

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service**National Register of Historic Places**  
**Continuation Sheet**

Yiddish Art Theatre

Name of Property

New York County

County and State

85002427

NR Reference Number

**State/Federal Agency Certification****DRAFT**

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended,

I hereby certify that this \_\_\_ additional documentation \_\_\_ move \_\_\_ removal  
\_\_\_ name change (additional documentation) \_\_\_ other

meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60.

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Signature of Certifying Official/Title:

Date of Action

**National Park Service Certification**

I hereby certify that this property is:

- \_\_\_ entered in the National Register  
\_\_\_ determined eligible for the National Register  
\_\_\_ determined not eligible for the National Register  
\_\_\_ removed from the National Register  
\_\_\_ additional documentation accepted  
\_\_\_ other (explain:) \_\_\_\_\_

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Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

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**SUMMARY**

The Yiddish Art Theatre was listed on the National Register of Historic Places on September 19, 1985, at the local level of significance for its association with the history of Yiddish theater in New York City and for its intact Moorish-inspired exterior and interior decoration, including a central recessed ceiling dome containing a prominent Star of David. The nomination discussed the history of Yiddish theater in Europe and the United States, Jewish immigration to America and especially New York City, and the social institutions that became important to Eastern European Jewish immigrants living in pluralistic urban settlements. Although no period of significance was stated, the original draft notes that the theater was built in 1926 and that the first Yiddish troupe using the theater was in operation until 1950. Since then, additional research has been compiled on the history of the theater and its association with Jewish performance art. Since Jewish theater is not the primary purpose of this submission, this additional information has been included in two appendices. Appendix A is the Yiddish theater heyday history from 1926 to 1945, and Appendix B is the revival Yiddish theater history from 1961 to 1987.

The purpose of this additional documentation is to document the theater's LGBT associations during its use as a live theater venue and for its association with Club 181, a venue that featured lavish shows of "female impersonators" (a term used at the time) and "drag king" (women dressed as men) wait staff under criterion A in areas of Social History/LGBT and Performing Arts. In addition, the document adds significance under criterion B in the areas of Social History/LGBT and Art for the theater's associations with the life and work of three important LGBT artists, **Jackie Curtis**, **Peter Hujar**, and **David Wojnarowicz**.<sup>1</sup> Each of the three lived and worked in the building at separate times between 1968 and 1992, and in each case, this building is the place most closely associated with their significant contributions. The end date for the period of significance for the building has been expanded to 1992 to encompass the periods of residence for these three significant artists

*Name Change to Louis N. Jaffe Art Theater Building*

This building was listed on the National Register as the Yiddish Art Theatre. However, that nomination confused the name of the first theater troupe in the building with the name of the performance venue. While this theater was intended as the permanent home of the Yiddish Art Theatre, that company only performed here during four theater seasons (1926-28 and 1932-34), so the theater was known under that name only during those years. During its entire Yiddish theater heyday, from 1926 to 1945, the theater operated under many different names according to the theater company then in residence. It was often known as the Yiddish Folks Theater to distinguish it from the Yiddish Art Theatre troupe. Other names included the [Ludwig] Satz Folks Theater, Molly Picon's Folks Theater, and [Misha and Lucy] Germans' Folks Theater, taking the name of the star Yiddish performers leading their troupes, as well as the New York Art Troupe at the Yiddish Folks Theater, and New Jewish Folk Theater. These theater

<sup>1</sup> Note: The names of LGBT people are in **bold**.

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names appeared on the building's marquee, as well as in advertisements and theater programs. After its initial Yiddish theater period, the theater operated under a variety of names – Phoenix, Casino East, Gayety, Eden, Entermedia, and Second Avenue – as well as several movie theater names. Appendix C includes the history of these later theaters and their LGBT associations.

The name Louis N. Jaffe Art Theater Building was chosen to represent the owner and builder of the theater and more appropriately embraces the entire history of the building, including its history during the post-Yiddish theater years. Louis Nathaniel Jaffe (1882-1944) was a Russian-born Brooklyn lawyer, prominent Jewish civic leader, and philanthropist. A Yiddish speaker and a devotee of Maurice Schwartz and his Yiddish Art Theatre troupe, Jaffe vowed to construct a theater for them. After two years, however, Schwartz decided that this theater was not adequate for his ambitious productions, so his company performed elsewhere throughout its existence. Jaffe then rented the theater to various other Yiddish companies. Louis N. Jaffe Art Theater was referenced in contemporary newspaper accounts, and the name “JAFTE ART THEATRE BLDG” appears on the building.<sup>2</sup>

Louis N. Jaffe Art Theater Building was also the name chosen for the landmark designations by the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission in 1993.<sup>3</sup> Thus, a name change would bring a consistency to its various designations. The inclusion of the word “building” also references the history of the spaces that were not part of the actual theater itself – downstairs restaurants/clubs and the front portion offices that were later converted to loft residences. These spaces, which became residences for three significant artists, are integral to the additional documentation being submitted.

## DESCRIPTION

### *Changes to the Interior Since the 1985 Listing*

The description submitted with the original nomination is comprehensive and accurate. However, the building has been altered since the original nomination. In 1990, the Jaffe Art Theater was converted into a seven-screen complex of movie theaters. To accommodate this change, the orchestra floor level of the auditorium was removed, and a new floor level inserted at the height of the stage; two new double stairways were installed to connect this level with the balcony level -- this is now the main movie theater in the complex. Additional movie theaters were inserted below this, behind the proscenium arch, and downstairs. The entrance lobby on Second Avenue was substantially rebuilt, with only the original ceiling remaining. Most other aspects of the historic interior remain essentially intact. The plasterwork of the ceiling of the auditorium was extensively damaged by the partial collapse of the concrete roof

<sup>2</sup> One example is “Attorney in Debt for \$223, 394 Has No Real Assets,” *Brooklyn Eagle*, May 19, 1931, 3.

<sup>3</sup> Jay Shockley, *Louis N. Jaffe Art Theater (Yiddish Art Theater/ Yiddish Folks Theater) Building Designation Report* and *Louis N. Jaffe Art Theater (Yiddish Art Theatre/ Yiddish Folks Theater) Building Interior Designation Report* (New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, 1993). These reports form a basis for this amended nomination, but much more material has become available in the subsequent three decades, along with the internet, than has been included in this document.

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above it in 1989. A successful ceiling restoration project was carried out by CTA Architects and Evergreene Architectural Studio from 2012 to 2015. Additional documentation about the original theater interior co-designer is included in Appendix D.

*Residential Space not described in the original nomination*

The 3N loft apartment that was the consecutive residence of three significant artists between 1968 and 1992 is located in the northern half of the third story in the front portion of the Louis N. Jaffe Art Theater Building. It was formerly two office spaces that were combined into one large loft apartment by the removal of an interior wall when some of the Jaffe offices were converted for use as residential loft apartments by 1968. It is mostly a large open space, approximately 1,036 square feet, with a high ceiling (based on 1925 blueprints, the original 10-foot ceiling was significantly lower).<sup>4</sup> The ceiling has a number of exposed concrete beams. Paired round-arched windows, each 6'-9" in width, are located on the northern side, as well as the northern end of the eastern side. Additionally on the eastern side, to the south, is a large arched window, 7'-10" in width, located above the main theater entrance. The bathroom, and later photographic darkroom, were located in the northwest corner of the loft. To the east of this, separated by a wall, was the kitchenette. To the south of the kitchenette was a doorway to the bathroom/darkroom area, and to the south of that was an open closet and shelving. The long south wall was blank. Access to the loft is by a long stairway from the street, with a door located to the south of the main theater entrance. The door into the loft apartment is just to the north of the third-floor landing. It leads into a small hallway, with another doorway into the main loft space. It is believed that the configuration of the loft apartment today is the same as it was in the 1968-1992 period.

<sup>4</sup> Louis N. Jaffe Art Theater Building blueprints (1925), New York City Department of Buildings.

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**SIGNIFICANCE**

**Summary**

The Louis N. Jaffe Art Theater Building is significant under criterion A in the area of Social History/LGBT and Performing Arts for its association with Club 181, a venue that, from 1946 to 1953, featured lavish shows of “female impersonators” (a term used at the time) and “drag king” (women dressed as men) wait staff, and for its association with the Phoenix Theater, a pioneering Off-Broadway theater, from 1953 to 1961, co-founded by the influential **Norris Houghton**, a gay man. These two venues operated here in the immediate post-World War II years, a socially and politically conservative time when LGBT people, largely invisible in mainstream society, were under increased surveillance and social control. Club 181 and the Phoenix Theater, therefore, provide invaluable insight into the LGBT experience in nightlife and theater – cornerstones of LGBT life – in New York City during one of the most homophobic periods of American history.

Club 181 was, according to **Lisa E. Davis**, historian and author of mid-twentieth century lesbian Manhattan nightlife, “the most famous of Village gay cabarets.”<sup>5</sup> Operated by the Mafia, the club is an early post-war example of the LGBT community’s long and complex relationship with mob-controlled nightlife spaces. Influential drag kings, such as **Buddy Kent** (one of the most renowned from the 1940s to the 1960s), **Gail Williams** and **Blackie Dennis**, who performed at Club 181, later revealed that the Mafia protected them from being violently attacked for dressing in drag. At the same time, they did not want their names attached to any stories connecting them to the mob during their lifetimes. The club’s popularity ultimately could not save it from being a target of institutional homophobia. After going to court to fight the loss of its license by the New York State Liquor Authority, mainly because of the mere presences of LGBT performers and patrons, the club closed in 1953.

The Phoenix Theater, in addition to being an early Off-Broadway theater and influencing the proliferation of regional American theater, is considered one of the most important, prolific, and creative companies of its time. Notable LGBT theater artists, other than Houghton, associated with the Phoenix include directors **Michael Redgrave**, **Eric Bentley**, and **Tony Richardson**; actors **Montgomery Clift**, **Farley Granger**, **Eva Le Gallienne**, and **Joel Grey**; costumer designer **Alvin Colt**; lighting designer **Tharon Musser**; scenic and costume designer **Rouben Ter-Arutunian**; and production and lighting designer **Jean Rosenthal**. Because the Phoenix operated during a highly homophobic period, it is important to acknowledge the names of the many LGBT individuals associated with the theater as a way of providing visibility and concrete documentation of the community’s influence on the American theater.

<sup>5</sup> Lisa E. Davis, “Drag Kings of Village Nightlife: Before and Way Before Stonewall,” *Google Arts & Culture*, <https://artsandculture.google.com/story/drag-kings-of-village-nightlife-before-and-way-before-stonewall/swUhRaa9JaRsbg>.

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The building is also significant under criterion A in the area of Social History/LGBT and criterion B in the area of art as the residence and workspace of three significant LGBT artists between 1968 and 1992: playwright, director, performer, and poet **Jackie Curtis**; photographer **Peter Hujar**; and artist **David Wojnarowicz**. Their contributions to the arts scene in the East Village from the 1960s to the 1990s, embodied major cultural trends of the LGBT experience in this era, which included new ideas about gender identity and expression, the creation of new forms of art, and the devastating impact of the AIDS epidemic. Each of the artists lived here, in the same loft apartment, sequentially in three separate periods between 1968 and 1992. Jackie Curtis developed a pioneering gender-fluid persona that defied gender stereotypes. He came to be at the center of, and a legend in, Manhattan's East Village Off-Off-Broadway theater, underground film, and LGBT scenes from the late-1960s through the 1970s. He became a successful playwright and a "Superstar" in **Andy Warhol** films. Curtis resided in the loft space from around the end of 1968 to 1973. Peter Hujar, already a photographer, fully developed his craft during his time in this residence, creating a darkroom and using his apartment as a photography studio. A stalwart of the East Village art scene, but an impoverished artist, Hujar was only partially recognized in his lifetime. Since his death from an AIDS-related illness, however, he has come to be regarded as one of the greatest American photographers of the twentieth century, particularly noted for his portraits. Hujar resided in the space from 1973 until his death in 1987. David Wojnarowicz channeled a life of extreme hardship into radical multimedia art, photography, filmmaking, writing, music, performance, and activism. He is among the most famous artists of the East Village scene of the 1980s, as well as one of the most esteemed activists lost during the height of the AIDS crisis in the 1980s and early '90s. A fearless political firebrand, he challenged the art world and lambasted America for failing the LGBT community, particularly in response to AIDS, and his fury spurred several national controversies. Wojnarowicz resided in the space from 1988 until his death in 1992, when he was given the first political funeral of the AIDS epidemic. The additional documentation also expands the period of significance for the theater building to 1992 to encompass the period of residence for each of the three artists.

*The LGBT Presence on the Lower East Side*

Despite the real and constant threat of urban renewal plans and neighborhood displacement, artists, writers, and people in the theater "discovered" the Lower East Side by the early 1950s. Many of these people would ordinarily have been attracted to Greenwich Village; but the increasing costs of living in that neighborhood forced them to find housing outside of that traditionally LGBT-welcoming community. The demolition of the Third Avenue elevated in 1955 made the area just to the east more desirable and more "connected" to New York University and Greenwich Village, especially between East Houston and East 14<sup>th</sup> Streets. Realtors began marketing this area, first as "Village East" and then as the "East Village." This area was still populated by substantial clusters of immigrant populations, including Polish, Russian, and Ukrainian. "Loisaida" (Spanglish for the Lower East Side), along the lettered avenues, had a large Puerto Rican community. Nevertheless, the newer residents soon established the East Village's reputation as edgy, artistic, and "counter-cultural," with residents such as

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the Beats and poets of the 1950s, the creation of underground film and Off-Off-Broadway theater in the 1950-60s, and the hippies of the 1960s.

According to the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission's *East Village/Lower East Side Historic District Designation Report*:

New York experienced a prolonged economic decline during the 1970s and early 1980s as the city lost many of its manufacturing jobs as well as a significant part of its population. The symbolic low point came during the financial crisis of 1975 when the municipal government barely avoided declaring bankruptcy. The East Village was particularly hard hit as many local property owners, unwilling or unable to pay for maintenance or property taxes, entered into a downward cycle of disinvestment in their buildings. The city assumed control of many of these properties, but because of the municipal economic crisis and a decrease in federal assistance for affordable housing, it too was unable to invest sufficiently in the neighborhood's housing stock. Some local residents and community groups began to rehabilitate their buildings through sweat-equity projects, in some cases via officially-sanctioned channels such as the Urban Homesteading Program and in others through illegal means such as squatting.<sup>6</sup>

Through this cycle of disinvestment and rehabilitation, the East Village became, for a decade in the 1980s, a center of locally, then nationally celebrated, avant-garde "punk" counterculture, art, and nightlife. The easternmost section of the East Village was particularly gritty. Artist and later gallery owner **Alan Barrows** described it and the 1980s as "a blockbuster decade for creative talent and the reinventing of a city after decades of neglect. Mountains of garbage and sealed up tenements in a neighborhood with its abandoned burnt out cars and trash resembled war-torn Beirut rather than part of the largest city in the United States."<sup>7</sup>

East Village residents in that period created a "downtown art scene" that was accompanied by an explosion of art galleries (briefly the center of the New York art world), other businesses and institutions, music venues, bars and clubs. Cheaper rents (many of the tenements did not have individual bathrooms in each apartment) attracted younger political activists and organizations and artists of all types. The LGBT community was a significant and accepted presence in the East Village – as artists and gallery and business owners in the Off-Off-Broadway theater world and in bars and clubs for LGBT nightlife, with its accompanying drag scene. The neighborhood and its artistic and LGBT scenes were drastically, negatively affected by the end of the decade by a number of factors. These included the AIDS epidemic, which emerged in 1981, and rampant drug abuse, both of which resulted in countless deaths, and significant changes in taste in the fickle art world. After that, the East Village succumbed to

<sup>6</sup> Christopher D. Brazee, *East Village/Lower East Side Historic District Designation Report* (New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, 2012).

