

HYPERALLERGIC

Peter Hujar's Photographs of the Downtown Legends of 1970s New York City

Carey Dunne February 16, 2016

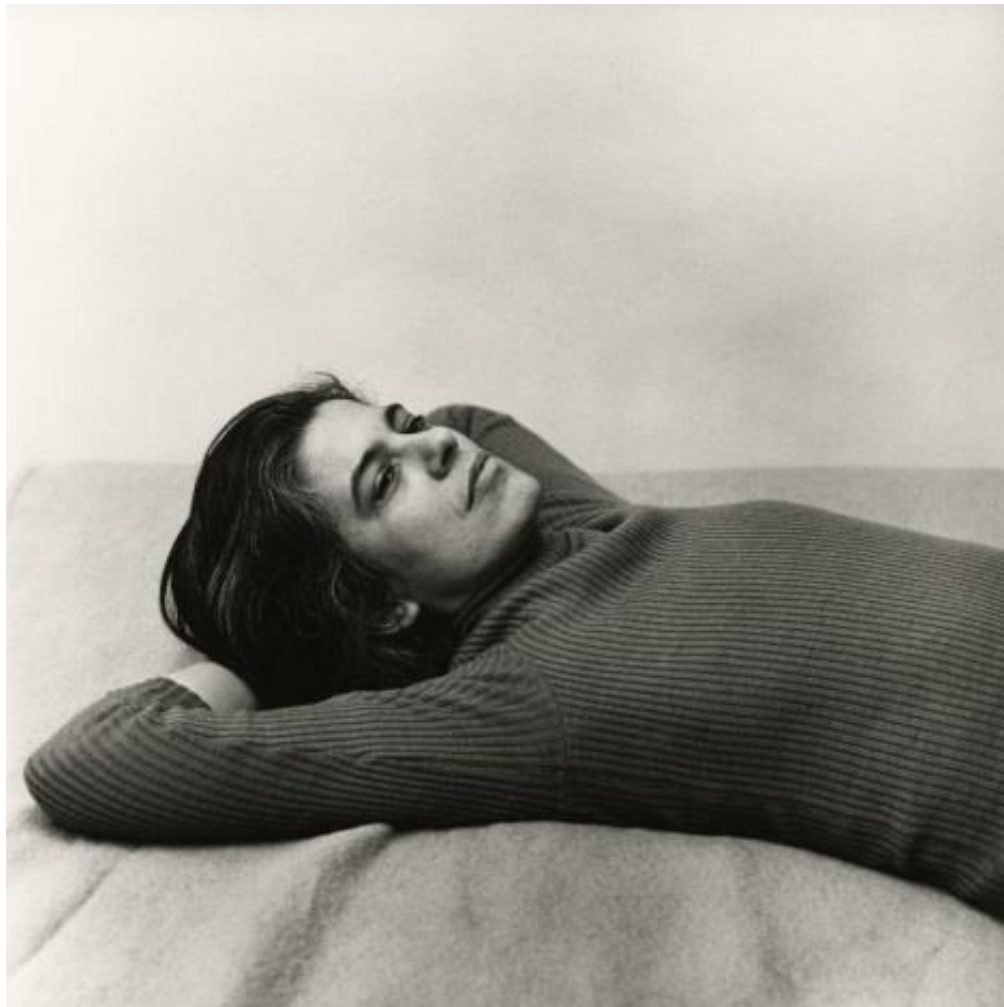


Peter Hujar, "Candy Darling on Her Deathbed, 1973" (1973) (all images © The Peter Hujar Archive LLC)

In the comparatively safe, sleek, and expensive New York City of today, nostalgia for the crime-ridden, scummy, and cheap New York City of the 1970s is as strong as ever. From

Patti Smith's memoir *Just Kids* (being turned into a TV miniseries), to Rachel Kushner's 2013 novel *The Flamethrowers*, set in part in the 1970s Soho art scene, to Baz Luhrmann's upcoming TV series about 1970s New York music scenes, plenty of current media looks back on this era with reverence.

Pace McGill and Paul Kasmin Gallery's *Lost Downtown*, an exhibit of work by the late Peter Hujar, one of 1970s New York City's best known photographers, will likely only add to this nostalgia. It features two dozen black-and-white portraits of Hujar's friends from New York's downtown art scene from 1973 to 1985 — among them, Susan Sontag, William Burroughs, Fran Lebowitz, Andy Warhol, Vince Aletti, John Waters, and Hujar's lover, artist David Wojnarowicz.



"Susan Sontag, 1975" (1975) (© The Peter Hujar Archive LLC)

It's a cast of characters that some might be sick of hearing about by now, but these mythologizing portraits are reminders of why we keep hearing about them. Captured in almost tenebrous light, Hujar's subjects seem to glow from within. These were artists and writers known as much for their lifestyles and theatrical personas as for their creative output, and it can be hard to see New York's current art scene as anything but derivative of what they started. ("They Made New York," went a recent *Times* headline of an article about artistic veterans of this era.)

Hujar's most famous photograph, "Candy Darling on her Deathbed" (1973), pictures the transgender Warhol superstar and Velvet Underground muse posed like an odalisque under hospital sheets, surrounded by roses. Darling, who died of lymphoma at age 29, was one of many queer icons that Hujar photographed. He captured the radical beginnings of the LGBTQ rights movement, both before and during the perpetual tragedy of the AIDS crisis. (Hujar himself died of AIDS at age 53 in 1987.)



