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Gender Euphoria: Photography, Fashion, and Gender Nonconformity in The East Village

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GENDER EUPHORIA: PHOTOGRAPHY, FASHION, AND GENDER
NONCONFORMITY IN THE EAST VILLAGE

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

in

The School of Art

by

Alicia Diane Ridout

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This work is dedicated to Geoffrey Matthew Badeaux, bringer of snack trays, who hasn't even complained *that much* that I took over his entire office for the last few months, and who has been instrumental in helping me have the time and concentration to accomplish this thesis. Thank you for your love and support.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iii
ABSTRACT.....	v
INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER I: A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE LOWER EAST SIDE	6
CHAPTER II: PETER HUJAR.....	21
Ethyl Eichelberger and the Great Women of History.....	23
The Cockettes and Angels of Light: Avant-Garde Gender-Benders.....	32
Photography Outside the Studio: Street Queens.....	36
Women in Revolt: Candy Darling and Greer Lankton.....	39
CHAPTER III: NAN GOLDIN.....	45
Early Work in Boston.....	49
A New Tribe: Drag Queens in 1990s New York City.....	52
Greer Lankton: Fashion and Intimacy in the East Village.....	58
CHAPTER IV: CONCLUSION	65
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	69
VITA.....	71

ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates the link between art and fashion photography in the work of Peter Hujar and Nan Goldin, both of whom commented on the nature of gender identity. There is an extensive body of fashion-inspired images by both of these East Village photographers that falls into this category. The pictures they produced of gender-nonconforming individuals serve to comment on the restrictive nature of gender identities represented in fashion photography, and also to elevate the status of those pictured to that of fashion models. The unique cultural context of the East Village served as the perfect location for both photographers to explore their interest in gender identity and expression, as the East Village of the 1970s through 1990s was home to a large population of gender-nonconforming individuals. By examining these artists' work in their cultural context, and comparing it to examples from fashion photography contemporaneous with their photographs, the connection between art and fashion photography is illuminated. Ultimately, this thesis seeks to demonstrate the importance of these photographs in the history of the East Village, and their lasting influence on society.

INTRODUCTION

"The pictures ... are not of people suffering gender dysphoria but rather expressing gender euphoria.... The people in these pictures are truly revolutionary; they are the real winners in the battle of the sexes because they have stepped out of the ring."¹

Nan Goldin

Popular fashion photography, in *Vogue*, *Harper's Bazaar*, and other magazines, had a profound effect on the photography of Peter Hujar and Nan Goldin. These two artists lived and worked in New York City's East Village between the decades of the 1970s and the 1990s. During this time the East Village underwent rapid changes: a transition from an area primarily composed of immigrant families, to a Bohemian artist's community, complete with the establishment of alternative club and performance spaces and a thriving art market. The two photographers shared a unique interest in photographing gender-nonconforming individuals in their social milieu, and explored this topic extensively, creating large bodies of work. When research on this project began, there were no indications that the project would become centered on the linkage between fashion and art photography. However, the connection became increasingly clear until it could no longer be ignored.

Both Peter Hujar and Nan Goldin repeatedly represented their gender-nonconforming sitters with poses and arrangements borrowed from fashion photography. This is the first study of the connection between the two artists, and their appropriation of pop cultural visual language borrowed from the pages of *Vogue*, *Harper's Bazaar*, and other sources, which

¹ Nan Goldin, David Armstrong, and Walter Keller, *Nan Goldin: The Other Side 1972-1992* (New York: Scalo, 2000), 5.

² For the purposes of this paper, cishnormativity is defined as the common misconception that there are merely two genders, and that every human is one or the other. It also encompasses

commented on the state of the gender-nonconforming individual in society. Their distinct, but similar work is concerned with elevating the status of the gender-nonconforming individual while critiquing the monotony and cisnormativity² of fashion photography.

The East Village provided an appropriate backdrop for this activity, due to the proliferation of both artists and gender-nonconforming persons in the East Village community. A combination of low rents, and much available space drew artists to the area, as an alternative to living outside of Manhattan or paying higher rent in the West Village.³ The majority of people photographed by both Hujar and Goldin lived on the Lower East Side, and many of them, such as Ethyl Eichelberger or Greer Lankton, were artists in their own right.

Goldin and Hujar were enamored with those who transgressed the gender binary because they were fascinated by the idea of fluidity of gender— what it was like to move between malleable gender identities, rather than exist in one fixed male or female identity. Goldin saw those who lived outside the binary as a “third gender,” which both fascinated and attracted her.⁴ Hujar was largely unconcerned with defining the people he photographed; he merely loved “those that dare.”⁵ The photography of these two very different individuals share a common thread in its embrace and celebration of freedom in gender expression—

² For the purposes of this paper, cisnormativity is defined as the common misconception that there are merely two genders, and that every human is one or the other. It also encompasses the social and political forces which coerce people into male or female gender roles. For more information, see Juniper Russo, *The Queer Dictionary*, accessed November 9, 2015, <http://queerdictionary.blogspot.com/2014/09/definition-of-cisnormativity.html>

³ Steven Hager, *Art after Midnight: The East Village Scene* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), 4.

⁴ Goldin, Armstrong, and Keller, *Nan Goldin: The Other Side*, 5.

⁵ Peter Hujar, "Interview with Peter Hujar," *Fire Island Newsmagazine*, June 5-19 1980.

what Nan Goldin called “gender euphoria.”⁶ The two address the idea of gender variance differently, but seen together create a clear picture of a now bygone community.

The two photographers knew each other, and were in a similar social circle. Peter Hujar was older and more experienced, and exerted influence over other younger photographers in the scene, including Goldin. Both artists engaged with fashion in one sense or another. Although they were thoroughly rooted in downtown communities, Hujar started his career as a fashion photographer, and the influence of Richard Avedon⁷ on his style is extremely marked.⁸ As for Goldin, she aspired to work in fashion photography, and her style can be better identified with the sexualized portraits of Helmut Newton.

Hujar hails from an older generation than Goldin, and a commitment to formal purity and the physical process of developing the images is a major part of his work. Goldin on the other hand, eschewed traditional photographic practices in an effort to capture moments as they happened—an attempt at complete honesty.⁹ Yet both were fascinated with fashion—and both seemed to see transfeminine people in particular as muses. They saw gender nonconformity as a form of transcendence. The pair used fashion photography, and occasionally art historical references, to celebrate those that, in Nan Goldin’s words, they

⁶ Goldin, Armstrong, and Keller, *Nan Goldin: The Other Side*, 8.

⁷ Richard Avedon was one of the most popular fashion photographers of the 20th Century, he worked for both Vogue and Harper’s Bazaar. For more information, see *The Richard Avedon Foundation*, <http://www.avedonfoundation.org/fashion/>. No scholarly biography yet exists.

⁸ Cynthia Carr, *Fire in the Belly: The Life and Times of David Wojnarowicz* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2012), 181.

⁹ Chris Townsend, "Nan Goldin: Bohemian Ballads," in *Phototextualities: Intersections of Photography and Narrative*, ed. Alex Hughes and Andrea Noble (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2003), 106-108.

saw as “truly revolutionary; they are the real winners of the battle of the sexes because they have stepped outside the ring.”¹⁰

In general, very little has been written about Peter Hujar. Hujar’s work, though still relatively unknown, is gaining popularity due to the efforts of several of his friends who are still alive today—Stephen Koch, Vince Aletti, Nan Goldin; and the slightly younger crowd of people who are interested in him—Joel Smith, Bill Arning, and others. He has only had one major solo show at a museum, *Peter Hujar: A Retrospective* at Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam in 1996, although he has been included in several smaller shows in universities and a few major museum shows such as: *Changing Difference: Peter Hujar, Mark Morrisroe, Jack Smith* at Galleria Civica di Modena in Modena, Italy; and *The Eighth Square: Gender, Life, and Desire in Art Since 1960* at Museum Ludwig in Köln, Germany, as well as *East Village USA* at the New Museum for Contemporary Art in New York City.¹¹ All other exhibitions of his work have been at galleries. He has still yet to have a monograph exhibition, though one is planned for the future.

These catalogs are some of the only resources on Peter Hujar that exist, outside of a chapter of a biography by Cynthia Carr of fellow East Village artist David Wojnarowicz, *A Fire In the Belly: The Life and Times of David Wojnarowicz*, published in 2012. Many of the things I discovered about Peter Hujar come from his papers, which were recently acquisitioned, along with 100 of Hujar’s prints by the Morgan Library and Museum in New York City.

¹⁰ Goldin, Armstrong, and Keller, *Nan Goldin: The Other Side*, 8.

¹¹ *Changing Difference: Queer Politics and Shifting Identities, Peter Hujar, Mark Morrisroe, Jack Smith* (Cinisello Balsamo: Silvana, 2012); Dan Cameron, *East Village USA* (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 2004).

Considering Nan Goldin, surprisingly, there is no scholarly or popular biography available. Her work has been reviewed widely, and she has published *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, *Fantastic Tales*, and *The Other Side*, the latter of which is referenced extensively here for her foreword on the topic of gender-nonconformity. There have been several large-scale installations of her work at major museums, including the Whitney and The Museum of Modern Art in New York City.

In 2003, a monograph of her work entitled *The Devil's Playground* was released by Phaidon. Goldin's work is seen as significant to feminist art, much on the level of Cindy Sherman, especially for her picture taken after she was battered—which shed light on domestic violence. Her use of the snapshot aesthetic has also been popular, as it gave her photographs a diaristic feeling, making them relatable and arresting.

Some writing has been done concerning Goldin's gender-nonconforming subjects, but the connection between this and her interest in fashion photography has not previously been explored. By comparing and contrasting Hujar and Goldin's work on this subject, I hope to highlight the influence of fashion work in fine art photography, and demonstrate how Hujar and Goldin used themes from fashion photography, to comment on the nature of the gender-nonconforming person in society.

CHAPTER I: A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE LOWER EAST SIDE

From the 1800s until the 1960s, the area known as the Lower East Side was an immigrant neighborhood.¹² It has long been a favorite place for photographers. In the 1880s Jacob Riis photographed the living conditions of immigrant families in the tenements there, some of which, more than likely, still stood in the 1980s. In the time of Hujar and Goldin it still retained some of its immigrant population, but was quickly becoming an enclave for people who were fleeing the monotony of middle-class life and looking to devote themselves to a career in art—or to experience a bohemian community. We commonly refer to this phenomenon as gentrification, but Christopher Mele, in *Selling the Lower East Side*, argues that there were also complicated cultural forces at work.

The post-World War II middle-class youth mentality, which helped make places like the Lower East Side hip, is familiar to many and has been parodied in popular culture. For example, in songs such as “Common People” by Pulp (1995)—the lyrics describe an affluent, female art school student from Greece, who wants to move to the Hackney borough of London to live like the “common people.” Other examples include theatre and movies such as *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, where the advertisement for a *RENT* casting call included the word “edgy” written into each character description, implying that living in poverty in the East Village makes one cool.