<sup>7</sup> Alan Barrows, Civilian Warfare Gallery, <https://civilianwarfaregallery.wordpress.com>.

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increasing gentrification. Loft apartments in the Jaffe Building were quite desirable, being centrally located amidst all of the East Village scenes, not to mention the cultural activities in the theater itself.

***LGBT Associations with the Louis N. Jaffe Art Theater Building 1946-1992***

***Club 181 - 1946 to 1951***

After the Louis N. Jaffe Art Theater Building's completion, the downstairs, entered at the south end on Second Avenue, was the location of a series of clubs and restaurants, most reflecting the then Russian-Ukrainian-Polish immigrant population of the neighborhood. All of them featured live entertainment: Russian Art Restaurant (1927-38), New Russian Art Restaurant (1939-40), Adria Polish Restaurant (1940), Club Adria (1941), Club 181 (1941-42), an "outpost of Harlem swing," and the Roumanian Folks Casino (1944-45).

Of particular significance to LGBT history was the popular Club 181 [not to be confused with the previous jazz club with that name]. Operating from 1946 to 1951, Club 181 was one of the most luxurious clubs in the U.S. that featured lavish shows of "female impersonators" (who might today identify as drag queens or transgender women) and a wait staff of "drag kings" (women dressed as men and who would perhaps identify as lesbians today) who also performed.<sup>8</sup> The club, under Mafia control, drew many LGBT patrons, as well as heterosexuals. It, therefore, serves as an important and early example of the LGBT nightlife experience, both in the audience and on stage, in the immediate post-World War II era, when the community faced increased policing and social control. This reflected a nationwide political conservatism that culminated in anti-Communist witch-hunts (the Second Red Scare) led by Senator Joseph A. McCarthy. A parallel "lavender scare" also greatly impacted LGBT people.

Laws curtailing homosexual activities were enacted or more strongly enforced beginning in the 1930s. After Prohibition ended in 1933, the New York Legislature created the New York State Liquor Authority (SLA) in 1934, which had the power to revoke the licenses of bar owners who "suffer or permit [their] premises to become disorderly." Though legislators declined to define "disorderly" in this context, the SLA, prodded by moral crusaders, took the interpretation of the state's homophobic 1923 solicitation statute and considered the mere presence of homosexuals at a bar to be so defined.<sup>9</sup> A bar could lose its liquor license if caught serving such "criminals." The Mafia, familiar with operating speakeasies during Prohibition and seizing another opportunity for exploitation and profit, opened some establishments under the ruse of being members-only private "bottle clubs" that didn't need a license. (Stonewall, an NHL, was a later example of this type of establishment.) But with the creation of the SLA, virtually all gay and lesbian bars or establishments that tolerated a gay, lesbian, or gender non-

<sup>8</sup> Jay Shockley, "Club 181," NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project, March 2017, revised November 2021, <https://www.nyclgbtsites.org/site/louis-n-jaffe-art-theater>.

<sup>9</sup> George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (Basic Books, 1994), 337.

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conforming presence, came to be owned and/or operated with some type of involvement by the Mafia, and a vicious cycle began of Mafia-police-SLA payoffs that continued through the 1980s. Owners and operators were forced to take out Mafia loans and patronize their monopoly on bar equipment and vending machines. Ironically, through these bribes and payoffs, the police and SLA authorities actually protected Mafia interests and kept many gay bars open.

Club 181 was opened by the family of the infamous Mafia boss Vito Genovese, who was one of the bigger Mafia club operators in Greenwich Village starting in the 1930s. **Anna Genovese** (1905-1982), Vito's bisexual wife, ran it with her brothers, Pete and Fred Petillo, and Genovese frontman/manager Stephen Franse. Anna had started out in clubs as the proprietor of Club Caravan, 578 West Broadway (demolished), in 1939, taking over many of her husband's business interests when he left New York City for exile in Italy in 1937 to avoid arrest for a murder and other crimes.

The Mafia connections at Club 181 illustrate the complex relationship that LGBT people had with the mob in the post-World War II era. Historian **Lisa E. Davis** stated, "You'd think that for gay girls, working for the Mafia would be some kind of scourge — it was the greatest thing that ever happened to them!"<sup>10</sup> Davis also said, "Being gay — dressing up in your little trousers and suit — you could easily get yourself murdered. The Mafia protected them."<sup>11</sup> At the same time, they did not want their names connected to any stories about them while they were alive. They told Davis that "Anna [Genovese] was definitely into the girls" and that having to navigate the situation without angering her or her husband was an issue.

Davis's research into this era led her to write the mystery novel *Under the Mink* (2001), set in Greenwich Village in 1949 and based on the famed drag kings of the era. The protagonist, Blackie Cole, was based on **Buddy Kent**, a Club 181 performer and one of the city's most renowned drag kings from the 1940s to the 1960s. Born Malvina Schwartz ca. 1925 in Manhattan, she adopted the name Buddy Kent after high school, noting that being Jewish and a lesbian made it difficult to find work. Frequenting the lesbian bar scene in Greenwich Village as a working-class teenager, she wore her preferred outfit — a white boy's shirt, a bow tie, a navy blue or black skirt, and men's shoes (because she had large feet) — and slicked her curly hair wet to make it straight. At eighteen years old, dressing by this point in what she described as "full drag" (pants, vest, shirt, tie, and short hair), she started bartending at Ernie's, one of several bars popular with lesbians in 1930s Greenwich Village. One night, Ernie's was short an act, so Kent filled in with a dancing routine. Seeing potential, people associated with Ernie's helped Kent put together a real act.

<sup>10</sup> Hugh Ryan, "The Three Lives of Malvina Schwartz," *Hazlitt*, October 12, 2016, <https://hazlitt.net/longreads/three-lives-malvina-schwartz>.

<sup>11</sup> Hugh Ryan, "Back in the Day, Lesbian Drag Kings Worked for the Mafia," *Vice*, July 5, 2015, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/when-drag-kings-ruled-alongside-the-mafia-235>.

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Kent would soon be performing at Club 181, “the most famous of Village gay cabarets,” according to Davis.<sup>12</sup> In a 1983 interview with Joan Nestle for the Lesbian Herstory Archives, Kent described her experience at the club:

When I was twenty-one, the 181 Club was hiring attractive lesbians to wait tables. If you had any talent, they put you in the chorus. So I became a chorus boy/waiter. We were all making money and buying cars and really living it up. I did a strip out of top hat and tails, a Fred Astaire dance and then — with one flip of the hand — my pants flew out from under me. Then I went into a girl strip. When I finished people didn’t know if I was a boy or a girl because I was quite slim and very flat.<sup>13</sup>

Among other notable drag king performers at Club 181 were **Gail Williams** (Gayle Krumpkin) and **Blackie Dennis**. Davis notes that Dennis was a star and a crooner. A popular lesbian stripper at the club was **Toni Bennett**.

*Swarsarnt Neuf’s Gay Guides* (1949) stated that “New York boasts two all-out drag shows. The 181... is the more elegant and pretentious of the two.”<sup>14</sup> Three shows performed nightly were produced by Neil Stone and “conceived, staged, and directed” by Broadway dancer (and later Tony Award-winning choreographer for stage, film and TV) Danny Daniels. Live music was provided by the orchestra of prolific Broadway conductor and musical director Al Goodman.<sup>15</sup> Historian **Lillian Faderman** wrote that the Club 181 had “waiters who were butch lesbians in tuxedos ... Like the bars of the 1920s, it drew many heterosexuals who came to gawk or to dabble, but many more men and women who were committed to homosexuality and who came to be with other homosexuals.”<sup>16</sup> One lesbian waiter, **Bertie Halpern**, reminisced that “it was like the homosexual Copacabana. It was a lovely club. Wedgewood walls, white and blue. It had a nice stage. They had the cream of the crop, as far as female impersonators. These weren’t just drag queens. They were guys that had talent behind their costumes.”<sup>17</sup> One such performer was the influential “**Kitt Russell**” (**Russell Paull**), who got his start here in 1948. He later became the director of the Club 82 Revue at Club 82, 82 East 4<sup>th</sup> Street.

Even with the Mafia’s influence, Club 181 had to navigate an era when widespread homophobia could shut down a business no matter its popularity. The extremely homophobic *Confidential* guidebooks, written by Jack Lait and Lee Mortimer, provide insight: “the most notorious Lesbian night club in New York is on Second Avenue, south of 14th Street, on the lower East Side - the 181 Club” (*New York:*

<sup>12</sup> Lisa E. Davis, “Drag Kings of Village Nightlife: Before and Way Before Stonewall.”

<sup>13</sup> Interview of Malvina Schwartz (aka Bubbles Kent, Buddy Kent) by Joan Nestle for the Lesbian Herstory Archives, 1983, via Hugh Ryan, <https://hazlitt.net/longreads/three-lives-malvina-schwartz>.

<sup>14</sup> Hugh Hagius, *Swarsarnt Nerf’s Gay Guides for 1949* (Bibliogay Publications, 2010).

<sup>15</sup> Club 181 souvenir programs and advertisement (n.d.).

<sup>16</sup> Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in 20th-Century America* (Columbia University Press, 1991).

<sup>17</sup> Allison Owings, *Hey, Waitress!: the USA From the Other Side of the Tray* (University of California Press, 2002), 193-194.

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*Confidential!*, 1948/1951); “New York’s most evil and notorious fairy-haunt, the disgusting 181 Club, at that address on Second Ave., where every cabaret law and ordinance on the books is fractured nightly” (*Washington: Confidential!*, 1951); and “the most famous fag joint in town” (*U.S.A. Confidential*, 1952).<sup>18</sup>

Through an action of the SLA, Club 181 lost its liquor license in April 1951. For five nights – December 15 through 19, 1950 – the club, its performers, staff, and patrons were surveilled by undercover police. The club was then cited for nine violations, including the sale of alcohol after hours; staff allegedly inducing patrons to buy alcohol; the club permitting an “indecent” act by a patron; the presence of “homosexuals,” lesbians, and other “undesirables,” and that the club put on “obscene, indecent” performances and exhibitions. In its report, the *New York Daily News* called the club “a hangout for perverts of both sexes.”<sup>19</sup>

Club 181 was extremely profitable, however, with a substantially straight outer borough and tourist crowd, and receipts for 1950 were reported as \$480,000. The Mafia, through the 181 Restaurant Corp., with Stephen Franse as president, contested the revocation of its license. The case was heard in the New York Supreme Court on March 28 and April 11, 1951. The counsel for the SLA stated, “the operation of this club constituted an affront to the community and a danger to the morals of the citizenry,” and much of the police testimony centered on the gender non-conforming dress and behavior of the performers, staff, and patrons. Franse was forced to deny any knowledge that gay men or lesbians frequented the club or were employed there. Interestingly, the club attempted to challenge the SLA’s use of the term “disorderly” (in Section 106 of its law) to revoke the licenses of places with an LGBT clientele, since it was so vague and the legislature had never defined it. Club 181’s license was officially revoked on April 27, then it was stayed until review by the court’s Appellate Division, which denied the appeal on June 6. The New York State Court of Appeals affirmed the earlier decision on July 11, and the club’s final appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court was denied.<sup>20</sup> Club 181’s operation was basically transferred to Club 82 in 1953.<sup>21</sup>

*Phoenix Theater - 1953 to 1961*

Following the end of Yiddish theater at the Jaffe (New Jewish Folk) Theater in 1945, it became a movie theater in 1946 known as the Stuyvesant Theater. In the fall of 1953, the vacant Stuyvesant was leased by a newly created theater company, and both the company and the theater were named the Phoenix Theater. The legendary Phoenix was an early Off-Broadway theater and considered one of the most

<sup>18</sup> Jack Lait and Lee Mortimer, *New York: Confidential!* (Crown Publishers, 1948/1951), *Washington: Confidential!* (Crown Publishers, 1951), and *U.S.A. Confidential* (Crown Publishers, 1952).

<sup>19</sup> “Which-Sex-Is-Which Club Loses License,” *New York Daily News*, April 28, 1951.

<sup>20</sup> New York Supreme Court, *181 Restaurant Corp. v. O’Connell, et al.* (New York State Liquor Authority), March 28 and April 11, 1951; New York State Court of Appeals, *Lenore F. Moore, Inc. v. O’Connell, et al.* (New York State Liquor Authority), June 19, 1951.

<sup>21</sup> Jay Shockley, “Club 82,” NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project, November 2021, <https://www.nyclgbtsites.org/site/club-82>.

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important, prolific, and creative companies of its time. It had an influence on the proliferation of regional American theater as well.<sup>22</sup>

Though there had been small, early “experimental” theaters in Greenwich Village, such as the Provincetown Playhouse (1916), the concept of what today is known as less commercialized, “Off-Broadway” theater in New York dates from the late 1940s and early 1950s. Theater historians often credit the Living Theatre (1947), created by actor/director Judith Malina and painter **Julian Beck**, as the first. Circle in the Square Theater, 5 Sheridan Square, was founded in 1951 by a group of actors that included Jose Quintero and Theodore Mann. It became known for producing revivals of plays by well-known playwrights and had an early success with **Tennessee Williams’s** *Summer and Smoke* in 1952. Another milestone in the history of Off-Broadway was the production of Brecht/Weill’s *The Threepenny Opera* at the Theatre de Lys, 121 Christopher Street, which ran from 1955 to 1961.

The co-founders of the Phoenix Theater were **Norris Houghton** (1909-2001), who became the artistic director, and T. Edward Hambleton (1911-2005), who acted as manager of the company. Houghton, born in Indianapolis, graduated from Princeton University, and in 1931 became a stage manager and scenic designer of the University Players in West Falmouth, Massachusetts. Following a Guggenheim Fellowship to study theater in Russia in 1934-35, he was an assistant to actor **Katharine Cornell** and director **Guthrie McClintic** (1936), was the scenic designer of seven Broadway productions (1937-38) and art director of the St. Louis Municipal Opera (1939). Houghton received a Rockefeller Foundation grant in 1940 to travel around the country to observe local theaters. In 1945, he was a founder, producer and director of Theatre, Inc., a non-profit producing organization, and was associate editor of *Theatre Arts* in 1945-48. He was the first American to direct a Shakespeare play in England, in 1947, and he directed three Broadway shows between 1948 and 1951, including **Michael Redgrave** in *Macbeth*.<sup>23</sup> Hambleton, descendant of a wealthy Baltimore banking family, had theater management and production experience. A Yale University drama graduate, he ran a theater in Rhode Island and produced seven Broadway shows between 1937 and 1950. He became associated with the Experimental Theater of the American National Theater and Academy (ANTA) in 1946, and was responsible for bringing German

<sup>22</sup> Shockley, *Louis N. Jaffe Art Theater (Yiddish Art Theater/ Yiddish Folks Theater) Building Designation Report*; Richard A. Cordell and Lowell Matson, ed., *The Off-Broadway Theatre: Seven Plays* (Random House, 1959); Weldon R. Durham, ed., *American Theatre Companies, 1931-1986* (Greenwood Press, 1989); Michael Feingold, “The Phoenix Theater 1953-1982,” *Village Voice*, Dec. 21, 1982, 117, 130; Norris Houghton, “The Phoenix Rises,” *New York Times*, Nov. 29, 1953, II, 1, 3; Stuart W. Little, *Off-Broadway: The Prophetic Theater (A Documentary History from 1952 to the Present)* (Coward McCann & Geoghegan, Inc., 1972); Stuart Vaughan, *A Possible Theatre: The Experiences of a Pioneer in America's Resident Theatre* (McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1969); “Tandy and Cronyn Launching New Theater,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, November 29, 1953; Albert Bermel, “The Phoenix Has Two Heads,” *Tulane Drama Review* (September 1959), 60-89, <https://www-jstor-org.i.ezproxy.nypl.org/stable/1124805?seq=1>.

