

FRIEZE

In Search of the Artist Ann Wilson

After a year of trying, Andrew Durbin finally tracks down a former friend and collaborator of Paul Thek and Peter Hujar – their meeting changed the course of his book



BY ANDREW DURBIN IN OPINION | 25 MAR 26



One Sunday in March 2022, I booked a taxi from Hudson, New York – where I was staying with an old friend – to the nearby village of Valatie. The night before, a heavy snowstorm had pummelled the Northeast, and the county's snow ploughs were still working to clear the roads. As we skidded out of town, the cab driver asked if I could wait a few more hours for conditions to improve. The drive north would be slow, he explained, the roads slippery.

If I weren't travelling to see the artist Ann Wilson, I might have agreed. But for almost a year I'd been trying to interview Ann for a book I was writing about her close friends and collaborators, the artists Paul Thek and Peter Hujar. It had taken months to track down her inactive email address, then a few more months before a friend of a friend passed along her number. All winter we played phone tag; there would be the click of the receiver, a faint 'hello' before disconnection. When I finally got through to her at her home on a Friday afternoon that March, I couldn't believe my luck. Her voice, Ann's voice! She asked me to come upstate immediately. At 90, she was not in great shape. 'You better hurry up,' she said.

I couldn't waste even an hour now that I was this close.



Peter Hujar, *Ann Wilson (II)*, 1975. Courtesy: © 2026 The Peter Hujar Archive / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, DACS London

Ann Wilson was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, on 14 October 1931. When she was in her mid-twenties, she packed a portfolio of her paintings and moved to Coenties Slip, an old fishermen's ward at the mouth of the East River in New York City, where she hoped to become a working artist. Lofts in the Slip were large and affordable, and, beginning in the 1950s, the area attracted a diverse group of artists, including Robert Indiana, Ellsworth Kelly, Agnes Martin, James Rosenquist and Lenore Tawney. Unlike the rest of this tight-knit community, Ann would never achieve substantial recognition in her lifetime; her work often drew on craft traditions typically associated with women, like quilting, and was suffused with dark, dreamy imagery, edging towards the limits of art. *The Skeleton and Plow* (1973), for instance, features a human skeleton decorated with wildflowers pushing a rusty piece of farm equipment. Even her drawings, paintings and other wall-based works could be elusive and difficult, though she shares some of Tawney's homespun delicacy.

Sometime in the early 1960s, a fellow artist introduced Ann to Hujar and Thek, with whom she struck up a lifelong friendship. Hujar photographed Ann many times. Some of my favourite portraits of her were taken by him in Oakleyville, Fire Island, where Hujar and Thek often rented a house for the summer. She stands in the dunes, in the ocean, absorbed by the immensity of her surroundings. She builds a cross on the beach, which Hujar later photographed against a backdrop of storm clouds – a gorgeous, evocative image. He also shot her in his loft, on the streets of New York, in Central Park or on the outskirts of town.



Ann Wilson, *The Skeleton and Plow* (detail), 1973. Courtesy: The Estate of Ann Wilson

As with so many of his subjects, Hujar discovered in Ann an unusual, offbeat beauty. In a 1975 portrait, Ann sits in a chair in Hujar's loft on Second Avenue. Her medium-length hair is pushed back. She has a handsome, strong face with deep-set eyes. If this portrait could speak, you would hear a remarkable voice – low, a little melancholy, with a slight Yinzers accent. Ann loved Hujar. When he was dying, she wrote to him: 'I always had the feeling that you and I have known each other for so many life times that much personal talk isn't necessary.'

Her relationship to Thek was more complicated, though no less loving. She thought he was a visionary but found him more difficult to be around. 'Peter and Paul were equals in creativity and in thinking,' she told an interviewer in 1992. 'Paul was a great humorist, he was a great summarizer, he was a great paranoid.' Code for: this guy was tough. Still, she was often at Thek's side when he lived in New York. After he moved to Italy in late 1967, she became one of his chief collaborators, joining, in 1971, his Artist's Co-op – a group of performers, painters and sculptors who helped Thek create transportive installations in museums around Europe. Though Thek emphasized the cooperative nature of the work, the installations were often described by critics as solo projects. Of course, this sort of erasure was not uncommon for women artists at the time (or at present). It didn't help that the 'artist' in Artist's Co-op was singular.