This is the Lower East Side where Hujar and Goldin lived, an immigrant neighborhood of tenement buildings, gradually shifting from one population to another. The AIDS crisis ravaged the neighborhood during this time, exacerbated by the strong heroin

¹² Christopher Mele, *Selling the Lower East Side : Culture, Real Estate, and Resistance in New York City* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), x.

trade in the neighborhood, as well as government resistance to spending funds to educate the population about safer sex.¹⁴ All the while, a flourishing art, music, and club scene was the major draw for those who flocked to the neighborhood.¹⁵

Historically, the area that would become known as the East Village was largely made up of various European ethnic groups, and Puerto Ricans. The European ethnics were diverse, with Polish, Ukrainian, Italian, and German populations—who, with the exception of the Italians, were largely of Jewish descent. Even today, there is still a vibrant Puerto Rican, Dominican, and African American population in the area, to whom the Lower East Side is known as *Loisaida*— a Spanish-English term meaning Lower East Side.¹⁶

In the 1960s, hippies frustrated with the quickly commodifying Greenwich Village flooded into the Lower East Side area.¹⁷ Thus the name East Village was coined, which both linked it to, and separated it from the West Village. The West Village, previously just “The Village” or “Greenwich Village” had been the east coast enclave of beat and hippie culture, and also a popular place for artists to live and work in the 1950s and 1960s. Painters such as Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Jasper Johns, and Robert Rauschenberg had all made Greenwich Village a home, as had the beat poets before them, and popular musicians such as Bob Dylan.¹⁸ With this popularity came rising rents and commercialization, as middle-class youth flocked to the neighborhood to experience what they believed was an authentic bohemian lifestyle.¹⁹

¹⁴ Ibid., 146-47.

¹⁵ Townsend, "Nan Goldin: Bohemian Ballads," 108.

¹⁶ Mele, *Selling the Lower East Side*, x-xii.

¹⁷ Ibid., 154.

¹⁸ Ibid., 159.

¹⁹ Ibid., 161.

When the hippies began to move to the Lower East Side, with them came additional waves of middle-class youth, and eventually the East Village began to go the way of Greenwich Village.²⁰ Others moved from the West Village to the East as well, sometimes taking up residence in rent-controlled apartments that once belonged to friends. Among them was a young Peter Hujar.²¹

By the late 1960s, the longtime citizens of the East Village area of the Lower East Side were becoming frustrated with the hippie presence there and violence erupted—culminating in the murder of a hippie couple in October 1967—an 18 year-old runaway girl named Linda Fitzpatrick from a wealthy family in Greenwich, Connecticut and an East Village regular who went by the name “Groovy.” It was actually not a community member that murdered the pair, rather it was two drifters. Nevertheless, the murder became symbolic of the social problems within the hippie movement. Simultaneously, a vigil was held in San Francisco for “Hippie”—the idea of the hippie, not any actual deceased person. These two events can be seen as presaging the death of hippie culture—which ultimately became unfashionable to most following the Charles Manson murders.

After the murder of the couple media coverage of life on the Lower East Side changed drastically, the media began painting it as a dangerous, violent place, rife with heroin dealers, seedy tenements, and violent people. Previously, the media had doted on the new East Village as a place of authentic hippie life, peace, and love. The coverage of the murder and the sense that hippie culture was on its way out, shocked real estate owners in the

²⁰ Ibid., 160-162.

²¹ Carr, *Fire in the Belly*, 183.

neighborhood, who had been preparing for rapid reinvestment and development because of the influx of middle-and upper-class youth.²²

Landlords quickly began disinvesting—leading to worsening conditions in the area that created empty apartments and very low rents, as well as an uptick in crime. The situation



Figure 1. *Peter Hujar, Gay Liberation Front, 1970.*
Gelatin silver print.

became desperate as landlords would slowly withdraw from the management of buildings—ceasing repairs, then terminating hot water and garbage services, and sometimes even setting buildings on fire to benefit from insurance money. Many buildings, in disrepair, their property taxes unpaid, became city property. Conditions did not improve with city possession; the only change was that tenants paid their rent to the city.²³

As the remaining hippies flowed out to rural settings to form communes as part of New Communalism, poor artists began to settle the neighborhood. Longtime residents began forming housing cooperatives where tenants put in “sweat hours” to maintain the building, in exchange for a low rent.²⁴ This sense of community sustained the Lower East Side between the hippie influx and exodus of the 1960s, and the following redevelopment of the 1980s because of the popularity of the East Village art scene.²⁵

²² Mele, *Selling the Lower East Side*, 173-77.

²³ *Ibid.*, 188-94.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 200-212.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 214-219.

It was in this area, with a decaying cityscape ever present, that the punk and new wave movement began²⁶. It is significant for the purposes of this study precisely because the punk movement was extremely influential on the style of performance, and even photography, which came from the East Village in the 1970s-1990s. Out of the end of hippie culture and the beginning of punk came several things: a lively club scene with an anything-goes attitude, experimental theatre such as Charles Ludlam's *Ridiculous Theater Company*, and a rejection of all things uptown. A similar subculture existed concurrently in London, in its own decaying tenement areas. The dereliction of working class areas in the inner city created the perfect setting for a shocking, rebellious, do-it-yourself youth culture to emerge.²⁷

In 1969, the Stonewall Riots took place on Christopher Street in Greenwich Village outside of a bar called the Stonewall Inn, marking the beginning of the Gay Liberation movement. The riots began because of continued police raids of the Stonewall Inn, which was a prominent gay bar that was also frequented by drag queens who had drug trade connections. Otherwise, drag queens were not permitted in the bar. During raids, many bar patrons would be arrested, beaten, or otherwise harassed for their sexuality or gender expression. The police would even check each person to see that they had three pieces of clothing on which matched their sex—if they did not, they could be arrested. It was obviously a highly subjective practice with much leeway for abuse.²⁸ Eventually, the

²⁶ The punk and new wave movements, broadly defined, are musical movements that were also concerned with art and fashion. See *Panic Attack! Art in the Punk Years* for more information.

²⁷ Tracy Warr, "Feral City," in *Panic Attack! Art in the Punk Years*, ed. Mark Sladen and Ariella Yedgar (London; New York: Merrell, 2007), 116.

²⁸ Sylvia Rivera, "Queens in Exile, The Forgotten Ones," in *Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries: Survival, Revolt, and Queer Antagonist Struggle* (Untorelli Press, n.d.), 32.

community was fed up, and when the police came to raid the bar on June 28th, 1969, the community fought back.²⁹

Among those who started the riots were street queens such as Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson, neighborhood transvestites who would go on to start Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries, now Street Transgender Action Revolutionaries, a trans activist group. Many other activist groups such as the Gay Liberation Front (Figure 1), were created in the wake of this unrest.³⁰ An already vibrant gay culture in the West Village began expanding into the East, with the disco loving, mainstream crowds staying in the West, and the more avant-garde, punk-oriented bars and clubs springing up in the East Village.

The Bohemian sections of the East Village became tolerant and even encouraging of experimentation with gender identity. This development stands in contrast to the Lower East Side of the late 1950s and early 1960s, which was largely comprised of working-class families and where gender nonconformity was actively discouraged, as Sylvia Rivera has described:

I only felt how unusual this [wearing makeup] was when I was back on the Lower East Side with my Grandmother where I had to go on the weekends. It was a male-dominant culture....Every once in a while there were remarks. A lot of the women would make innuendos. A woman once time patted me on my ass and said, "Huh, your ass is getting big, that means you're getting pumped," and I took offense at that because I knew when I was home ... that there was something wrong with what I was doing.³¹

²⁹ Susan Stryker, *Transgender History* (New York City: Seal Press), 82-85.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 86-89.

³¹ Rivera, "Queens in Exile, The Forgotten Ones," 41.

It seems that an unintentional consequence of the rising number of hippies, and then young artists in the neighborhood was greater acceptance of non-heteronormative³² and non-



Figure 2. Ande Whyland, *Wendy Wild at Club 57*, color print

cisnormative³³ identities.

The East Village art scene came into existence largely because of the low rents of the area. For example, Peter Hujar chose to live in the East Village because he was desperately poor, as his friend and director of his archive, Stephen Koch notes, “he was the poorest adult I ever knew.”³⁴ He moved into an apartment previously occupied by Jackie Curtis, a drag queen, Warhol Superstar, and friend of Hujar.³⁵ Hujar was not alone in moving to the East Village, and by the late seventies there was a burgeoning

club scene, complete with a style of music (Punk/New Wave), and a fledgling art scene developing in the area as an alternative to Greenwich and SoHo. This scene was important for the LGBTQ community, as a place to exhibit works, keep up with each other, and stage performances.

Hujar, who had been a commercial photographer, eventually ceased most commercial work to pursue art photography, and paid the bills with the occasional music journalism.³⁶ He instead turned to his own work, photographing the personalities of the East Village, the city itself, and, on occasion, animals. Out of these areas of his work, the photographs taken on

³² Heteronormative refers to the idea of treating heterosexuality as the acceptable default.

³³ Cisnormativity refers to the idea of treating the male/female gender binary, specifically that sex and gender are one and the same, as a default.

³⁴ Carr, *Fire in the Belly*, 183.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., 184-187.

East Village personalities have been the most popular—and there are many of them. The East Village was a perfect setting for this activity, as it provided no dearth of interesting people to photograph.

It was easy to meet people to photograph. Clubs such as Club 57, The Mudd Club, and later The Pyramid Club came to define the scene, with outlandish theme nights and an anything goes attitude.³⁷ The Mudd Club, which became a fashionable club that drew people



Figure 3. Ande Whyland, *Ethyl Eichelberger Dancing at the Pyramid Bar*, 1990s, color print.

to the East Village from other areas of Manhattan, was the first to begin experimentation with theme nights where the decorations would change and patrons would dress in costume. The first one

happened semi-spontaneously, at the request of the club owner after meeting

the new wave band, The B52's.³⁸ He was enthralled by their strange thrift-store-surf-rock style. Fred Schneider, the front man of the band, decided to do a “cheesy luau” and picked a Hawaiian theme. It was a hit. The club wisely continued the practice, throwing elaborate and strange theme parties, such as a 60s revival party in 1979— with the club separated into “good trip” and “bad trip” sections. Other outlandish themes included “Joan Crawford Mother’s Day Party” and a tribute to dead rock stars.³⁹ As a result, costume, camp, and creativity became mainstays of the East Village community, and by the early 1990s, one can

³⁷ Hager, *Art after Midnight*, 55-56.

³⁸ Hager, *Art after Midnight*, 55-56.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 57-63.

observe the encroachment of once underground punk fashions, born in the clubs, in popular fashion magazines.

