

Death of a Hippie

Many artists in the 1960s railed against aspects of the art market. They wanted to develop new practices and types of art that could not be easily traded or collected so as to avoid being caught in the commercial system. But lacking the traditional indicators of cultural and financial value that the art market bestowed, some of their works became vulnerable to casual neglect – particularly if the artists were not in a position to look after them themselves. This was the case with a work that was seen as important at the time – and increasingly so since its final disappearance – Paul Thek's *The Tomb* 1967.

We know *The Tomb* now largely through two black and white photographs of the work showing it as it looked when installed at the Stable Gallery, New York, in September 1967, and through a lengthy description published in the magazine *Artforum*. The author, Robert Pincus-Witten, was conscious as he wrote that people might never again be able to see the work and took great pains to describe the various elements of the installation in detail in his review. Indeed, we would have very little idea of how the work was experienced without his thoughtful account:

One enters a spacious, rosy-lit and incensed haze from which rises a large, three-tiered ziggurat ... Passing through the short entrance one arrives at a shallow parapet, like the interior of a glass phone booth, through which one peers into the dim, pink light of the burial site of the artist's wax simulacrum. The effigy is stretched out before us – the dead artist has been interred with unction. All is 'petal and American vermillion' pink – the light, the garments, the Tomb interior, the shoes. Thek's stringy blond locks have been casually brushed away from his forehead, revealing a dead mask, eye-lids closed, and a dark, plagued tongue flopping upon a half parted mouth. Thek's long Genghis moustache, his lashes and lids have been painstakingly fitted, hair by hair, in to the wax mask. Absolute fetishism.

Perhaps Pincus-Witten had spoken with the artist, or at least, with his friends, because he observed that the work might represent 'a summation and an adieu'. Having shown himself dead, with the fingers of his right hand severed (a comment on the difficulties he felt he faced as an artist in America), Thek left New York just a few days after the show opened to start a new phase in his career in Europe.

But *The Tomb* was not forgotten. Seen as an important work, it was displayed in London in 1968, New York in 1969 and Minneapolis in 1970; and critics went on trying to define why the work was so unsettling. In London Edward Lucie-Smith commented in 1968 that the piece 'was not an example of realism because it was too real, so much so

that it almost seemed to refuse to be art.’ In the same year William Williamson said that Thek’s work was ‘about the presence of vivid and tenacious feelings and percepts which cannot be intellectualised, conceptualised, categorised’. And he added that *The Tomb* was a ‘manifesto against that part of contemporary art which reduces art to abstract acts, to operations, and to an absence of hand.’

To some extent, the work can be seen as a wry reflection on some the dominant trends in art of the time. *The Tomb*’s ziggurat shape and the notice inside informing visitors about the structure’s manufacture, dimensions and cost seemed like a deadpan joke about the geometric forms and factual language of minimalism, while the presentation of mortal remains within a tomb structure, with its evident echoes of ancient cultures, could hardly have been further from pop art’s engagement with consumerist culture or, as Williamson noted above, the ‘abstract acts’ of conceptual art.

Although very much part of the in crowd in Greenwich Village and friends with writers such as Susan Sontag and artists Andy Warhol and Eva Hesse, Thek was deeply uncomfortable about what he saw as the art world’s divorce from reality. Later he recalled, ‘The world was falling apart, anyone could see it ... I’d go to a gallery and there would be a lot of fancy people looking at a lot of stuff that did not say anything about anything to anyone.’ However, although he wanted to ground art in human experience, he sought principally to find ways of beautifying and transcending the real (the effigy was painted petal pink and seen through a sheet of yellow Perspex) and offering solace (the tomb was a place of reflection and engagement with the nature of the self).

Brought up a Catholic, Thek was concerned with questions relating to spirituality and mortality throughout his life. A trip to the Capuchin catacombs in Palermo, Sicily, in 1963 had made a deep impact on him, enabling him to look at death without repulsion or fear. Remembering the sight of the bodies in the catacombs, Thek said:

their initial effect is so stunning that 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. I opened one and picked up what I thought was a piece of paper; it was a piece of dried thigh. I felt strangely relieved and free. It delighted me that bodies could be used to decorate a room, like flowers. We accept our thing-ness intellectually but the emotional acceptance of it can be a joy.

However, the spiritual aspects of *The Tomb* were quickly overshadowed by its topicality. Almost against Thek’s will, the piece became quickly seen as an expression and summation of the era. During the summer of 1967, ‘the summer of love’, as many as 100,000 people converged on the Haight-Ashbury neighbourhood of San Francisco. Flower power – a cultural and political rebellion involving street protests, psychedelic rock music, drugs, creative self-expression and sexual freedom – had arrived. Towards the end of the summer, however, a small group in San Francisco objected to the popularisation of the hippie movement and dilution of its ideas by the mass media.

Attempting to halt the tide of press hype, they staged a demonstration through the streets of the city on 6 October 1967 called ‘the death of the hippie’, carrying a young man on a stretcher.

This was some three weeks after the opening of the exhibition of *The Tomb* in New York, when Thek was already in Europe having decided that he would never again make artworks for the market. But Thek’s recumbent effigy, with its long hair, moustaches, and psychedelic patterns on the disks on its cheeks, so resembled an archetypal hippie that the work became talked about, and retitled within a few months, as *The Death of a Hippie*. Thek hated the new title (‘Thek’s *Tomb* + commercialized chic revolution don’t mix’, he wrote). But in the late 1960s the artwork was increasingly seen to express the aspirations and fears of the counterculture generation, beset by growing numbers of casualties in the Vietnam war, tougher action by the state against the anti-war and free speech movements, and political violence on the streets – and the name stuck.

