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## THE MORGAN PRESENTS THE FIRST FULL-SCALE RETROSPECTIVE OF THE PHOTOGRAPHY OF PETER HUJAR

### *Peter Hujar: Speed of Life*

January 26 through May 20, 2018

**Press Preview:** Thursday, January 25, 10:00 – 11:30 am

**RSVP:** [media@themorgan.org](mailto:media@themorgan.org)

**New York, NY, January 9, 2018** — The life and art of Peter Hujar (1934–1987) were rooted in downtown New York. Private by nature, combative in manner, well-read, and widely connected, Hujar inhabited a



*Boy on Raft*, 1978, gelatin silver print, purchased on The Charina Endowment Fund, The Morgan Library & Museum, 2013.108:1.97. © Peter Hujar Archive, LLC, courtesy Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York and Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco.

world of avant-garde dance, music, art, and drag performance. His mature career paralleled the public unfolding of gay life between the Stonewall uprising in 1969 and the AIDS crisis of the 1980s.

In his loft studio in the East Village, Hujar focused on those who followed their creative instincts and shunned mainstream success. He made, in his words, “uncomplicated, direct photographs of complicated and difficult subjects,” immortalizing moments, individuals, and subcultures passing at the speed of life.

*Peter Hujar: Speed of Life*—on view at the Morgan from January 26 through May 20—presents one hundred and forty photographs by this enormously important and influential artist. Drawn from the extensive holdings of his work at the Morgan and from nine other collections, the show and its catalog follow Hujar from his beginnings in the mid-1950s to his central role in the

East Village art scene three decades later. The catalog features full-page reproductions of one hundred and sixty photographs, essays by curator Joel Smith, Philip Gefter, and Steve Turtell, and the first fully researched chronology, exhibition history, and bibliography to be published on Hujar.

The exhibition was organized by the Morgan and Fundación MAPFRE, Madrid. After opening at Fundación MAPFRE in Barcelona, Spain, it traveled to the Fotomuseum, The Hague, the Netherlands. Following its Morgan showing, it will be exhibited at the Berkeley Art Museum & Pacific Film Archive later in 2018.

“Peter Hujar published only one monograph in his lifetime and did not have his first solo gallery show until he was forty-two,” said Colin B. Bailey, director of the Morgan Library & Museum. “Yet, today, critical appreciation of the full scope of his work is at an all-time high. Best known for the searching intimacy of his photographic portraits, he also distinctively explored landscapes, architecture, and the nocturnal city in works of stark beauty. The downtown New York he captured is a small, intensely creative world that no longer exists, which helps explain why his work is so resonant for young artists today. The Morgan is delighted to present the first in-depth look at this remarkable artist.”

### **The Exhibition**

*Speed of Life* adopts the form of a traditional retrospective while staying true to how Hujar wanted his work to be exhibited. In his gallery shows, Hujar displayed prints either in isolation or in large groupings that flirted with disorder. He fine-tuned the layout of his final gallery show (1986) until no one type of image (portrait, nude, animal, still life, landscape, cityscape) appeared twice consecutively. Each of his subjects thus held to its own identity, rather than illustrating an imposed theme. The arrangement also emphasized his inventive range, proposing echoes among seemingly unrelated images and highlighting preoccupations that united his entire career.

### **Portraiture**

Hujar was easy to meet but difficult to know closely. He participated in a dizzying array of social scenes and subcultures without becoming a part of them. For him, the camera provided a means of creating a relationship between author and subject founded on intimacy, silence, and trust.

His earliest known exhibition print portrays his former high school English teacher