Club 57 was another popular bar in the East Village. Formally titled “East Village Student’s Club”, was located in the basement of a Polish Church at 57 St. Mark’s Place. It, too organized strange theme nights and hosted avant-garde performances, such as *The Sound of Music* featuring Warhol Superstar and drag queen Holly Woodlawn as the leading lady, Maria.⁴⁰

In 1979, a drag bar called The Pyramid Club opened, and it eventually came to dominate East Village nightlife. As Ande Whyland, a former club photographer for Club 57, and a regular visitor of the Pyramid Club recalls:

Most of the drag was more about personality and talent and wacky over the top looks. Ru Paul, Lady Bunny, Ethyl Eichelberger ... were the most well known to this day. Like Club 57 a core group of us would be there every night and there was always a show. It wouldn't be surprising to walk into the Pyramid club while a straight rock band was on stage and Ru Paul and Ethyl would be done up in crazy drag dancing on the bar and getting tips. One of my most favorite and famous photos is of Ethyl Eichelberger dancing on the bar. At both clubs no matter how many people would show up, there was so much work that went into these shows. Pyramid was very much a drag club.⁴¹

This account demonstrates that a large part of this scene included people who were gender-nonconforming—those who did not prescribe to male or female identities, who experimented with drag, or those transitioning between the two. The emphasis on creativity in dress and costume celebrated and invited transgression of the gender binary in this community, to the point where it was commonplace. Compared to most places in society, even in New York City, the East Village was welcoming, and had a refreshing lack of

⁴⁰ Ande Whyland, e-mail message to the author, April 15, 2015.

⁴¹ Ibid.

mainstream disco “clone” culture (as Keith Haring put it) that was commonly seen in Greenwich and uptown.⁴²

The East Village did not just attract artists from poor backgrounds; it also, as it had in the 60s, attracted middle-class individuals who wanted to flee suburban life, especially once the club scene began to thrive. It was the antithesis of stereotypically stifling suburbia. One such person, Nan Goldin, settled there in the late 1970s, in the area which is known as The Bowery, which is the western part of the Lower East Side.⁴³ A large attraction of the area for many individuals like Goldin was drugs— Goldin has said multiple times that in her youth she found drugs to be glamorous.⁴⁴ The subversive idea of a neighborhood where rent is cheap enough to focus on your work, the nightlife is vibrant, and drugs are inexpensive and readily available was irresistible.

Ande Whyland, who moved there in the early 1980s, points out that the East Village “really was like a village”, and it was easy to make friends. Like many others, she had moved to the West Village from out of town and found it dissatisfying, and eventually ended up in an East Village apartment, paying only 135 dollars per month. Speaking about the neighborhood, Whyland said:

We were all friends and doing many creative projects. Our rents were so cheap that we could go out every night, come home any hour and sleep as long as we liked...I believe that many of us who had not always fit in or understood main stream society found a place that we belonged to for the first time in our adult lives.⁴⁵

⁴² Hager, *Art after Midnight*, 75-79.

⁴³ Goldin, Armstrong, and Keller, *Nan Goldin: The Other Side 1972-1992*, 6-7.

⁴⁴ Sean O'Hagan, “Nan Goldin: 'I Wanted to Get High from a Really Early Age,’” *The Guardian Online (US Edition)* accessed May 25, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/mar/23/nan-goldin-photographer-wanted-get-high-early-age>.

⁴⁵ Ande Whyland, e-mail message to the author, April 15, 2015.

As Whyland noted, it was a place where people who faced alienation in mainstream society could integrate into the community more easily. Amongst its gender-nonconforming residents one could find artist Greer Lankton, performer Ethyl Eichelberger, Warhol Superstar Holly Woodlawn, and many famous drag queens, such as RuPaul, Tabboo!, and Lypsynka. The bar scene created a space where being unusual, gender-nonconforming, wild, or otherwise unacceptable to the mainstream was welcomed and celebrated. Artists frequented performances and parties in bars for fun and inspiration, and to keep up with what their colleagues and friends were working on.

However, popularity tends to dismantle counter culture, and as early as 1981, when Keith Haring and Jean Michel-Basquiat had solo shows at the fledgling FUN gallery, the boom of East Village Art began in earnest. This was wonderful for artists, gallery owners, and entrepreneurs, who benefited from the notoriety generated by rising visual art stars like Haring, Basquiat, and eventually Kenny Scharf. Through the early eighties, new galleries opened constantly in the East Village, resulting in skyrocketing rents. Many people who had lived in the neighborhood for years were pushed out.⁴⁶ The booming market did not bode as well for artists who were engaged in politically controversial themes, such as David Wojnarowicz, who was struggling with conservative attacks on his career due to a mixture of homoerotic and religious themes in his work. Wojnarowicz eventually inherited Peter Hujar's rent controlled apartment upon the latter's death, allowing him to continue living in the East Village.⁴⁷

Dealers and collectors saw the potential of Goldin's work to encapsulate the East Village experience in all its eclectic glory, and although she too did political work, such as

⁴⁶ Mele, *Selling the Lower East Side*, 245-254.

⁴⁷ Carr, *Fire in the Belly*, 183.

the image of her face after being battered, and the organization of *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing*, a show to protest the AIDS crisis, Goldin incited less political criticism than many of her peers.⁴⁸ In addition to the political side, there is a personal quality to her work, since much of it during this period is literally born from, and made for the club scene where she took many of her photos and would show them in slideshow format put to music. It was a wonderfully relatable medium, and it became a hit locally—because the people watching these slideshows were generally the people *in* them.⁴⁹ It was a brilliant subversion of one of the most stereotypically boring aspects of middle-class culture: the family vacation slideshow. Goldin, before having much commercial success, published a book called *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, an organized, printed version of these popular slide shows.⁵⁰ This project helped her gain notoriety, and by the early nineties Matthew Marks Gallery, based out of Chelsea, represented her.

The East Village Eye prematurely pronounced the East Village art movement dead in 1986, because popular artists such as Haring, Scharf, and Basquiat moved on to SoHo galleries, and many of its longtime artists such as Peter Hujar, were dying of AIDS.⁵¹ In *Art After Midnight*, Stephen Hager claims highly derivative works were sold to hapless tourists “as easy as buying a loaf of bread.”⁵² Thus, the scene was nowhere near “dead”—it was just changing rapidly. The Mudd Club, Club 57, and FUN gallery all closed in quick succession, and the only bar which retained the authenticity of the underground became the more recently opened Pyramid Club.

⁴⁸ Nan Goldin, *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing* (New York: Artists Space, 1989).

⁴⁹ Townsend, "Nan Goldin: Bohemian Ballads," 106-108.

⁵⁰ Nan Goldin, et al, *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* (New York, N.Y.: Aperture Foundation, 1986).

⁵¹ Hager, *Art after Midnight*, 126-131.

⁵² Ibid.

A club called Area opened in 1983 in TriBeCa. Area positioned itself as The Mudd Club with more money—instead of small scale, silly theme nights whose point was to inspire creativity, Area was a club designed to impress the new (and old) movers and shakers of the art and music worlds. Basquiat, Warhol, and Debby Harry were known to frequent the club. Every few weeks it underwent an expensive and radical redecoration to give it a new theme.⁵³ Owned by four young entrepreneurs: Eric Goode, his brother Christopher, and friends Shawn Hausman and Darius Azari, the club had a distinctly youthful and cutting edge vibe. The Goode brother's sister Jennifer was the club's Art Director, and the club made extensive use of East Village art on its walls.⁵⁴

Area's theme nights were much more general than the Mudd Club's, with themes such as "Confinement", "Sex", or "Religion." For example, religion featured an enormous burning cross and a confessional booth—it was a level of extravagance that the Mudd Club could have never accomplished in its small space and limited budget. Area drew a very fashionable crowd, from Andy Warhol to JFK Jr.⁵⁵ It was a true symbol for the commercialization of counter culture, a process that seems to run in cycles. Punk culture, out of which the East Village scene was born, was a reaction to the commercialization of Hippie culture. While commercialization may arrest the development of a counter culture, stripping it of its authenticity, it also popularizes it and allows more individuals to participate.

Regardless of the tendency of counter culture to become subsumed by pop culture, the struggle between downtown and uptown is in a way typified by Hujar's and Goldin's

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Peter Davis, "A Look Back at Area, The 80's Club That Turned Partying Into an Art," Paper Mag, November 6, 2013, accessed November 9, 2015, <http://www.papermag.com/a-look-back-at-area-the-80s-club-that-turned-partying-into-an-art-1427128384.html>.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

work with gender-nonconforming individuals. Hujar, a former commercial fashion photographer, and Goldin, an aspiring fashion photographer, both used familiar styles from the pages of *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar* to frame their downtown compatriots. Thus, the downtown style to which they both belonged appropriated the style of more popular, uptown photographers, such as Richard Avedon, Helmut Newton, and others, to critique the fashion industry and to elevate the status of their sitters. The East Village, itself in a constant state of flux, was a perfect place for those who are in a state of transition—be it permanently or for the night—between gender identities. The East Village art movement existed in a time when ideas about gender identity and expression were rapidly changing, and Hujar and Goldin were poised to capture this spirit.

In their work, Peter Hujar and Nan Goldin specifically address the life and identity of gender-nonconforming individuals, who were a large part of the East Village community and subculture. Their work on this subject covers the 1970s through the 1990s, up to when the popularity of East Village art began its decline. Experimentation with gender and sexuality were embraced by the subculture of the area, and thus the East Village provided a welcome alternative from other, less open spaces. Gender fluidity, avant-garde art and performance were deeply ingrained aspects of East Village culture.

The photographs that Peter Hujar and Nan Goldin produced at this time in the East Village are an important record of a neighborhood that encouraged experimentation with gender, sexuality, art, and fashion. The East Village scene has influenced pop culture from its inception in the 1960s until today, and has helped promote a proliferation of LGBTQ culture in mainstream modern life. Through Hujar and Goldin's own appropriation of pop culture that would eventually subsume the counter culture of the East Village, the artists participated

in this shift while working authentically in their own styles. Their work has served to both capture the memory of a neighborhood in a state of flux and of people in a state of gender fluidity.

CHAPTER II: PETER HUJAR

*"I like people who can transform themselves."*⁵⁶

Peter Hujar

Peter Hujar, born in Trenton, New Jersey, in 1934, was a photographer who lived in New York City through the years of the sexual revolution, Stonewall riots,



AIDS, and countless other seismic shifts in American culture. He was a central figure in the East Village art scene, albeit a lesser-known one, and many contemporaries were drawn to him for his combination of artistic talent, charismatic personality, and emotional unavailability.⁵⁷ He was an "artist's artist", whose place in

Figure 4. Caravaggio, *Bacchus*, 1595, oil on canvas

photography is analogous to the Velvet Underground's place in music, whose influence is ubiquitous despite the band never achieving mainstream popularity. Similarly, Peter Hujar's influence on photography is far ranging in contemporary work, as noted by Fran Lebowitz.⁵⁸

Raised in an often emotionally distant and sometimes abusive household, Hujar was a person who had an affinity for outsiders.⁵⁹ His background can be seen in both his art and his surviving correspondence. He left home in his teens and

⁵⁶ Untitled correspondence, n.d., Peter Hujar Papers, Morgan Library and Museum, 2013.108.