<sup>23</sup> Paula Burba, “Theater director, producer Norris Houghton dies,” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, October 12, 2001; John Russell, “A Dear Comrade in Art,” *New York Times*, August 18, 1991, 7-2; Kenneth Jones, “Norris Houghton, Director and Designer Who Co-Founded Influential Phoenix, Dead at 92,” *Playbill*, <https://www.playbill.com/article/norris-houghton-director-and-designer-whoco-founded-influential-phoenix-dead-at-92-com-99104>; “Norris Houghton,” Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Norris\\_Houghton](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Norris_Houghton);

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playwright Bertolt Brecht to Los Angeles in 1947 for *Galileo*.<sup>24</sup>

The Phoenix Theater was formed initially as a limited partnership company, its partners including such theatrical luminaries as Richard Rodgers, Elia Kazan, Mildred Dunnock, **William Inge**, and Peggy Wood. It also had financial backing from the wealthy and successful theater producer Roger L. Stevens. Planned as an “art theater”/repertory company, modelled in part after the Lyric Hammersmith Theater in London, the Phoenix was envisioned to be freed from the restrictions, both artistic and economic, of the Broadway stage. In their statement of purpose, the theater’s founders expressed their desires “to release actors, directors, playwrights, and designers from the pressures forced on them by the hit-or-flop patterns of Broadway” and to give theater patrons “a playhouse where they can see top-flight productions of fine plays with professional casts within the limitations of their budgets.”<sup>25</sup>

The search for a theater away from the Times Square area led the founders to this vacant house in the East Village. Houghton touted the attractiveness of the 1,100-seat theater, which was newer than many of the Broadway houses, and its advantages of location, in terms of transportation and proximity to the 30,000 residents of Stuyvesant Town and Peter Cooper Village. The goal of presenting serious theater, with tickets costing only \$1.20 to \$3.00, was to be met through union concessions, a salary ceiling for performers at \$100 a week, and a limited engagement schedule of four weeks per production.

The theater opened in December 1953, with Sidney Howard’s *Madam, Will You Walk*, starring Jessica Tandy and Hume Cronyn. Over the course of eight full seasons in this house, the Phoenix Theater presented an impressive array of American and European theatrical talent, from both the stage and motion pictures. Directors of Phoenix productions included John Houseman, Howard da Silva, Sidney Lumet, Oscar Homolka, Tyrone Guthrie, **Michael Redgrave**, **Eric Bentley**, **Tony Richardson**, and George Abbott. The numerous distinguished actors with the company included Robert Ryan, Mildred Natwick, Kaye Ballard, **Montgomery Clift**, Maureen Stapleton, Geraldine Fitzgerald, Nancy Walker, **Farley Granger**, Viveca Lindfors, Uta Hagen, Siobhan McKenna, **Eva Le Gallienne**, Irene Worth, Eli Wallach, Joan Plowright, June Havoc, Jacob Ben-Ami, Lillian Gish, and Mildred Dunnock. Despite the company’s emphasis on established actors, it also formed a reputation for assisting the careers of talented newcomers, some of whom included Tammy Grimes, **Joel Grey**, Charlotte Rae, Larry Storch, Jerry Stiller, Peter Falk, and Fritz Weaver.

The theater also employed esteemed scenic, costume, and lighting designers, composers, librettists, and choreographers. The company tended toward classic dramas (by Shakespeare, Chekhov, Shaw, Ibsen, Brecht, Schiller, Eliot, O’Casey, etc.), but it became notable as well for its innovative musicals.

<sup>24</sup> J. Wynn Rousuck, “Pioneering producer reshaped the theater,” *Baltimore Sun*, December 20, 2005; Celestine Bohlen, “Norris Houghton, Theater Director, Dies at 92,” *New York Times*, October 10, 2001.

<sup>25</sup> Little, 54.

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The Phoenix Theater was never a profitable venture after its first critically successful season (which included *The Golden Apple*), and it had periods of failure, success, and change. The second season saw its first major popular hit, the musical revue *Phoenix '55*, and the installation of air conditioning for the first time, so that the house could still be used during the warmest months. Following the fourth season, the company was reorganized both as a nonprofit organization under the financial administration of Theatre, Inc. (Roger L. Stevens, president), and as a permanent repertory company under artistic director Stuart Vaughan. The theater's least successful season (1958-59) was followed by its greatest success, the musical comedy *Once Upon a Mattress*, which launched the career of Carol Burnett. The company was later acclaimed for its productions of Shakespeare's *Henry IV* (Parts I and II) and *Hamlet*, the latter, starring Donald Madden, one of the most successful American presentations of that play to date. After years of deficits, the Phoenix Theater directors considered its large house to be a burden for its type of theater company, and Houghton was increasingly turning his attention to academia. The Phoenix moved to a smaller house at 334 East 74<sup>th</sup> Street in the fall of 1961, and the company survived until 1982, still influential.

*LGBT Associations at the Phoenix Theater*

As with Club 181, the Phoenix operated at the Louis N. Jaffe Art Theater Building during one of the most homophobic periods in American history – the post-World War II era. At this time, the policing and social control of LGBT people extended even to the New York theater world.<sup>26</sup> In 1927, the New York Legislature had passed the Wales Padlock Law, which made “depicting or dealing with, the subject of sex degeneracy, or sex perversion” illegal, and offending theaters could be closed; the law remained on the books until 1967. While it is not clear if productions at the Phoenix were directly impacted, this legal discrimination helped foster such a high level of invisibility and secrecy that determining the full extent of LGBT contributions to the theater remains a difficult task. As such, documenting the names of LGBT individuals associated with any theater, when possible, provides important and concrete evidence of these enormous contributions.

*The Gay & Lesbian Theatrical Legacy: A Biographical Dictionary of Major Figures in American Stage History in the Pre-Stonewall Era* (2005) was a pioneering effort to compile biographies of some of the leading LGBT people in American theater, prior to 1969, in one volume. The introduction of this work saliently articulated the unique difficulties of this task:

The theater has long borne the reputation of being a “haven for homosexuality.” As such, it has been both denigrated as a denizen of depravity by members of the dominant, straight culture and sought after as a refuge by queer people, those whose sexual desires deviated from prevailing norms. If the haven has allowed indulgence in transgressive behavior, it has also served as a closet, as both straights and queers have been heavily

<sup>26</sup> For more information on the policing and social control of LGBT people in theater, see Amanda Davis, “Caffe Cino,” National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form (New York: NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project, 2016).

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invested in obscuring the sexual identities of its specific inhabitants. ... These dynamics of closeting have been particularly salient in the United States... Thus for all the queers rumored to be have inhabited the theatrical haven, precise knowledge of who they were and what they did has remained, until recently, very shrouded, and it is still largely diffuse, couched in a relatively few studies focused on individual figures that dare to deal openly with their sexuality.<sup>27</sup>

This project further argued that:

knowledge of the role of same-sex sexual desire in historical figures' theatrical careers is central to understanding their contributions... Our larger project has been to examine how societal and cultural attitudes shaped our subjects' sense of sexual difference in their respective periods and the interplay of their on- and offstage lives in this context; how their sexuality affected their choice of intimates, professional associates, the kind of work they did, and how they performed it; how shared understandings with people of like persuasion both enabled and inhibited their collaborations; and how they and their associates exploited as well as suffered from modes of oppression and discrimination.<sup>28</sup>

The Phoenix Theater featured the work of many significant LGBT authors, composers, lyricists, directors, scenic, costume, and lighting designers, and actors, some well-established and some at the start of their careers. They collectively demonstrate the important contributions of the LGBT community to the creation of Off-Broadway theater and to American theater in general. Notable LGBT designers, all of whom earned acclaim over their careers, included costume designer **Alvin Colt** (sixteen productions), lighting designer **Tharon Musser** (six productions), production and lighting designer **Jean Rosenthal** (five productions), and scenic and costume designer **Rouben Ter-Arutunian** (three productions). Within the context described at the beginning of this section, determining which theatrical figures involved in the Phoenix Theater were/are LGBT has not been an easy task.<sup>29</sup> Other than famous individuals, there were many lesser known, but very significant, LGBT actors and creators where the only evidence of their sexuality has been an obituary, and usually only when there is a surviving partner. Appendix E is a production history of the Phoenix Theater, including current knowledge of which LGBT individuals created work there.

*LGBT Residents of the Louis N. Jaffe Art Theater Building*

The Louis N. Jaffe Art Theater Building, aside from the theater and downstairs restaurant/club space, also originally contained six commercial stores on the ground story with offices above them. By the late

<sup>27</sup> *The Gay & Lesbian Theatrical Legacy: A Biographical Dictionary of Major Figures in American Stage History in the Pre-Stonewall Era*, Billy J. Harbin, Kim Marra, and Robert A. Schanke, eds. (University of Michigan Press, 2005), Introduction, 1.

<sup>28</sup> *The Gay & Lesbian Theatrical Legacy*, Introduction, 2.

<sup>29</sup> NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project; Hundreds of online searches of countless resources.

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1960s, some of the offices were converted for use as loft apartments.<sup>30</sup> Three notable interconnected LGBT residents who lived sequentially in apartment 3N on the third floor were **Jackie Curtis**, **Peter Hugar**, and **David Wojnarowicz**, all of whom were part of the arts scene in the East Village from the mid-1960s to the early 1990s.<sup>31</sup>

*Jackie Curtis (1947-1985)*<sup>32</sup>

Prolific avant-garde playwright, director, performer, singer, poet, and Warhol “Superstar” **Jackie Curtis** resided in third-story loft apartment 3N in the Louis N. Jaffe Art Theater Building from around the end of 1968 to 1973. Though he lived in other apartments during his relatively short life, this building is significant as the residence where he lived when many of his plays were produced and when his reputation as an influential downtown artist was solidified, and this was also the only apartment that he had on his own. His plays were performed at several downtown theaters, but most notably at La MaMa, the Off-Off-Broadway theater company with which he would become the most associated over the course of his career. Curtis met **Andy Warhol** shortly before moving to the Second Avenue loft, later becoming a Warhol “Superstar” (fellow “Superstar” **Candy Darling** briefly lived with him here). He and other “Superstars” were immortalized in **Lou Reed**’s famous 1972 song “Walk on the Wild Side” during the period Curtis lived on Second Avenue.

Born John Curtis Holder Jr. (1947-1985), Curtis was raised in the East Village and became interested in performing at a young age. He adopted the name Jackie Curtis in the mid-1960s as he developed his pioneering gender-fluid persona. He came to be at the center of, and a legend in, the East Village Off-Off-Broadway, underground film, and LGBT scenes in the late 1960s through the 1970s.

His father, John Holder Sr., worked for the Veterans Administration, and his mother, Jenevieve (Jean) Uglialoro, worked as a certified public accountant. They met in a New York dance hall, married, and

<sup>30</sup> According to the building’s 1994 Certificate of Occupancy, there was one apartment and one office on the second floor, two apartments on the third floor, and one apartment on the fourth. According to the Property Shark website in 2024, there are three residences and two commercial spaces. Current buzzers on the building indicate cinema offices on the second floor, two apartments on the third floor, and one apartment on the fourth floor.

<sup>31</sup> These three artists were mentioned in Shockley, *Louis N. Jaffe Art Theater (Yiddish Art Theatre/ Yiddish Folks Theater) Building Designation Report*.

<sup>32</sup> Ken Lustbader, “Jackie Curtis Residence,” NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project, February 2021, <https://www.nyclgbtsites.org/site/jackie-curtis-residence>; Collection #142 – Jackie Curtis Papers, NYC LGBT Community Center National History Archive; Craig B. Highberger, email to Ken Lustbader/NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project, January 2021; Joe Preston, Executor of the Estate of Jackie Curtis, emails to Ken Lustbader/NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project, January and February 2021; Guy Trebay, “A Vision in Thrift-Shop Chic Visits From the 60’s,” *New York Times*, May 2, 2004; Jackie Curtis (accessed February 6, 2021), [bit.ly/3aG5GeU](http://bit.ly/3aG5GeU); “Jackie Curtis, 38, Performer And Writer for Warhol Films,” *New York Times*, May 17, 1985; “Jackie Curtis,” The Downtown Pop Underground (accessed February 8, 2021), [bit.ly/36U15T8](http://bit.ly/36U15T8); Rosalyn Regelson, “Not a Boy, Not a Girl, Just Me, Jackie,” *New York Times*, November 2, 1969; Craig B. Highberger, director and producer, *Superstar in a Housedress* documentary, 2004; Craig B. Highberger, *Superstar in a Housedress: the Life and Legend of Jackie Curtis* (Open Road, 2015); Joe Preston, *Jackie Curtis Undressed!* (Independent, 2024).

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moved to Tennessee after their son was born. Not relating to that location and missing New York, Jean separated from her husband after seven months, moved back to the city, and divorced Holder in 1948. In the 1950 United States Census, Jean Holder, age 23, was living with her son “Jack” at 315 East 13<sup>th</sup> Street and working as a “hostess” in a dance hall. Her mother, Anna Uglialoro, was living in another apartment in the same building (where she worked as a superintendent) with her husband, Joseph Verra, her daughter, Josephine, and her son, Jack. Anna, Jean, and Josephine all worked as “taxi dancers” in the 1940s-50s.

Jack Holder reportedly was raised largely by his grandmother, who in 1956 opened a bar called “Slugger Ann’s” at 192 Second Avenue, at the northeast corner of East 12<sup>th</sup> Street, catty-corner from the Louis N. Jaffe Art Theater. The bar’s name referenced her reputation for the way in which she dealt with men who made inappropriate advances. In 1959, the Phoenix Theater, the company then in the Jaffe Theater, had its biggest hit, *Once Upon a Mattress*, which made Carol Burnett a star. Young Jack, age 12, used to wait for her at the stage door until he finally met her and was photographed with her. He later said that Burnett inspired him to become a performer.

Holder attended the School of Art and Design from 1962 to 1965. He became friends in 1965 with Susana Ventura (the future Off-Off-Broadway actor **Penny Arcade**), and the pair used to haunt the thrift shops of the neighborhood. Ventura claims to be the first one to dress Holder in drag. That same year, he started to use the name “Jackie Curtis.” Also in 1965, his grandmother rented an apartment at 324 East 14<sup>th</sup> Street (their East 13<sup>th</sup> Street building was going to be demolished) and Curtis moved into this apartment.

