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### The Ongoing Discovery of Paul Thek

Julie Ault

“We are all the past tense, parts of us no longer here, etc., the great and beautiful unfolding of the plot.  
The unfolding of the plot; the unfolding of the plot.”

-Paul Thek

Paul Thek was diagnosed with AIDS at a time when the prognosis implied imminent death. Hoping to help the artist secure a place for his work and archives, curators Tricia Collins and Richard Milazzo recommended Brooke Alexander Gallery in SoHo, where Ted Bonin was director.<sup>1</sup>

There, in the summer of 1988, Bonin installed *Paul Thek: Selected Works from 1987 and 1988*, as the artist was not well enough to come to the gallery. Bonin was dissatisfied with the exhibition and encouraged Thek to come see it when he could. Showing up a couple of weeks later, Thek promptly asked Bonin if he would get him a cup of water. On Bonin's return, Thek was taking work off the wall; he proceeded to fully reinstall the show with the help of a preparator.<sup>2</sup> There was hardly any audience or critical response to the exhibition, and nothing was sold. Thek died while it was on view.

More than twenty years earlier, in 1966, Susan Sontag, who had dedicated her volume of essays *Against Interpretation* to Thek, perceived an affinity between her friend's practice and that of artist and theater director Robert Wilson. She suggested Thek visit Wilson in Paris, where Wilson was assembling a stage production of his *Deafman Glance* (1970). The meeting led to Thek playing several roles in the piece. He then collaborated on the stage imagery for Wilson's continuous twenty-four-hour performance *Overture for KA MOUNTAIN AND GUARDENIA TERRACE* (1972).<sup>3</sup> Thek and Wilson's bond grew from their shared penchant for collaboratively choreographing ephemeral installations and presentations and because both were largely overlooked at the time in the United States, their home country, while being recognized and respected in Europe.

Just weeks before he died, Thek convinced Wilson to take charge of his estate. “I was with Paul Thek in the hospital in the final days of his life. He did not want to speak of his death. I had tried numerous times to get him to talk about his will, and reluctantly, he finally agreed. He said he would do so only if I agreed to be his executor. For him, I, as an artist, was closest to his work, and had the best understanding of what he was doing. He lacked a sense for business, which he thought I had.”<sup>4</sup> Speaking with Sontag in his hospital room, Thek envisioned the resolution as “the biggest breakthrough” of his career.<sup>5</sup> That year, Sontag dedicated her book *AIDS and Its Metaphors* “for Paul, August 10, 1988.”

Wilson approached several prominent gallerists to gauge interest in representing the Thek estate to no avail. Given the brevity of its relationship with Thek, it was also unclear whether Brooke Alexander Gallery might be interested in extending its commitment over the long-term or even whether Wilson would approach the gallery. Beyond some brief conversations and a trip to the storage space that safeguarded the artist's work and papers, Bonin had had little interaction with Thek, who was notoriously unpredictable and had maintained no long-term relationships with galleries. Thek was perceived as a complex and itinerant artist with a complicated personality; he was also known for engaging multiple mediums, none of them primary—which made representing the work challenging. He was also known to be critical of, even antipathetic to the art system and establishment, including the dominant movements of the 1960s and 1970s—pop art and minimalism. When Wilson finally approached Brooke Alexander Gallery, Bonin voiced his commitment. Recalling that the artist spoke of “protecting his legacy” when visiting the gallery to rehang his exhibition, Bonin had been fascinated and empathized with Thek. He saw the potential of his work and, as a fellow gay man, felt the responsibility to preserve it.<sup>6</sup>

Absorbing all things Paul Thek and shepherding the artist's "ephemeral legacy" became Bonin's lifelong passion, first through Brooke Alexander Gallery and then through Alexander and Bonin, the gallery he formed with Carolyn Alexander in 1995.<sup>7</sup> Thek's intuition that his own death and Robert Wilson's management as his estate's executor would usher in "the biggest breakthrough" of his career proved true as true can be when Ted Bonin's unforeseen but crucial advocacy came into the picture.

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Thek first caused a stir and aroused critical attention with his *Technological Reliquaries* when he exhibited them in New York at the Stable Gallery in 1964 and Pace Gallery in 1966, as did *The Tomb*, shown at Stable in 1967. During the following decade, Thek primarily created elaborate temporary installations and processions using fragile and perishable materials in Germany (including at Documenta 5, Kassel, in 1973), the Netherlands, Sweden, and Switzerland, where he gained something of a cult following and the designation "artist's artist." He nevertheless remained largely unknown at home. Even though Thek mounted a solo exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia in 1977 and represented the United States in the 18th International Biennial of São Paulo, in 1985, not a single museum or public collection in the United States owned his work when he died. Despite his brilliance, he was nearly forgotten by the mainstream art world.