⁵⁷ Carr, *Fire in the Belly*, 180-81.

⁵⁸ Fran Lebowitz and Thomas Sokolowski, "To Me They Look Like Peter," in *Peter Hujar: Love & Lust*, ed. Jeffrey Fraenkel and Darius Himes (New York City: Artbook DAP, 2014).

⁵⁹ Carr, *Fire in the Belly*, 180-81.

eventually became a fashion photographer, shooting for *Harper's Bazaar*, *GQ*, and other magazines.⁶⁰ He worked under Richard Avedon while at *Bazaar*, and took Avedon's master class, his only formal training outside of high school and apprenticeships. He never went to college. Of his work in general, he said, "my work comes out of my life. The people I photograph are not freaks or curiosities to me. I like people who dare."⁶¹

This propensity toward photographing those who do not conform to mainstream ideas or values, for documenting "those who dare," to transgress the traditional sex-gender boundaries, is a significant part of Hujar's oeuvre. Hujar's portraits of people outside the gender binary are rendered with an acute sense for composition, and a deep sense of humanity. He also took candid shots on his nights out. The prevalence of gender-nonconforming individuals in Hujar's work parallels the rise of the visibility and acceptance of transgender human beings, in the wake of the Stonewall riots. Unfortunately, the involvement of gender-nonconforming people in the LGBTQ community would be continually resisted and challenged as the mainstream gay rights and feminism movements made political and institutional strides forward in the 1970s.⁶² Peter Hujar was never a part of this negativity toward gender-nonconforming people. He consistently befriended, worked with, and photographed gender-nonconforming individuals. Hujar saw them as vital members of the East Village community.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 183.

⁶¹ Untitled correspondence, n.d., Peter Hujar Papers, Morgan Library and Museum.

⁶² Stryker, *Transgender History*, 92-103.

During the time Hujar was alive in the post-Stonewall era (1969-1987), gender-nonconforming people were outspoken members of the downtown New York community—fighting for not only their liberation, but the liberation of women, LGB people, and people of color. Trans and gender-nonconforming people also starred in movies, played in bands, and created visual and performance art in the East Village. Hujar documented his gender-nonconforming friends and neighbors, and sometimes their art, with a profoundly emotional capacity for the importance of these people’s lives, the beauty inherent in them as individuals, and the significance of their contributions to the East Village community and the world at large, while adopting conventions he learned from his early career in fashion photography.

Ethyl Eichelberger and the Great Women of History

Perhaps the gender nonconforming person most photographed by Peter Hujar was Ethyl Eichelberger. Hujar took a series of photographs featuring this prominent downtown drag performer that he called his “mock-fashion photos,” according to Stephen Koch, friend of Hujar, and Director of The Peter Hujar Archive.⁶³ These portraits, featuring Eichelberger in a variety of traditionally feminine costumes and poses, are part of an attempt to use fashion to comment on the stifling nature of binary gender roles. Mostly through choice of pose, they mock stereotypical trappings of female identity in advertising, and the repetitive nature of fashion photography.

⁶³ Stephen Koch (Director of Peter Hujar archive), in conversation with the author, 11 August 2014.

Considering Hujar's past in commercial photography, this approach is unsurprising. Peter Hujar's work in fashion photography culminated in a modest career in the mid-1960s shooting magazine covers and advertising.⁶⁴ However, by 1970, Hujar reached a point where he ceased being interested in pursuing fashion photography as a career.⁶⁵ He said that it "...wasn't right for me. You know, you felt as though you always had to charm people---meet them afterwards at Elaine's. And when someone would say that they saw one of my photos in *Bazaar*, I felt embarrassed." ⁶⁶ He continued to take photographs of bands for magazines on occasion, but dropped most commercial work and focused on fine art photography.

Though he left the work of fashion photography, his time working for *Harper's Bazaar*, which simultaneously employed Richard Avedon, was transformational for his style. Avedon, who was famously bought out from *Harper's Bazaar* by *Vogue* for a rumored million-dollar signing bonus in 1965—after a twenty-year career at *Bazaar*.⁶⁷ His style had a profound impact on Peter Hujar, who strove to get his sitters to open up for the camera. A quote by Avedon describes their similarity in process and style as:

...a series of no's. No to exquisite light, no to compositions, no to the seduction of poses or the narrative. And all these no's force me to the 'yes.' I have a white background. I have the person I'm interested in and the thing that happens inbetween us.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ Carr, *Fire in the Belly*, 182-83.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ "Photography Discovery", *SoHo Weekly News*, Thursday, Sept. 5, 1974.

⁶⁷ Norberto Angeletti and Alberto Oliva, *In Vogue: The Illustrated History of the World's Most Famous Fashion Magazine* (New York: Rizzoli, 2006), 196.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 196.

Hujar's photographs often have the same simplicity—white background, and nothing more than perhaps a bed or a chair, if anything. This style is directly inherited from Avedon, from his influence over Hujar's professional past in the fashion world and the experiments in front of the camera for his Master Class. Hujar also had an affinity for old master painting, frequently discussing Caravaggio at length with friend and confidant



Figure 5. Peter Hujar, *Ethyl Eichelberger as Nefertiti (III)*, 1979, gelatin silver print.

Stephen Koch.⁶⁹ In Hujar's papers, there is a transcript from a cassette recording of an interview for a book entitled *Voyeurism: A Photographic Survey*, where he talks about the simple and overtly sexual nature of some of Caravaggio's paintings of boys.⁷⁰ The influence is clear, as Caravaggio too favored minimal backgrounds and foregrounded the sitters in his paintings—for example, *Bacchus* (Figure 4) of 1595. The painting features a plain background, and only essential attributes (grapes, wine, and wreath), while Bacchus intently gazes at the viewer. Susan Sontag describes this phenomenon in an essay on Avedon's photography, where "the subject occupies an ideal, therefore unspecifiable space."⁷¹

⁶⁹ Stephen Koch (Director of Peter Hujar archive), in conversation with the author, 11 August 2014.

⁷⁰ Peter Hujar, text for "Voyeurism: A Photographic Survey," ed. Gerard Malanga (New York City: Lustrum Press, 1982), Peter Hujar Papers, The Morgan Library and Museum, New York City. This work, I have reason to believe, eventually became *Scopophilia: The Love of Looking* which Malanga published in 1985.

⁷¹ Susan Sontag, "Looking with Avedon" in *In Vogue: The Illustrated History of the World's Most Famous Fashion Magazine* (New York: Rizzoli, 2006), 208-211.

The fact that there was intent to comment on fashion photography is apparent when one examines the “mock-fashion” photos taken with Ethyl Eichelberger in comparison to contemporaneous fashion advertisements. Hujar employs irony to critique cissexism⁷² subtly, while others, such as Cindy Sherman, were more forthright. His irony may have been lost on some critics. Evidence of this misunderstanding is clear when reading a review of his work by Andy Grundberg. The clipping, which Hujar kept for the remainder of his life, appeared in *The New York Times* in 1981. Grundberg reviews a show favorably, but not Hujar’s work. He claims that it misses an ironical bent that would make it more than merely fashionable, saying:

The straightforward, conventionalized portraits by Margaret K. Mitchell and Marth Pearson seem uninspired by comparison [to works earlier discussed], while the auteristic, expressionistic work of Peter Hujar and Freidrich Cantor looks merely fashionable. ... What is missing in the show that is otherwise prevalent in contemporary portraiture is an ironic or at least distant relationship between the image and its maker. One thinks, for example, of the role-playing advertisements for the self that Cindy Sherman concocts.⁷³

⁷² Cissexism can be defined as the appeal to norms that enforce the gender binary, and gender essentialism, resulting in the oppression of gender variant, non-binary and trans identities, for more information, see Juniper Russo, *The Queer Dictionary*, accessed November 9, 2015, <http://queerdictionary.blogspot.com/2014/09/definition-of-cisnormativity.html>.

⁷³ Andy Grundberg, “Photography View: A New Vigor in the Field of Portraiture,” *The New York Times*, 1981.



Figure 6. *Diana Vreeland, Egypt inspired fashion, For Vogue Magazine, 1971*

He criticizes Hujar for being too expressive, and not ironic or distant enough from his subjects. Yet, a few years later, he would laud Nan Goldin for her close personal relationship to her autobiographical photography, even if he called it grim.⁷⁴ Perhaps it was Goldin's lack of traditional form that excited Grundberg.

However, it seems that Grundberg largely missed the point of Hujar's work. In his critique, he cites the

work of Cindy Sherman as exemplary for its irony. There is a difference of course, between what Sherman was doing and what Hujar captured in his portraits. Hujar's use of a studio, of models as opposed to the self, and of much less elaborate settings set Hujar's work apart from Sherman's carefully constructed world of appropriation.

Hujar specifically embraced the bare-studio approach, for its clarity. In an interview with *Fire Island Newsmagazine* he said of his technique:

Yes I think of them [his portraits] as simple. I want the intensity of just a person against a wall. I'm not looking for intensity, I see that afterwards. Having too many things around confuses me, which may be why the pictures look like they do... Everything in a picture is important and has some visual meaning. Most things are too arbitrary if left in, so I'd get rid of a lot of stuff. If I took a picture of you, I'd get rid of that bicycle and that chair, they'd have too much meaning to be left in, they're just in the way.⁷⁵

Yet, the work of Hujar is often ironic, and comments on gender and sexuality like Sherman's work. Particularly in his photos of Ethyl Eichelberger, he seems to

⁷⁴ Andy Grundberg, "Nan Goldin's Grim 'Ballad'," in *Crisis of the Real: Writings on Photography Since 1974*, ed. Andy Grundberg (New York: Aperture, 1986), 95-98.

⁷⁵ "Peter Hujar," *Fire Island News Magazine*, June 5, 1977.

foreshadow the coming of Judith Butler’s theory of gender as a social construct, which did not emerge into theoretical discourse until 1990 with the release of *Gender Trouble*.⁷⁶ In art, Eichelberger and Hujar seem to imply that gender is a social construct which is completely fashioned, as opposed to being determined by biology. Hujar does so by staging the images as fashion photography, and by styling Eichelberger to assume the role of many of the famous archetypes of femininity—such as Nefertiti, a southern belle, or a maid.



Figure 7. Richard Avedon, *Judy Garland*, 1963.