Around this time, Jackie Curtis met Ellen Stewart, founder of La MaMa Experimental Theatre Club, one of New York’s early and influential Off-Off-Broadway theaters, located in the East Village. Off-Off-Broadway theater, largely associated with Greenwich Village and the East Village, was experimental, avant-garde, and strictly non-commercial. Caffè Cino, 31 Cornelia Street (NRHP-listed), which operated from 1958 to 1968, is widely recognized as the birthplace of Off-Off-Broadway and of gay theater. After this, La MaMa was one of the most significant Off-Off-Broadway venues and one that was also important for putting on the work of LGBT playwrights and performers. Curtis had a long-time association with La MaMa as playwright, performer, or both. Fresh out of high school, he wrote his first play, *Glamour, Glory and Gold* (1965). In December 1965, he made his first stage appearance, at La MaMa, in **Tom Eyan’s** *Miss Nefertiti Regrets*, which starred a young Bette Midler.

During this period, Curtis began creating his pioneering persona that defied gender stereotypes without attempting to “pass” as female. In March 1966, he met transgender performers **Candy Darling** and **Holly Woodlawn**. He told his friend and future biographer **Craig B. Highberger** that “Candy and Holly take female hormones and talk about having sex change operations. That is not for me at all, because my body is my body, and my sex is my sex and my ambiguity is my ambiguity. And I cling to that,

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fervently.”<sup>33</sup> Throughout his life, Curtis expressed elements of his personality that ignored sexual or gender identity labels. He spent years both living and performing in his unique style of drag. Standing at 5’11,” he would appear in private and in public wearing female attire (without falsies), older thrift shop dresses or miniskirts, expensive outfits purposely torn, ripped stockings, and haphazard makeup (often with glitter around his eyes). Depending on his mood, he would also adopt what he described as his male “**James Dean**” persona. In 1969, he described himself to the *New York Times* as “not a boy, not a girl, not a faggot, not a drag queen, not a transsexual – just me, Jackie,” adding that he was “not trying to pass as a woman.”<sup>34</sup> This concept was uncommon at the time, as drag before this was usually associated with “realness.” Curtis’s “style” was widely adopted by others, including many fashion designers in the 1970s and ‘80s, and is often cited as an inspiration for the “glam-rock” look.

In 1967, Curtis and Darling met artist **Andy Warhol** while walking in Greenwich Village. In September, Curtis’s play *Glamour, Glory and Gold: the Life and Legend of Nola Noonan, Goddess and Star* opened at Tony Bastiano’s Playwright’s Workshop Club at 14 Waverly Place, with Warhol in attendance. Directed by **Ron Link**, with Curtis and Darling in the cast, it was a hit and ran for six months. At the time, Curtis and Darling were also working at Slugger Ann’s Bar. Curtis’s next play, the musical *Lucky Wonderful*, with Curtis as the lead, opened at Playwright’s Workshop Club in March 1968 to mixed reviews but was still a hit. A second production of *Glamour, Glory and Gold* in May included Robert DeNiro in his stage debut.

Warhol’s association helped to get Curtis’s plays noticed. In the summer of 1968, Warhol’s publicist and filmmaker, Paul Morrissey, filmed the movie *Flesh*, with Curtis and Darling in the cast in their movie debuts. It was an immediate cult “underground” hit. Morrissey’s next film, also a success, was *Trash* (1970), co-starring Woodlawn. Curtis, Darling, and Woodlawn became known as Warhol “Superstars,” regularly hanging out at Max’s Kansas City (213 Park Avenue South) with Warhol and his entourage. Morrissey next cast these three “Superstars” in *Women in Revolt* (filmed in 1970, released in 1971), his parody of the women’s liberation movement. Warhol reportedly stated, “Jackie Curtis is not a drag queen. Jackie is an artist. A pioneer without a frontier.”<sup>35</sup> Curtis appeared on the cover of the newspaper *Gay Power* in 1969. Noted portrait painter Alice Neel painted Curtis in drag in “Jackie Curtis and Ritta Redd” in 1970 (Cleveland Museum of Art), and as a male in “Jackie Curtis as a Boy” in 1972 (private collection).

Around the fall of 1968, Curtis and Darling rented a room at the Hotel Albert on University Place. According to **Joe Preston**, Curtis’s cousin, their grandmother “Slugger Ann” was the super of the building that her bar was in, and since the same company also owned the Louis N. Jaffe Art Theater Building, she also worked as a super there. After some of the Jaffe offices were converted for use as residential loft apartments, Curtis moved into the northern space on the third story, around the end of

<sup>33</sup> Highberger, *Superstar in a Housedress* (2005), 39.

<sup>34</sup> Regelson.

<sup>35</sup> Cited in Highberger, book, 67.

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1968. He lived there until 1973, and this was the only apartment that he had on his own. Candy Darling's biographer, Cynthia Carr, wrote that Darling for a short time curtained off a corner of the loft and lived there with Curtis.<sup>36</sup> Preston described it as a "cavernous studio with high ceilings" that was "a nucleus hang-out respite for the circuit of downtown performers and creative artists who would drop by at all times of the day and night."<sup>37</sup> The space included the main loft area, an open floor plan facing Second Avenue to the east and East 12<sup>th</sup> Street to the north, and a western section with no windows.

Beginning in the late 1960s, while he lived in the Jaffe building, plays by Curtis in which he performed the lead roles were produced at La MaMa and elsewhere downtown. His work featured trans and non-binary actors and characters and themes that lampooned sexual and social conventions. Curtis's collaborators included many names that are now revered in Off-Off-Broadway history. Curtis was in Tom Murrin's play *Cock Strong* at **John Vaccaro's** Play-House of the Ridiculous in June 1969. Vaccaro also produced Curtis's play *Heaven Grand in Amber Orbit* in September, but he fired Curtis from the cast after creative differences. It was positively reviewed and an immediate hit, and it also played at La MaMa in February 1970 (Vaccaro took it on tour in Europe for over a year). Curtis's next play, *Femme Fatale: the Three Faces of Gloria*, was performed at La MaMa in May 1970, with Curtis, Patti Smith, **Penny Arcade**, and **Wayne County** in the cast and, despite mixed reviews, it was another hit. *Vain Victory: the Vicissitudes of the Damned* was Curtis's next play, which he also directed, at La MaMa, opening in May 1971. With a large cast that included Curtis, Darling, **Agosto Machado**, **Mario Montez**, and fashion photographer **Francesco Scavullo**, it was a huge sold-out hit, transferring in August, as a musical, to the Workshop of the Player's Art, 333 Bowery. Curtis's *Americka Cleopatra*, featuring Curtis, **Alexis de Lago**, **Harvey Fierstein**, and Machado in the cast, opened in May 1972 to mixed reviews.

**Lou Reed** immortalized Warhol "Superstars" Curtis, Darling, Woodlawn, and Joe Dallesandro in his famous 1972 song "Walk on the Wild Side" -- one of the lyrics was "Jackie is just speeding away / Thought she was James Dean for a day / Then I guess she had to crash..." Struggling with alcohol and drug addiction and not always able to pay the rent, Curtis moved out of the Jaffe Art Theater Building loft in 1973. After his grandmother's bar building was renovated, she assisted Curtis in renting a small studio behind her bar, at 301 East 12<sup>th</sup> Street, where he lived for a few years. He also stayed at several other apartments with friends.

*Glamour, Glory and Gold* was revived to acclaim in March 1974, again directed by Ron Link, with Curtis as the lead. In May-June 1974, Curtis and Woodlawn had a huge success performing "Cabaret in the Sky – an Evening with Holly Woodlawn and Jackie Curtis" at the New York Cultural Center at Columbus Circle. *Heaven Grand in Amber Orbit* was revived in September 1976 at La MaMa. After

<sup>36</sup> Cynthia Carr, *Candy Darling: Dreamer, Icon, Superstar* (Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2024), 213.

<sup>37</sup> Preston, 4

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spending some time in Tennessee and Los Angeles in 1977, Curtis returned to New York in January 1978 and moved into his grandmother's apartment at 324 East 14<sup>th</sup> Street, which was his last residence. In the fall of 1979, Curtis performed in drag on weekends at Slugger Ann's Bar. His grandmother died in July 1980.

In the early 1980s, Curtis's new work included *Flop* (1982), a musical; *I Died Yesterday* (1983), by Nick Markovich, at La MaMa, based on the story of actor Frances Farmer, with Curtis as the lead and also with Penny Arcade; and *Champagne*, his last play, at La MaMa, in January 1985, with Curtis as the lead. During this period, Curtis performed in several cabaret venues, as well as at events for the Poetry Project and at the Pyramid Club, both located in the East Village. Curtis had experimented with heroin since 1971, and in May 1985 he died of an accidental overdose at the age of 38. A wake was held at the Andrett Funeral Home at 353 Second Avenue, while a funeral mass was held at St. Ann's Church (demolished except for the façade), 110 East 12th Street.

Craig B. Highberger created the acclaimed documentary *Superstar in a Housedress: the Life and Legend of Jackie Curtis* (2004), as well as a biography with the same name (2015). The legendary La MaMa founder Ellen Stewart said of Curtis, "He was always extremely talented. In fact, I thought he was a genius. And he created many beautiful things. Jackie was a wonderful writer." She believed that Curtis really wanted to be known most as a writer, but that drag brought him more fame.<sup>38</sup> Renowned comedian/actor **Lily Tomlin** lauded Curtis as an original, natural satirist who lived his life as a kind of performance art.<sup>39</sup> Jackie Curtis's papers are held by the LGBT Community Center National History Archive in Greenwich Village.

*Peter William Hujar (1934-1987)*<sup>40</sup>

When Jackie Curtis moved out of the Louis N. Jaffe Art Theater Building in 1973, **Peter Hujar** (1934-1987), a neighbor and friend, moved into the 3N loft apartment space, where he lived until his death. A photographer since 1955, Hujar, during his time in this residence, fully developed his craft. He created a darkroom and used the apartment as a photography studio. A stalwart of the East Village art scene and

<sup>38</sup> Highberger, book, 41.

<sup>39</sup> Highberger, documentary.

<sup>40</sup> George Benson, "Peter Hujar Residence," NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project, January 2021, <https://www.nyclgbtsites.org/site/peter-hujar-residence-studio-david-wojnarowicz-residence-studio>; Guy Trebay, "Peter Hujar and the Lost New York," *New York Times*, March 4, 2016, [nyti.ms/3hXzbbF](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/04/nyregion/peter-hujar-and-the-lost-new-york.html); Peter Schjeldahl, "The Bohemian Rhapsody of Peter Hujar," *The New Yorker*, January 29, 2018, [bit.ly/3cl8AUZ](https://www.newyorker.com/2018/01/29/peter-hujar); Holland Cotter, "He Made Them Glow: A Maverick's Portraits Live On," *New York Times*, February 8, 2018, [nyti.ms/2ZXIhPq](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/08/nyregion/peter-hujar-photos.html); Simon Bowcock, "Peter Hujar: the photographer who defined downtown New York," *The Guardian*, October 14, 2016, [bit.ly/2ROmzJx](https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/oct/14/peter-hujar-photos); Edmund White, "Why Can't We Stop Talking About New York in the Late 1970s?," *New York Times Style Magazine*, September 10, 2015, [nyti.ms/3mNXMUb](https://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/10/style/why-cant-we-stop-talking-about-new-york-in-the-late-1970s.html); "About," The Peter Hujar Archive, [bit.ly/3hTklmw](http://peterhujar.com/); "Peter Hujar," Wikipedia, [bit.ly/302cAEG](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peter_Hujar); Linda Rosenkrantz, "What It Was Like When Peter Hujar Took Your Photograph," *Opinion*, November 25, 2021, <https://www.frieze.com/article/linda-rosenkrantz-remembers-peter-hujar>; Jackson Davidov, "Peter Hujar Died Young. Now, His Striking Photographs of Queer Culture Are Being Resurrected," *Art in America*, October 15, 2024, <https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/features/peter-hujar-queer-culture-resurrected-1234720349>.

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the definition of an impoverished artist, Hujar was only partially recognized in his lifetime. Since his death, however, he has come to be regarded as one of the greatest American photographers in the twentieth century.

Born in 1934 in Trenton, New Jersey, Hujar started life on a New Jersey farm with his Ukrainian grandparents (English was his second language). His father had abandoned the family before he was born, and his mother left him to work in New York City. At the age of eleven, he moved in with her in Manhattan, but he left at sixteen. He had received his first camera in 1947. After graduating from the School of Industrial Art (later the High School of Art and Design) and at the urging of **Daisy Aldan** – a poet, editor, and English teacher who recognized his artistic talent – Hujar got apprenticeships in commercial photography studios starting in 1955.

He accompanied his then-lover, artist **Joseph Raffael**, on a trip to Italy in 1958. Hujar later returned to Italy on a Fulbright-sponsored trip in 1963 with the future artist **Paul Thek**, his lover at the time. Images that Hujar took on this second trip appeared later in his only book of photography published in his lifetime, *Portraits in Life and Death* (1976, republished 2024). Hujar worked as a fashion photographer for *Harper's Bazaar* and *Gentlemen's Quarterly*.

From 1968 to 1971, photographs by Hujar were printed in *Newspaper*, which was an experimental pictures-only tabloid. It was published out of the apartment at 188 Second Avenue (across the avenue from the Jaffe Art Theater Building) of its editor, **Paul Lawrence**, who was then Hujar's lover. Hujar lived with him there until they had a falling out in 1973. *Newspaper* “was the product of a coterie that largely revolved around Hujar and a circle of friends which included photographers, painters, musicians, performers, and sculptors. The publication brought together the disparate subjects, interests, and artworks of their Downtown New York arts scene.”<sup>41</sup>

Even though Hujar was not politically involved, art critic **Holland Cotter** observed, “He was around for the 1969 Stonewall Rebellion. And when, in its wake, his then-lover, **Jim Fouratt**, became a founding member of the Gay Liberation Front, Hujar contributed to the cause the only way he knew how, with a photograph - of GLF members staging a protest march for his camera. It remains one of the signature images of the time.”<sup>42</sup>

Photographer Lisette Model was one of the influences on Hujar's decision to turn from freelance fashion and commercial photography to almost solely personal art photography in 1973. This was the time when he moved into Curtis's former loft in the Jaffe Building. The space was large enough that he no longer had to rent studio time elsewhere. The concrete floor and the bare wall on the south side of the main loft

<sup>41</sup> Marcelo Gabriel Yanez, “Peter Hujar and the Brief History of ‘Newspaper’,” <https://jeudepaume.org/en/mediateque/peter-hujar-and-the-brief-history-of-newspaper-by-marcelo-gabriel-yanez>.

<sup>42</sup> Cotter.