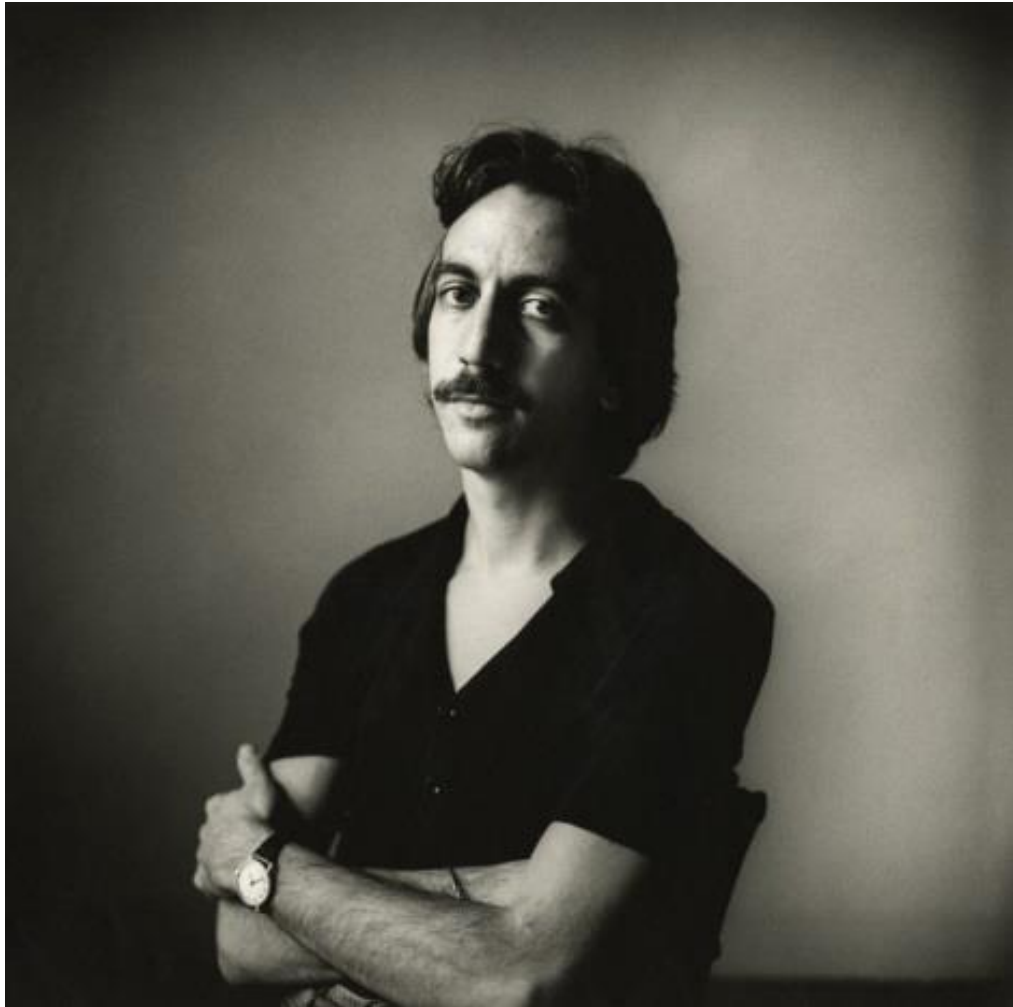
John Waters (I), 1975" (1975) (© The Peter Hujar Archive LLC)

The darkness and drama of “Candy Darling on Her Deathbed” encapsulates what today’s naive nostalgia for New York’s crime-ridden ’70s is all about: the danger of the era made for more cinematic stories and more exciting art. Now, living in New York City no longer means you’re brave, and it no longer means you automatically have an exceptional tale to tell. More often, it means you’re never too far from a Starbucks.

Even veterans of the era who claim not to miss it usually admit that something has been lost — not least an artist’s ability to pay NYC rent without going bankrupt. “Well, I sure don’t have nostalgia about being mugged,” John Waters told Edmund White for his essay “Why Can’t We Stop Talking About New York City in the 1970s?” He then qualified his statement: “But I do get a little weary when I realize that if anybody could find one dangerous block left in the city, there’d be a stampede of restaurant owners fighting each other off to open there first. It seems almost impossible to remember that just going out in New York was once dangerous. Do any artistic troublemakers want to feel that their city may be the safest in America? Who’s going to write a book about walking the safe streets of Manhattan? It’s always right before a storm that the air is filled with dangerous possibilities.”



"Paul Thek (II), 1975" (1975) (© The Peter Hujar Archive LLC)



"Vince Aletti, 1975" (1975) (© The Peter Hugar Archive LLC)



"Larry Ree Backstage, c.1973" (1973) (© The Peter Hujar Archive LLC)



"Andy Warhol (III),1975" (1975) (© The Peter Hujar Archive LLC)



"Fran Lebowitz [at Home in Morristown],1974" (1974) (© The Peter Hujar Archive LLC)



"John Heys in Lana Turner Dress #1,1979" (1975) (© The Peter Hujar Archive LLC)



"David Wojnarowicz, 1981" (1981) (© The Peter Hujar Archive LLC)

Peter Hujar: *Lost Downtown* is on view at *Paul Kasmin Gallery* (297 Tenth Avenue, Chelsea, Manhattan) until February 27. There's also a Peter Hujar exhibition at the *Fraenkel Gallery* (49 Geary Street, 4th Floor, Union Square, San Francisco), titled *Peter Hujar: 21 Pictures*, which continues until March 5.