Hujar found Eichelberger charming because, like him, Eichelberger had left a rising career (in acting) to pursue a calling, in this case, acting as the “great women of history” in Charles Ludlam’s *Ridiculous Theater Company*, an avant-garde group who performed late-nights in bars.⁷⁷ This dedication

to one’s own personal mission in art and life over fame or money united the pair. Eichelberger and

Hujar likely met via Ludlam, as Ludlam and Hujar were friends.⁷⁸

Ludlam’s style of theater also informed the photos that Hujar would do of Eichelberger and of other drag performers, such as the *Angels of Light*, an experimental drag troupe. Ridiculous Theater is a modern blend of Commedia dell’Arte, Vaudeville, Burlesque, and drag performance in the tradition of

⁷⁶ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

⁷⁷ Rick Roemer, *Charles Ludlam and the Ridiculous Theatrical Company: Critical Analyses of 29 Plays* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., 1998).

⁷⁸ Carr, *Fire in the Belly*, 183-86.

homosexual camp.⁷⁹ Ludlam, and by extension Eichelberger, sought to restore the vulgar comedy to theater, and to question the notion of what is considered acceptable in society, by engaging in ridiculous performance.⁸⁰

Eichelberger and *The Ridiculous Theater Company*, who performed at all the local bars, were very influential. They attempted to “force the observer, whether consciously or unconsciously, to reevaluate certain ideas pertaining to sex and the sex roles.”⁸¹ To further this aim, Ludlam’s costumes could often be considered incomplete—he would emerge in drag but showing a hairy chest, for example.⁸² Eichelberger would play certain roles, such as Ante Bellam, an aging southern belle, who were not attractive, but ridiculous; these characters would tell stories and perform in ways atypical for even the world of drag.

Eichelberger often posed as different characters for Hujar. Formally, the intensity and simplicity of many of Hujar’s portrait photographs recall the earliest portraits in art photography, such as the arresting portraits taken of members of the French intelligentsia by Nadar, perhaps the first great portrait photographer. Indeed, Hujar was fond of early photography.⁸³ There is a sense of capturing not just the image, but also the character of the sitter that elevates Hujar’s portraits. The lack of a setting and the focus on the subject of the portrait allow for a certain intensity of character that can be muffled by a busy scene. Whereas one has to possess a cursory

⁷⁹ Roemer, *Charles Ludlam and the Ridiculous Theatrical Company*, 42-47.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 53-55.

⁸¹ Ibid., 49.

⁸² Ibid., 52.

⁸³ Peter Hujar, “Essay on the Death of Andy Warhol,” Peter Hujar Papers, The Morgan Library and Museum, New York City.

understanding of feminism to truly understand Cindy Sherman's *Film Stills*, Hujar's work with Eichelberger and, later, the *Angels of Light*, is self-evident but clever.

Eichelberger played what he called "the great women of history" both behind Hujar's camera and on stage, and he did not consider them to be female impersonation.⁸⁴ This is an important distinction to make. During the time after Stonewall, there was a proliferation of new gender identities as American society, particularly in New York City, opened up to ideas beyond the binary. Many performers, such as Eichelberger, performed in drag, but outside of the traditional context of a female impersonator.



Figure 8. Peter Hujar, *Ethyl Eichelberger as Minnie the Maid*, 1981, gelatin silver print.

Ethyl Eichelberger instead explored different historical archetypes or personas, such as Nefertiti, seen in *Ethyl Eichelberger as Nefertiti (III)* (Figure 5) of 1979. This work specifically recalls portraits of models for *Vogue* taken by Diana Vreeland in 1971 (Figure 6), shortly after Hujar left the commercial scene.⁸⁵ It also recalls Avedon's action shots (Figure 7). Yet, by picturing a known drag queen and comedian in the role—and removing it from its Egyptian context—it inverts the fashionable image.

⁸⁴ Cynthia Carr, *On Edge: Performance at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1993), 60-63.

⁸⁵ Angeletti and Oliva, *In Vogue*, 206-07.



Figure 9. *Karen Black for Hanes Alive Pantyhose, 1977.*

Some of these photos were used in promotional posters for Eichelberger's shows at East Village locations. When viewing one of these performances, the spectator could have noticed the clear difference between typical drag and Eichelberger's avant-garde performance. Eichelberger's work encompassed experimental theater, which defied the boundaries of traditional gender expression, and even traditional drag expression. In a performance as Minnie the Maid,

Eichelberger jokes with the audience that if they have come to see a "classy drag show" that she does not want to disappoint them. So, she rattles off one-liners from famous divas and then goes about her act as Minnie, a loveable maid/hairdresser who plays the accordion, and is still looking for Mr. Right.⁸⁶ Minnie is perhaps the character that can most closely be identified with Eichelberger. As the artist remarked, "Minnie is me."⁸⁷ Eichelberger, like Minnie, was a hairdresser by day, and obviously, they both played the accordion.

She certainly seems the most cheerful of Eichelberger's characters, especially in the 1981 photograph *Ethyl Eichelberger as Minnie the Maid* (Figure 8). In Hujar's studio, the fishnet-wearing Minnie delights in the camera, smiling and posing as if she were appearing in the latest panty hose advertisement (Figure 9). Minnie, a working-class girl looking for a husband, is the kind of woman a pantyhose

⁸⁶ Ethyl Eichelberger, *Minnie the Maid at the Pyramid Club Nyc* (YouTube), Video.

⁸⁷ Carr, *On Edge*, 60-63.

advertisement likely targeted. This body of photographs of Eichelberger is simultaneously a celebration of experimentation with gender and a declaration of the performative act of gender, ironically imitating fashion photography and advertising to illustrate what RuPaul famously remarked, “we are born naked, and everything else is drag.”⁸⁸

The Cockettes and Angels of Light: Avant-Garde Gender-Benders

Hujar had always loved gender outlaws. When *The Cockettes*, a San Francisco based experimental theater troupe came to New York City, Hujar photographed them. They were a group of atypical drag queens who were more experimental even than Ethyl Eichelberger and the *Ridiculous Theatre Company*. In late 1960s San Francisco they were gender bending pioneers—intentionally crafting a look which is a combination of masculine and feminine, and thus outside the gender binary.



Figure 10. Peter Hujar, *Cockette John Rothermell in a Fashion Pose*, gelatin silver print.

Their stay and string of performances in New York City in 1971 was not exactly successful—*The Cockettes* were not much for rehearsing, and their hippie, acid-laced performance was badly received. Andy Warhol and others famously walked out, and even though they would get a good review from the *Village Voice*,

⁸⁸ Leslie Feinberg, *Transgender Warriors: Making History from Joan of Arc to RuPaul* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 97.

ultimately *The Cockettes* often played before an empty house during their weeks in New York.⁸⁹

In the world of downtown New York City, *The Cockettes*, despite their unrehearsed performances, were welcomed into the social milieu, if not on stage.

Stephen Koch noted for one, that he “was not aware that the local response was negative, and that it certainly was not in the mind of Peter Hujar.”⁹⁰ Hujar likely ran into *The Cockettes* at parties. One of the reasons why *The Cockettes* were so ill prepared was that before their string of performances they were the hottest party guests of November 1971, frequenting the houses of Robert Rauschenberg and other celebrities.⁹¹



Figure 11. Peter Hujar, *Bearded Cockette*, gelatin silver print.

Hujar’s photos of *The Cockettes* introduce some of the playfulness combined with appropriation that we saw in later pictures of Eichelberger, specifically in *Cockette John Rothermell in a Fashion Pose* (Figure 10). The pose affected by Rothermell, and his dress, recalls Audrey Hepburn in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*—which is still today a popular model of sophisticated femininity.

Many of the other portraits are provocations, as the sitters stare out at us with easy confidence and a wry smile, such as in *Bearded Cockette* (Figure 11). This

⁸⁹ Joshua Gamson, *The Fabulous Sylvester: The Legend, the Music, the 70s in San Francisco* (New York: H. Holt, 2005), 81-85.

⁹⁰ Stephen Koch, 5 May 2015.

⁹¹ Gamson, *The Fabulous Sylvester*, 74-76.

person is proud of, and emphasizes their difference, which was exactly the kind of personality that fascinated Peter Hujar. The adoption of a very seductive, feminine posture is juxtaposed with the masculinity of the sitter's bearded physique. These contradictions were what Hujar found enthralling.



Figure 12. Peter Hujar, *Man Backstage, Angels of Light*, 1973, gelatin silver print

In fact, Hujar related in *Voyeurism: A Photographic Survey* that he once hung up the phone, left his apartment and burst out to the street to meet, and perhaps photograph, a beautiful bearded woman he saw. He found her across the street in a health food store and was too afraid to talk to her, because he “found the whole thing very sexy and sexual so much that it intimidated me. I couldn’t talk to her. I was shy. I just stared at her.”⁹²

The power of photography is captured by Susan Sontag who wrote: “someone is marvelous, because of some power or energy or aura; therefore, what the person looks like becomes a standard of fashion.”⁹³ Peter Hujar saw in subjects such as *The Cockettes* the ability to become the “standard of fashion,” to transform what was fashionable in the mainstream.

⁹² Hujar, “Voyeurism: A Photographic Survey.”

⁹³ Sontag, “Looking With Avedon,” in *In Vogue: The Illustrated History of the World's Most Famous Fashion Magazine*, 208-211.

The Cockettes, at the time of their visit to New York, were about to fracture into two groups: *The Cockettes*, and the *Angels of Light*. The new group was very similar, and was led by Hibiscus, the former leader of *The Cockettes*. The split happened because some of *The Cockettes* wanted to be paid to perform, while others that formed the *Angels of Light* believed all performances should be free and open to the public.⁹⁴

The Angels of Light would visit New York City in 1973, where they too were photographed by Hujar. In *Man Backstage – Angels of Light* (Figure 12), we see an Angel of Light in full costume in the shadows of backstage, preparing to perform. This candid photo seems to embrace the impromptu spirit of the *Angels of Light*—who were an even less organized group than *The Cockettes*—sometimes unscripted and often with less elaborately planned costumes and sets.⁹⁵ Here we see the influence of Hujar’s occasional forays into rock and roll photography—he was as talented at shooting in the spur of the moment as he was talented at shooting in his studio. In his contact sheets, there are images of Janis Joplin performing, of photos he took of The Fugs for music magazines, and other rock-journalism snapshots. These photos would be influential on younger photographers, such as Nan Goldin.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

Photography Outside of the Studio: Street Queens

Outside of the studio, Hujar photographed the street queens who were a large part of the East Village nightlife. They provided Hujar with candid shots on Halloween in 1976, in 1978, and in 1979. Given the occasion, it is uncertain whether or not these people were in costume, or simply enjoying the revelries in their everyday attire. What is remarkable about these photos is the more dramatic departure from Hujar's usual simple studio style, while still bearing the mark of influence from the fashion world.