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area would provide the primary setting for his photography, an informal “studio.” Friends of Hujar, **Gary Schneider** and his partner, **John Erdman**, who formed the firm Schneider/Erdman Inc., through which Schneider became a renowned master printer, were familiar with the space. They recalled that the darkroom was originally in the bathroom, with a black curtain to keep light out. Located in the northwestern section of the loft, the bathroom did not have exterior windows. Later, builder Charles Baxter, of Coxsackie, New York, built Hujar a real darkroom with dry and wet labs that backed into the plumbing of the kitchenette (located to the east in the main loft area).<sup>43</sup>

In this space, Hujar developed the skills to be considered a master printer of his own work and to take many of the photographs for the genre that he is best known for today – black and white portraits of artists, many of whom are now legendary figures. These include **Jackie Curtis**, drag performer **Ethyl Eichelberger**, Downtown performer **Agosto Machado**, filmmaker **John Waters**, actor/drag performer **Divine**, actor Mink Stole, poet/dance critic **Edwin Denby**, fashion editor Diana Vreeland, poet/painter/art critic/actor **Rene Ricard**, Downtown theater legend **Charles Ludlam**, artists **David Wojnarowicz**, Louise Nevelson and Kiki Smith, choreographer **Merce Cunningham**, composer **John Cage**, theater director **Robert Wilson**, TV personality/journalist/punk rock musician **Lance Loud**, and writers **Susan Sontag**, **Fran Lebowitz**, and **William S. Burroughs**. Some critics consider his photo of actress **Candy Darling**, taken just before her death in 1974, among his finest portraits.<sup>44</sup>

Hujar took many of these portraits, as well as self-portraits, in his Second Avenue loft; most often, the background was the loft’s bare south wall and concrete floor.<sup>45</sup> Regarding Hujar’s portraits, Cotter recalled, “He did most of his indoor photographs there, using available furniture - a kitchen chair, his bed - as props. His sitters were often neighborhood friends, usually male, frequently nude, sometimes in a state of sexual arousal. Whether identified by name or not, the likenesses went well beyond being those of studio models; they had a particularity that made them read as portraits.”<sup>46</sup> A selection of these portraits, spanning Hujar’s residency of the loft, include actor **Larry Ree** (1975), Schneider (1979), transgender artist **Greer Lankton** (1983), a group portrait of artists Wojnarowicz, **Chuck Nanney**, **Steve Brown**, and **Steve Doughton** (1985), and Cunningham and Cage (1986). Notably, Hujar took several portraits here of Eichelberger, often in costume, in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Some were used in promotional materials for Eichelberger’s performances at popular local underground venues, such as a 1979 portrait as Medea that appeared in a 1980 flyer for Club 57, and a 1979 portrait as Nefertiti in a 1983 flyer for the Pyramid Club.

Friend and fellow photographer **Nan Goldin** gave Hujar’s portraits the highest praise: “Peter didn’t photograph anyone or anything he didn’t have deep feelings for. He had such integrity. When he got a

<sup>43</sup> Peter Hujar Archive.

<sup>44</sup> Christie’s, <https://onlineonly.christies.com/s/photographs/peter-hujar-1934-1987-3/163273>, 2022.

<sup>45</sup> Based on Hujar’s digitized portraits, including those at Second Avenue, via The Peter Hujar Archive.

<sup>46</sup> Cotter.

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new camera, he had to find out whether it was speaking for him, and if not he would return it. That was something I learned from him. The depth in Peter's photographs is astounding. They are as calm as he was but so intense. He had a special relationship with light. Many people have tried to imitate it and failed. In his portraits, he doesn't exert the gaze, which is the norm of most photography. He met people where they lived. He is the greatest portraitist of the twentieth century."<sup>47</sup> The Pace Gallery stated that "Peter Hujar photographed his subjects with penetrating sensitivity and psychological depth. Unflinching and at times dark, he captured intellectuals, luminaries, and members of New York City subculture in moments of disarmed vulnerability. Hujar embraced male sexuality unabashedly and was unafraid to examine death and dying."<sup>48</sup>

Along with his portraits, Hujar became known for photographs of animals and landscapes, capturing street scenes of a New York in decline, and the gay life that blossomed along the piers on the Hudson River waterfront. He also chronicled the unique creative world of the East Village in the 1970s and '80s that largely died out with AIDS and, later, gentrification.

Published in 1976, with an introduction by his friend Susan Sontag, *Portraits in Life and Death* was Hujar's only book of photography published in his lifetime. It featured portraits taken in 1974-75, juxtaposed with photographs of corpses entombed in the catacombs of Palermo, Sicily, that he had taken on his 1963 trip. The book received a tepid reception, however, and only gained its place as a classic of American photography after his death (and was republished in 2024).

The Second Avenue loft played a central role in Hujar's personal and professional life. He had a large social and artistic circle, and his loft was known for having a constantly open door. Friends noted that people were naturally drawn to Hujar, but he was more circumspect about who he entertained and photographed at the loft.<sup>49</sup> He used the northern half of the main loft area as his living space, and area rugs covered most of the concrete floor here. His friends said that his loft was tidy and sparse with a kitchen table near the kitchenette in the northwest corner.<sup>50</sup> **John Douglas Millar**, Hujar's biographer, suggests that "the elegant images of the loft ... are fictions constructed by Peter ... Peter was a fastidious minimalist by temperament."<sup>51</sup> A number of Hujar's photographs feature his living space, either on its own or as the backdrop of his self-portraits, revealing an intimate connection between the

<sup>47</sup> Nan Goldin, quoted in Sarah Nicole Prickett, "The Eternal Peter Hujar," *Document*, February 7, 2018, <https://www.documentjournal.com/2018/02/nan-goldin-dev-hynes-david-velasco-on-the-eternal-peter-hujar>.

<sup>48</sup> "Peter Hujar," Pace Gallery, <https://www.pacegallery.com/artists/peter-hujar>.

<sup>49</sup> David Wojnarowicz Foundation interview by NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project.

<sup>50</sup> The David Wojnarowicz Foundation interview by the NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project. Those interviewed include Anita Vitale, Board Chair, The David Wojnarowicz Foundation; Jean Foos, Creative Director, The David Wojnarowicz Foundation; Gary Schneider, Master Printer for David Wojnarowicz and Peter Hujar; John Erdman, partner of Gary Schneider in Schneider/Erdman Photography; Cynthia Carr, biographer of David Wojnarowicz and Candy Darling; and John Douglas Millar, biographer of a work in progress of Peter Hujar.

<sup>51</sup> John Douglas Millar, in David Wojnarowicz Foundation interview by NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project.

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artist and his residence. One of his most iconic self-portraits, *Self-Portrait Jumping (1)* (1974), shows him jumping in the air here. Two undated black and white images of the main loft area show the northeast corner furnished with two chairs and a coffee table on a large area rug, a dresser with a record player, lamp, potted plants, a desk with a lamp, a television on a stand, and a simple rectangular mirror (with a bird wing on top) hanging on the wall above a radiator. Directly to the south, a twin bed sits next to an upright piano, both projecting into the room from the east wall, with a large area rug to the west of both pieces and a smaller one in front of the piano; and, directly to the south, a white harpsichord and potted plants are located on the bare concrete floor next to the large arched window. Sheer, light-colored curtains hang on rods at the windows. The sparsely decorated walls, beamed ceiling, and window trim are painted the same white (or light) color.

A 1976 self-portrait shows Hujar with his camera looking at the mirror. Shown in the mirror - behind him - is the wall that divides the main area from the western section with the bathroom and darkroom. The wall has an open doorway with the kitchenette to the north and an open closet with clothes and items on racks and shelves to the south (this closet is in line with the bed on the other side of the room, as if creating a separation from the southern half of the loft where he did his photography). Another photograph shows the southern end of the main loft area, in which the bare white walls, ceiling, and concrete floor provide a blank backdrop for a bicycle, bench, and empty shelving at the southwest corner. According to friends, Hujar also displayed a 1983 multi-frame portrait of himself by Paul Thek in the small hallway by the loft's southwest entrance.<sup>52</sup>

Insight into how Hujar used his space can be gleaned from the book *Peter Hujar's Day* (2022), by his friend Linda Rosenkrantz, which includes the full transcript of a tape-recorded conversation that the two had about everything Hujar did the day prior, December 18, 1974.<sup>53</sup> The David Wojnarowicz Foundation summarized the exchange, noting that Hujar recalled,

...oversleeping his alarm, jumping into the clothes he'll wear for two days; welcoming an editor from *Elle* magazine from France picking up his portraits of actress Lauren Hutton, fielding a dozen phone calls including one from Susan Sontag, taking two naps, making two meals, going to the shop downstairs to buy cigarettes, watering his plants, leaving again to photograph Allen Ginsberg for the *Times*; developing film and making prints in the darkroom for several hours; welcoming Glenn O'Brien who drops in for ten minutes, and a friend who comes to use his shower (in exchange for a Chinese takeout dinner); then playing his harpsichord before bed.<sup>54</sup>

Hujar was considered a towering figure in the East Village, often donning the role of tutor or parental figure to up-and-coming artists, such as photographers Nan Goldin and Gary Schneider and artist Kiki

<sup>52</sup> David Wojnarowicz Foundation interview by NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project.

<sup>53</sup> The film version of the same name, directed by Ira Sachs, was released in 2025.

<sup>54</sup> David Wojnarowicz Foundation interview by NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project.

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Smith. Hujar is now partly remembered for his intense relationship with **David Wojnarowicz** [see below], who he met in 1980. Hujar was for a time his lover and served as an unparalleled source of support, inspiration, and tutelage for the younger man to start creating and to become an artist. Wojnarowicz saw Hujar as “like the parent I never had, like the brother I never had.”<sup>55</sup> Friend and writer **Stephen Koch**, to whom Hujar left his estate, observed that “one of the keys to [Hujar’s] personality, I later figured out, was that anyone who had been an abused child was automatically on Peter’s A list.”<sup>56</sup> This was certainly the case with Wojnarowicz, and the two found solidarity in upbringings of shared hardship. Several of Hujar’s friends recall that he displayed Wojnarowicz’s painting, *Evolution* (1986), over his bed in the last year of his life.<sup>57</sup>

Despite his prolific work, many who knew Hujar said that he rigidly avoided commercialism, and some considered his career largely self-sabotaged. His friend Fran Lebowitz noted at his funeral that “Peter Hujar has hung up on every important photography dealer in the Western world.”<sup>58</sup> Another friend, poet **Steve Turtell**, vividly remembered Hujar’s lifestyle in his Second Avenue loft and studio: “I watched Peter wring out a pair of blue jeans he had just washed in his own sink and hang them over the curtain rod to dry” because he couldn’t afford the laundromat. He often went without heat and emptied his household garbage into public trash cans. Turtell added that Hujar’s loft “was like a monk’s cell. He had what he needed and nothing more.”<sup>59</sup>

Tragically, Hujar received a diagnosis of AIDS at the beginning of January 1987. In despair, he never photographed again, except for one portrait session as a favor for his friend **John Heys**. Wojnarowicz attempted to cheer up his friend and mentor by spray-painting the entire intersection of Second Avenue and East 12<sup>th</sup> Street, so it could be seen from the windows of Hujar’s apartment. Wojnarowicz variously painted “friendly cows” with a hamburger in a thought bubble, or dreaming of a television. (He had previously painted this intersection in 1982 with his signature “gagging cow,” an image of the head of a cow on its way to slaughter.)

During his time living in the Jaffe Building loft apartment, Hujar did receive recognition. Between 1974 and 1986, his photographs were included in at least seven gallery exhibitions in New York City and New York State, and eight in Europe.<sup>60</sup> Wojnarowicz convinced Gracie Mansion Gallery in the East Village to host a retrospective of Hujar’s photographs, which was “Peter Hujar: Recent Photographs” in January 1986. Of the 100 prints on display, only two were sold.

Hujar died at age fifty-three from AIDS-related pneumonia on November 26, 1987, at Cabrini Medical

<sup>55</sup> Schjeldahl.

<sup>56</sup> Schjeldahl.

<sup>57</sup> David Wojnarowicz Foundation interview by NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project.

<sup>58</sup> Schjeldahl.

<sup>59</sup> Cynthia Carr, *Fire in the Belly: The Life and Times of David Wojnarowicz* (Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2012), 183.

<sup>60</sup> “Peter Hujar,” Wikipedia.

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Center near Gramercy Park. Wojnarowicz was by his bedside and was overcome with sadness. He famously photographed Hujar in the hospital bed. Hujar's body was handled by Redden's Funeral Home, 325 West 14<sup>th</sup> Street, the first in all of New York City to provide service for those who died of AIDS. His funeral was held on November 28 at St. Joseph's R.C. Church in Greenwich Village. In its obituary, *Newsday* called Hujar "a noted city photographer whose signed portraits of literary and artistic celebrities hang in the collections of several major museums and are prized by private collectors."<sup>61</sup>

Wojnarowicz held a celebration of Hujar's life in his Jaffe Building loft apartment on December 20, complete with Hujar's photographs on the walls, and a shrine to his mentor. Wojnarowicz commented that "coming back to his place the candle and shrine had burnt down to a beige hard puddle. I told him out loud how sad I am... I can't imagine my life without this man..."<sup>62</sup> Wojnarowicz once stated that "everything I made, I made for Peter," and he had difficulty in expressing what he felt after Hujar's death, since Hujar had been the recipient of his most personal thoughts.<sup>63</sup> Wojnarowicz created a panel for Hujar for the memorial National AIDS Quilt, which had been started in 1987 in San Francisco, and also designed the headstone – the shape, according to Wojnarowicz biographer Cynthia Carr, of the small arched windows of the Second Avenue loft – for Hujar's grave in Westchester County, New York.

Hujar suspected he would only gain notoriety after his death, which turned out to be true. Posthumously, Hujar's photographs have been shown in numerous solo museum and commercial gallery exhibitions throughout the United States and Europe. (In June 1992, shortly before his own death from AIDS-related complications, Wojnarowicz donated four of his Hujar prints to the Museum of Modern Art.) Hujar's work has often been more favorably compared to his contemporary, photographer **Robert Mapplethorpe**, who produced more stylized celebrity portraits.<sup>64</sup> "Peter Hujar Photographs" was the first retrospective exhibit at New York University's Grey Art Gallery in 1989.<sup>65</sup> Associated with the Peter Hujar Archive after 2000 were the Matthew Marks Gallery and Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York, and Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco. In 2014, the Fraenkel Gallery put on the exhibition of his lesser displayed erotic works, "Peter Hujar: Love & Lust."<sup>66</sup>

Since 2013, the Morgan Library and Museum has been the foremost institution for research on Hujar, since it acquired all of Hujar's personal and business papers, 100 photographic prints, and all of his 5,783 photographic contact sheets spanning his entire photographic career. Its 2018 traveling exhibition, "Peter Hujar: Speed of Life," was a full retrospective of his career, and the catalogue included the first

<sup>61</sup> "Peter Hujar, Photographer," *Newsday*, November 30, 1987, 43.

<sup>62</sup> Carr, *Fire in the Belly*, 381.

<sup>63</sup> Carr, *Fire in the Belly*, 179.

<sup>64</sup> Andy Grundberg, "Review/Photography: Photos by Peter Hujar, a Mapplethorpe Precursor," *New York Times*, February 2, 1990.

<sup>65</sup> "Grey Art Gallery," *Newsday*, February 2, 1990, 176.

<sup>66</sup> Fraenkel Gallery, "Vince Aletti on Peter Hujar's Love & Lust," January 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gvjZTKWa-F4>.

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full account of Hujar's life.<sup>67</sup>

Hujar's work is also held in the permanent collections of many other major institutions. These include the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Museum of Modern Art, Whitney Museum of American Art, and Brooklyn Museum, in New York; Art Institute of Chicago; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh; Dallas Museum of Art; Fogg Museum, Cambridge, Massachusetts; J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles; Museum of Fine Art, Boston; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri; St. Louis Art Museum; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven; and at least five museums in Europe.