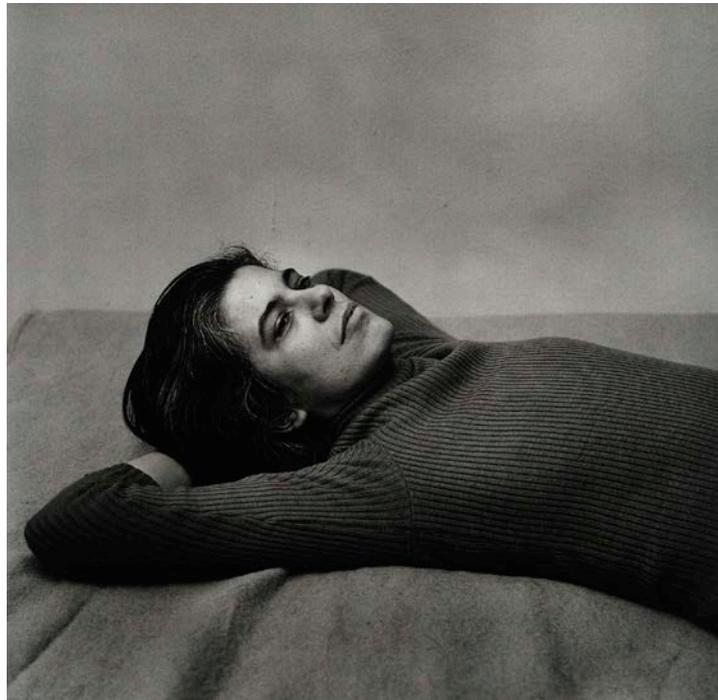
*Daisy Aldan, June 19, 1955, gelatin silver print, The Morgan Library & Museum, gift of Stephen Koch; 2016.58. © Peter Hujar Archive, LLC, courtesy Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York and Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco.*

(*Daisy Aldan, June 18, 1955*), posing in the midtown photography studio where Hujar worked as an assistant after graduating from high school in 1953. The portrait, reflecting the lively and gentle humor they shared, foreshadows the simplicity Hujar would cultivate in his portraiture. Daisy Aldan (1918–2001) was the first adult to encourage him to pursue photography and art. A former child radio actor and a lesbian who was a translator, poet, and editor, in 1953 she founded the small literary magazine *Folder*, which published a roster of rising New York talent, including John Ashbery, one of Hujar's future subjects.

Hujar met Susan Sontag through their mutual friend, artist Paul Thek, in Sicily in 1963. Sontag later contributed the introduction to Hujar's 1976 monograph *Portraits in Life and Death*. It included his iconic reclining portrait of the writer. At the time, *The New York Review of Books* had begun publishing the six essays that would be collected in her book *On Photography* (1977).

The reclining portrait is a genre of photograph Hujar made his own. He relied on it as a means of reaching something unique in every sitter. To face a camera lens from a reclining position is an unfamiliar and provoking experience. It stirred a

distinct reaction from everyone who experienced it, from playwright Charles Ludlam's shy deflection to the quizzical skepticism of Hujar's close friend Fran Lebowitz.



*Susan Sontag*, 1975, gelatin silver print, purchased on The Charina Endowment Fund, The Morgan Library & Museum, 2013.108.8.2310. © Peter Hujar Archive, LLC, courtesy Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York and Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco

### **Hujar's Social and Political World**

In the mid-1960s, as several of Hujar's artist friends found success, he remained at the periphery of the art world. He lacked an outlet for his work, but photographed crowds at events such as parades and antiwar rallies. In 1969, when he was working for fashion and music magazines, he at last put his art to explicit political use. In late June, a police raid inspired fierce resistance from the patrons of the Stonewall Inn, in the West Village. Hujar's boyfriend at the time, Jim Fouratt, arrived on the scene to organize for the Gay Liberation Front (GLF), the first political group to cite homosexuality in its name. Hujar agreed to make a photograph for a GLF poster. The poster, portraying a jubilant group of GLF members under the

slogan COME OUT!!, appeared in late spring 1970 in advance of the gay liberation march that marked the first anniversary of Stonewall.