Figure 13. Peter Hujar, *Two Drag Queens Mugging, Halloween (II)*, 1978, gelatin silver print

In this series, the individuals photographed, as in *Two Drag Queens Mugging – Halloween (II)* (Figure 13), taken in 1978, are less calm and controlled and more exuberant. Similar nightlife pictures of Hujar's exist of David Wojnarowicz and other friends, but they have a cool, composed nature, as if Hujar had transported the studio with him into the night street. The image has little direct relation to fashion, but alludes to the growing middle-class custom of taking and collecting photographs in photo albums—to remember the good times. These spontaneous photos of the nightlife prefigure similar shots by Nan Goldin years later.



Figure 14. Peter Hujar, *Two Drag Queens in a Car, Halloween, 1976*, gelatin silver print.

In this photo and others in this section of his work, Hujar presents the *joie de vivre* of members of his community; a truly radical statement if one considers the context. Even today, gender-nonconforming people are harassed, raped, arrested, and murdered at alarming rates.⁹⁶ In the crime-ridden world of New York City in the 1970s through the 1990s, this was a

particularly serious problem. There was often little to no justice for the loved ones of murdered gender-nonconforming individuals. Take for example the case of Marsha P. Johnson, who was possibly murdered in 1992, following the annual Pride March. Her body was found in the Hudson River, and the police scantily investigated, ruling it a suicide. She had been suffering from some mental illness, as reported by her friend Sylvia Rivera.⁹⁷ However, it seemed dubious to many that she committed suicide that day. Neighborhood efforts to investigate the crime uncovered that she had been

⁹⁶ Rebecca L. Stozzer, "Violence against transgender people: A review of United States data." *Aggression & Violent Behavior*, 2009 14, no. 3: 170-179.

⁹⁷ Rivera, "Queens in Exile, The Forgotten Ones," in *Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries*, 43.

harassed near the piers on the day of her death.⁹⁸ The police never took action on the case, although it was reportedly reopened in 2012.⁹⁹

In fact, it was very commonplace for police to harass people on the basis of their gender identity or expression, as it still is today. However, these gender-nonconforming people refused to live in fear, and celebrated the life and freedom to which they were entitled. They were determined to be seen, to be heard, and to be present in their communities, particularly on Halloween, a day which generally means less harassment for transgender individuals by police, since on this occasion looking different is to be expected.¹⁰⁰

In an earlier photo, from 1976, entitled *Two Queens in a Car, Halloween* (Figure 14), Hujar's work is reminiscent of that of Garry Winogrand, who was very influential on New York City photographers when Hujar was coming into his own in the 1960s. In this photo, the queens, in a beat-up, top-down convertible, seem to be enjoying the relative freedom that the neighborhood offered. Winogrand was renowned for capturing a quintessentially American quality in his photos, and here Hujar is similarly successful in capturing the essence of the New York City East Village.

There was also a trend of representing women in cars in fashion magazines, which appealed to the more progressive woman of the 1960s and 1970s.¹⁰¹ This visual tradition harkens back to the work of Art Déco painter Tamara de Lempicka,

⁹⁸ Feinberg, *Transgender Warriors*, 131.

⁹⁹ Shayna Jacobs, "Exclusive: DA Reopens Unsolved 1992 Case Involving the 'Saint of Gay Life'," *New York Daily News*, accessed May 20, 2015, <http://www.nydailynews.com/new-york/da-reopens-unsolved-1992-case-involving-saint-gay-life-article-1.1221742>.

¹⁰⁰ Feinberg, *Transgender Warriors* 8-9.

¹⁰¹ Angeletti and Oliva, *In Vogue*, 152-155.

and her famous *Autoportrait* of 1929—where she positioned herself behind the wheel of the Bugatti as a declaration of her independence. Here, the images of the female driving the automobile are symbolic of the independence of the queens.

The printed street-life pictures have a celebratory air to them that seems unique within Hujar's printed oeuvre. The fact remains that many more of these photos are unprinted, but constitute a significant number of photographs taken during his lifetime. In 1980, Hujar traveled to New Orleans for Mardi Gras. Five or more contact sheets of this trip survive with fifty plus unprinted photographs of carnival carousers, all dressed in costume and utterly flamboyant.¹⁰² Similar contact sheets exist from other festivals and holidays in New York City, indicating his continued interest in the human figure, costume and celebration. We will observe this same theme represented extensively in the work of Nan Goldin.

Women in Revolt: Candy Darling and Greer Lankton

Drag and costume aside, Hujar also made beautiful portraits of friends who were not merely gender-nonconforming or gender-benders but transsexuals—those who live as a gender different from what they were assigned at birth and seek medical treatment (hormones, surgery) to attain alignment of their sex and gender. Most notably, he photographed Candy Darling, a Warhol Superstar. He also took pictures of fellow East Village artist, Greer Lankton.

¹⁰² The Peter Hujar Archive, "The Peter Hujar Archive Tumblr," <http://peterhujararchive.tumblr.com>.

These photos are some of his most famous images. Hujar portrays the women with a sense of openness and calm. Nan Goldin complimented his work by pointing



out that,

In the days when we were all drunk and social disasters he gently hovered over us—he had this calming effect—like a human tranquilizer. You can see it in his work. He was a magician, he hypnotized his subjects. He never forced exposure, he seduced people to want to reveal all to him. His pictures are so great, so pure, and they go so deep.¹⁰³

This capacity for depth

Figure 15. Peter Hujar, *Candy Darling on Her Deathbed*, 1973, gelatin silver print.

emerges in his work with Candy Darling. *Candy Darling on Her*

Deathbed (Figure 15), of 1974 shows the final days of Candy’s life with regal dignity.

She had been hospitalized several times leading up to the taking of this photograph,

but this was her last stay before she succumbed to lymphoma.¹⁰⁴

Hujar captures her so beautifully that she does not look as if she would die within a week or two. The flowers that adorn her beside soften the sterile hospital interior. The fluorescent light above her normally would give the room a sickly glow, but seems to radiate gently in black and white. The single rose placed in her bed is a *memento mori*, and yet Candy is calm, resigned, dignified, and almost bored in the face of death. Her deathbed quote, “did you know I couldn’t last, I always knew it.” is

¹⁰³ Nan Goldin, Peter Hujar: A Retrospective (Zürich: Scalo, 1994), 14-15.

¹⁰⁴ Holly Woodlawn and Jeffrey Copeland. *A Low Life in High Heels: The Holly Woodlawn Story* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), 92.

famous, and these photographs seem to epitomize her attitude, as she bid farewell to her fans through Hujar's photography.¹⁰⁵

The single rose which lays on her pillow is imbued with symbolism which alludes to beauty, impermanence, love, and secrecy. Knowing that for Hujar everything in the image is important, one can infer that this was an intentional choice. In letters to Hujar, Candy states that her wish was to be portrayed in this photo series as she was known—glamorously. She also wished for the photographs to be featured



Figure 16. Peter Hujar, *Greer in a Fashion Pose I-III*, 1983, gelatin silver prints.

in the *Village Voice*, as a farewell to her fans, but the weekly newspaper turned Hujar down.¹⁰⁶ Indeed the picture was later published by the competing *SoHo Weekly News* instead, and attained further fame on the cover for *I Am A Bird Now*, an album by Antony and The Johnsons.

¹⁰⁵ Candy Darling, Letter to Andy Warhol, 22 March 1974.

¹⁰⁶ Letters from Candy Darling to Peter Hujar, n.d., Peter Hujar Papers, Morgan Library and Museum, New York City.

Candy was a powerful symbol of 1960s fashion to many people, appearing in many of Andy Warhol's films alongside other gender-nonconforming members of Andy Warhol's Factory, such as Jackie Curtis and Holly Woodlawn. She was immortalized along with the other two in a song by Lou Reed, "Walk on the Wild Side." It was indeed Woodlawn and Curtis who brought her the single red rose with which she is pictured, and the three of them apparently spent hours in the hospital



Figure 17. Peter Hujar, *Greer Lankton in Bed*, 1983, gelatin silver print.

looking at pictures of themselves in *Vogue*, *Photoplay*, and other magazines.¹⁰⁷ Candy likely would have continued to be a fixture of the New York fashion world, had it not been from her untimely death from lymphoma in 1974.

Within the body of Hujar's studio work, his demure portraits of Greer Lankton, taken ten years later, also deserve consideration. Lankton's idol was Candy Darling.¹⁰⁸ Greer Lankton, like Candy, is photographed by Hujar in a manner that emphasized her glamor and personality. In *Greer in a Fashion Pose I – III* (Figure

¹⁰⁷ Woodlawn and Copeland. *A Low Life in High Heels*, 95.

¹⁰⁸ Julia Morton, "Greer Lankton, a Memoir," *ARTNet* (2006), accessed August 15, 2015, <http://www.artnet.com/magazineus/features/morton/morton1-26-07.asp>.

16), her supine pose seems open and inviting. These portraits have a tranquil, intimate quality.

The “fashion pose” pictures with Greer are different from the ones he took with Eichelberger. Hujar found the exchange between photographer and sitter to be an erotic, sometimes overtly sexual experience, and this comes through in the way the sitters are posed and look at the camera. This approach, hearkens back to his roots in fashion photography with Avedon. In this series of photos Greer looks open, confident, and polished, as if Hujar could somehow bring out only the best in her.

Like her idol Candy Darling, she appears brooding and glamorous, and in *Greer*

Lankton in Bed (Figure 14) and *Greer*

Lankton's Legs (Figure 15), Hujar

presents her with an attitude that

invokes the sex appeal of Douglas

Kirkland's famous images of Marilyn

Monroe in bed (Figure 16), which ran

in fashion magazines just before

Monroe's death. This analogous

psychological quality comes from his

allowing the sitter to become comfortable with the environment, the camera, and the

photographer. This is a practice we can assume Hujar learned from Avedon, who

patiently waited for the subject to reveal themselves.

Those who dared to challenge the conventions of society fascinated Peter

Hujar. In his photographs there is a celebration and appreciation for those who could



Figure 18. Peter Hujar, *Greer Lankton's Legs*, 1983, gelatin silver print.



Figure 19. Douglas Kirkland, *Marilyn Monroe in Bed*, 1961, color print.

transform themselves. Hujar recognized these gender-nonconforming people—his friends, neighbors, and fellow artists—as vitally important figures in the East Village neighborhood and society.

Hujar used his talent acquired from fashion photography to comment on the position of gender-nonconforming individuals, to question the cisnormativity of the fashion world while creating subversive images that could easily blend into that world. The effect of this approach is a simultaneous admiration of fashion and a critique of its rigidity. Ultimately, Hujar's style would influence Nan Goldin, who was already beginning to do similar work.

