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Peter Hujar's Downtown New York, Frame by Frame

During a moment of renewed fascination with the photographer, an exhibition and book reveal Hujar at work—and the luminaries he shot.

by **Claire Valentine McCartney**
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There's never been a better moment to spend time with Peter Hujar. Last fall, director Ira Sachs brought the downtown photographer to the screen in *Peter Hujar's Day*, a biographical drama about Hujar's friendship with writer Linda Rosenkrantz in the early 1970s that premiered at Sundance. This spring, Andrew Durbin's dual biography *The Wonderful World That Almost Was: A Life of Peter Hujar and Paul Thek* traces the decades-long relationship between Hujar and his sometimes lover, the sculptor Paul Thek. Now, The Morgan Library & Museum adds another piece to the Hujar renaissance. *Hujar: Contact*, opening May 22, brings together more than 110 of the photographer's contact sheets and 20 enlargements, drawn from The Morgan's archive of over 5,700 preserved sheets. The accompanying catalog, published by MACK, arrives the same day.

The black-and-white sheets offer a candid glimpse into Hujar's vibrant social scene, which included luminaries of the day: Susan Sontag, Fran Lebowitz, John Waters, Iggy Pop, Candy Darling, and David Wojnarowicz all make appearances (Thek is in there, too). The images are made all the more intimate by Hujar's cropping notes and personal edits in the margins.



Candy Darling in room 1423, Cabrini Health Care Center, 1973, job 587
The Morgan Library & Museum, Peter Hujar Collection, New York purchased on the Charina Endowment Fund, 2013, 2013.108:8.5770. Courtesy of Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco and Ortuzar, New York; © The Peter Hujar Archive/ Artists Rights Society (ARS)

Hujar, who died from AIDS-related complications in 1987, began making and filing his contact sheets at 21. The meticulously organized images trace Hujar's photography career—from his beginnings as a studio assistant in 1955 to his years as a freelancer in the late '60s working across industries, including fashion and advertising. Of course, his influential years as a working artist embedded in the East Village scene of the 1970s and '80s is well-covered. The photos capture the spirit of that period, with subjects like Marsha P. Johnson and Patti Smith acting as figureheads for movements including the Stonewall riots and the explosion of punk rock in New York City.

There are truly vulnerable moments—like the contact sheet for Candy Darling, made in 1973, in room 1423 of Cabrini Health Care Center, where the Warhol superstar was dying of leukemia at 29. She's depicted surrounded by flowers, reclining against white hospital linens. In another image, Marsha P. Johnson beams at the camera from the Christopher Street Pier on Easter Sunday in 1976, surrounded by bikes, bodies, and the wide Hudson River. And in yet another, Thek stands, young and alive, among the mummified dead of the Capuchin Catacombs in Palermo; neither Thek nor Hujar knew at that time they would go on to pass within a year of each other.



Marsha P. Johnson on Christopher Street Pier, Easter, 1976, job 719
The Morgan Library & Museum, Peter Hujar Collection, New York purchased on the Charina Endowment Fund, 2013, 2013.108:8.2624. Courtesy of Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco and Ortuazar, New York; © The Peter Hujar Archive/ Artists Rights Society (ARS)

“Peter Hujar’s portraits exclude the trivial and the superfluous, but they leave intact his subjects’ singularity and eccentricity,” says Joel Smith, Richard L. Menschel Curator and Department Head of Photography at The Morgan, who organized the exhibition. “His pictures are uncluttered, but full of the complication of being an individual. Our lives, so much of which happen online, are full of photographs that are supposedly about self-expression. But everyone suspects or knows that their public photos are really about conforming, imitating, pretending. Living in a sameness machine leaves us hungry for images of selfhood that aren’t fake. That’s what Hujar insisted on.”

Hujar: Contact (2026) by Joel Smith is published by MACK and The Morgan Library & Museum. Hujar: Contact is at The Morgan Library & Museum from May 22 to October 25, 2026.



Capuchin Catacombs, Palermo, with Paul Thek, 1963, job 256
The Morgan Library & Museum, purchased on the Charina Endowment Fund, 2013, 2013.108:8.5269-5272. Courtesy of Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco and Ortuzar, New York; © The Peter Hujar Archive / Artists Rights Society (ARS).