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Ann considered her contributions to be both part of Thek's work and separate, too. She was comfortable with blurred boundaries; her work often riffed on the hazy line between fine art and craft, reality and dream. Once, on Fire Island in the late 1960s or early '70s, she saw a stag emerge from the misty waves – a scene that inspired her extraordinary sculpture *Stag in the Boat* (1972), an assemblage comprising a taxidermied deer installed in an old Swedish fishing craft filled with plants. The work became a central element of Thek's installation *Ark, Pyramid* (1972) for Documenta 5. Later, Ann exhibited *Stag* on its own, but the sculpture remains largely associated with Thek's installations of the '70s, and contemporaneous writing about him rarely mentions her. Among critics, there was an almost wilful blindness to Ann's involvement – a woman's involvement – in Thek's work, beginning with her contribution to his 1969 exhibition at the Stable Gallery in New York. For that show, Thek strung up a latex replica of himself – the *Fishman* (1969) – to an ailanthus tree in the gallery's courtyard. The Stable's interior was empty except for a landscape painting by Ann. Among the critics who wrote about the show, only Peter Schjeldahl mentioned Ann's contribution. But it was never photographed, and the painting has gone missing.

I kept all this – Ann's absence – in mind when I was researching for my book. As a writer, I hoped to correct the record. No amount of snow could have deterred me from meeting her. I would walk to Valatie, if I had to.

When I arrived at Ann's place, I found her lying in bed in a small room on the ground floor. She was tended by two nurses, who had already retrieved her diaries, which Ann felt would be valuable to my research. She was right. These diaries contained her first-hand accounts of the creation of some of Hujar's and Thek's most famous works, as well as her memories of their friendships.



Ann Wilson, *Hexakis*, 1993, Chinese ink on quilt, 51 × 51 cm. Courtesy: The Estate of Ann Wilson

Ann's movement was limited; she had not walked in years. Her voice was shaky, though still powerful, authoritative. She was beautiful, an almost oracular presence. I pulled a chair to her bed and held her hand. Our conversation felt like a communion. We ate candied ginger I'd brought from a market in Hudson. At her side, she kept an unframed Hujar portrait of her with her late partner Gene Swenson at the Central Park Be-In in 1967. (Swenson, an important curator and art critic, died in a horrible car accident two years later, something that still haunted Ann.) 'If you read something from one of the diaries,' she said, 'that might trigger memories.'

For the rest of the day, I read aloud, sifted through photographs, uncovered artworks in her closets and attic. We revisited the moment Thek showed her the famous 'dead hippie' of his 1967 sculpture *The Tomb* – he stored its pyramid structure at her loft before it was exhibited at the Stable. We travelled to West Virginia, 1969, when she and Hujar drove into the mountains and talked with farm animals. We returned to Europe, to Fire Island, and to Thek's death in 1988. My visit to Valatie was indispensable for my research; her diaries furnished me with scenes and dialogue that breathed life into my book. She could not remember much, it turned out, but fragments of the past slowly surfaced – broken phrases, small moments.



Peter Hujar, *Ann Wilson, Fire Island*, ca. 1971. Courtesy: © 2026 The Peter Hujar Archive / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, DACS London

I sensed a lurking question as to her place in my book. That was reasonable after what had happened to her; she was aware that she had been minimized in art history. But Ann was self-effacing and did not press or insist on her role in the story. She believed I would find my own way into the material – that is, her history, her friendships. All she asked of me was that I read her some passages from the manuscript. Regretfully, I said no. I was too precious about the little writing I had done so far; I was contending with real life – with her life – and I needed to get it right. Now, I wish I had prepared something for her, even a paragraph. What was I thinking, saying no to this woman? But I feared my early drafts, because those pages had been written before I met her. And I was right to.

I had not yet found my way into the story I was trying to tell. The real writing would not begin until my day in Valatie was over. It would begin, in fact, with a note I found in one of her diaries – a line she had recorded from Thek, and which became an epigraph for my book: 'Isn't it marvellous we've been given life?'

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