

# The Meat of Sculpture

## Paul Thek

BY MICHAËL AMY



OPPOSITE: HIRSHHORN MUSEUM AND SCULPTURE GARDEN, SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION, WASHINGTON, DC / THIS PAGE: © KENNY SCHACHTER AND PACE GALLERY, 2013, COURTESY PACE LONDON

One can know quite a bit about American art after 1960 while knowing little or nothing about the work of Paul Thek. Indeed, one can visit many museums with important holdings in modern and contemporary art without chancing upon Thek's work, and one can digest quite a body of literature on American art before stumbling across his name. Thek did not belong to any dominant artistic current when he came of age: he embraced highly illusionistic figuration at a time when illusionism was disdained and figuration considered passé—though the stylizations of Pop art did give the latter new meaning. Although Thek showed with some prominent galleries early on, he seemed a marginal figure—the art world likes to keep its storyline simple and does not allow too many outsiders at the table.

**Opposite:** *Warrior's Leg*, 1966–67. Wax, metal, leather, and paint, 54.5 x 30.7 x 17.7 cm., in artist's vitrine, 66.7 x 21 x 36.8 cm. **Above and detail:** *Meat Cable*, 1966. Wax, mixed media, and steel cable, 335.3 x 10.2 x 10.2 cm.

Thek was by all accounts a difficult man, and he became more so as the years went by, which did not help his career. His exile from the American scene and the disappearance of most of the assemblage sculpture that he produced during his years in Europe further distort the picture we have of his achievement. By the time he returned to New York in 1976, after an absence of almost a decade, he had been gone too long. He continued to work in semi-obscurity, producing drawings with synthetic polymer and gesso on newspaper at a time when painterly figuration, much of it loud and inept, was once again front and center, thereby drowning out his own rather touching, serially conceived contributions.

The meat pieces (1963–67), the first works of Thek's maturity, remain his most striking productions. The fragments that survive from the collaborative installations and assemblages of his middle period, on the other hand, offer too hazy a picture of what exactly he achieved during his European years, even when complemented

with photographic and literary documentation.

The story of the meat pieces begins with *La Corazza di Michelangelo* (1963), a work inspired by Michelangelo's treatment of the carved marble cuirass worn by Giuliano de' Medici, Duke of Nemours, which transcends flesh itself in terms of liveliness and pliability (the figure is in Michelangelo's New Sacristy at San Lorenzo, Florence). In Thek's *La Corazza*, the armor appears infected with putrefying tumors, a bloody and greasy corrosion that prefigures developments in the gorier branches of horror and science fiction (*Night of the Living Dead* and *Alien*), as well as the very real and terrifying AIDS epidemic, which felled so many young men, including Thek himself. Thek tackled the homosexual master Michelangelo, but reduced his figure of Giuliano to mere still-life—namely the cuirass—taken over by a living ooze that sullies and destroys. Thek also toppled the artistic father figure by modeling, mixing media, and adding color—methods that Michelangelo opposed.



*Meat Sculpture with Butterflies*, 1966. Plexiglas on white pedestal, wax, and butterflies, 51.5 x 37 x 27 cm.

Mixed media and color had already been introduced into sculpture some years earlier by Jasper Johns—an extremely successful young artist and thus a role model—in *Target with Plaster Casts* (1955). This work combining painting and sculpture enjoyed a *succès de scandale* for, among other reasons, its deadpan reduction of the male body—including the sacrosanct genitalia—to a sequence of chopped-up, differently colored body parts, placed like mere objects in tight compartments. In this work, as well as in others from that same remarkable year, Johns reintroduced figuration into contemporary practice with awe-inspiring determination. He did so while holding on to the meatiness of a particular type of Abstract Expressionist brushwork, with roots in late Monet, though he twisted the gesture by using the slow and deliberate medium of encaustic instead of slick oil and/or enamel. Johns's glorious handling of encaustic—a medium that he made very much his own, perhaps in response to de Kooning's famous utterance that "flesh is the reason oil paint was invented"—most