CHAPTER III: NAN GOLDIN

“My aspiration was to be a fashion photographer; my goal was to put the queens on the cover of Vogue.”
Nan Goldin

Nan Goldin achieved fame through her expressive candid photography, and at the inception of her career aspired to be a fashion photographer. Since 2011, she has worked in fashion photography. Before this, she inspired a whole generation of photographers with her point-and-shoot style, a process that Hujar would note was prevalent in the photographic work of Andy Warhol.¹⁰⁹ Similarly, Goldin spurned the darkroom, and at the outset of her career paid little heed to what type of camera she was using, until she became a devotee of Leica in the 1990s.¹¹⁰ Her focus initially was solely on her subject matter: the everyday lives of her friends, many of whom were gender-nonconforming. She found glamor in everyday life. Through her photography, she sought to give her friends, what she calls her “tribe,” their fifteen minutes of fame.¹¹¹

Goldin was born in Washington, D.C. in 1953, and grew up just outside Boston. When she was 19, she began filming and photographing drag queens. This interest manifested itself in what she called in 1992 “an obsession that has lasted twenty years.”¹¹² In 1973, she took a night course in photography, and her first show that same year was comprised of portraits of her friends in drag. In 1974, she attended The School of the

¹⁰⁹ Peter Hujar, *Essay On the Death of Andy Warhol*, March 1, 1987, Peter Hujar Papers, Morgan Library and Museum, New York City.

¹¹⁰ Goldin, Armstrong, and Keller, *Nan Goldin: The Other Side 1972-1992*, 6.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 142.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

Museum of Fine Arts Boston/Tufts University for photography. She moved to downtown New York City after graduating.¹¹³

Her use of photography as diary may have been inspired by the violent suicide of her sister, which occurred when Goldin was a child. Goldin is convinced that her sister died because of alienation.¹¹⁴ So, Goldin sought a tribe from an early age. When she met David



Figure 20. Garry Winogrand, *New York*, 1972, gelatin-silver print

Armstrong in Boston, and began frequenting the drag bar The Other Side, she found her tribe.¹¹⁵ Her early art photographs were taken in this environment, where she became acquainted with her first closely-knit group of gender-nonconforming friends.¹¹⁶ Her photography in this time

laid the foundation for her later work, which would focus on drag queens in downtown New York City in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Her best photographs are those that she took of people who transgressed gender boundaries. Like Hujar, “those who dare” captivated her. Her admiration took the form of complete immersion in drag culture, which in the 1970s was an almost entirely separate entity from lesbian, gay and bisexual culture. Herself a bisexual woman, she found that drag queens, to her a third gender, were perfect companions. By transgressing the bounds of the

¹¹³ Ibid., 6.

¹¹⁴ O'Hagan, “Nan Goldin: ‘I Wanted to Get High from a Really Early Age,’”

¹¹⁵ David Armstrong was a fellow photographer and a close friend of Goldin's. For more information see his website, <http://davidarmstrongphotographs.com>.

¹¹⁶ Goldin, Armstrong, and Keller, *Nan Goldin: The Other Side 1972-1992*, 5.

binary, they had created identities that were infinitely more meaningful.¹¹⁷ Her book *The Other Side* chronicled this phase of her career, covering her time in Boston, New York City, and her travels abroad. The title makes reference to the bar where she first became enamored with drag culture.¹¹⁸



Figure 21. Nan Goldin, *Bruce Bleaching His Eyebrows*, 1975, cibachrome color print.

Goldin went to art school following this initial phase of her career in Boston. She later tried to go back to The Other Side and photograph the bar and the queens there, but felt like an outsider, because she had been away for too long. Shortly thereafter, she moved to New York City, and became a member of the community on the Lower East Side.¹¹⁹

In the East Village, Goldin captured important moments in the lives of her gender-nonconforming friends, many of whom were performers and artists in their own right. Greer Lankton is probably the most famous of the people Goldin pictured, but her lens captured many others. She presents them often candidly, and always as true to the reality of their environment as possible. This characteristic reveals the influence of Hujar's photographs of street queens (and unprinted photographs of festivals) on her work. While Hujar rarely printed his forays into portraiture outside the studio, Goldin would only take images outside of a studio setting. The two lived in the same community for about a decade, and it is reasonable to believe she would have seen his unprinted photos of street life and revelry.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 6.

She was likely also influenced by other photographers who took photographs of street life, such as Garry Winogrand. He did a portfolio of photographs entitled *Women Are Beautiful*, featuring primarily street shots of women in a candid context, as well as featuring many shots of women in his *In the Street* series (Figure 20). Taking the approach a step further, Goldin employed candid shots even in interior settings in an attempt to capture the moment truthfully.¹²⁰ Goldin spoke of the way that she initially used photography to have proof of life as she remembers it. Goldin invested the power of truth in her photographs, using her camera to build a visual diary, which she shared with the people in it. Looking through and choosing their favorite photos that she had taken was a favorite pastime of her friend group, just as was browsing fashion magazines. One can even observe a friend bleaching his eyebrows while being photographed by Goldin, and on the floor rests a Harper's Bazaar anthology (Figure 21).¹²¹

The spontaneous, voyeuristic look was also gaining popularity in fashion. Whereas Hujar practiced the stripped-down personality shot that made Richard Avedon famous, Goldin had a sensibility connected to the next generation of fashion photographers, specifically Helmut Newton. Newton famously brought a controversial and erotic aesthetic to the pages of *Vogue*, introducing partially nude models in various domestic settings, an arrangement prevalent in the work of Goldin.¹²² The influence of prominent fashion photography on her work is evident. Like Hujar, Nan Goldin photographed her gender-nonconforming friends in arrangements borrowed from fashion magazines.

¹²⁰ Townsend, "Nan Goldin: Bohemian Ballads," 103-104.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Angeletti and Oliva, *In Vogue*, 220-222.

Early Work in Boston

Goldin's early work in Boston differs from her work in New York City, but anticipated her future style. At this time, she was using mainly black and white film to photograph almost exclusively her drag queen roommates. She mounted an exhibition of these works in a basement gallery in Cambridge prior to attending art school.¹²³ These



Figure 22. Nan Goldin, *Ivy with Marilyn*, 1973.

photos, although from an early phase of her career, link her early work to her mature work of the 1990s. Early on, Goldin catches the moments when her roommates were glamorous and compared them to popular fashion icons. In *Ivy with Marilyn* (Figure 22) from 1973, Ivy's pose evokes the portrait of Marilyn above her: a poster reproduction of an Andy Warhol silkscreen. Her makeup is in Marilyn Monroe's style, and she poses with the same half-lidded eyes. She is topless, except for a long fur scarf, cleverly arranged to hide her lack of breasts. The juxtaposition of a reproduction of the "real" Marilyn Monroe with the "impersonator" of Marilyn calls in to question just what *is* real about gender. Ivy is certainly in some ways the more authentic Marilyn in this photograph. She undoubtedly is much more real than the two-dimensional reproduction of the Warhol floating above her. She lives and breathes, she wears the same makeup, and she is making deliberate fashion choices to resemble the iconic image of femininity associated with Marilyn Monroe. Monroe herself had to use makeup, hair

¹²³ Goldin, Armstrong, and Keller, *Nan Goldin: The Other Side 1972-1992*, 3.

styling, and clothing— even food and exercise decisions—to become the Marilyn that *is* the iconic Marilyn.

Thus, even a biologically female-bodied individual often must perform self-styling to become recognized as such by society. The photo is a comment on the non-deterministic nature of sex in relation to gender. It also fits the qualities that Susan Sontag identifies in the ideal fashion photograph. “The ideal would be something very close and quite inaccessible, an image both realistic and preposterous, titillating and chase, nude and in drag.”¹²⁴ *Ivy with Marilyn* embodies all of these qualities, which often contradict each other. Inside of the contradiction is a comment on the inaccessibility of what is printed in the fashion magazine, the female or male archetype.

In *Marlene, Colette, and Naomi on the Street* (Figure 23) from 1973, one can observe a popular arrangement from 1970s fashion photography. The girls, dressed in the height of seventies fashion with bell-bottoms and midriffs, are caught out on the street and react to the camera’s presence. This was a popular image type, which followed conventions established by Garry



Figure 23. Nan Goldin, *Marlene, Colette, and Naomi on the Street*, 1973.

Winogrand. Winogrand often pictured people on the streets and in cars. Describing this work he disclosed that: “I photograph to find out what the world looks like photographed.”¹²⁵ The idea is capturing the tensions and connections between humans in society in a candid

¹²⁴ Sontag, “Looking With Avedon”, in *In Vogue*, 209.

¹²⁵ Mary Warner Marien, *Photography: A Cultural History* (Upper River Saddle, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 2002), 346.

manner. Winogrand very successfully accomplished this goal in the early 1960s. Here, Goldin brings us an updated version, capturing an entirely different segment of American life, but no less skillfully. In the early 1970s, Winogrand's influence was absorbed into fashion photography, as is visible by the use of "street style" photography in '70s *Vogue* to appeal to the "real woman" and to also show the garments in a more natural fashion.¹²⁶ Goldin had little formal training at this point, so it is not clear whether she knew of Winogrand's work directly, or whether this influential style reached her through magazines. A street-scene is lent the charge of fantasy by being reproduced in the fashion magazine, where one would typically see ideal images, bestowing glamor on the commonplace.

Goldin's early work in Boston, which was her first body of work concerning gender-nonconforming individuals, inspired her to go to art school to hone her craft. These early photos are significant because they prefigure her later work, which has a sharper eye and a deeper knowledge of photographic practice and technique. The Boston pictures serve as a link to her later photographs in New York City, a necessary precondition for understanding the evolution of her style, and the increased influence that fashion photography would exert on it.

¹²⁶ Angeletti and Oliva, *In Vogue*, 229.

A New Tribe: Drag Queens in 1990s New York City

Much of Goldin's book *The Other Side* is dedicated to her photographs from 1980/90s New York City, where she lived with several drag queens and other gender-nonconforming people. She once said that it was her goal to get "the queens on the cover of *Vogue*," and this intention is very

clear in the photographs she took during this period.¹²⁷



Figure 24. Nan Goldin, *Misty, Tabboo!, and Jimmy Paulette Dressing*, 1991, cibachrome print.



Figure 25. Nan Goldin, *Misty and Jimmy Paulette in a Taxi*, 1991, cibachrome print.

In *Misty, Tabboo!, and Jimmy Paulette dressing* (Figure 24), of 1991, we see three queens, one completely dressed and fixated on the camera, while the other two girls, in profile, are made up but still undressed. Misty and Jimmy Paulette however do not acknowledge the camera's

¹²⁷ Goldin, Armstrong, and Keller, *Nan Goldin: The Other Side 1972-1992*, 6.

presence. Goldin was fascinated by the process of dressing, and sought to photograph this practice without the scandalous tone of unmasking. The photograph epitomizes what Goldin found intriguing about queens.