Benjamin Moser in the *New Yorker* in 2024 summarized Hujar's significance:

Since Hujar's death, this marginal artist has found himself understood to a degree barely comprehensible to those who knew him during his lifetime. Book has followed book, and exhibition upon exhibition. The attendees are young, and never complain that it is hard to understand. But the pictures haven't changed. Something else has, and it has rendered Hujar "assimilable" in a way he never was. ... Hujar's milieu – downtown opposed to uptown, homosexual opposed to heterosexual, counterculture opposed to culture – was not big; it was bounded by a few streets and inhabited by people who, though they surely weren't opposed to money, made no real effort to pursue it. They chose instead the occupations – as poets and artists, as drag performers and Off Broadway actors – that were proud to exist at the margins.<sup>68</sup>

The film *Peter Hujar's Day*, by director **Ira Sachs**, based on the aforementioned conversation Hujar had with his friend Linda Rosenkrantz in 1974, was released in 2025.

David Michael Wojnarowicz (1954-1992)<sup>69</sup>

A fearless political firebrand, the radical artist **David Wojnarowicz** challenged the art world and lambasted America for failing the LGBT community, particularly in response to the AIDS crisis.

<sup>67</sup> Morgan Library and Museum, "Peter Hujar: Speed of Life," 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s-lCgOoLmCc>, and "Peter Hujar's Career in Contact Sheets/Collection in Focus," 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kynVlvL6FTg>.

<sup>68</sup> Benjamin Moser, "The Enduring Power of Peter Hujar's 'Portraits in Life and Death'," *The New Yorker*, October 8, 2024.

<sup>69</sup> George Benson, "David Wojnarowicz Residence," NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project, January 2021, <https://www.nyclgbtsites.org/site/peter-hujar-residence-studio-david-wojnarowicz-residence-studio>; Carr, *Fire in the Belly: The Life and Times of David Wojnarowicz*; Christine Smallwood, "The Rage and Tenderness of David Wojnarowicz's Art," *New York Times Magazine*, September 7, 2018, [nyti.ms/2JrCmxh](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/07/magazine/david-wojnarowicz.html); Moira Donegan, "David Wojnarowicz's Still-Burning Rage," *The New Yorker*, August 18, 2018, [bit.ly/3aNtQnx](https://www.newyorker.com/2018/08/18/david-wojnarowicz); "David Wojnarowicz," Visual AIDS, [bit.ly/2X4FqCN](https://visualaids.org/david-wojnarowicz); Chris McKim, director, *Wojnarowicz: Fuck You Faggot Fucker* documentary (2020); Rosa von Praunheim, director, *Silence = Death* film (1990); David Wojnarowicz Foundation, <https://wojfound.org>, and emails to the NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project, October 2024; Alan Barrows, Civilian Warfare Gallery, <https://civilianwarfaregallery.wordpress.com>; Art Blart, "Exhibition: 'David Wojnarowicz: History Keeps Me Awake' at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York," September 28, 2018, <https://artblart.com/tag/david-wojnarowicz-hujar-dead/>; "David Wojnarowicz," Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David\\_Wojnarowicz](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Wojnarowicz).

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Wojnarowicz lived and worked in Peter Hujar's former loft apartment in the Jaffe Art Theater Building from 1988 until his death (in the loft) from AIDS in 1992, the period of his greatest fame and notoriety. He was also given the first political funeral of the AIDS epidemic, which began outside the loft.

Wojnarowicz (1954-1992) lived a life of extreme hardship, but it was one he was able to channel into his radical multimedia art, photography, filmmaking, writing, music, performance, and activism. Writer **Fran Lebowitz**, a friend of Hujar, described Wojnarowicz's upbringing as "a classic background for a serial killer."<sup>70</sup> He was born in Red Bank, New Jersey, to a physically abusive, alcoholic father and neglectful mother. After a brief time at age eleven living with his mother in Hell's Kitchen in Manhattan, he left home and had a very rough life living on the streets, in halfway houses, cheap hotels, the Gay Activists Alliance Firehouse (99 Wooster Street), in squats, and was hustling in Times Square.<sup>71</sup> He managed to enroll in the prestigious High School for Music and Art and graduated in 1973.

After an experience hitchhiking with a friend across the U.S. in 1976, he went with a sister for a nine-month stay in Paris in 1978. After his return to New York in 1979, Wojnarowicz lived for a time with a friend in Vinegar Hill, Brooklyn. He began to photograph friends posing in various locations around the city, wearing a mask of the face of one of his personal "outsider" heroes, the nineteenth-century French poet **Arthur Rimbaud**. He also began to create collages that were tributes to other heroes and kept journals and audio recordings of his daily life, a habit which continued for the rest of his life.

Wojnarowicz gravitated to the East Village, where he found rapport with the characters he met there. He was attracted to those he considered outsiders, like himself, of the "pre-invented world," his term for societal structures that influence people from birth, such as the law, language, religion, and the corporate sphere. For a meager salary in 1980, he worked at gay activist **Jim Furratt**'s club Danceteria on West 37<sup>th</sup> Street and, until June 1981, lived with friends at 159 Second Avenue.

Wojnarowicz met photographer **Peter Hujar** [see above] in 1980 at The Bar on Second Avenue and East 4<sup>th</sup> Street. Hujar was for a time his lover, and then the two settled into a platonic spiritual bond that for both men would be their most important relationship. Hujar acted as the father figure Wojnarowicz never had and served as an unparalleled source of support, inspiration, and tutelage for the younger man to expand as an artist and to start painting. Hujar told Wojnarowicz never to compromise in his art, advice that he took to heart always. The two often used each other as subjects in their art. Wojnarowicz later paid tribute to his friend by convincing Gracie Mansion Gallery to host a retrospective of Hujar's photographs, which was "Peter Hujar: Recent Photographs" in January 1986.

Wojnarowicz began as a street artist, spray-painting stencils of images such as targets, a falling man, and a burning house, on cars, buildings and streets, for which he began to be noticed. There were no East

<sup>70</sup> Cited in Smallwood.

<sup>71</sup> The Gay Activists Alliance Firehouse was designated a landmark by the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission in June 2019.

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Village art galleries at the time, so local art was being shown in other places, such as clubs and cafes. Wojnarowicz was invited to include some of his art in artist **Keith Haring's** "First Annual Group Erotic and Pornographic Art Exhibition" at Club 57, 57 St. Mark's Place, in February 1981. Wojnarowicz had a photograph included in a photographic exhibition at FOTO Gallery, 492 Broome Street in SoHo, in June 1981. Starting in July 1981, Wojnarowicz lived with Tom Cochran, the manager of his band (3 Teens Kill 4), at 36 East 4<sup>th</sup> Street for four years (to May 1985). Wojnarowicz turned to art full time in 1982, finding inspiration in found printed matter and objects on the streets of the East Village. His art was deeply personal, expressed as "diaries" of his life.

Wojnarowicz also began to frequent the abandoned pier buildings along the Hudson River waterfront that had been appropriated by gay men, both for cruising and sex. Wojnarowicz began to create large drawings on interior surfaces in some piers. He joined with artist Mike Bidlo in inviting other artists to do their artwork at the enormous, abandoned Pier 34 on the Hudson River at Canal Street in late 1982 to early 1983. Joined eventually by hundreds of artists, who painted on all available surfaces, it was a significant moment in time that represented the intersection between the emerging, edgy downtown artistic scene and the LGBT community, which included many of these artists. Unsanctioned by New York officialdom, Pier 34 was closed by police and demolished in 1984.

Wojnarowicz's first painting, a portrait of Hujar, was included in June 1982 for his first time in an art gallery - the "Fast Exhibition" at the Alexander F. Milliken Gallery, at 141 Prince Street in SoHo. His inclusion was the result of artist/curator **Ed Baynard** asking Hujar who was creating the stencil art he had seen around the neighborhood. Wojnarowicz's painting, known as "Peter Hujar Dreaming/Yukio Mishima: Saint Sebastian," was explicitly homoerotic, with Hujar dreaming of bisexual Japanese author/playwright **Yukio Mishima**, who is masturbating to an image of Saint Sebastian.

The art gallery scene in the East Village began to emerge in 1981. Civilian Warfare Gallery, at 526 East 11<sup>th</sup> Street (new façade), was one of the first of note, started by two gay artists, **Alan Barrows** and **Dean Savard**, in the spring of 1982. Gracie Mansion Gallery, started by "Gracie Mansion" (Joanne Mayhew-Young), included Wojnarowicz in "The Famous Show" in 1982. Wojnarowicz curated a group show at Lucky Strike Cafe, 16 Stuyvesant Street, in October 1982 that featured his work along with that of friends, including Hujar, and Wojnarowicz's 3 Teens Kill 4 bandmates Doug Bressler and Julie Hair. Wojnarowicz had his first solo exhibition at the Milliken Gallery in December 1982. He later told his biographer Cynthia Carr that "I was really happy with some of the images I made. Things dealing with homosexuality, and guys arming themselves as defense against government's intrusion in their sexual lives, things dealing with myth -- self-created myth."<sup>72</sup>

An article by Grace Glueck in the *New York Times* on the East Village art scene in June 1983 helped to

<sup>72</sup> David Wojnarowicz Foundation website.

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fuel an explosion of art galleries in the neighborhood, and wealthy collectors descending downtown to search out the art. The scene was further featured in the article “Slouching Towards Avenue D” in *Art in America* in the summer of 1984. At its height, there were 176 art galleries in the East Village.<sup>73</sup>

Wojnarowicz was featured in a number of solo exhibitions at several East Village galleries: Civilian Warfare Gallery, June 1983; **Hal Bromm** Gallery’s East Village branch, November 1983; Civilian Warfare Gallery, May 1984; Gracie Mansion Gallery, his “Installation Room” (and the gallery became his representative), 1984; and Ground Zero Gallery, “You Killed Me First Installation #8,” a multimedia collaboration with Richard Kern, 1985.

By the mid-1980s Wojnarowicz’s artwork grew more complex, filled with signs and symbols that were his commentary on an American culture that he considered excluded so many people from the mainstream. His breakthrough into the museum world came in 1985 when the Whitney Museum of American Art exhibited two of his paintings in its Biennial (he was also included in the 1991 Biennial). In April 1986, Gracie Mansion Gallery put on his “An Exploration of the History of Collisions in Reverse” exhibition, and all of the paintings sold. Wojnarowicz, however, was deeply ambivalent about this success, in part because of his dislike and distrust of rich people, and he stopped painting for a time.

In September 1985, Wojnarowicz moved into 225 East 2<sup>nd</sup> Street (between Avenues B and C), and in January 1986 he moved to 529 East 13<sup>th</sup> Street. On January 1, 1986, he met **Tom Rauffenbart**, a social worker, at the porn Bijou Theater in the East Village. They were partners for the rest of Wojnarowicz’s life, and he began painting again.

On a trip to Mexico in 1986, he filmed as “a visual notebook” and began to edit the footage into a video, *A Fire in My Belly*, that was never completed. Ground Zero Gallery displayed his “Mexican Diaries” paintings in January 1987, but nothing sold. Gracie Mansion Gallery in September 1987 put on the Wojnarowicz exhibition “The Four Elements,” but only one of the paintings was sold -- “Wind (for Peter Hujar).” The East Village art scene was considered essentially over. As cogently written by Cynthia Carr, “The discovery, exploitation, and demise of New York’s last bohemia coincided with – among other things – the new visibility of queer culture, due in part to the advancing horror of AIDS. In brief, the media spotlight suddenly illuminated what had once been the cultural margin, exposing artists (especially gay artists) to an audience guaranteed to find them intolerable.”<sup>74</sup>

As mentioned above, Wojnarowicz was greatly impacted by Hujar’s death. In January 1988, Wojnarowicz moved into Hujar’s loft apartment so that, according to his biographer, he could “breathe the same air Hujar had breathed. He would hang on to any vestige.”<sup>75</sup> Wojnarowicz also stated that he

<sup>73</sup> Carr, *Fire in the Belly*, 240.

<sup>74</sup> Carr, *Fire in the Belly*, 4.

<sup>75</sup> Carr, 3 *Fire in the Belly*, 82.

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couldn't afford the rent at the place where he was then living on 13<sup>th</sup> Street, which had doubled in two years. In May, Wojnarowicz was diagnosed with AIDS. According to Carr, the building owner refused his rent checks since he was not on the apartment lease, so the Hujar Estate paid the rent and was reimbursed by Wojnarowicz. He was notified that he had to vacate the loft after the lease expired on November 30, 1988, so he was forced to hire a lawyer to fight eviction in court. An unusual compromise was reached in which the eviction was stayed, as long as Wojnarowicz remained HIV+ but, should he be cured, he would have to leave.<sup>76</sup> (Wojnarowicz would continue to live in the loft for the last five years of his life.) Wojnarowicz's friends recall that he lived more messily in the loft than Hujar had, which is corroborated in two films of Wojnarowicz here [see below]. That the basic layout of the loft remained the same is confirmed by a photograph taken of friend and photographer Marion Scemama in the kitchenette, as well as a video that Scemama made in 1989, *Self Portrait in 23 Rounds*, which shows Wojnarowicz in front of the kitchenette area.<sup>77</sup>

Street life happening outside Wojnarowicz's loft captured his attention, as is evident in many photos he took of the Second Avenue and East 12<sup>th</sup> Street intersection.<sup>78</sup> The loft was where he made paintings and printed photographs. (In 1987, before Wojnarowicz moved into the loft, he used a Super-8mm camera to create a silent thirteen-minute sequence in Hujar's memory. Filmed in black and white and in color, this is the only known film he made there.) Wojnarowicz utilized Hujar's loft darkroom, which further spurred his artistic process and allowed him to produce some of his most memorable images. He had kept many negatives of photographs that he had taken but never developed over the years, and he had never shown his own photography until after Hujar's death. According to Carr, he was at first intimidated by the darkroom, since he had not worked in one since the early 1980s. Master printers **Gary Schneider** and **John Erdman**, who printed final versions of all of Wojnarowicz's work since 1984, recalled that the first versions of "Untitled (Falling Buffalo)" (1988-89) were done in the loft, as were the "technically complex" "Untitled (Sex Series)" (1989). Schneider commented that "Of all the work that I made for David, the "Sex Series" was the most poetic of our relationship, because I could bring this technical thing to it and he had made these masterpieces of the darkroom."<sup>79</sup> This series was Wojnarowicz's response to the backlash against sexual activity among gay and bisexual men that the AIDS epidemic fomented. Photography would become increasingly important from this point in Wojnarowicz's artistic output.

Wojnarowicz had worried that his art career was over, particularly since the East Village art scene had basically ended and only one of his works had sold in 1987, but he started to paint again in the summer of 1988. All of Wojnarowicz's paintings from this point on, as well as his work on a film, were created

<sup>76</sup> Carr, 3 *Fire in the Belly*, 94-396, 400-401, 414-415.

<sup>77</sup> Found on a contact sheet in the David Wojnarowicz Papers, The Fales Library & Special Collections, New York University.

<sup>78</sup> Based on contact sheets in the David Wojnarowicz Papers, The Fales Library & Special Collections, New York University.

