

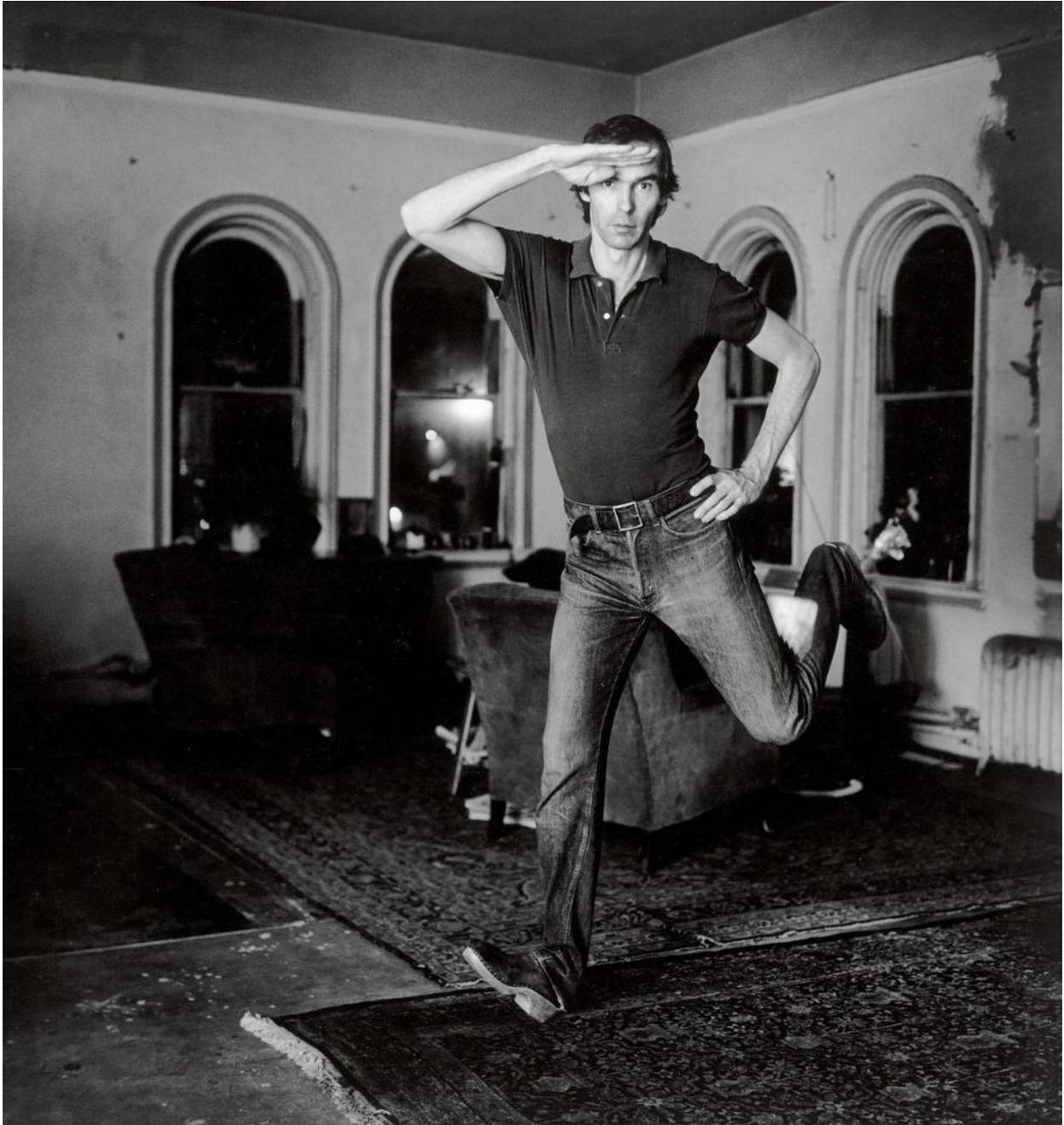
# Forbes

## A New Aperture Book 'Peter Hujar: Speed Of Life' Analyzes An Uncompromising Photographer

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The career of the late fine art photographer Peter Hujar could be both inspiring and daunting to a young photographer like myself. On one hand, Hujar's abilities for evoking dark psychological themes, imbuing a distinct visual aesthetic into the various photographic styles (portrait, landscape, nude, still life) he experimented with, and treating photography with the deep respect of a technician and a craftsman have solidified his place amongst the most venerated and influential fine art photographers working in New York in the seventies. But Hujar's work and career can also read as worrisome to a young artist. How does an artist this talented and respected go his entire life without making a dime and, towards the end, not being able to get galleries to show his work (in 1986, Hujar enjoyed a solo exhibition at Gracie Mansion Gallery that he was given partially due to the lobbying of his newly successful close friend and once-lover David Wojnarowicz)? It is widely known that when Hujar succumbed to AIDS-related Pneumonia in 1987, he was just about penniless. The new [Aperture](#) publication *Peter Hujar: Speed of Life* reinforces the dark and poetic beauty that defines Hujar's art work and legacy, but also serves to put a complicated, sometimes downright abrasive, personality into focus. Hujar stands as a legend of fine art photography in 2017, but this book reveals that what partly fueled that genius was an arguably damaged soul who had a self-destructive tendency for spite and anger. Above all, this book illuminates a defining New York artist: driven, tortured, vulnerable, street-wise, and utterly uncompromising in his approach to image making, perhaps at times to his own detriment.



