

PETER HUJAR**Night**

January 15 – March 5, 2005



Peter Hujar, *Night Downtown*, 1976, black and white photograph, 14 x 14".

Peter Hujar (1934–1987) is a hard photographer to pin down—to brand, so to speak—which might be one reason why his reputation is still percolating from “insider’s insider” status toward the mainstream. He has been compared aptly to Berenice Abbott and Eugène Atget, to Weegee and Richard Avedon, Diane Arbus and Nan Goldin. He was a storyteller; he was a formalist; he was a portraitist of artists, performers, and intellectuals; he was a chronicler of life on the margins. His work exudes insouciant verve, serene detachment, gothic creepiness. If he was consistently animated by any single impulse, it seems to have been an attraction to contradiction, as evidenced by the title of the only book he published during his lifetime: *Portraits in Life and Death*, 1976, which juxtaposed pictures of his friends with photos of corpses in the catacombs of Palermo.

Recently shown at Matthew Marks Gallery, Hujar’s “Night” pictures are a group of forty-three square-format black-and-white photographs, all but one dated from 1974 to 1985, all taken between dusk and dawn and almost all in New York City. Fittingly they seem preoccupied as much with light as with darkness, or rather, with the formal interplay between the two. In brooding, unpopulated streetscapes that show empty West Side intersections, warehouses, or derelict diners and gas stations, Hujar tunes in to the inimitably bilious chiaroscuro of a mercury streetlamp casting its bleaching light on cobblestones, asphalt, corrugated trashcans, and security gates, then abruptly fading out into pools of shadow. This is the instantly recognizable light of an urban night on the wane, the light of crime, early-onset hangovers, and diminishing returns. But when Hujar steps back, as he does in a number of sweeping shots of

institutional architecture—corporate high-rises, City Hall, an avenue of nineteenth-century office buildings—the light seems almost beneficent, emanating in phosphorescent penumbræ from intermittently illuminated windows. Together these images articulate a sort of pigeon’s eye view of the city, alternately, as Oscar Wilde would have it, down in the gutter and gazing at the stars.

The people who appear in fifteen of the pictures—drag queens with hyperdilated pupils, a young girl nodding out in a hallway, men cruising in parks, Hujar’s longtime boyfriend David Wojnarowicz lighting a cigarette—might be the sort Wilde had in mind when he coined his aphorism. They’ve all ventured out into the city at night to look for something that surpasses, and subverts, the quotidian. In 1990, Wojnarowicz wrote, “No one can really explain in a rational way what makes a good or bad photograph. . . . This is why the art world will not throw billions of dollars at photography the way it has at painting; and that is what makes it an exciting medium.” Fifteen years later, Wojnarowicz’s faith in photography as an inherently subversive medium, perpetually beyond the pale of the culture industry, is a ghost of history—just one of the many ghosts that populate these photographs. Let’s hope they keep haunting us.

—*Elizabeth Schambelan*