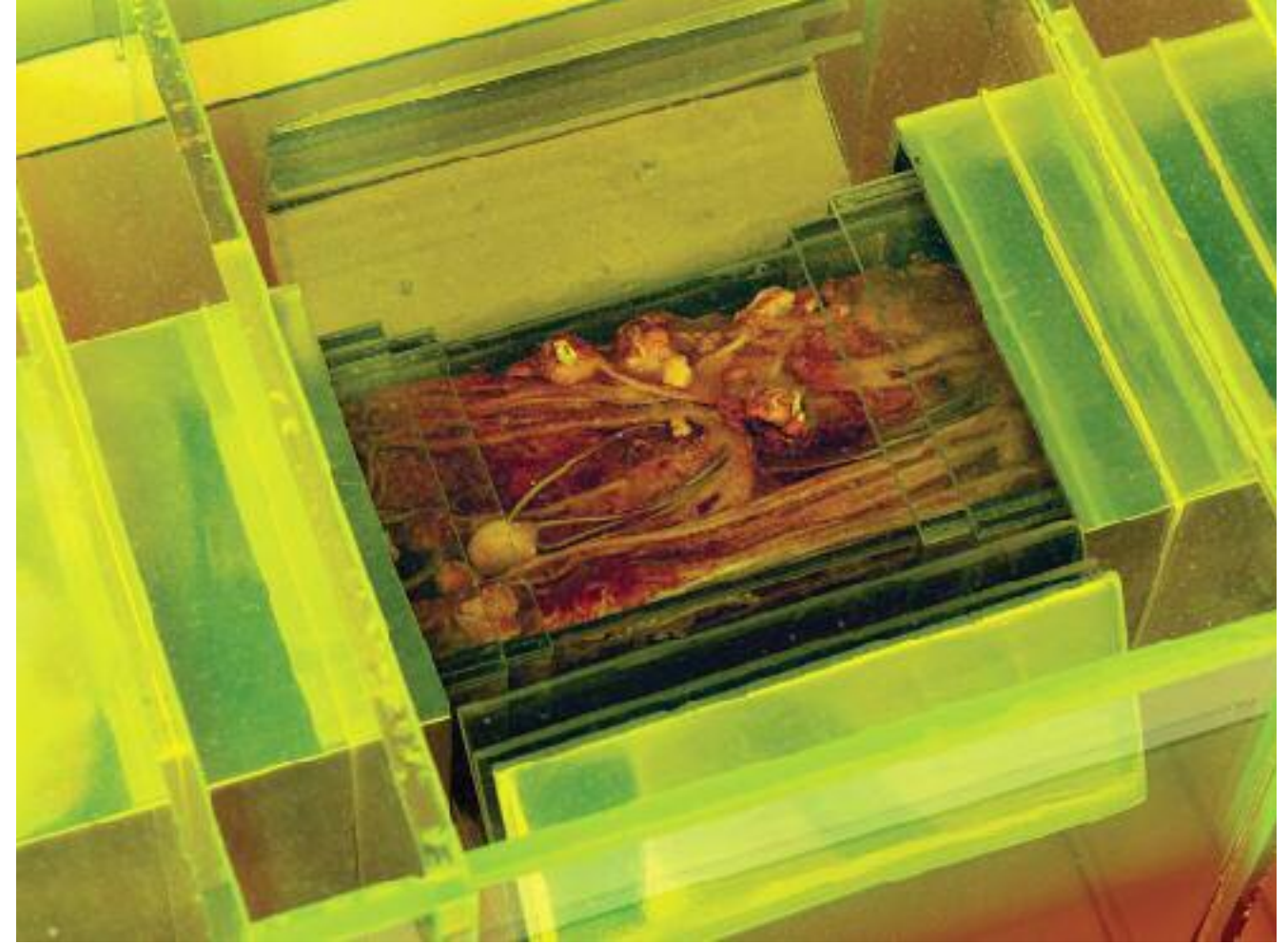
likely inspired Thek's manipulation of colored wax in his *trompe-l'oeil* meat pieces. (*Trompe-l'oeil*, by the way, interested Johns as well, as can be seen in *Painted Bronze* [Savarin Can], 1960). Through Johns, Thek could take on the elder statesman de Kooning, the personification of hot-headed heterosexual machismo, whom Rauschenberg and Johns had already tackled in *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (1953) and *Painted Bronze* (Ale Cans). Thek's juicy, raw, red meat pieces have a great deal to do with the liquidity of de Kooning's oils, and their fattiness, lumpiness, and translucency are indebted to Johns's encaustic paintings and, almost certainly, to Rauschenberg's dark red (near) monochromes with their warped surfaces (1953–54). Claes Oldenburg's papier-mâché sculptures of the early '60s, dripping with enamel paint, should also be taken into the equation, as should the remarkable 18th-century wax anatomical models at La Specola in Florence (a section of Florence's Museum of Natural History, an institution of seminal historical importance, which holds a stu-