<sup>79</sup> David Wojnarowicz Foundation, "Master Printer Gary Schneider," [https://wojfound.org/oral\\_history/gary-schneider](https://wojfound.org/oral_history/gary-schneider).

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in this loft residence and studio, with the exception of a few works done in 1990 while he was in Illinois [see below]. After the Jaffe Theater had closed as a live venue in 1987, it was being converted into a multiplex movie theater, which was quite disruptive for Wojnarowicz and the other residential tenants.

Several weeks after Hujar's death, Wojnarowicz's partner Rauffenbart tested positive for AIDS, then Wojnarowicz did too in May 1988. They started attending meetings and demonstrations of ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power), which had formed in March 1987. It became New York's leading AIDS political action group fighting to bring widespread attention to AIDS, and for a governmental response to the epidemic, as well as for access to experimental drugs. Already one of the major figureheads of the East Village art scene, Wojnarowicz helped to inspire people into taking direct action in the fight against AIDS. Though his art had never featured a signature visual style, it had always contained within it his acid wit, burning rage, and transgressive politics. His piece "Untitled (Hujar Dead)" was shown at a Lower Broadway gallery in October 1988, and was written about in *Arts* magazine, changing the art world's perception of the artist - he "wasn't just the East Village primitive anymore" but a furious gay man with "the power to change lives."<sup>80</sup>

Knowing that he probably had little time left, since there was no cure in sight for AIDS, Wojnarowicz used the disease as a focus and a furious weapon in his art, and even more particularly in his writings - raging against American society, for its indifference, paranoia, hatred, bigotry, and homophobia. Wojnarowicz wrote extensively and did many readings of his work. A 1990 interview with National Public Radio's Terry Gross gave insight into what motivated Wojnarowicz as an artist: "Whatever work I've done, it's always been informed by my experience as an American in this country, as a homosexual in this country, as a person who is legislated into silence in this country."<sup>81</sup> He didn't always perceive his art as provocation, but as a way to express his truth. As Carr wrote, "David never wanted to be known as an 'AIDS artist' but felt compelled to respond to the devastation around him."<sup>82</sup>

Wojnarowicz wrote an essay in 1989 called "Postcards from America: X-rays from Hell" for the catalogue of the Artists Space Gallery exhibition "Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing" in 1989-90, organized by artist/photographer Nan Goldin, at 233 West Broadway. The press release stated that "Witnesses represents a personal reflection on the influence AIDS has had on aesthetics, culture and sexuality among Goldin's friends in Manhattan's Lower East Side community."<sup>83</sup> Wojnarowicz attempted to describe his own state of mind and body and that of other friends with AIDS and expressed his outrage at the medical community, conservative religious leaders and politicians, and the museum and art collecting world - "WHEN I WAS TOLD THAT I'D CONTRACTED THIS VIRUS IT

<sup>80</sup> Carr, *Fire in the Belly*, 402.

<sup>81</sup> Maximiliano Duron, "David Wojnarowicz's Art Continues to Resonate, But a New Documentary About Him Fails to Impress," *ARTnews*, November 11, 2020.

<sup>82</sup> Carr, *Fire in the Belly*, 439.

<sup>83</sup> Artists Space, "Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing" press release, November 1989.

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DIDN'T TAKE ME LONG TO REALIZE THAT I'D CONTRACTED A DISEASED SOCIETY AS WELL." He expressed many things that he would like to do, in his mind, to display that outrage in response to the epidemic and the loss of friends and lovers, but at the end of the essay he offered hope that others would respond, in public, to assist in the crisis:

But, bottom line, this is my own feeling of urgency and need; bottom line emotionally, even a tiny charcoal scratching done as a gesture to mark a person's response to this epidemic means whole worlds to me if it is hung in public; bottom line, each and every gesture carries a reverberation that is meaningful in its diversity; bottom line, we have to find our own forms of gesture and communication – you can never depend on the mass media to reflect us or our needs or our states of mind.<sup>84</sup>

The exhibition and catalogue, and especially Wojnarowicz's essay, meant to be local and elegiac, ended up igniting a national controversy. Earlier in 1989, Congressional controversies started over National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) funding for homoerotic photography by Robert Mapplethorpe and the painting "Piss Christ" by Andres Serrano. The Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington cancelled its planned Mapplethorpe exhibition, igniting a firestorm of protest from the artistic community, then came to regret its decision. In October 1989, Congress' 1990 Appropriation Act for NEA prohibited funding for, among other things, "obscene" or "homoerotic" art that was deemed lacking in artistic merit. Artists Space had received a \$10,000 NEA grant, but newly appointed NEA chairman John E. Frohnmayer withdrew the grant, stating that the funds were slated for an exhibition that was artistic in nature, not political. But much of the political pressure in the attack on Artists Space was due to Wojnarowicz's frank essay, in which he criticized, by name, New York's Catholic Cardinal John O'Connor, conservative California Representative William Dannemeyer, and conservative North Carolina Senator Jesse Helms. The NEA grant was in fact restored, for the exhibition only, and not the catalogue, under the technicality that the grant had originally been given prior to the legislation. During the controversy, Wojnarowicz was filmed by **Phil Zwickler** in his loft apartment, as seen in *Footage of Wojnarowicz speaking about the National Endowment for the Arts controversy* (1989). The loft apartment was also seen in German director **Rosa von Praunheim**'s film *Silence = Death* (1989), in which Wojnarowicz is interviewed and rants furiously; it includes footage from Wojnarowicz's unfinished *Fire in My Belly*.

Barry Blinderman, director of the University Galleries at Illinois State University, Normal, Illinois, had acquired an important early Wojnarowicz painting, "Fuck You Faggot Fucker" (1984), its title taken from a homophobic scrap of paper he found and included in the work. In 1990, to honor Wojnarowicz (he had been contacted by Gracie Mansion after Wojnarowicz's AIDS diagnosis), Blinderman organized a retrospective exhibition titled "David Wojnarowicz: Tongues of Flame" in Normal. At the February

<sup>84</sup> David Wojnarowicz, "Postcards from America: X-rays from Hell," in Artists Space Gallery, "Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing" exhibition catalogue, 1989.

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opening, Wojnarowicz gave a performance amidst four of his videos, to an enthusiastic crowd of over 700 people, and the exhibition catalogue sold out. The exhibition, however, which had received an NEA grant of \$15,000, started another national controversy. The right-wing, self-appointed moralist “Reverend” Donald Wildmon of the American Family Association (AFA) defamed Wojnarowicz’s art and mailed thousands of leaflets to members of Congress and to religious institutions throughout the U.S. Wojnarowicz sued Wildmon for a million dollars for defamation, copyright infringement, and taking his artwork out of context. Wildmon used the created controversy for fundraising. After the court case in June, AFA was ordered to send a corrective mailing, but Wojnarowicz was only awarded \$1.00 in damages. “Tongues of Flame” opened in July 1990 at the Santa Monica Museum of Art, where it was also attacked by the right-wing “religious” community in California. In November, “Tongues of Flame” was displayed at Exit Art in New York, but the gallery had great difficulty obtaining any funding for it.

Between the “Tongues of Flame” trial and the end of 1990, Wojnarowicz created his last visual art. He had stayed in Bloomington-Normal for several weeks during the exhibition, where he produced a number of lithographs. Later in August he went back to Normal for a month, while work was being done in his New York loft apartment, and a broken pipe had flooded it. Perhaps his most famous artwork created in 1990-91 was “Untitled (One Day This Kid...)” Wojnarowicz surrounded a black and white image of himself, around the age of eight, with text written in his characteristically relentless rhythm, taking aim at societal structures that made “existence intolerable for this kid” because of their oppressive abuse and homophobic attitudes towards his sexuality.

Wojnarowicz’s last solo exhibition, in November 1990, was at the P.P.O.W. Gallery in New York. “In the Garden” was a series he had created in Normal. Wojnarowicz had expressed that he was tired of the controversies and his image as a bad boy angry artist and wanted to do something beautiful, so he created four exotic flower paintings with blocks of text, which were hung along with photographs and other new and old art. Some have interpreted the flower paintings as symbols of the importance of beauty, of the beauty of one’s body and its fragility, and of AIDS.<sup>85</sup>

As he was becoming increasingly sicker from AIDS, Wojnarowicz took a “last trip” with friend Marion Scemama to Arizona. She took a photograph that has now become iconic – of Wojnarowicz buried in the dirt, with only parts of his face showing. On October 26, 1991, Wojnarowicz gave his last reading, at the Drawing Center, as a benefit for ACT UP. *Seven Miles a Second* (1991), a comic book version of his life, was created by James Romberger and Marguerite van Cook. Wojnarowicz’s two memoirs were published -- *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration* (1991), with “Hujar Dreaming” on the cover, and *Memories That Smell Like Gasoline* (1992). In June 1992, the Museum of Modern Art acquired Wojnarowicz’s painting “Fire” from his “The Four Elements” series.

<sup>85</sup> Smallwood.

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Wojnarowicz's partner Tom Rauffenbart moved into his loft apartment in December 1991, in order to assist in his care. Wojnarowicz was able to receive round-the-clock home care, due in part (according to his doctor) to the force of his personality.<sup>86</sup> According to friends, in the last six months of his life, he purposely hung his work *Fever* (1988-89) above his bed.<sup>87</sup> In this period, he also asked his friend, performance artist Karen Finley, to take a baby elephant skeleton that he had prominently displayed in this residence and his previous one after purchasing it, along with other skeletons, in Paris in 1985. Finley, who believed he wanted her to ensure its safekeeping, said, "I always saw it as an image really of him, of his totem. He's an elephant. The elephant never forgets. You know—there's the ancientness of it."<sup>88</sup> (The skeleton appears next to Wojnarowicz at the loft in a 1990 portrait by Nan Goldin.) Wojnarowicz died, at age 37, in his loft apartment on July 22, 1992, surrounded by Rauffenbart, four friends, and three of his siblings. An image, taken by an unknown photographer, shows the dying Wojnarowicz lying in his bed in the Second Avenue loft.<sup>89</sup> His body was taken to Redden's Funeral Home on West 14<sup>th</sup> Street, as had Hujar's. Friends, some of whom were ACT UP members, urged Rauffenbart to open the loft on the Sunday after Wojnarowicz's death, since they wanted to plan an action that followed Wojnarowicz's writing that AIDS deaths should be made public.

One week after his death, on July 29, Wojnarowicz was given the first political funeral to come out of the AIDS epidemic, organized by members of ACT UP and the PWA (People With AIDS) Coalition. Written across a huge banner that led the funeral procession, which began at the Jaffe Art Theater Building, were the words: DAVID WOJNAROWICZ, 1954–1992, DIED OF AIDS DUE TO GOVERNMENT NEGLECT. The group, estimated at 300, marched south on Second Avenue, then east to Avenue A, where they were joined by a police car that led them, then south to Houston Street, west to the Bowery, and north to the Cooper Union Building. Marchers walked in silence to the beat of the Women's Action Coalition drum corps, and many people stepped off the sidewalks to join. Near Cooper Union, Wojnarowicz images were projected on a wall, along with readings of his words, then the funeral banner was set on fire along with placards that people had carried.<sup>90</sup> A Memorial for Wojnarowicz was held on September 14 at St. Mark's Church in-the-Bowery. Rauffenbart took Wojnarowicz's ashes to many places of meaning to them both – some were sealed into the wall of the loft apartment, and some, as a final political statement, were thrown onto the White House lawn.

Even after his death Wojnarowicz was a touchstone for right-wing controversy. In 2010, the National Portrait Gallery was forced to remove an eleven-second portion of his silent video *Fire in My Belly* from an exhibition. This was "Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture," a pioneering look

<sup>86</sup> McKim, documentary.

<sup>87</sup> David Wojnarowicz Foundation interview by NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project.

<sup>88</sup> "Sculpture—Other Objects, David Wojnarowicz Knowledge Base," Artist Archives Initiative, New York University, [https://artistarchives.hosting.nyu.edu/DavidWojnarowicz/KnowledgeBase/index.php/Sculpture--Other\\_Objects.html#cite\\_note-1](https://artistarchives.hosting.nyu.edu/DavidWojnarowicz/KnowledgeBase/index.php/Sculpture--Other_Objects.html#cite_note-1).

<sup>89</sup> The image can be found in David Wojnarowicz Papers, Fales Library & Special Collections, New York University.

<sup>90</sup> Carr, *Fire in the Belly*; Guy Trebay, "City of Widows," *Village Voice*, August 11, 1992, 14.

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at sexual difference in American art, that had been refused by every major museum in New York City. The secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, C. Wayne Clough, under pressure from the Catholic League and right-wing politicians who threatened funding cuts for the Smithsonian, made the decision since he was worried that the entire exhibition would be shut down. In turn, this decision received a storm of criticism from the national arts world.

The University Galleries of Illinois State University summarized the import of Wojnarowicz's work in the context of that latest controversy:

Self-taught in the arts and letters, David Wojnarowicz used any mode of communication at his disposal to fight for visibility in what he termed "the pre-invented world." He developed a stirring and concise lexicon of sounds and images, looking to visionary discontents like **Jean Genet**, **Arthur Rimbaud**, and **William Burroughs** for inspiration. Following his diagnosis with AIDS in the late 1980s, Wojnarowicz's relentless anger at a homophobic Church, and politicians who ignored the existence of this deadly illness, fueled much of his scathing imagery. The soul-piercing diatribes he delivered to audiences throughout the U.S. until his death in 1992 still resound today; the sustained power of his work is evident in the political storm surrounding the removal of his video *Fire in My Belly* from an exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery in 2010.<sup>91</sup>

In 2020, Maximiliano Duron in *ARTnews* opined that "David Wojnarowicz is among the most famous artists and activists lost during the height of the AIDS crisis in the 1980s and early '90s. His life and his beautiful, unapologetically political art continue to intrigue, and in recent years, they have been the subject of a biography, an Aperture monograph, a Whitney Museum retrospective, and, now, a new documentary."<sup>92</sup>

The continuing interest and study of Wojnarowicz's life and work is indicated by the many books, exhibitions, and documentary on him since his death: the book *David Wojnarowicz: Brush Fires in the Social Landscape* by Aperture (1994); the exhibition "Fever: The Art of David Wojnarowicz" at the New Museum (1999); the *Artforum* special issue on East Village art (1999), which featured a photograph of Wojnarowicz at Pier 34 on the cover; the book *In the Shadow of the American Dream: The Diaries of David Wojnarowicz*, Amy Scholder, editor, Grove/Atlantic (2000); the book *Rimbaud In New York 1978–1979*, Andrew Roth, editor, Roth Horowitz, LLC/PPP Editions (2004); "Spirituality," a partial retrospective at the P.P.O.W. Gallery (2011); Art reporter Cynthia Carr's exhaustive biography, *Fire in the Belly: The Life and Times of David Wojnarowicz*, New York: Bloomsbury USA (2012); the book *Weight of the Earth: The Tape Journals of David Wojnarowicz*, Lisa Darms and David O'Neill, editors, MIT Press (2018); and the documentary *Wojnarowicz: Fuck You Faggot Fucker* by director Chris McKim (2020).

<sup>91</sup> University Galleries of Illinois State University, "David Wojnarowicz: Tongues of Flame," <https://galleries.illinoisstate.edu/exhibitions/1990/Wojnarowicz>.

<sup>92</sup> Duron.

