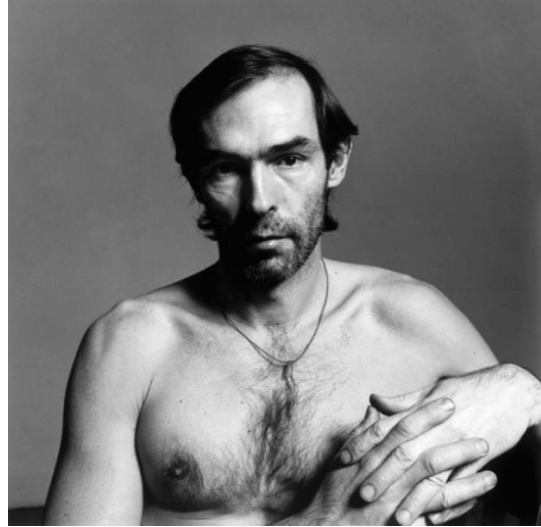


#37 February 2018 Cameraderie
Peter Hujar (1934-1987)



Self-Portrait 1980

This is the story about a very difficult person, or perhaps rather a person for whom the world was very difficult. But this informed and created his art.

Peter Hujar's photography is all grit. Stop here if you don't care for that. He lived and worked and was among the New York underground scene in the 70s and 80s. And he died of AIDS, like his contemporary, Robert Mapplethorpe (see #17 Mar 2015).

Here is the Wikipedia article on Peter Hujar:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peter_Hujar

Here is Hujar's official archive—it is all black and white, and there is a lot to see—please go there and examine the work of this contemporary and unique photographer:

<http://peterhujararchive.com/>

Here are a few characterizing words quoted from Hujar's official archive:

... he was enormously admired for his completely uncompromising attitude towards work and life. ... Highly emotional yet stripped of excess, Hujar's photographs are always beautiful, although rarely in a conventional way.

Here is a New Yorker article from earlier this year:

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/02/05/the-bohemian-rhapsody-of-peter-hujar>

Here is a series of quotes from the New Yorker article that, to me, captures the main point of who Hujar was and what kind of artist he was:

Hujar's celebrity was, is, and always will be associated with a downtown bohemia that flourished in New York between the late nineteen-sixties and the onset of the AIDS plague.

He lived the bohemian dream of becoming legendary rather than the bourgeois one of being rich and conventionally famous. [Unlike his contemporary, Robert Mapplethorpe, who did become rich and famous (see #17 Mar 2015).]

His personal glamour consorts so awkwardly with his artistic discipline that trying to keep both in mind at once can hurt your brain. But the conundrum defines Hujar's significance at a **historic crossroads of high art and low life** [emphasis added] in the late twentieth century.

Hujar, typically through hours of shooting with a twin-lens reflex camera (discreetly looking down to view the subject), got beyond what people look like to what—from the depths of themselves, facing out toward the world—they are, conveying, at once, their armor and their vulnerability. But they couldn't be just anybody. "I like people who dare," he said.

[His] works have in common less a visual vocabulary than a uniform intensity and practically a smell, as of smoldering electrical wires. Hujar's is an art that disdains the pursuit of happiness in favor of episodic, hard joys.

Now let's look at some samples of his work:

Road, West Virginia Trip 1969



Abandoned Building, Caven Point, N.J. 1984



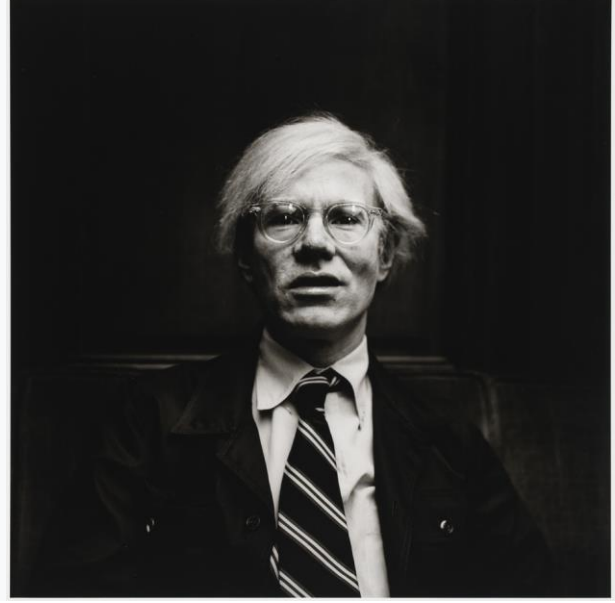
I may be reading too much into this, but I have paired these two images because I feel they reflect a younger and more hopeful Hujar, versus an older and decaying Hujar. *Road* is an obviously optimistic view of traveling forward, from darkness into light. *Abandoned Building*

(shot only three years before his death from AIDS) has possibly seized Hujar's interest, reflecting his view of his own failing body.

Skyscraper 1976



Andy Warhol (III) 1975



Note how Hujar uses the third (vertical) vanishing point perspective to emphasize the soaring tower of his skyscraper shot. He does not attempt to "correct" the perspective. The commoner two horizontal vanishing points are also quite evident in the faces of the building that recede away to the left and right. I am sure I am stretching the point to call the image of Andy Warhol a "towering" image, but Warhol actually was a "towering" figure in the New York art scene.

Gary Schneider in Contortion 1979

Self-Portrait Jumping I 1974



These two images are unconventional in the extreme. It is all about the highly original poses. Surely the shooting session with Gary Schneider must have been a tremendously creative event. As for Hujar's self-portrait—I think he is mocking absolutely everything, not least of which is his faux salute—he might as well have been holding up a middle finger—but this is more effective.