



Title

Peter Hujar: Eyes Open in the Dark

Author(s)

Theo Gordon

Article DOI**Url**

<https://contemporary.burlington.org.uk/reviews/reviews/peter-hujar-eyes-open-in-the-dark>

ISSN

2631-5661

Cite as

Theo Gordon: 'Peter Hujar: Eyes Open in the Dark', *Burlington Contemporary* (26th March 2025),

<https://contemporary.burlington.org.uk/reviews/reviews/peter-hujar-eyes-open-in-the-dark>

About the author(s)

is a Leverhulme Early Career Fellow in the Department of History of Art, University of York, working on a book on art and HIV/AIDS in the United Kingdom.

Cover image: **Fig. 2** *Canal Street Pier, New York (Stairs)*, by Peter Hujar. 1983. Pigmented ink print. (© Peter Hujar Archive; Artists Rights Society, New York; DACS, London; Pace Gallery, New York; Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco; Maureen Paley, London; Mai 36 Galerie, Zurich; exh. Raven Row, London).

Peter Hujar: Eyes Open in the Dark

by Theo Gordon • 26.03.2025

What would it be like to spend a day with Peter Hujar (1934–87)? By the photographer's own reckoning, not particularly eventful. In a recently rediscovered dialogue with the writer Linda Rosenkrantz, Hujar described his sense of non-productivity: 'I often have the feeling that in my day nothing much happens, that I've wasted it'.¹ Yet, when tasked by Rosenkrantz to recount his activities on a randomly selected day in 1974, Hujar described a sequence of encounters that, to the contemporary reader, seem nothing short of remarkable: a morning phone call from Susan Sontag; a lunchtime photoshoot for the *New York Times* with a curmudgeonly Allen Ginsberg, who refuses to give himself over to Hujar and his camera; and an evening session in the darkroom that is variously interrupted by Glenn O'Brien, Fran Lebowitz and Vince Aletti, the last of whom had come round to use the shower.

Speaking before the distortions of posterity, Hujar reflected, 'I've wasted another day. All I did is spend two hours with Ginsberg – this takes a day?'.² Yet, his extended descriptions of urban encounters and observations, and his absorption in the everyday details of New York life, belie his apparent frustration at time frittered away or priorities lost. For example, while ordering Chinese takeaway, he is taken by the presence of another customer, a man 'who looks sort of fat but he has a very nice face', doodling little squares in felt-tip on the restaurant's calling cards while waiting for his order.³ He is similarly drawn to the minutiae of the darkroom process, describing to Rosenkrantz his attempt to reattach a mount with an iron and his failing ability to dye out imperfections in prints. There is a consistent engaged interest across Hujar's day, albeit distributed beyond his own awareness and his sense of time well spent.



Fig. 1 Installation view of *Peter Hujar: Eyes Open in the Dark* at Raven Row, London, 2025, showing, on the top left, *Fran Lebowitz*, by Peter Hujar. 1974. Pigmented ink print. (© 2025 Peter Hujar Archive, New York; DACS, London; Pace Gallery, New York; Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco; Maureen Paley, London; Mai 36 Galerie, Zurich; photograph Marcus J. Leith).

Such questions of framing, of relevant content and composition and the relationship between detail and context, subject and surround, are central to Hujar's photographic practice. Curated by John Douglas Millar and Gary Schneider with Alex Sainsbury, *Eyes Open in the Dark* at Raven Row, London, is a magisterial attempt to distil his form of artistic attention. Bringing together works primarily from the 1970s and 1980s, the retrospective exploits the architecture of the gallery to offer a series of encounters with and entrances and exits to Hujar's photography. The ground-floor displays – spread across the old shop space of 58 Artillery Lane and the contemporary galleries at the back – introduce a broad selection of the photographer's subjects, drawing on his preference for grid hangs of his work. The curatorial attention to detail is exemplary, with the first and last works in each sequence, as well as the photographs one can glimpse through doorways and apertures, perfectly chosen to foreground Hujar's ability to picture both singularity and difference.

Upon entering the exhibition, one's attention is caught by a portrait of a restive Lebowitz **FIG.1**, who is propped up in bed, polka dot sheets and blankets swathing her figure as she lies in front of a wall of graphic teardrop wallpaper. Immediately below, *Canal Street Pier, New York (Stairs)* **FIG.2** shows the gaping hole of a litter-strewn staircase, which leads upwards into darkness, its tiled façade flaking in decay. The two-tier hang continues with juxtapositions of Daniel Schock sucking his own toe (1981) and Susan Sontag reclining (1975); the open-toe-heeled legs of Greer

Lankton (1983) and *Self-Portrait (I)* (1975). In the rear galleries, *Cow (Barbed Wire)*, *Hyrkin Farm, Westtown, New York* (1978) opens onto a sequence of human and animal portraits and urban landscapes, while a three-by-seven grid **FIG.3** offers a rhythmical interplay of various subjects that interested Hujar, from the derelict junk of *Queens Landscape, New York* (1984) to the *Dead Gull* (1985) posed upright on the beach.