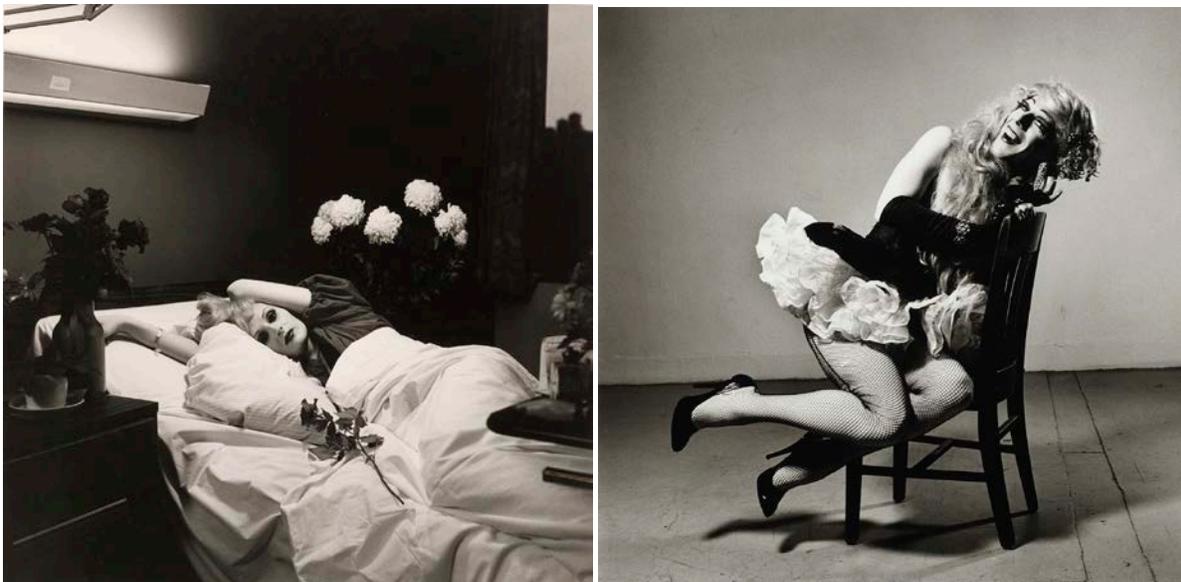
**Left:** *Gay Liberation Front Poster Image*, 1969, gelatin silver print, purchased on The Charina Endowment Fund, The Morgan Library & Museum, 2013.108:1.76. © Peter Hujar Archive, LLC, courtesy Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York and Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco. **Right:** *Christopher Street Pier (2)*, 1976, gelatin silver print, purchased on The Charina Endowment Fund, The Morgan Library & Museum, 2013.108:1.84. © Peter Hujar Archive, LLC, courtesy Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York and Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco.

The Christopher Street Pier, on the Hudson River at West Tenth Street, was known familiarly in the 1970s as “the sex pier.” A place to see others displayed and to display oneself, it was also a site where a photographer could work openly. The pier is an idyll in Hujar’s photographs. Despite its extralegal, outsider status, it exists under broad sunlight, seamlessly a part of city life. During a heat wave on Easter weekend in 1976, Hujar photographed a man framed by his crossed legs on the pier’s wooden ledge. The place and the mood are instantly recognizable in the image, which later appeared on the cover of an issue of *The Village Voice* celebrating gay life on the tenth anniversary of Stonewall.

In the early 1970s Hujar consciously turned his back on the commercial mainstream, deciding that the hustle of fashion and music photography “wasn’t right for me.” Moving into a loft above a theater at Twelfth Street and Second Avenue in 1973, he pursued a bohemian life of poverty, taking paying jobs only when necessary and focusing on the subjects that compelled him. The crumbling East Village, increasingly crime-ridden and arson-prone, was a place where artists could live without thinking much

about money. It was also the right place and time to catch the first prefigurations of punk emerging in music, art, and fashion. Hujar was led that way by his instincts, his rock-journalist contacts, and his interest in absurdist drag and performance.

In September 1973, transgender Warhol Superstar Candy Darling (born James Lawrence Slattery) was hospitalized for lymphoma. She asked Hujar to make a portrait of her “as a farewell to my fans.” Out of several dozen exposures, Hujar chose to print a languorous pose in which Candy’s banal, fluorescent-lit hospital room looks as elegant as the studio props in a Hollywood starlet’s portrait. Hujar later wrote that his style cues came from Candy, who was “playing every death scene from every movie.” The image became the most widely reproduced of Hujar’s works during his lifetime.



Left: *Candy Darling on her Deathbed*, 1973, gelatin silver print, collection of Ronay and Richard Menschel. © Peter Hujar Archive, LLC, courtesy Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York and Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco. Right: *Ethyl Eichelberger as Minnie the Maid*, 1981, gelatin silver print, purchased on The Charina Endowment Fund, The Morgan Library & Museum, 2013.108:1.41. © Peter Hujar Archive, LLC, courtesy Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York and Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco.

The subjects of his art, Hujar wrote, were “those who push themselves to any extreme” and those who “cling to the freedom to be themselves.” He lavished a portraitist’s attention on subjects who defied it in some way, such as drag performer Ethyl Eichelberger. The most photographed person in his body of work, Ethyl remains an insistently “double” subject, in whom neither actor nor role predominates. From 1978 to 1984, Hujar photographed Ethyl for flyers advertising the stage personae Nefertiti, Auntie Bellum, Medusa, Jocasta, Carlota Empress of Mexico, Hamlette, and a dozen more.

