

What's New York Art in 2026? MoMA PS1's "Greater New York" Has the Answers (excerpt)

by Maxwell Rabb

May 13, 2026

Tom Thayer



Courtesy of Tom Thayer and Bureau, New York.

Tom Thayer's day job is at the City College of New York, where he is a professor of painting. However, in the early mornings, the diligent artist is busy orchestrating non-narrative dioramas and puppets from repurposed materials, such as cardboard, metal wire, and even plastic milk jugs. These lo-fi "scenographic plays," as the 55-year-old artist calls them, often tell mythological stories imbued with potent emotionality, buoyed by bright colors emanating from old TVs and soft, melodic music. His installation for "Greater New York," *Counterdoses for the Home*, is likely the calmest (and strangest) corner in the show.

Why do you think this iteration of "Greater New York" feels so urgent? How do you think your contribution fits the narrative put forward by the curators?

We are living in such anxious and urgent times. I feel like alarms are continually going off in our heads, and the artwork reflects that reality.

The work I have in "Greater New York" is autobiographical and deals with the psychic gravity of contemporary domestic life. Its narrative borrows its form from dreams, a continual series of

strange scenes that rehash our daily life. To mine this, I made most of the work in a state between being asleep and awake. I'm not totally aware of what decisions I'm making, but when I reflect on the work later, I can see what it's referencing from real life—much like analyzing the meanings behind our dreams.

Can you explain what you mean when you call your work “scenographic plays”?

My sculptures, paintings, works on paper, and music are often by-products of the animated videos I create for performances. I bring them to my “scenographic plays” and activate them through light, projection, and live sound, summoning a series of improvised scenes that sit side by side. The aggregate of these scenes suggests narratives that are open enough for the audience to play an active role in interpreting.



Tom Thayer, *Counterdoses for the Home*, 2026. Photo: Kris Graves. Courtesy MoMA PS1.

My inspiration for this type of narrative began when I watched Louis Malle's film *My Dinner With Andre* as a child. Andre Gregory vividly describes leading a Grotowski paratheatrical exercise called a “Beehive.” In a Beehive, a group of individuals—often strangers—comes together for a private performance in which the player is the audience and the audience is the player.

The goal is to remove the division between participants and spectators, suspend social roles, and create a genuine encounter. Gregory describes the Beehive he led in Poland: “In a way, it's going right back to childhood, where simply a group of children enter a room or are brought into a room, without toys, and they begin to play. Grown-ups were learning how to play again.... I think I experienced for the first time what it means to be truly alive.”