The surrounding walls show similarly diverse groups of images, including a self-portrait from 1975 in which he bears his arsehole to the camera, astonishing in its quiet, raw monumentality, and a nod towards the London context in the portrait of Lavinia Co-op (1980), one of the Blooplips drag performance troupe. It would be inaccurate to claim that Hujar, or the curators, make equivalences or simple correspondences between the sundry subjects of his camera in these ground floor rooms. Rather, it is Hujar's attentive vision that is foregrounded. As Adrian Rifkin writes in the accompanying publication, 'he makes no claim to truth, only to valuing or loving these forms in the moments that he records them' (p.23).⁴ The curators offer *Shoe (for Elizabeth)* (1980) as a final image of the downstairs display – the single, glistening, high-heel pump a lingering reminder of Hujar's ability to draw attention to the marginal, ultimately challenging the relevance of the categories of 'centre' and 'periphery' altogether.

On the first floor, the curators focus on Hujar's relationships and collaborations with Paul Thek (1933–88) and David Wojnarowicz (1954–92), using the linked eighteenth-century parlour rooms to establish the two-way, reciprocal and reversible flow between the artists. In one room, Hujar's nude self-portraits and *David Wojnarowicz with a Snake* (1981) reflect in the mirror above the mantelpiece **FIG.4**, on which leans *Paul Thek, Florida* (1956). In another, Hujar's portraits of Thek in 1973 and Wojnarowicz in 1983 and 1985 hang opposite the latter's well-known photographs of Hujar's face, hands and feet, taken moments after his death from AIDS-related complications on 26th November 1987. A third room shows Andy Warhol's footage of Hujar in his *Screen Tests* **FIG.5**, and Thek's painting *Portrait of Peter Hujar* (1963–64). This push and pull between earlier and later moments, across and between spaces, serves to decentre any sentimental overdetermination of Hujar's work through the circumstances of his death, despite the awareness, as Fiona Anderson writes, that 'HIV/AIDS had a catastrophic impact on Hujar's lifeworld' (p.41).



Fig. 2 *Canal Street Pier, New York (Stairs)*, by Peter Hujar. 1983. Pigmented ink print. (© Peter Hujar Archive; Artists Rights Society, New York; DACS, London; Pace Gallery, New York; Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco; Maureen Paley, London; Mai 36 Galerie, Zurich; exh. Raven Row, London).

Eyes Open in the Dark proceeds to reject teleology further by focusing the second, final floor of the display on Hujar's work from a single year: 1976. The curators show three sets of work. First is a selection of photographs he took on a walk on Easter Sunday, in which he passed St Patrick's Cathedral in Midtown and the cruising crowds on the West Side piers, before ascending the World Trade Center to look down on the city; these are accompanied by the set of contact sheets, showing his marking up of favoured shots FIG.6. These are followed by the artist's celebrated Hudson and East River photographs FIG.7, and finally his three nude portraits of the dancer Bruce de Sainte Croix FIG.8. Again, the curation emphasises the reciprocity between these three bodies of work: the invocation of spiritual transcendence in the glossy, dark depths of the water, which reverberates through the bodily tension and release of Sainte Croix's cumshot, and the thrumming Easter crowds, the cruising men, the city pulsing from above. This final floor of the exhibition plunges the viewer into the deep yet free-wheeling energy of Hujar's work – what Sainte Croix calls a 'kind of quiet ecstasy where one simply sighs in understanding' (p.66), and what the present reviewer might define as Hujar's particular form of sublimation, a sexualised, if not

necessarily always sexual, attention.

Perhaps then, contrary to his own belief, Hujar was not wasting time. According to published reviews of this exhibition, certainly not.⁵ However, London audiences have not always been so kind: a reviewer of Hujar's first retrospective in the United Kingdom, at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in 2007, remarked that the photographer 'was often good, but never quite great'.⁶ He commented that 'it's easy to see why Hujar has been overlooked – his photographs lack the cool classicism that makes Mapplethorpe so impressive, the dirty glamour that makes Goldin intriguing', and described his 'dull' animal portraits as a particular low point.⁷ The heretical nature of such views now indicates the recent profound shifts in structures of feeling that have enabled a renewed celebration of Hujar's work. There is an appetite for authenticity, for a vision of the New York that has been swept away by urban regeneration and gentrification. There is a desire to dwell in the artistic lifeworld of the city into which HIV/AIDS erupted, whether in nostalgic, morbid sentimentality or, more profoundly, in an effort to find ways to resist the political systems that caused the epidemic to burgeon. Perhaps most of all, after 2008, as capital continues to rip through the social fabric, demanding more work, more hours, for ever less remuneration, Hujar appears as an artist who truly took their time, modelling languid exuberance as a reclamation of life and work.



