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A LOW-HANGING SUN SPECKLED WITH MYSTIC HORRORS

THE NEW YORK OF PETER HUJAR AND DAVID WOJNAROWICZ
By Gil Blank

*Je sais les cieux crevant en éclairs, et les trombes
Et les ressacs et les courants: Je sais le soir,
L'aube exaltée ainsi qu'un peuple de colombes,
Et j'ai vu quelques fois ce que l'homme a cru voir !*

In the middle and late 1970s, two photographers of fiercely independent inclination but like spirit set about creating bodies of work in New York City that mainlined the particular phantasmagoria of that time and place, now long gone. Peter Hujar and David Wojnarowicz didn't meet until 1980, well into the former's career and after the latter had already completed his Rimbaud in New York series. First as lovers, later as comrades in letters and arms, they formed a bond that would define their voices as much as the persona of the city in their time.

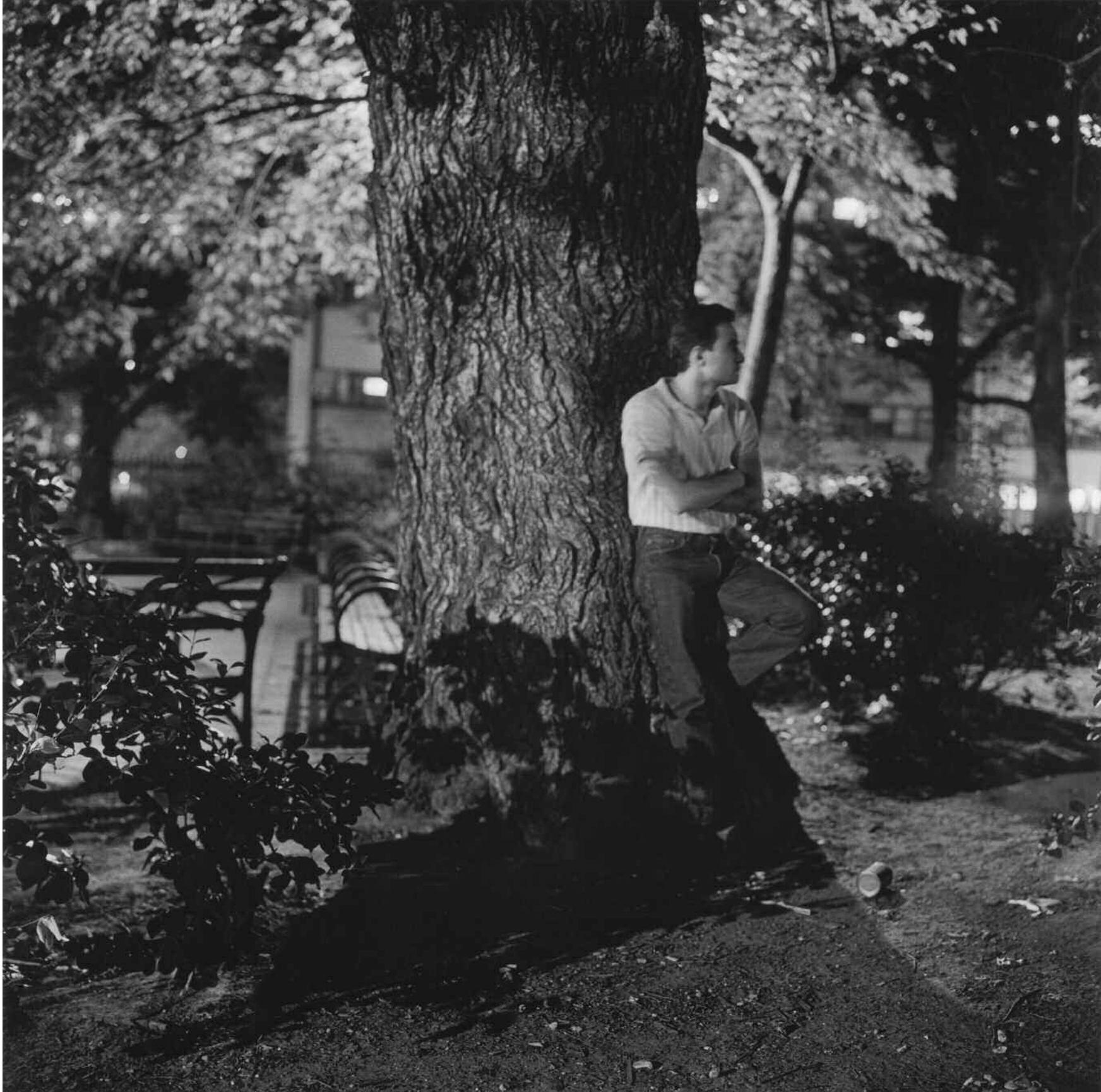
Hujar, nearly two decades older than his friend, was a classicist by form who turned that sense of restraint on the likes of catacombs, drag queens, abandoned cars, and Brooklyn alleys. He chose subject matter not commonly regarded as worthy of the attention, decisions suggesting that one could look with longing upon the corporeal forms of decay and men. Mortality sounds throughout. His particular finesse though was for keeping that inevitability in sight without giving in to the morose. Having survived a brutal and precarious childhood, death for Hujar was the given that most fiercely commended the fecundity of the living. He responded to Susan Sontag's call for an "erotic of art", and understood it with sufficiently horrible clarity to recognize the irreversible sequence that bound desire for the flesh to its decline: desire too being intrinsic to the human experience, it might at its most refined encompass that demise. The sophistication of Hujar's erotics then are that they allow for more than the sexuality upon which they occasionally fixate—at any rate, so much more than what his most caustic and prejudiced critics had the sense to conceive of—and

admit as the broader target of our delectation farther aspects of the human grotesque.