### **Diverse Motifs in Hujar’s Work**

The exhibition features suites of photographs that highlight recurring themes in Hujar’s art.

On his contact sheets, he often marked images in which a linear element guides the eye from the top left to the bottom right of the frame, as seen in his study of dancer Sheryl Sutton (1977). The motif, for which he offered no interpretation, is suggestive but ambiguous; it could be a diagram of decline, a gesture of self-cancellation, or perhaps something else entirely.



**Top:** *Sheryl Sutton*, 1977, gelatin silver print, purchased on The Charina Endowment Fund, The Morgan Library & Museum, 2013.108:1.46. © Peter Hujar Archive, LLC, courtesy Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York and Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco. **Bottom:** *Gary Schneider in Contortion (2)*, 1979, gelatin silver print, purchased on The Charina Endowment Fund, The Morgan Library & Museum, 2013.108:1.79. © Peter Hujar Archive, LLC, courtesy Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York and Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco.

Portraiture of bodies is another preoccupation in Hujar's last decade of work. Bodies, he proposed, might be read as freely as faces for character, emotion, or life story. He photographed bodies in the extremes of youth and old age, bodies displaying unique features, and bodies in transient states, notably pregnancy and arousal. A pair of photographs depicts photographer Gary Schneider in contorted positions. Hujar declined to direct him in any explicit way. After a long period of false starts, Schneider says, "my defenses were dropped and I became comfortable, and then there was a very strong communication between us." An interest in the interiority of his subject is characteristic of Hujar's work.

With the same sensitivity that he brought to human subjects, Hujar made portraits of closed-off entities such as skyscrapers, bodies of water, and animals. When photographing dogs, livestock, or even snakes, he would speak to them in a constant, ordinary conversational tone. Hujar's animals often appear to be holding a pose, as if they were people who, understanding what a camera does, arrange themselves like a photograph.



**Top left:** *Horse in West Virginia Mountains*, 1969, gelatin silver print, collection of Ronay and Richard Menschel. © Peter Hujar Archive, LLC, courtesy Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York and Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco. **Top right:** *Hudson River*, 1975, gelatin silver print, purchased on The Charina Endowment Fund, The Morgan Library & Museum, 2013.108:1.54. © Peter Hujar Archive, LLC, courtesy Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York and Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco. **Bottom left:** *Steel Ruins (13)*, 1978, gelatin silver print, purchased on The Charina Endowment Fund, The Morgan Library & Museum, 2013.108:1.67. © Peter Hujar Archive, LLC, courtesy Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York and Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco. **Bottom right:** *Dog, Westtown, New York*, 1978, gelatin silver print, purchased on The Charina Endowment Fund, The Morgan Library & Museum, 2013.108:1.98. © Peter Hujar Archive, LLC, courtesy Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York and Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco.

In 1981, a brief affair between the photographer and the young artist David Wojnarowicz evolved into a mentoring bond that changed both their lives. On their excursions to blighted areas around New York, Hujar crafted the portrait of a city in free fall, complementing Wojnarowicz's dark vision of Reagan-era America. In his final seven years, he continued chronicling a creative downtown subculture that was running out of time in a fast-changing city. Peter Hujar died of AIDS-related pneumonia in 1987.

Thirty years after his death, Hujar's photographs are more widely known than they were in his lifetime. They come across as more empathetic than those of an older artist, Diane Arbus, and more soulful and psychological than those of a younger one, Robert Mapplethorpe. It was beauty that moved him to make photographs. Hujar admired the present-mindedness of his contemporary, Andy Warhol, but felt closer to nineteenth-century forebears like Julia Margaret Cameron and Mathew Brady. Like them, he wrote, "I compose the picture in the camera. I make the print. It has to be beautiful."

### **The Peter Hujar Collection at the Morgan**

The Morgan owns the most comprehensive public collection of Peter Hujar's work. In addition to over one hundred photographic prints dating from 1955 to 1985, the collection includes more than 5,700 contact sheets, representing nearly every black-and-white exposure made by the photographer. It also contains his job books and print inventories, correspondence, snapshots by and of Hujar and his friends, and tear sheets from features he published in periodicals such as *Harper's Bazaar*, *GQ*, and *The Village Voice*.

### **Publication**

The exhibition catalogue features full-page reproductions of all 160 works in the touring exhibition, essays by curator Joel Smith, Philip Geffer, and Steve Turtell, and the first fully researched chronology, exhibition history, and bibliography to be published on Hujar.