Perhaps partly because of the fraught political atmosphere surrounding the hippie movement and anti-war protests, no collector or museum bought *The Tomb/The Death of the Hippie*. Inevitably, this left it vulnerable to the vagaries and everyday mishaps of shipping and storage.

Moving from country to country in Europe, Thek no longer made individual objects but rather focused on creating symbolic environments in museums, often working collaboratively with a changing group of other artists. Acceding to the wishes of some exhibition curators, he had the figure brought over to Europe and used it in his new work, but left the large wooden tomb in the US. After having stored it for nearly two years in the cellar of a museum employee (although Thek had once indicated that it could be destroyed), Michael Friedman, Director of the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, wrote to the artist in 1972 explaining that he could no longer keep the tomb edifice and asking where it should be sent. Thek prevaricated. Perhaps he was fishing for an invitation to create a new installation at the museum using the pink tomb in a new work; or perhaps he did not want to take responsibility for deciding the fate of the structure: after all, he was engaged in making ephemeral installations that he considered ‘work in progress’. Eventually, he named a former dealer to act as his agent. The dealer, however, replied to the museum promptly and laconically, writing, ‘I’m afraid it’ll just have to go then – dump.’

The Tomb may have existed only for a few years as an entity but the ‘dead artist’ within it had a second life, and different meaning, within the complex environments that Thek was invited to create in various European museums in the 1970s. Perhaps ambivalent about the fame the ‘hippie’ had brought him, or perhaps uneasy at some level with the representation of himself as dead, Thek transformed the effigy. Inspired by Viking warriors in funeral boats, he showed the corpse in its shipping crate, resting on a pillow and covered by a blue blanket. On this were strewn tulip and onion bulbs symbolising pleasure (flowers) and pain (onions can induce tears) that sprouted during the course of the exhibitions. But visitors to his exhibitions might have been forgiven for missing the effigy entirely. Interviewed about one such installation, Thek said

The Hippie was simply placed in the choreography of the movement of the public through the space. One had to come through a twisting, almost-pink newspaper tunnel, and walk up some steps onto a wharf ... at the very end, just before you exit, is the Hippie as a Viking chieftain in a kind of boat. But you almost don't see it. There's no light on it; it's a total throwaway at that point.

Thek returned to New York in 1976. He found himself more or less forgotten in his home country, and felt he had stayed away too long. For a period he struggled to support himself, taking odd jobs bagging groceries and working as a hospital janitor. Much of his artwork was too challenging for the commercial art market, though in reviewing Thek's recent small paintings in 1980 critic Richard Flood began by reminding his readers how Thek's *The Tomb* had been 'a sculptural roman à clef which summed up and buried an era' and how his 'narrative-realist stance – with its autobiographical context, and ritual implications – also proved a significant compass reading from '70s art.'

But Thek's increasingly erratic behaviour – sometimes forgetful, sometimes paranoid, particularly with those with whom he had practical dealings – alienated many of his erstwhile friends and supporters, and contributed to the destruction of the figure from *The Tomb*. Shipped back to the USA in 1982, the effigy was held by a storage company. When Thek discovered that the piece had not been insured, he instructed the company to destroy the work, which they refused to do without written directions. He then telephoned the company again and arranged for a delivery, but the work was sent back when it was found to be missing its hands. The records are unclear at this point but it seems likely that the shipping company must have thrown the work out sometime thereafter, not having received instructions from Thek or further payment for storing the crate.

Thek died of AIDS in 1988 and for some years was largely forgotten. Few museums, especially in the US, owned his works; and little was published about him for many years. Yet *The Tomb* has been increasingly recognised as a key work of the 1960s and as an important point of reference for the work of later artists who focused on the body, sexuality and mortality.

There is of course an irony in mourning the loss of a work about death by an artist who was ambivalent about the commercial art world and its norms of preservation and display. In a sense, Thek's failure to look after the piece himself reflected his sense of transience as a positive and inescapable part of his art and of life in general. However, the loss of Thek's *The Tomb* also raises interesting questions about why this work and indeed the artist himself slipped out of the narrative of art history for so long. Was it because of the physical absence of this celebrated work, aesthetic discomfort with its waxwork realism, or ongoing antipathy to the countercultural values it expressed?

Thek's nomadic existence during the most productive phase of his career, his use of transient or unstable materials, his lack of an easily identified style, and presentation of his environments as 'works in progress', seem to have contributed to his neglect by

critics and art historians. But in the view of American artist Mike Kelley, Thek's work had been overlooked primarily because it did not fit the established picture of 1960s art ('Official art culture', he noted in 1992, 'knows that the best way to treat contradictory material is not to rail against it, but simply to pretend it didn't happen.') In his view, it also touched upon too many raw nerves. Visually opulent and encapsulating America's fear about death, eroticism and gender confusion, *The Tomb* was for Kelley not only Thek's masterwork but also 'a shrine to anti-Americanism' – albeit one now known largely through a couple of black and white photographs and a journalist's description in an art magazine.

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