*Peter Hujar, Self-Portrait Jumping (1), 1974; from Peter Hujar: Speed of Life*

The images presented in *Speed of Life* draw from Hujar's most known series, the *Portraits in Life and Death* book that presented images of Hujar's East Village inner circle of artists, performers and writers (including Susan Sontag, Candy Darling, John Waters) and others, but also presents a far more wide-ranging body of work demonstrating Hujar's singular aesthetic against disparate styles of photography. If there was one central idea that seemed to drive Hujar's pursuit of beauty, it was the awareness of mortality. All of his images present a somberness

or a dreadful albeit poetic reality that all of this awareness, this existence, is temporary. In some of his photographs, he may have not even realized that he was examining death, such as in his lush landscape photographs of the ocean capturing its vastness and unknowability. *Surf* (1972) and its depiction of a beautiful oceanic scene (in near-perfect black and white tonalities, as to be expected) is evocative of a parable between life, and what is knowable, and death, and what is terrifyingly unknowable. And then there were photographs where he absolutely knew that he was capturing the in-between of birth and death, or even death itself. His images of catacomb tombs, like *Palermo Catacombs* (1963) for instance, features mummified corpses shot as elegantly and seriously as Hujar would have shot a living subject. One of his most iconic photographs, *Candy Darling on Her Deathbed* (1973), that he shot of his friend Candy while she was dying of Cancer, is perhaps the image that best explains his overall approach. In the photograph, Candy is dying, but she is glamorously posed, solidified in the photographic image as an icon of performance and self-actualization. Hujar named his only book *Portraits in Life and Death*, and 15 of its subjects are reclining and four have their eyes closed. Sontag compared photography to death, but Village Voice critic Owen Edwards elaborated on that idea in his review of *Portraits* in 1976, in which Edwards described photography as a “mummification.” In that sense, photography captures a moment that was alive and then became a part of the past; therefore, the photograph exists solely between these two states, much like life itself exists only in-between in-utero stasis/birth and then, of course, death.

In his excellent essay on Hujar’s life and career in *Speed of Live*, 'A Gorgeous Mental Discretion,' The Morgan Library and Museum Photography Curator Joel Smith transmits a new dimension to the life and death theory in Hujar’s work. “Hujar’s photographs monumentalize moments, beings, lifetimes, and subcultures that might otherwise have disappeared into time.” He continues, “His subject is those who live—whether out of animal simplicity or fatalist irony or supreme indifference—at the speed of life, in present tense, undistracted by hope, anxiety, or nostalgia.”



*Peter Hujar, Candy Darling on Her Deathbed, 1973; from Peter Hujar: Speed of Life*

By this examination we can confirm that Hujar's real talent was in solidifying moments of life in his subjects, to scream at the world, "This person, or animal, or building, existed!" The only comfort that we can take in the moments that we die is the thought that those we leave behind will honor and remember us. Hujar's photographs, dark and tense as they may be, are a form of that comfort. As a critic of art, it's sometimes hard to imagine that the artists whose work you are imbuing with so much subtext were actually creating their artwork with those concepts in mind. But with Hujar, and especially with the Hujar presented in *Speed of Life*, it's hard to imagine that he was anything but conscious of these

layers of subtext in his images, so great was his intellectual prowess and talents for identifying the series of symbols that life is inherently broken down into. But as presented in *Speed of Life*, Hujar reinforces one of the uglier stereotypes of artistic genius: difficult, bull-headed, arrogant, and so disdainful of the art market he technically was a part of that he arguably put himself in the position of the financially destitute artist by the time that he died. Do you remember the skit from Dave Chapelle's iconic Comedy Central series *Chappelle's Show* titled *When Keeping it Real Goes Wrong*? I am reminded of this sketch when reading the essays included in *Speed of Light*. Hujar was deeply, almost belligerently, committed to authenticity, and flagrantly critical of those that he believed did not meet his standards of integrity. His disdain for many of the art stars that emerged out of fine art photography in the seventies, and particularly his ire directed towards Robert Mapplethorpe, often worked against him. There is something admirable in Hujar's utter disregard for compromise. He was, after all, a fine art photographer with deep respect for the medium's technical requirements and dismissed many of the seventies art photographers who couldn't even explain what "aperture" meant if they were forced to.