pendous collection of wax sculpture by Clemente Susini). It is worth noting that Thek spent time in Italy in 1962 and 1963, though mostly in Rome and Sicily; he also returned later in the '60s and '70s.

Sculpture is traditionally about the human body. Thek was being especially perverse in presenting a large lump of raw flesh, instead of a full or bust-length body, as a work of sculpture—a still-life displayed clinically inside a glass or yellow Plexiglas box so that we can neither touch nor smell it. This move constituted a brilliant way of crashing on to the art scene. The early '60s witnessed a revival of interest in Dadaism and Surrealism, which was shared by Thek, who presented his wax meat pieces, often of unknown origin (animal or human?), in an unexpected context—namely enshrined in clear cases (the container for the waxen bodies of saints/martyrs and rulers) and inside an art gallery. The meat pieces belong to what Thek—a deeply religious Catholic—called the "Technological Reliquaries" series, a name that simultaneously references tradition, change, holiness, science, and industry. With equidistant, parallel yellow lines running down the glass (thereby allowing us to measure the contents), these sci-fi reliquaries seem to have been brought back from a grim future, when human and animal life will be reduced to nothing more than hermetically isolated lumps of meat—a reading that makes greater sense in the wake of the near-apocalypse precipitated by the Cuban Missile Crisis. One surmises that extreme violence or horrific catastrophe led to the parceling out of all of this meat. Did or will technology run amuck?

It has been argued, convincingly in my view, that Jasper Johns's flags and targets—objects tied to national pride, saluting, aiming, and shooting when left in their real-world contexts—were made in response to mounting Cold War tensions. Packed in their transparent boxes, Thek's meat pieces seem tailored as a response to the assassination of President Kennedy and the escalation in Vietnam. Johns was the grand master of cool aloofness, the antidote to de Kooning. Thek could be equally cold-blooded, as in *Birthday Cake* (1964), with its four slabs of meat, each diminishing in

LOTHAR SCHNEFF, © KOLUMBA, KÖLN



size, stacked one above the other, and punctuated with small candles. This bloody zigurat within a glass pyramid seems related to Johns's *Three Flags* (1958) in which the charged symbol for a nation is repeated on a shrinking scale, one iteration in front of the other. In Thek's hyper-realistic meat pieces, the pounds of flesh are about death, objectified and anonymous. These meticulously produced sculptures form a meaty equivalent to the Capuchin catacombs of Palermo, which Thek visited during the summer of 1963 with his lover, photographer Peter Hujar, and where he was deeply impressed by the "8,000 corpses... used to decorate a room, like flowers." In *Untitled (Meat Piece with Flies)* (1965), *Untitled (Meat Piece with Chair)* (1966), and *Meat Sculpture with Butterflies* (1966), Thek takes on the abject with full force, dealing with putrefaction of the flesh. Such a work brings to mind the likes of Otto Dix, Damien Hirst, and Berlinde De Bruyckere. Thek was clearly a singular and important artist.

*Michaël Amy is a professor of the history of art at the Rochester Institute of Technology.*

© KENNY SCHACHTER AND PACE GALLERY, 2013. COURTESY PACE LONDON



Above and detail: *Untitled*, from the "Technological Reliquaries" series, 1965–66. Wax, Formica, metal, wood, glass beads, resin, and Plexiglas, 98.4 x 31.1 cm.