The task of increasing the visibility of the work of a deceased artist, much of which was ephemeral, destroyed, or deteriorated, is inherently challenging. Thek needed a representative to recognize the fundamental value of his practice, irrespective of fashion or market viability. Bonin, who was artist-centered at his core, possessed a subtle mind, an archival instinct, and patience that equipped him for managing such work. In tending to Thek's legacy, Bonin worked closely with Wilson and, since 1994, Noah Khoshbin, manager of the estate and curator at the Watermill Center, an artist residency and study center for the arts and humanities founded by Wilson on eastern Long Island. Khoshbin reflected on his utter trust in Bonin and his judgment. "This is one of the big success stories in terms of an estate and a legacy, this is an artist that did not have a single work in an American institution when he died." He continued, "There is no curator, no academic, no biographer that really can be or is what Ted was."<sup>8</sup>

Bonin learned about Thek gradually, continually seeking information and absorbing and deciphering it as he gathered it. Always desiring more details, he approached Thek's art as a researcher or historian would. Preparing for an exhibition of his paintings, drawings, and notebooks made during the 1970s in Italy, Bonin traveled to the Pontine Islands archipelago to experience the island Thek had so adored. For many years, the artist had rented a small, inexpensive place in Ponza, an island in the Tyrrhenian Sea, between Rome and Naples. It was Thek's sanctuary, where his nomadism and restlessness found tranquility and contentment. Kathryn Gile, who worked closely at the gallery with Bonin, searched for a place for him to stay. Knowing his wishes and style, she reserved a room in a modest hilltop house overlooking the water. Uncannily, the location turned out to be the very place Thek had rented decades before. The house's owner, Enzo Di Giovanni, had lived there as a child and spent a lot of time with Thek. Bonin uncovered meaningful details about the artist's life in Ponza through conversation with Di Giovanni, while soaking up the atmosphere in which Thek made countless paintings and drawings, many gifted to or bartered with friends and neighbors.<sup>9</sup>

Along with many others, I witnessed and learned from Ted as his insight deepened over decades, ultimately making him the principal specialist on Thek's work, though his modesty would have prevented him from describing himself as such. Ted recognized Thek's capriciousness without judgment; his role was to illuminate, care for, and give space to all the artist's dimensions and creative output. He was resistant to any singular narrative—whether of Thek's "predominantly gay sexuality," Catholicism and religious beliefs, "difficult and volatile personality," or others. He did not allow the artist to be reductively corralled but intrepidly followed Thek's own winding path, with its many forks, intersections, and unexpected digressions and through its diverse terrains into a forever expanding landscape.

With a cooperative, open-minded spirit, Ted welcomed new research and scholarship by providing access to materials and generously sharing knowledge. He was alert to writers, curators, galleries, and institutional partners who might widen the reach and enrich understandings of Thek. Khoshbin said recently, "No matter how wild an

idea, Ted wouldn't reject it out of hand in some reactionary way. He always thought with the future in mind and what Paul would have wanted to do in all that contradiction."<sup>10</sup> Ted focused on the present *and* the long haul, acting in a timely but never hurried way; he took care to consider multiple perspectives. Khoshbin notes, "One of Ted's main strengths was how he paced everything, the pace of his considerations and new ideas," "even in how he talked to you, which was very beautiful."<sup>11</sup> A meeting or meal with Ted could easily turn into a five- or six-hour event, providing the kind of generative conversation that unfurls over the long-term.

Ted Bonin's steady discovery process ended only when he died unexpectedly of natural causes on April 3, 2023. Ted's warmth and integrity, sensitive and sensible character, guided his engagement with Thek, as well as the decisions about who, what, when, where, and how to exhibit, distribute, analyze, and present his work, notebooks, and more. Victor Gisler of Mai 36 Galerie in Zurich has described Bonin as "straightforward, trustworthy, and very precise," portraying his friend and colleague of thirty years as a model advocate "fighting for the recognition of the artist, whose priority was always *what can we do for the artist*."<sup>12</sup>

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In 1992, Daniel Buchholz curated the first institutional exhibition in Europe after Thek's passing. *Paul Thek: Sculpture and Drawings* took place at Castello Di Rivara in Italy and was accompanied by a catalogue for which Buchholz commissioned new writing, including Mike Kelley's seminal, much-quoted essay, "Death and Transfiguration—A Letter from America." Buchholz's alliance with Ted Bonin is rooted in that time.