Hujar learned photography the old-fashioned way. He spent four years working as an assistant to various commercial photographers, and later took on fashion photography, working for GQ and Harper's Bazaar, and also spent many a night shooting the musical acts that hit New York in the seventies. He was deeply influenced, of course, by the three most prevalent New York photographers of the late-sixties: the fashion photography of Irving Penn and Richard Avedon and the darkly psychological street portraiture of Diane Arbus. This made some of his early work blandly derivative, and according to Smith's essay, Hujar once was coldly rebuked by Diane Arbus at a photography seminar when he introduced himself to her and she responded, "I know who you are," meaning, she was aware that Hujar was copping her style. Hujar was such a master photographer that he had to strip away some of that technical knowledge to locate the art within his images. Perhaps this is why he so disdained a photographer like Mapplethorpe. Mapplethorpe's pathological ambition, his awareness that what he was doing in photography was art, and his efforts to make all of his images look like "capital A-ART" would have been vaguely offensive to Hujar. Hujar wanted to make beautiful photographs first and foremost, and yet, many of them also work as magnificent works of art.



*Peter Hujar, Palermo Catacombs (11), 1963; from Peter Hujar: Speed of Life*

I so wish I could have avoided this cliché, but Hujar was one of those rare fine art photographers that is now equally admired as a “photographer’s photographer” in the way that Cartier-Bresson was or Lisette Model was, but he is also very much admired as a singularly important New York artist with a cult-y appeal and an influence that is still reverberating through to today’s contemporary photographers. In a more enterprising response to the rise of late-seventies art photographer stars, Hujar started a photography lab in the East Village with printers John Erdman and Gary Schneider that printed the early works of a jaw-dropping list of icons: Nan Goldin, Robert Gober, Lorna Simpson, and fashion

photography legend Steven Meisel among them. But even this enterprise was borne out of Hujar's contempt for photographers not knowing the technical skills that he had mastered. Reading these essays on his life, one gets the sense that had Hujar been more open to the changes in the art world swirling around him, he could have achieved great wealth and success. Instead of dismissing Mapplethorpe's work as "looking like art" (as opposed to accepting them as actual art) to anyone who would listen, he may have been able to seize on the moment, place himself alongside the movement that was building in his very neighborhood, and grown inestimably rich and achieved that validation that all ambitious people hope to achieve, consciously or not. But Hujar was, as this book often points out, dismissive of any artist who produced work for, or seemingly for, financial gain, and Mapplethorpe's conscious cultivation of his "bad boy art star" mystique read as offensively self-serving and Hujar apparently said as much to anyone who would listen.

But it wasn't just artists that he often found himself at odds with, Hujar often created uncomfortable relationships between himself and even his closest friends and allies. In *Speed of Life*, Hujar's hostility towards his friends is best illustrated in poet and writer Steve Turtell's essay 'Peter Hujar in New Orleans' that documents a trip Turtell took with Hujar to New Orleans via bus in 1980. Turtell manages to dissect Hujar's positive personality traits; his confidence, his charm, his ability to suss out cities and find magic, his gift of storytelling; while also illustrating the artist at his most difficult. Turtell describes a passive aggressive Hujar angry that Turtell didn't bring adequate money for the trip and who went as far as to leave Turtell behind for long stretches of the journey. He documents the malicious remarks Hujar would throw at some of his closest allies; in one passage, Turtell recollects Hujar criticizing his friend (and most famous portrait subject) Susan Sontag and her essay *On Photography* for his perception that she failed to discuss photography as "conscious works of art." "I never thought she was all that bright," recalls Turtell of Hujar saying about Sontag. The tension culminates in an explosive argument between the poet and the photographer on the train, in which Turtell tells Hujar, "You're a miserable prick because you want to be. And everyone knows it."

Turtell's assessment of Hujar seems to ring true throughout the book. Hujar seems to have been someone that fluctuated between supreme self-confidence and utter insecurity. Maybe his difficult childhood can explain all of that, but there's little doubt that he could have been a much bigger artist if he didn't continuously burn bridges. But perhaps he was happy to be the cult icon that he was, beloved by those in-the-know but widely unknown to the masses. His relationship to David Wojnarowicz is clear evidence that he was capable of

fostering a nurturing mentor role when he believed his pupil to be worthy. Hujar saw in Wojnarowicz a kindred spirit: a young handsome gay man from a difficult background with a raw talent totally self-taught and deinstitutionalized. Hujar's primary pursuit was authenticity. He was authentic. Wojnarowicz was undeniably authentic. But perhaps the glut of successful Manhattan fine artists and photographers, like Mapplethorpe, read to him as opportunistic and inherently inauthentic.



*Peter Hujar, David Wojnarowicz Reclining (2), 1981; from Peter Hujar: Speed of Life*

And Hujar's relative cult status as one of the most gifted photographers who was widely ignored by the art mainstream only makes him all the more fascinating and inspiring today. He was an artist who used a camera to examine a wide variety of subject matter while always imbuing that subject matter with a similar style and conceptual dialog. Hujar opens up different avenues for photographers to explore, proving that an art photographer need not explore the same ideas for an entire career merely because it is what is financially successful. Humans, animals, landscapes, body parts, mummification, architecture, life, and death are all immortalized in his beautiful photographs. Hujar is a manifestation of the the artist's role as folkloric street hero. Having not achieved the international fame and obscene wealth of someone like Mapplethorpe has made analyzing the psychological depth in his life and work all the more fascinating. Aperture's *Peter Hujar: Speed of Life* book provides a remarkable attempt at knowing an essentially unknowable artist.