Joseph Raffael among other Stable Gallery artists and staff, ca. 1967, job 327

The Morgan Library & Museum, Peter Hujar Collection, Morgan Library & Museum, New York purchased on the Charina Endowment Fund, 2013, 2013.108:8.499.
Courtesy of Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco and Ortzar, New York; © The Peter Hujar Archive / Artists Rights Society (ARS)



Diana Vreeland at home, 1975, job 655

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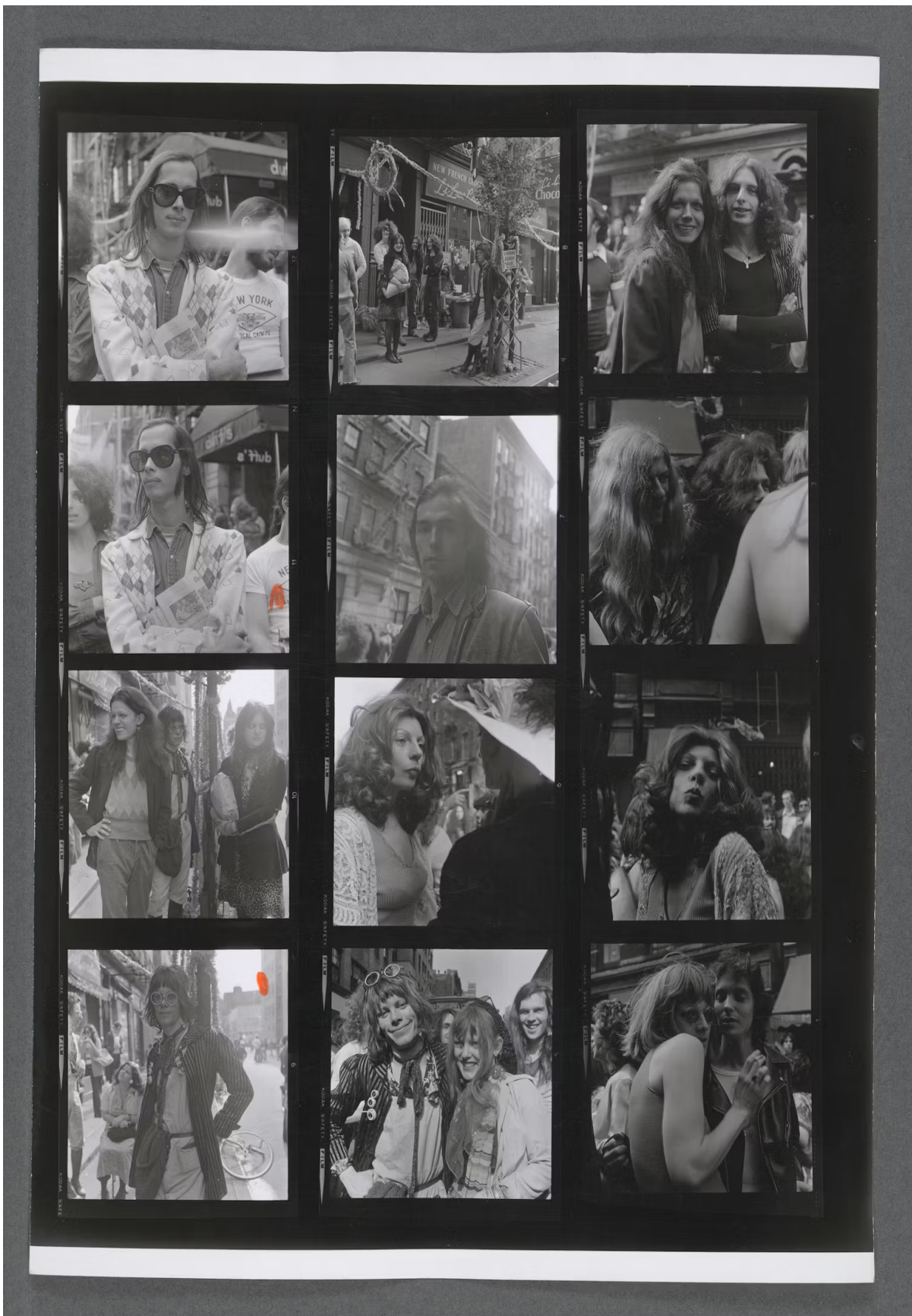
Susan Sontag at home, 1975, job 67

The Morgan Library & Museum, Peter Hujar Collection, New York purchased on the Charina Endowment Fund, 2013. Courtesy of Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco and Ortuzar, New York; © The Peter Hujar Archive/ Artists Rights Society (ARS).