Authors: Joel Smith, Philip Geffer, Steve Turtell, and Martha Scott Burton.  
Publisher: Aperture and Fundación MAPFRE, 2017.  
248 pages.

### **Public Programs**

#### **DISCUSSION An Evening with Fran Lebowitz: On Peter Hujar**

"When people talk about me," Peter Hujar once said of his posthumous reputation, "I want them to be whispering." That will not happen tonight, as writer, humorist, and cultural commentator Fran Lebowitz reflects candidly on the trials and joys of her close friendship with the artist. Lebowitz was twenty-one, Hujar thirty-seven, when they met at a film screening in 1971... but let her tell the story. Lebowitz will speak with Joel Smith, Richard L. Menschel Curator and Department Head of Photography.

**Thursday, February 8, 6:30 pm\***

**Tickets:** \$15; 10 for members; free for students with a valid ID.

*\*The exhibition Peter Hujar: Speed of Life will open at 5:30 pm for program attendees.*

#### **DISCUSSION Peter Hujar: Life and Times**

**Vince Aletti, Cynthia Carr, Jonathan D. Katz, and Gary Schneider**

Hujar's friends and artist colleagues join with scholars of his time, place, and work to offer unique perspectives on the artist's life in four short talks. Speakers include photography

critic Vince Aletti, Hujar's East Village neighbor and friend; Cynthia Carr, author of *Fire in the Belly: The Life and Times of David Wojnarowicz*; Jonathan D. Katz, author of *Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture* and director of the doctoral program in Visual Culture Studies at State University of New York at Buffalo; and artist Gary Schneider, who modeled for Hujar, observed him in the darkroom, and in 1981, at Hujar's urging, co-founded the influential printing lab Schneider/Erdman Inc.

**Saturday, April 7, 2 pm\***

**Tickets:** \$15; 10 for members; free for students with a valid ID.

*\*The exhibition Peter Hujar: Speed of Life will open at 1 pm for program attendees.*

**FILM**

***Pink Flamingos***

**Director:** John Waters

(1972, 93 minutes, rated NC-17)

Within a year of the release of John Water's epic "exercise in poor taste," Peter Hujar was friends with the director and performers Divine and Cookie Mueller. *Pink Flamingos* tells the story of the memorably terrible Babs Johnson (Divine) and her battle with a criminal couple (David Lochary and Mink Stole) who aim to steal her tabloid-given title as "The Filthiest Person Alive."

**Friday, March 2, 7 pm\***

**Tickets:** \$15; 10 for members; free for students with a valid ID.

*\*The exhibition Peter Hujar: Speed of Life will open at 6 pm for program attendees.*

**GALLERY**

**Peter Hujar: Speed of Life**

**TALKS**

Joel Smith, Richard L. Menschel Curator and Department Head, Photography

**Friday, March 9, 6 PM**

**Friday, April 27, 1 PM**

**Organization and Sponsorship**

*Peter Hujar: Speed of Life* is organized by the Morgan Library & Museum, New York and Fundación MAPFRE, Madrid. The curator of the exhibition is Joel Smith, Richard L. Menschel Curator of Photography and Department Head, the Morgan Library & Museum.

Major funding for the international tour was received from the Terra Foundation for American Art. Generous support for the New York presentation was also provided by the Margaret T. Morris Fund for Americana, the J. W. Kieckhefer Foundation, The Keith Haring Foundation, The Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation, Patricia and Thruston Morton, and Nancy and Burton Staniar.

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The programs of the Morgan Library & Museum are made possible with public funds from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs in partnership with the City Council, and by the New York State Council on the Arts with the support of Governor Andrew Cuomo and the New York State Legislature.



### **The Morgan Library & Museum**

A complex of buildings in the heart of New York City, the Morgan Library & Museum began as the private library of financier Pierpont Morgan, one of the preeminent collectors and cultural benefactors in the United States. Today it is a museum, independent research library, music venue, architectural landmark, and historic site. A century after its founding, the Morgan maintains a unique position in the cultural life of New York City and is considered one of its greatest treasures. With the 2006 reopening of its newly renovated campus, designed by renowned architect Renzo Piano, and the 2010 refurbishment of the original library, the Morgan reaffirmed its role as an important repository for the history, art, and literature of Western civilization from 4000 B.C. to the twenty-first century.

### **The Morgan Library & Museum**

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