What tension there is in a Hujar image begins when the photographer visibly strains to square the darker angels of his longing with an archly conservative approach to representation: a concern for the implications, universal if dubious, that are automatically alleged with any depiction of a human face; for the essentializing view; for exquisite light and perfected composition. And always for taste: the lurid and sensational was nothing photographically new by his time, but that kind of pandering theatricality was never admissible to his practice. His struggle was to align his highly prejudicial sensibility with an awareness of and even an appetite for the raw. It's an alien equilibrium, but he found its meridian against the backdrops of the studio and the night—neutral vacuums both, white and black. The refuge offered by those two blank slates—the open city where you could be or meet anyone and the private space in which you could then conspire—gave Hujar a license that he could not have found anywhere else.

Identities are assumed in the images rather than revealed; there is little currency paid to the notion of photography as great informer. Yet Hujar pulls up short of the precipice that Robert Mapplethorpe would in time blast straight over at full throttle. Mapplethorpe melded photography's sense of the hyperreal with New York's manic secular pageant, building confections of personality rather than just portraits, and leveraging without remorse a Fascist-style idolatry of form for the glorification of the ostensibly decadent. Hujar's aesthetic could be possessed of a comparatively brittle aloofness, and if that prevented him from ever fully exploiting his privileged status as disenfranchised outsider, it also suffused his imagery with a more ambiguously brooding air. The influences of Weegee, Lisette Modell, Irving Penn, and Diane Arbus are evident, but the material and the stories are entirely his own.

Wojnarowicz, always the more brazen of the two, turned the anxiety of his influences into an emblem, and in so doing, demonstrated one of the first artistic manifestations of inversion that would be the hallmark of rage after Stonewall: not merely bearing the conflicts of one's identity, but brandishing their burden as war paint. For his first cohesive artistic









project, he cut out a photocopy of Etienne Carjat’s iconic portrait of ur-hipster Arthur Rimbaud, punching holes through the eyes to crudely fashion himself a hi-contrast, lo-fi mask. He then proceeded to pose a model wearing the mask—whether it was himself at times or a friend remains unclear—within highly specific tableaux that spoke to his own biographical history as a street kid, druggie, hustler, and soon-to-be artist.

Alternating as homage and oedipal skit, the Rimbaud pictures physically enact the psychic and libidinal angst sublimated in the elder poet’s proto-Surrealist verse, rendering them in terms literally black and white. The hero of twenty-four-year-old Wojnarowicz’s story haunts the (as yet uncolonized) meatpacking district, cruises Times Square when doing so was still actually possible, shoots up, flops down, jacks off and drifts unmoored in an ecstatic delirium that the seventeen-year-old Rimbaud only abstractly alluded to in *Le Bateau Ivre*. Viewed in the retrospect, the cost of taking such adventuring to its farthest extent grounds the series with a gravity that Wojnarowicz himself could neither have intended or even fathomed until his later work, after both he and Hujar had been diagnosed with AIDS and become active voices in the social debates that arose with the epidemic. As much as the series operates as a portrait of the photographer himself (whether or not he was actually the one behind the mask), it also becomes an antebellum sketch of New York drawn on the eve of a different kind of war, the city and the man caught together in what Jim Lewis has described as “a brief period of both innocence and raunch. . . a wonderland of sex and drugs, of art and love, of material poverty and overwhelming emotional richness.”

In donning the mask, Wojnarowicz’s foil simultaneously denies his own identity and gains one more universal than that of Rimbaud the man. He becomes the incarnation of New York’s infernal night, much as the poet himself long ago ceased to exist, ceding his image to myth. Wojnarowicz’s pictures make clear what anyone who has walked 14th Street at 3 am knows: the New York night is afoot among us and nameless, in us, as a temper and a mate. “Rimbaud in New York” is not a statement of location or even time, but of cross-contamination, Rimbaud in New York, New York in Rimbaud.

What links these two bodies of photographic work is more than the personal or historical, despite how those aspects mark the high points of much of the art within them. In a recursive mode and one of Hujar’s finest portraits, he turned his camera back onto Wojnarowicz as he lit a cigarette. The younger man’s natural raffishness, all mussy hair and scuffed leather, spikes the older’s rendition of beatification by street-light. Wojnarowicz’s hands are blurred; his charge won’t be contained, even within Hujar’s wish of saturnine elegance. The picture operates as dual biography, but if it has any larger potency it comes from a uniquely photographic paradox that conflates the factually specific with the open-ended and timeless. This is Wojnarowicz, now lost to us. This is 1985; this is the New York of a different age. But the image, like the two larger series, also functions as an unresolved parable for a city that takes all comers.

The New York of Hujar and Wojnarowicz is a trenchantly photographic condition, like the Paris of Atget and Brassai before them (the cooler non-territories of transglobal cityscapes, viewed at a remove by the likes of Andreas Gursky and Thomas Struth, were still years away). A quarter-century later, the photographs in the two series seem well-stocked with the asset of charm that can often be lethal to art, but their thorniness naturally spurns the kind of sentimentalizing reflexive to views of the Pigalle covered in fog. If the stink of a Koch-era lower Manhattan inspires wistfulness (and the endemic cynicism that attends all change to that city is for a moment discounted), it might not in this case be a function of setting and mood, but of lost possibility, of the phantom trace of transient bodies, and time transfigured.