David Wojnarowicz II, 189 Second Avenue, 1981, job 936

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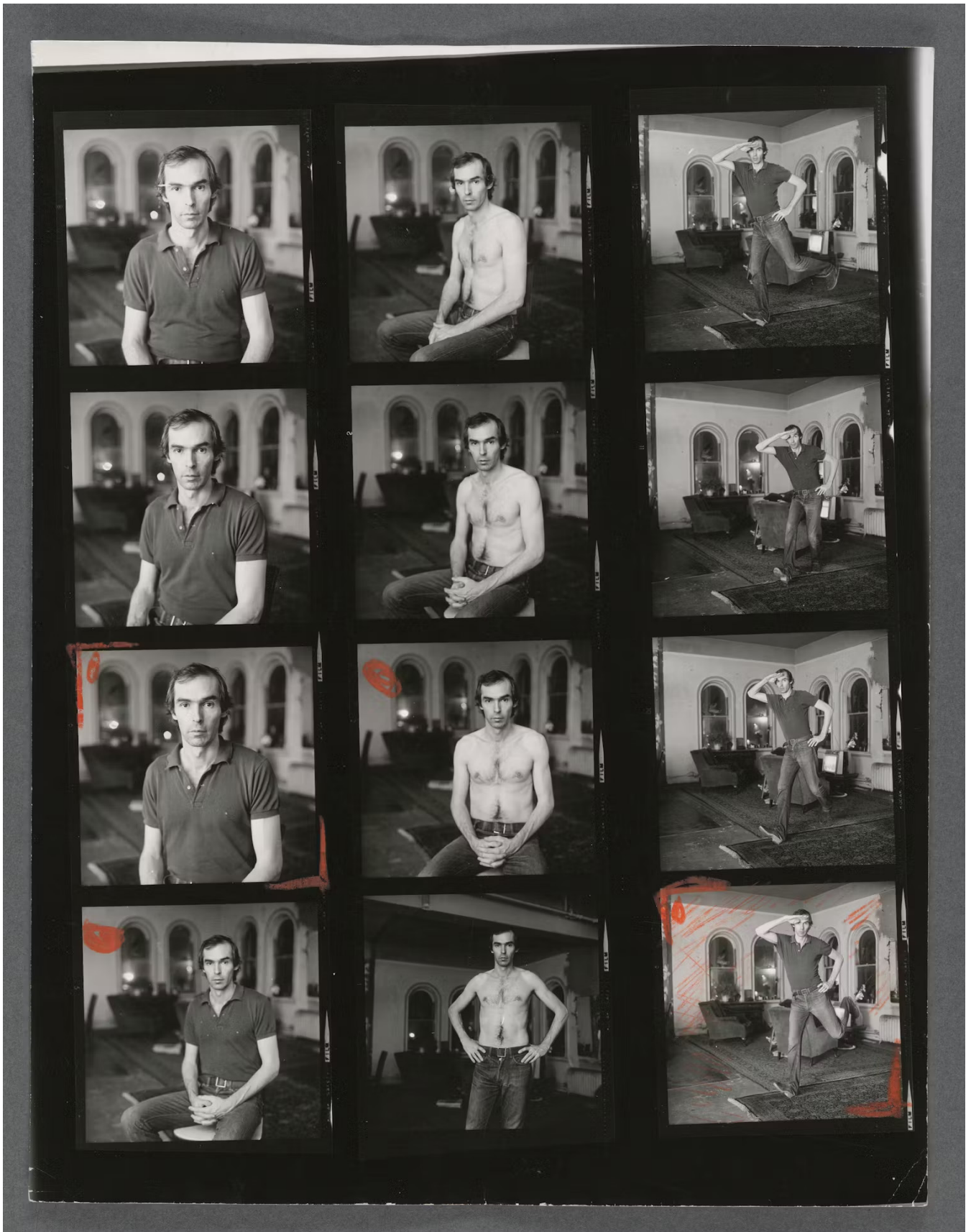
Christopher Street Liberation Day Fair with John Waters and Jackie Curtis, 1973, job 577

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John Heys and Angel Rodriguez, 189 Second Avenue, 1979, job 823

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Self-portraits at 189 Second Avenue, 1974, job 620

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