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In 2018, the Whitney Museum of American Art exhibited the full retrospective “David Wojnarowicz: History Keeps Me Awake at Night.” The Whitney extolled his significance:

In an artistic practice spanning photography, painting, collage, sculpture, film, and writing, David Wojnarowicz distilled his moral fury into a powerful weapon amid the political and social turbulence of the 1980s -- addressing in particular the devastation of the AIDS epidemic, homophobic politicians and policy, and the institutionalized apathy and loss of spirituality he saw in American society.<sup>93</sup>

The David Wojnarowicz Papers are housed at the Fales Library at New York University, and the David Wojnarowicz Foundation maintains an online research archive. The P.P.O.W. Gallery has managed the Estate of David Wojnarowicz since his death in 1992. Wojnarowicz’s artwork is in the permanent collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Museum of Modern Art, Whitney Museum of American Art, and Leslie-Lohman Museum of Art, New York; Princeton University Art Museum; Art Institute of Chicago; Hammer Museum of Art and The Broad, Los Angeles; Minneapolis Museum of Art; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Cleveland Museum of Art; Zimmerli Art Museum, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey; Newark Museum, Newark, New Jersey; National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; Chazen Museum of Art, Madison, Wisconsin; Hallmark Art Collection, St. Louis, Missouri; Henry Art Gallery, Seattle, Washington; Addison Gallery of American Art, Andover, Massachusetts; Columbus Museum of Art, Ohio; Philadelphia Museum of Art; University Galleries of Illinois State University, Normal; Dallas Museum of Art; Hall Art Foundation, Reading, Vermont; Harvard University Museums, Cambridge, Massachusetts; Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Connecticut; Tate Britain, London, England; and Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid,

## SUMMARY

The Louis N. Jaffe Art Theater Building illustrates several key themes connected to LGBT history over nearly half a century. Despite living through two of the most homophobic periods in American history – the post-World War II era and the AIDS crisis – LGBT people connected to this site made important and well-documented contributions to American culture through the performing arts, nightlife, the visual arts, and AIDS activism from the 1940s to the 1990s. In that timeframe, the people associated with the building represented a wide range of identities within the LGBT community: lesbians, gay men, drag kings, female impersonators, and those who today might identify as gender fluid, gender nonconforming, or transgender. As a result, this additional documentation for LGBT history for the Louis N. Jaffe Art Theater Building provides context for the site’s diverse and dynamic social and cultural significance in the latter half of the twentieth century.

<sup>93</sup> Whitney Museum of American Art, “David Wojnarowicz 1954-1992,” <https://whitney.org/artists/3598>.

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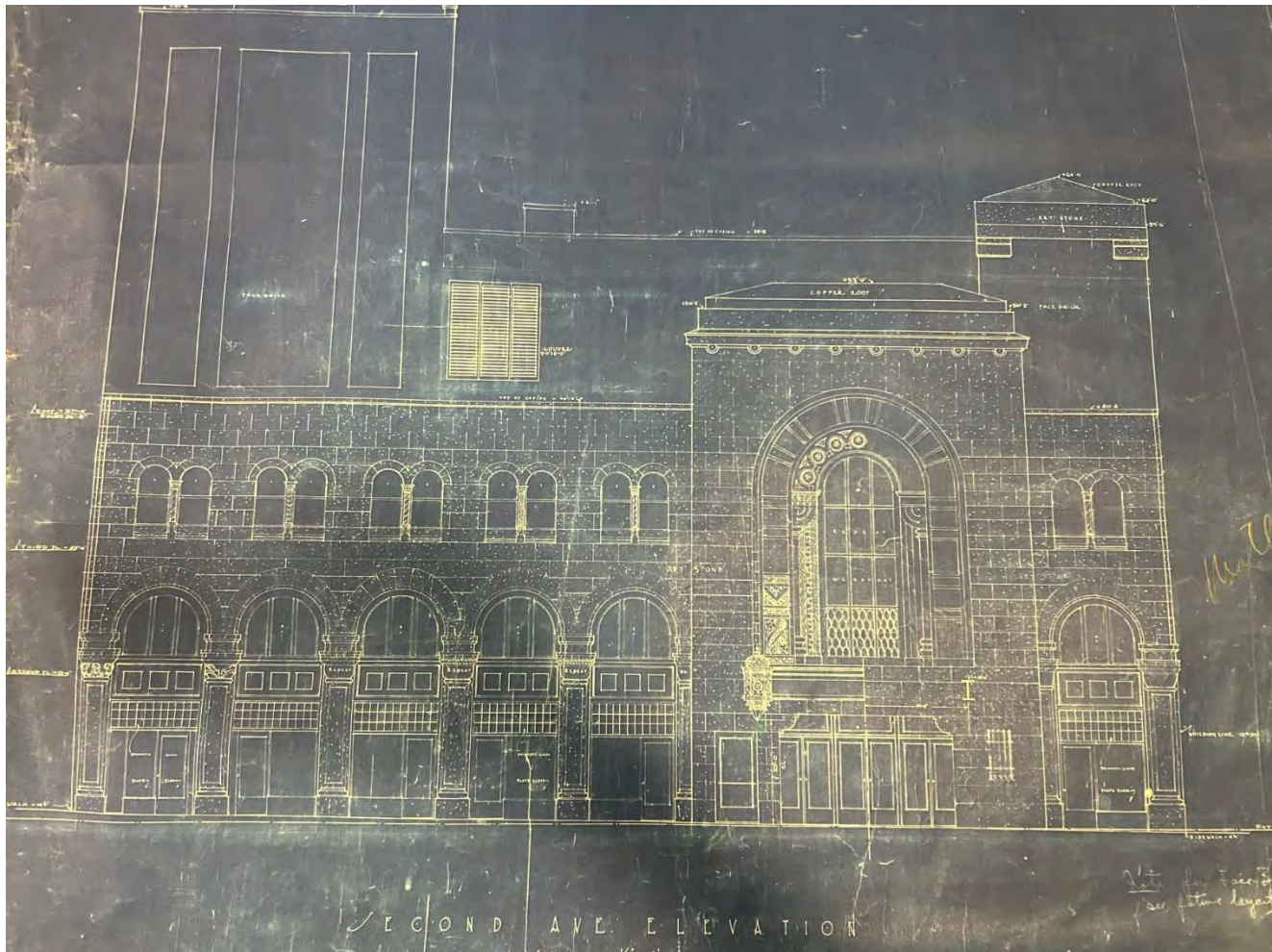
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2<sup>nd</sup> Ave Elevation 1925

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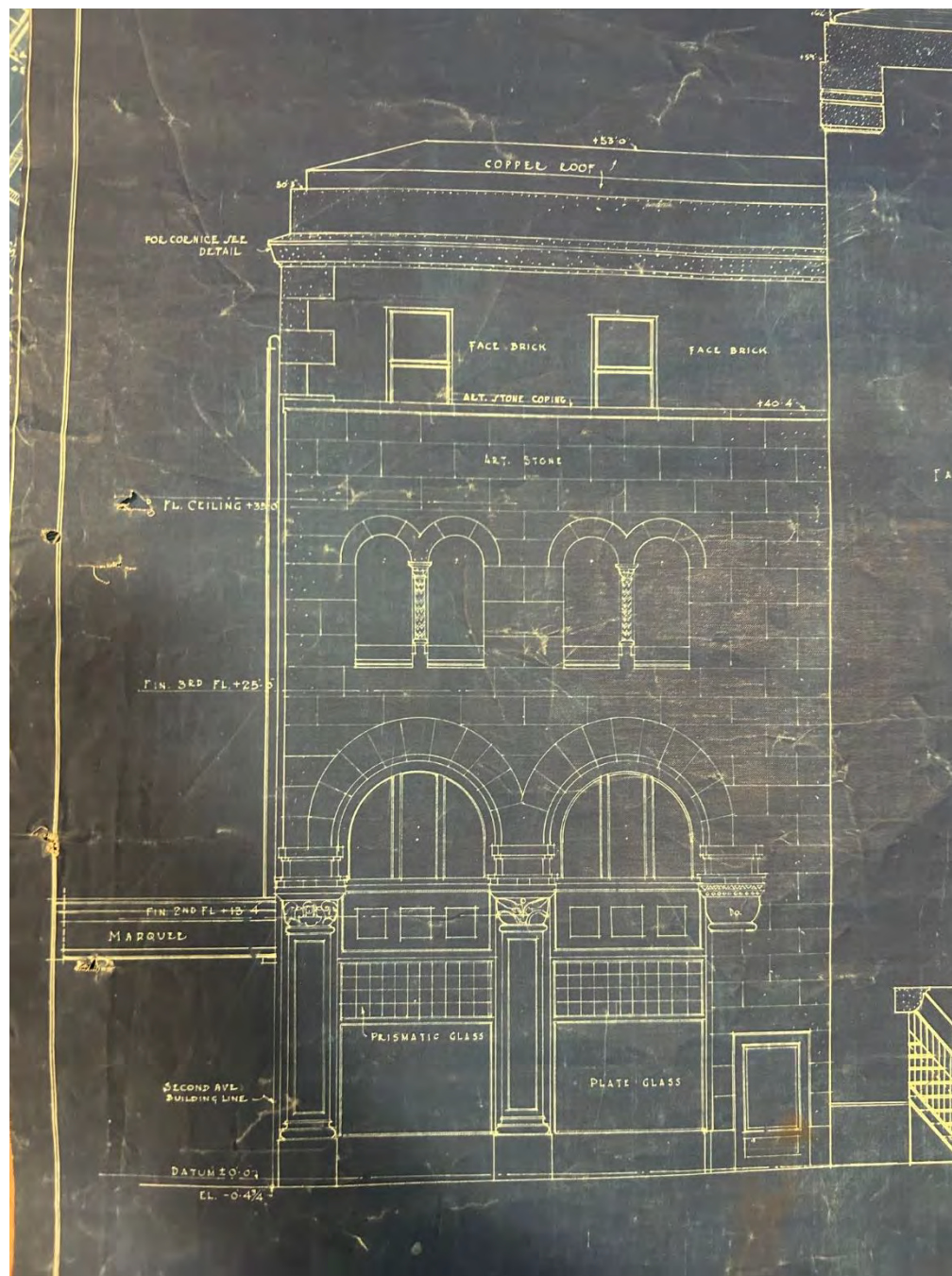
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12<sup>th</sup> St elevation 1925

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Loft Interior 1 – courtesy of Wojnarowicz Foundation

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Loft Interior 2 – Courtesy of Wojnarowicz Foundation

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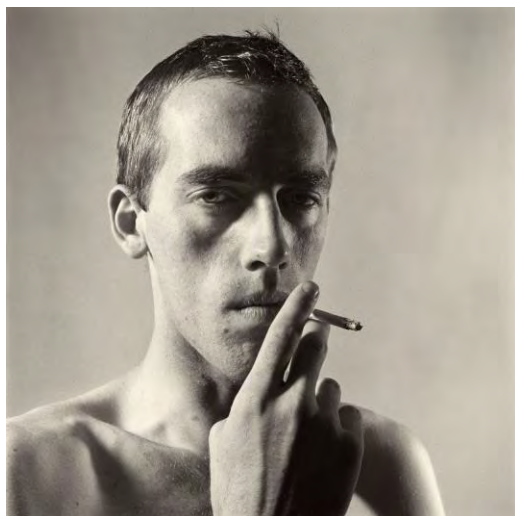
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Jackie Curtis



David Wojnarowicz

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Peter Hujar - Self Portrait in Loft – 1974

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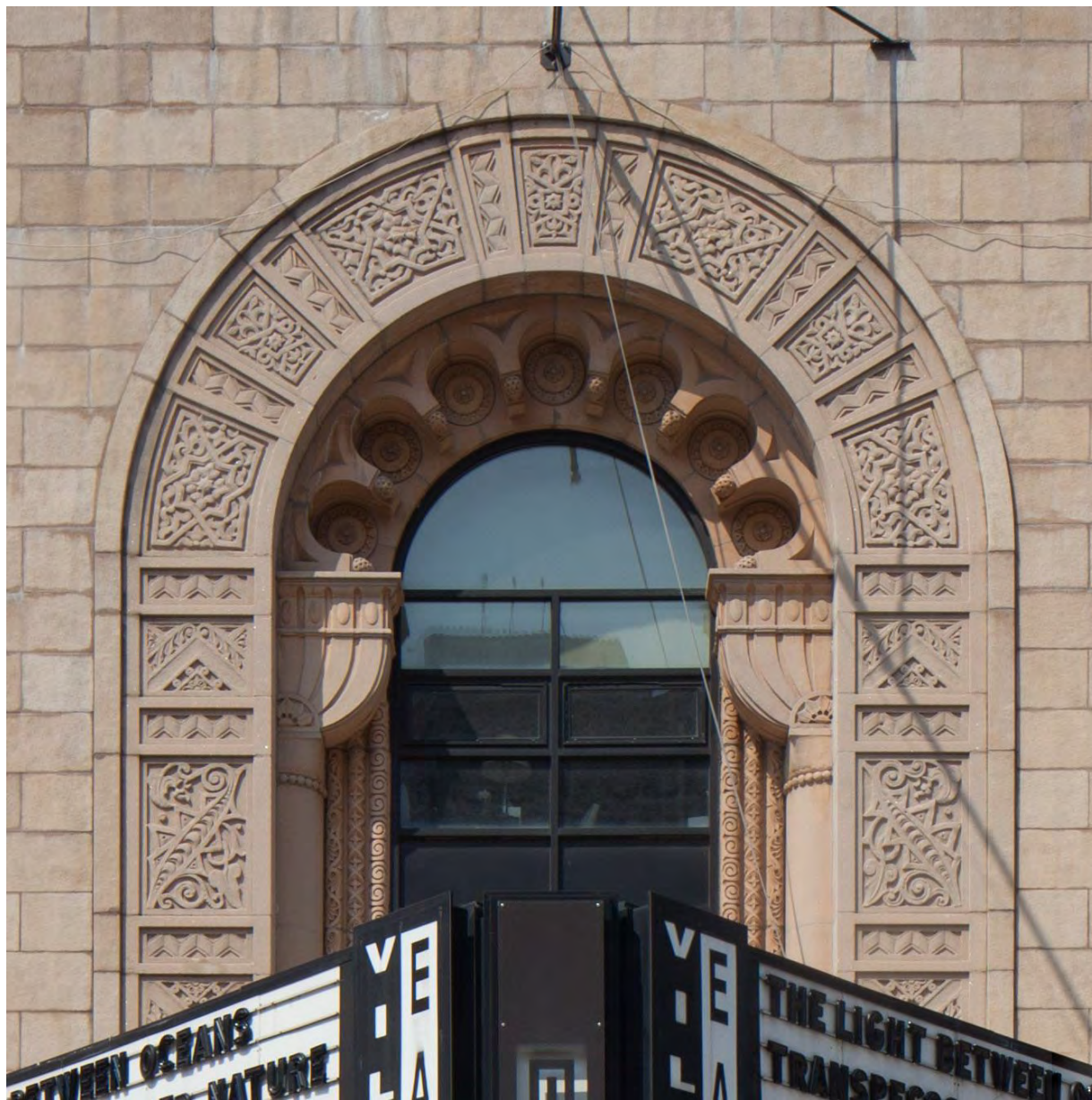
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