TO A SCREWDRIVER AND A HOT PLATE.



Above, *Work Space with Hand Sculpture*, 1967, color slide.

Opposite, *Tomb Figure from Above*, 1967, color slide.

HUJAR'S IMAGES OF THEK in his studio offer an astonishingly thorough documentation of *The Tomb* figure. They record the work in a near-completed state, from different perspectives and in great detail. One can see the figure, on the work table, in the context of the studio, with Thek making finishing touches (like finessing the hair). Hujar captures the figure close-up, from

1 See Harald Falckenberg, "Freedom is first of all Freedom from Identification," in *Paul Thek: Artist's Artist*, eds. Harald Falckenberg and Peter Weibel, Cambridge, Karlsruhe: MIT Press / ZKM Center for Art and Media Technology, 2009, p. 32. Germer's comments were originally made in Germer, "Full Fathom Five My Father Lies: Speculations About Paul Thek's Contemporaries," which was delivered at the colloquium "Hujar/Thek," Jan. 27-28, 1996, organized by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) in Berlin in conjunction with the exhibition "Paul Thek—The wonderful world that almost was" at the Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin. **2** After the installation of *The Tomb* at the Stable Gallery, the work was shown in the following exhibitions: "The Obsessive Image," Institute of Contemporary Arts, London (1968); "Human Concern/Personal Torment," Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (1969); "Figures and Environments," Walker Art Center, Minneapolis (1970). Following the demolition of the structure, the figure was shown independently in the following exhibitions: "Pyramid/A Work in Progress," Moderna Museet, Stockholm (1971); "Ark, Pyramid—Christmas, aka Die Krippe [The Manger]," Wilhelm Lehbruck Museum, Duisburg (1973). In 1981, Thek gave permission to Kasper König to reconstruct the ziggurat; the figure and the tomb were shown that year in König's exhibition "Westkunst: Contemporary Art since 1939," Rheinhallen der Kölner Messe, Cologne (1981). The piece was then installed in "Herbs from Heaven and Hell" at the Museum voor Land- en Volkenkunde, Rotterdam (1981), which was its final exhibition. **3** Robert Pincus-Witten, "Thek's Tomb . . . Absolute Fetishism . . .," *Artforum*, November 1967, pp. 24-25. The title *Death of a Hippie* was first used at the Whitney Museum in 1969. Though Thek would adopt the title, he was, in the words of Lynn Zelevansky, "at best, ambivalent" about it and "often railed against it." See Zelevansky, "Life is Just a Bowl of Cherries: The Life and Art of Paul Thek" in *Paul Thek: Diver, a Retrospective*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2010, p. 14. **4** The images most often reproduced of the work are two black-and-white photographs by John D. Schiff. **5** Elisabeth Sussman, "Photography in Life and Death: Paul Thek and Photography," in *Paul Thek: Diver, a Retrospective*, p. 30.

"Paul Thek: Diver, a Retrospective" is at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Oct. 21-Jan. 9, 2011. It travels to the Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, Feb. 5-May 1, 2011, and the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, May 22-Sept. 4, 2011. "Paul Thek: cityscapes and other ideas" and "Peter Hujar: Thek's studio, 1967" are on view at Alexander and Bonin in New York, Oct. 16-Nov. 27.

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above, and from both its left and right sides. The most powerful images of the figure are point-blank views of the face, in which its verisimilitude is striking. Yet at the same time, these views encourage one to find proof of the work's artificiality, such as a bumpiness in the wax or a faint seam between the figure's neck and chest.

Moreover, the slides amount to a revealing record of Thek's East Village studio; it's almost possible to inventory the tools. Thek's small studio housed a rainbow of colors of Krylon spray paint, coffee cans full of paintbrushes, scissors, clamps, hammers and saws hooked onto the wall, hot plates for melting wax, bodies of (fake?) birds, and sheets of orange, yellow and clear Plexiglas, which Thek used to encase his "meat" and "relic" works. A few walls of the studio are covered by book and news clippings, and one immediately perceives these as possible influences on the work. Among them are photographs of grotesquely deformed twins; Michelangelo's *David*; Christ on the cross; diseased cells, organs and body parts; and a "Freak Monster Face" and "A Little Boy Chewed to Death" pictured in what looks like the *Daily News*. Hujar separately photographed some nearby bookshelves. Unfortunately, because of the shallow focus of the pictures, most of the book titles can't be made out, although Sontag's first novel, *The Benefactor*, can be identified.

Since some of Hujar's photographs functioned as publicity shots (e.g., for the Stable Gallery poster), they also testify to the manner in which Hujar and Thek conceived presenting Thek and his work to the public. One major theme the photographs stress is the uncanny resemblance between Thek's body and his fetishistic sculptures. The images consistently juxtapose the real and the sculpted. This is especially jarring in the pictures of Thek working on the *Tomb* figure. The scene is incredibly strange: Thek casually fashioning a surrogate of his own body in death. One is prompted to consider if such a work—and a body of work based on casts of Thek himself—is a product of self-obsession, self-exploration or masochistic impulses. Sussman sees these photographs as taking Thek's and Hujar's interest in the dead one step further. She believes they literalize the whole activity of photography itself, if one accepts the theory put forth by Roland Barthes in his



Thek Working on the Tomb Figure, 1967, printed 2010 by Gary Schneider, pigmented ink print, 12½ by 18½ inches.

Camera Lucida, that photography, while capturing life, simultaneously admits death.⁵

For another group from the series, Thek and Hujar arranged some of the sculptures beside the tools used to create them. They position a wax hand next to a screwdriver and a hot plate. Hujar's camera finally turns to Thek alone in his studio. Hujar shoots him from the chest up, close-up and in raking light. Thek does not smile, and in most of the images he simply turns his face to the right or left, puts his hands behind his head or leans in a bit toward the camera—toward Hujar. While these pictures are impressive in their composition, what most strikes the viewer is their suggestion of the materiality of Thek himself. Maybe this is the aftereffect of looking at all of Thek's sculptures—

especially *The Tomb* figure—but in these images, Thek's face, body and clothing appear as waxlike as his works. These invaluable images provide a view into Thek's creative space, where he—and Hujar—questioned the divide between real and fabricated, living and dead. Although other photos Hujar took of Thek from the same period attest to a romantic connection between the two men, one wonders whether Thek's somber expression in these portraits reflects the impending demise of their relationship, even as they now give new life to Thek's seminal work. ○