Buchholz and Christopher Müller, who together run Galerie Buchholz, began talking with Bonin about collaborating on a new Thek exhibition at the end of 2021, just after Alexander and Bonin had closed their Tribeca gallery. The show would consist of Thek's early landscape paintings made in Norway and Sicily, which have never been seen together, along with the two extant paintings from his contemporaneous *Television Analyzation* series. In a 1963 letter to friends, Thek wrote, "These days am feeling magnificently schizophrenic... wanting very much to work in two directions, completely different... both exciting I think."<sup>13</sup>

*Paul Thek: Five Paintings 1962-1963* reunites these eloquent works for the first time. The simultaneously aerial, microscopic, and fleshy *Sicily* (1963) anticipated Thek's plunge into sculpture with his *Technological Reliquaries* when he returned to New York in late 1963.<sup>14</sup> These earlier paintings have often been overlooked in favor of positioning the *Reliquaries* as his first body of work. While Thek was living in a medieval tower at Casteldaccia in Sicily during the summer of 1963, he visited the Capuchin catacombs in Palermo with Peter Hujar. Thek later invoked the recollection when speaking about the *Technological Reliquaries*:

"I hope the work has the innocence of those Baroque Crypts in Sicily; their initial effect is so stunning you fall back for a moment and then it's exhilarating. There are 8,000 corpses—not skeletons, corpses—decorating the walls, and the corridors are filled with windowed coffins... It delighted me that bodies could be used to decorate a room, like flowers."<sup>15</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Collins and Milazzo had contacted Brooke Alexander Gallery to gauge their interest. The exhibition had been on view at Mokotoff Gallery on the Lower East Side with the title *Some New Work*, and Thek wanted to relocate it.

<sup>2</sup> Lynn Zelevansky wrote, “Thek completely reinstalled the exhibition, cutting about half the works and including the bronze *Tar Baby*. His final installation was calm, contemplative, and very beautiful. Everything was hung low on the wall. A child’s school chair faced two small works with lamps attached to the frames.” Zelevansky, “Life Is Just a Bowl of Cherries: The Life and Art of Paul Thek,” in *Paul Thek: Diver*, ed. Elizabeth Sussman and Lynn Zelevansky (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2010), 24.

<sup>3</sup> Thek was credited for the set design for *Overture for KA MOUNTAIN AND GUARDenia TERRACE*, which took place at the Opéra Comique (Festival d’Automne and Théâtre des Nations) in Paris, on November 12, 1972.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Wilson, in “It Was His Universe: Robert Wilson in Conversation with Owen Laub, 26 November 2022,” in *Paul Thek: Italian Hours* (Milan: Humboldt Books, 2023), 89–90.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Thek, quoted in Harald Falckenberg, “Freedom Is First of All Freedom from Identification,” in *Paul Thek: Artist’s Artist*, ed. Harald Falckenberg and Peter Weibel, (Karlsruhe, Germany: ZKM | Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe, 2008), 32.

<sup>6</sup> Ted Bonin, conversation with Julie Ault, December 13, 2019.

<sup>7</sup> Leslie Dick used the phrase “ephemeral legacy of this influential and obscure American artist” in her review, “Paul Thek: A Retrospective,” *X-tra* 13, no. 3 (Spring 2011), [www.x-traonline.org/article/paul-thek-diver-a-retrospective](http://www.x-traonline.org/article/paul-thek-diver-a-retrospective).

<sup>8</sup> Noah Khoshbin, conversation with Julie Ault, January 13, 2024.

<sup>9</sup> Ted Bonin in conversation with Enzo Di Giovanni, in *Paul Thek: Ponzia and Roma* (New York: Alexander and Bonin, New York, 2015).

<sup>10</sup> Khoshbin, conversation with Ault.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Victor Gisler, remarks at “A Celebration of the Life of Ted Bonin” (Artists Space, New York, June 1, 2023).

<sup>13</sup> Paul Thek, letter from Rome to his friends Joy and Asmund Boyum, May 22, 1963, private collection.

<sup>14</sup> Thek’s *La Corazza Di Michelangelo* (1963), a ceramic souvenir of a gladiator’s breastplate embellished with wax and paint to resemble bloody flesh and considered Thek’s first “meat piece,” was made in Rome.

<sup>15</sup> Paul Thek, quoted in G. R. Swenson, “Beneath the Skin, Interview with Paul Thek,” *Artnews* 65, no. 2 (April 1966), 35.