Fig. 3 Installation view of *Peter Hujar: Eyes Open in the Dark* at Raven Row, London, 2025. (© 2025 Peter Hujar Archive, New York; DACS, London; Pace Gallery, New York; Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco; Maureen Paley, London; Mai 36 Galerie, Zurich; photograph Marcus J. Leith).



Fig. 4 Installation view of *Peter Hujar: Eyes Open in the Dark* at Raven Row, London, 2025. (© 2025 Peter Hujar Archive, New York; DACS, London; Pace Gallery, New York; Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco; Maureen Paley, London; Mai 36 Galerie, Zurich; photograph Marcus J. Leith).



Fig. 5 Installation view of *Peter Hujar: Eyes Open in the Dark* at Raven Row, London, 2025, showing *Peter Hujar [ST 156–59]*, by Andy Warhol. 1964. 16mm film transferred to digital file, 4 videos, each approx. 4 minutes 24 seconds. (© 2025 Peter Hujar Archive, New York; DACS, London; Pace Gallery, New York; Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco; Maureen Paley, London; Mai 36 Galerie, Zurich; Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh; photograph Marcus J. Leith).



Fig. 6 Contact sheets for *Easter Sunday, 1976*, by Peter Hujar. 1976. (© 2025 Peter Hujar Archive, New York; DACS, London; Pace Gallery, New York; Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco; Maureen Paley, London; Mai 36 Galerie, Zurich; photograph Marcus J. Leith).



Fig. 7 Installation view of *Peter Hujar: Eyes Open in the Dark* at Raven Row, London, 2025. (© 2025 Peter Hujar Archive, New York; DACS, London; Pace Gallery, New York; Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco; Maureen Paley, London; Mai 36 Galerie, Zurich; photograph Marcus J. Leith).



Fig. 8 Installation view of *Peter Hujar: Eyes Open in the Dark* at Raven Row, London, 2025. (© 2025 Peter Hujar Archive, New York; DACS, London; Pace Gallery, New York; Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco; Maureen Paley, London; Mai 36 Galerie, Zurich; photograph Marcus J. Leith).

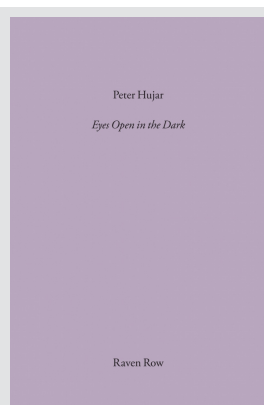
Exhibition details

Peter Hujar: Eyes Open in the Dark

Raven Row, London

30th January–6th April 2025

About this book



Peter Hujar: Eyes Open in the Dark

With contributions by John Douglas Miller, Vince Aletti, Adrian Rifkin, Fiona Anderson and Gary Schneider and Bruce de Sainte Croix and Stephen Koch

Raven Row, London, 2025

Available free of charge and texts available to read online

ISBN 978-1-06865-562-3

Footnotes

- 1** Peter Hujar, quoted from L. Rosenkrantz: *Peter Hujar's Day*, New York 2019, p.28.
- 2** Peter Hujar, quoted from *ibid.*, p.28.
- 3** Peter Hujar, quoted from *ibid.*, p.27.
- 4** Accompanying publication: *Peter Hujar: Eyes Open in the Dark*. By John Douglas Miller *et al.* 79 pp. incl. 22 b. & w. ills. (Raven Row, London, 2025), ISBN 978-1-06865-562-3. The book is available free of charge, and the texts are available at ravenrow.org/exhibitions/peter-hujar-eyes-open-in-the-dark, accessed 26th March 2025.
- 5** See, for example, S. O'Hagan: 'Peter Hujar: Eyes Open in the Dark review – visions of a vanished world', *The Guardian* (2nd February 2025), available at www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2025/feb/02/peter-hujar-eyes-open-in-the-dark-raven-row-london-review, accessed 24th March 2025; A. Searle: 'Peter Hujar: Eyes Open in the Dark review – life, death and a gnarly dildo', *The Guardian* (30th January 2025), available at www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2025/jan/30/peter-hujar-eyes-open-in-the-dark-review-raven-row-london-intense-intimate-photographs-70s-80s-new-york, accessed 24th March 2025; and G. Valaquenta: 'Peter Hujar: Eyes Open in the Dark', *Musée Magazine* (12th February 2025), available at museemagazine.com/culture/2025/2/11/peter-hujar-eyes-open-in-the-dark, accessed 24th March 2025.
- 6** A. Montgomery: 'Peter Hujar', *Gay Times* 353 (February 2008), p.54.
- 7** *Ibid.*

THE
BURLINGTON
MAGAZINE

© The Burlington Magazine Publications Limited. All rights reserved
ISSN 2631-5661

The Burlington Magazine
14-16 Duke's Road, London WC1H 9SZ