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Paul Thek's First Trip to Europe

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In July of 1962, Paul Thek (1933-1988) set sail from Philadelphia on his first trip to Europe. The trip took three weeks, passing through Venezuela before arriving in Rotterdam in August. He would join his friend and lover, photographer Peter Hujar (1934-1987), who was in Italy on a Fulbright scholarship. Before arriving in Italy in October, Thek spent a couple of weeks in Holland, Norway, and France.

Correspondences with Hujar indicate that Thek reached Norway in early September and stayed there until early October. He first arrived in Oslo, then headed to the north of the country. He stayed with a family in the remote Fjaerland region, in Bøyum, a small town north of one of the arms of the Sognefjord. In his first letter from Bøyum, sent to Hujar on September 20, he talks about the mountains he climbs to draw views from.

In another letter to Hujar he describes his fascination with the beauty of the landscape, the fjord and the glacier Bøyabreen: "I am so cut IN this fantastic wild nature [...] it is the most beautiful, beautiful thing I have ever seen... the colors of the trees now, well into autumn, standing out of these great hulking mountains... the valley incredibly green, everything covered with mosses of all kinds, the fjord absolutely clear and yet bright emerald green." (Letter from Paul Thek to Peter Hujar, October 1, 1962)

It is the memory of this unspoiled nature that he depicts in sprawling, vividly colored motifs in square-format paintings produced between 1962 and 1963. "Fjord" and "Bøyadale" (the title of the latter certainly refers to the Bøyabreen glacier that fascinated Thek) may well have been painted in Italy, based on his nature drawings made in Norway. Despite its radiant, warmer colors, the painting "Sicily" is also reminiscent of those autumnal Norwegian landscapes, whose trees the artist described as being "the color of dried blood." Its title "Sicily" refers to where Thek was when he finished this painting in the summer-autumn of 1963. "Bøyadale" is reproduced on one of the two invitations for his first solo exhibition in Rome at Charles Moses's Galleria 88 in November 1963. These landscape paintings were exhibited alongside paintings titled "Television Analyzations," which Thek produced between August and November of 1963, while staying at the family home of another Roman gallerist Topazia Alliata in the Sicilian village of Casteldaccia, a few kilometers outside of Palermo.

In his "Television Analyzations" paintings, Thek was drawn to the motif of the screen, particularly in the representation of the cinematographic and televisual image, a subject also addressed by contemporary Italian artist Fabio Mauri, whom Thek met in Rome. Mauri had investigated the way the image was being used and disseminated in entertainment during the years of the "miracolo economico," the era in which Italian consumer society emerged.

Thek made a number of paintings for the "Television Analyzation" series. Close-ups, multiplications, and details of enlarged body parts are the motifs depicted in his paintings. In a letter dated October 1963 sent to Hujar, Thek explains his interest in the "Television Analyzation" series to generate "new images of our time", employing the effects of slow motion, superimposition, and zoom. The topicality of his approach became apparent when the opening of the exhibition at Galleria 88 in Rome needed to be postponed due to the assassination of John F. Kennedy in Dallas on November 22, 1963, an event covered by a 70-hour long continuous broadcast in the US with an international reach, a new standard of ubiquity for the televisual media's scope. Although the invitation cards list November 23 - December 7, 1963 as the dates for the exhibition, the opening reception was rescheduled to November 26.