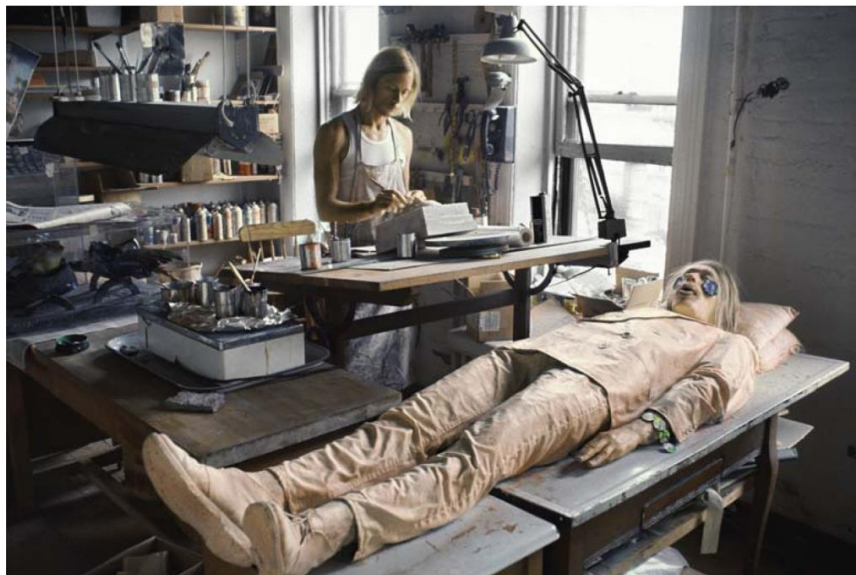


Storr, Robert. "This Time Around"
Frieze (January – February 2011)

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This Time Around

Recalling the difference between
hermeneutics and erotics by Robert Storr

'In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art.' So concludes Susan Sontag's 1964 polemic, 'Against Interpretation'. They are words we would do well to recall. Especially in a period such as the present, when delirious discourses and numbing exegetical exercises constitute the academic as well as museological norm, and when the search for 'meaning' – and professional squirmishes over who'll brand it – so often pre-empt (if not preclude) the sensual experience of art. As a grace note, Sontag's instantly famous and perennially quoted essay appeared in an eponymous collection dedicated to an artist few of her readers knew about, even in the heyday of counter-cultural hedonism heralded by Sontag's call to pleasure and weirdly embodied by the work of her male muse. Even fewer know him now, although a travelling retrospective that recently opened at the Whitney Museum of American Art may yet change that. His name was Paul Thek. Half angel-flying-too-close-to-the-ground (Willie Nelson's lyric), half angel-headed hipster (Allen Ginsberg's queering one), Thek has returned in our moment of need to remind us of the difference between hermeneutics and erotics. If we fail to get the message this time around, it will be because we are just too far-gone in our addiction to Po-Mo downers to feel much of

anything, at any rate nothing capable of saving us – not even the intimations of our impending extinction conveyed by the seductive caress of desiring Death, Thek's constant preoccupation. For, if Eros lures us into Thek's netherworld, Thanatos, our ever-present but habitually shunned familiar, presides over it. Everything we gaze upon in his work bears the wondrously inventive marks of universal rot, from waxen chunks of simulated flesh, to the once rubbery but currently brittle latex sheaths Thek used to fashion surrogate corpses for installation pieces such as *The Tomb – Death of a Hippie* (1967) and *Fishman in Excelsis* (1970–1), to the tattered sheets of copybook paper and newsprint on which he recorded his observations of everyday anomalies and cosmic metamorphosis. The destruction of *The Tomb*, like that of other key works missing from the show and present only in the documentary films and catalogue illustrations, is perhaps the most poignant expression of the essentially ephemeral nature of people and art.

Like many mystically inclined sensualists – 'decadents' such as J.K. Huysmans, author of *A Rebours* (Against Nature, 1884) and the Satanist fantasy *La-Bas* (Down There, 1891), come to mind – Thek had a fundamentally religious imagination. Informed by a Roman Catholic upbringing and stocked by exposure

Peter Hujar
*Thek Working on
The Tomb Figure*
1967/2010

to antique grotesqueries – a visit to Capucin catacombs near Palermo in Sicily fixed his eyes on the beauty of arrested putrefaction – the artist made his entrance onto the scene with his 'Technological Reliquaries' (1966), sleek, quasi-science-fictional, quasi-Pop Perspex and metal containers in which what appear to be fresh cut or torn slabs of raw meat are encased. The weirdest is the most perversely Pop example; an Andy Warhol 'Brillo Box' with a massive sanguinary cross section of skin, fat and sinew. They are unforgettably pristine, unforgettably loathsome objects.

After a fast mid-1960s start in the galleries, Thek, a natural bohemian nomad, spent the remainder of the decade and much of the 1970s drifting back and forth between New York and Europe. He appeared in a variety of prestigious commercial and non-commercial venues, most notably Harald Szeemann's landmark documenta 5 in 1972. He also collaborated with Robert Wilson on stage pieces that, at the pinnacle of American Formalist hegemony, gloriously fulfilled Michael Fried's worst fears about art aspiring to the status of theatre, even as he lived an often hard-scrabble loft-life of that recession-haunted era – here comes another – only to slip into near oblivion as the 1980s began.

Thek's profound influence on his contemporaries – from fastidious funkster Jeff Koons, to mess-masters Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy, to the obsessive-objectifier Robert Gober – seems retrospectively obvious thanks to this exhibition, the first in America since 'Thek/Processions' (at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia in 1977), which featured the ceremonial assemblage work that McCarthy and Kelley pushed off from, while Koons fastened onto the reliquaries. However, Koons' art is still-born by design in cata-tonic denial of mortality, whereas Thek's causes a macabre, vitality-inverting frisson that comes with what Kelley calls 'playing with dead things' even as Gober's poignantly hovers between life-like and death-like.

Reprising the spectacle of King Tut as hippie bricolage, Thek's work causes you to simultaneously anticipate its moldering and to marvel at its exquisite survival. To encounter it is also to regret the passing of this Adonis-as-gnostic-demiurge who created the perishable treasures arranged before us – and with him the disappearance of all the gay artists who have died of AIDS since the plague began. Speaking of that scything of several generations to an audience of students too young to recall its terrible onset, John Kelly recently asked what the present would look like if the dead were still among us. Elegantly, achingly Thek summons them.

Robert Storr is an artist, curator, and Dean of the Yale School of Art.