When describing this work in the introduction to *The Other Side* she invokes Oscar Wilde's quote "you are who you pretend to be."¹²⁸ The possibility of choosing your own place on the spectrum of gender identity, and the agency to actively shape your identity inspired Goldin. She found it to be both radical and liberating, particularly when she returned to this work after wrestling with the tension between the sexes in *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*.

In addition to photos of her friends dressing, Goldin shows her tribe out on the town, as in the shot of *Misty and Jimmy Paulette in a Taxi* (Figure 25), from 1991. Both queens have a sharp, frontal gaze, much like models on the runway. The effect is to make them look as if they could be staring out from the pages of *Vogue* or *Harper's Bazaar*. Their makeup and dress are reflective of the fashion popular in nineties club culture, which was both influenced by, and influenced high fashion of the time. It is the look from the spreads in early nineties *Vogue*, in which fishnet shirts, metallic fabrics, and lots of skin abound. There is a shared love of excess and flamboyance in both fashion and drag culture.



Figure 26. Nan Goldin, *Guy at Wigstock*, 1991 cibachrome print.

¹²⁸ Ibid, 3.

The queens photographed by Nan Goldin are beautiful, strong, and self-assured—just as a model would be on a runway, or in the pages of a fashion magazine. Pictures like this one, featuring confident people who do not conform to traditional notions of gender



Figure 27. Nan Goldin, *Cody at the Gay Pride Parade*, 1992, cibachrome print.

artist's specific intent to elevate drag culture to the level of high culture, by illuminating these affinities.

The Other Side features more photos of Goldin's New York City tribe— specifically photos of Wigstock in 1991 and Pride in 1992. Wigstock was a yearly outdoor drag pageant and festival, which started spontaneously when inebriated revelers from The Pyramid Club decided to do a drag show in Tompkins Square Park.

identity, in a public space show a sense of pride. Indeed, the photo was taken on the way to a pride parade. It is demonstrative of both the growing acceptance of queer and gender-nonconforming people by the lesbian, gay, and bisexual community, and the



Figure 28. Richard Avedon, *Harper's Bazaar April 1965, Ruth Ansel*, color print.

In *Guy at Wigstock* (Figure 21) 1991, we see a blurry shot of a queen striking a pose for Goldin. Guy is in elaborate dress, similar to what a Las Vegas showgirl would wear. The occasion is the celebration of Wigstock, a uniquely East Village spectacle, the yearly festival celebrated gender nonconformity, drag, and camp. Drag queens and other revelers ranged in costume from the exceedingly elegant to the rowdy and ridiculous.¹²⁹ The festival included pageants and the opportunity to model one's outfit and wig for the crowd. It was in a way a parody of prior exclusive drag balls held in Manhattan, such as the April in Paris ball.¹³⁰ These were events centered on innovation and competition in drag fashion. Wigstock was a more jocular version, but one that still had competitive elements, a show quality to it. It was not very different from a fashion show.



Figure 29. Helmut Newton, *Cindy Crawford*, 1991

This festival, given its celebration of drag queens, must have enraptured Nan Goldin. The event typifies the environment of the East Village and the readiness to experiment with gender, sexuality, and costume. Celebrating difference and deviance from heterosexual and cisgender norms created an environment within the East Village that supported a thriving LGBTQ culture. Another celebration of this culture that Nan Goldin photographed during this period of her career was the annual Pride Parade.

¹²⁹ Marc Wilkins, *Wigstock: Holiday on Heels* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1996).

¹³⁰ Rivera, "Queens in Exile, the Forgotten Ones," in *Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries*, 43.



Figure 30. Alfred Stieglitz, *Georgia O'Keefe*, 1918.

the 1991
photos

featuring Cindy Crawford by Helmut Newton (Figure 29). Goldin's photograph, taken a year later, highlights the symbiotic relationship between fashion and art photography.

Eroticism was another popular theme of photography which linked both fashion and art. If one looks back to Alfred Stieglitz's nude portraits of Georgia O'Keefe (Figure 30), for example, one finds

that the sexualization of the fragmentation of the female body has an extensive history.

The aforementioned Helmut Newton, a photographer with a career marked by publications in *Vogue*, ignited controversy with an article in November 1976 *Vogue* that compared him to French photographer Brassai. It featured a photograph of a woman on a balcony

Cody at the Gay Pride Parade (Figure 27),

taken in 1992, features a blonde bombshell of a queen in a classic fashion pose. She is looking beyond the camera, lips slightly parted (as was popular on *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar* covers since the sixties, see Figure 28 for an example) and windswept hair billows behind her. Her tight black tank, red lips, and voluminous blonde locks recall



Figure 31. Helmut Newton, *Winne Looking Out the Window, Nice*, 1973.

contemplating the city of Nice, with her nude buttocks turned toward us (Figure 31).¹³¹ The influence of this image is seen directly in Goldin's composition from 1991, *Joey on my Roof* (Figure 32). It is nighttime, the model turns her back on the viewer, while her buttocks are visible through her fishnets, and she contemplates the city below her. It is a Newton work,



but rendered in a downtown New York City style. In Goldin's composition, instead of a cisgender woman, we have a queen; instead of a fur coat, we have fishnets. This photograph shows the clear connection

Figure 32. Nan Goldin, *Joey on my Roof*, 1991, cibachrome print.

between Goldin's work, with queens and

transwomen, and fashion photography—

and the continued popularity of images that eroticize fragmented parts of the feminine body.

Finally, a portrait that draws a direct connection between Goldin's work in Boston and in New York City is *Cody in the Dressing Room at the Boy Bar* (Figure 33), from the same year. In this photograph, Cody poses with a theatrical attitude— nude, hands in the hair, lips slightly parted, gaze aimed aggressively at the camera—while behind her is poster of the famous model Twiggy in the style of Andy Warhol. Twiggy was the model that introduced the thin, boyish appearance to fashion. As in *Ivy with Marilyn* (Figure 22), there are clear parallels between the sitter and the iconic model on the wall.

¹³¹ Angeletti and Oliva, *In Vogue*, 231-235.

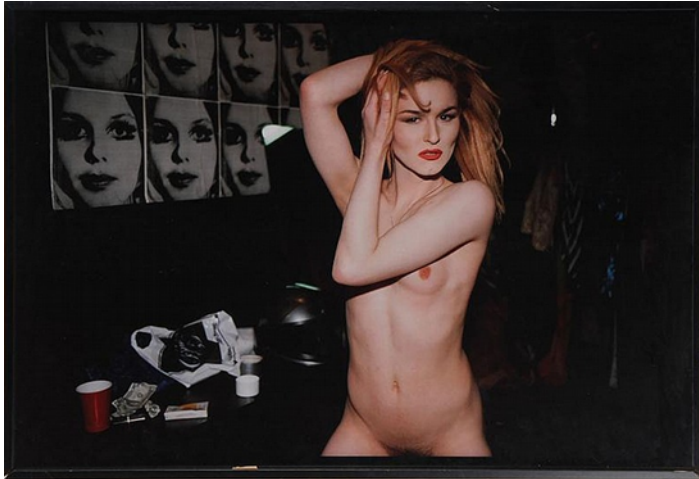


Figure 33. Nan Goldin, *Cody in the Dressing Room at the Boy Bar, NYC, 1991*, cibachrome print.

Cody is blonde and thin, as Twiggy was. One can imagine that Goldin might have noticed the poster and asked Cody to pose in front of it. Keeping with Goldin's quest for authenticity to the scene, no one

cared to clear the detritus from the table—there are solo cups, lipstick,

cash, and shopping bags. These leftovers highlight the spontaneous nature of the scene, taking the fashion photo into a new context.

Greer Lankton: Fashion and Intimacy in the East Village

Nan Goldin was a close friend to Greer Lankton. Thus, there are innumerable photos taken by Goldin of Greer. The two were roommates through the early part of the eighties and it was during this time that the majority of the photos of Lankton were taken by Goldin. Many of them were part of *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*.



Figure 34. Nan Goldin, *Greer and Robert in Bed, NYC, 1982*, cibachrome print

One photo from this series is *Greer and Robert in Bed NYC*, 1982 (Figure 34). This photo captures, in a blurry snapshot fashion, the alienation of an unhappy couple— that is the tension of unrequited love. There is a disturbing quality to



Figure 35. *Nan Goldin, Greer in the Tub, 1983, cibachrome print.*



Figure 36. Don Herron, *Tubshot: Jackie Curtis, 1980.*

Greer's weary, listless pose that evokes Hujar's *Candy Darling on Her Deathbed*, but without the poise and glamor. Candy was one of Greer's heroes, and they both died quite young. It also reminds one of the strange, alienated pictures of women by Deborah Turbeville, a popular fashion photographer in the 1970s and 80s. Turbeville had the following to report on her pictures of women, in contrast to those taken by men such as Helmut

Newton:

Their exciting and brilliant photographs put women down. They look pushed around in a hard way, totally vulnerable. For me there is no sensitivity in that. I don't feel the same way about eroticism and women. Women should be vulnerable and emotional; they can be insecure and alone; but it is the psychological tone and the mood that I work for.¹³²

Although I would assert that the absence of men in the majority of her photographs is the real contrast, since a viewer might not know at the outset that the photographer is female, Turbeville's alienated psychological mood is a quality that Goldin's work shares. There is a

¹³² Angeletti and Oliva, *In Vogue*, 237.

deep vulnerability expressed by her subjects, and her ability to portray this is a strength of her style. There is a tense psychological mood that is created by the unvarnished quality of many of her photographs, and *Greer and Robert in Bed* is an exemplar of this. The photograph bespeaks the reality of opioid usage, since both figures appear glazed-over, isolated, and sweaty. Much like Larry Clark's work in *Tulsa*, the reality of drug use is disturbing and dismal.

Still other images of Greer Lankton show the intimacy of her friendship with Goldin. For example, *Greer in the Tub* (Figure 35) of 1983, depicts Lankton in her bathtub, at the moment when she submerges her head in the water. The photograph focuses on her breasts, again invoking the eroticization and fragmentation of the female body, reminiscent of Helmut Newton.

The photograph also calls to mind the work of Goldin's contemporary, Don Herron, who did a series of "Tub Shots" of downtown New York City personalities. The series was given a full spread in the *Village Voice* in April 1980, featuring Peter Hujar, Robert Mapplethorpe, and others in their bathtubs (Figure 36).¹³³ The series utilizes the intimate setting to capture arresting character portraits.

In 1985, Goldin produced a photograph of Greer entitled *Greer Modeling Jewelry* (Figure 37). In this image, the nude Lankton adopts a downturned gaze as she models one of her jewelry creations. In addition to being a sculptor, Lankton designed clothes and jewelry with her future husband Paul Munroe. The long, pearl studded necklace doubles as a headdress, and the camera's focus rests on it, instead of Lankton, like in a fashion

¹³³ "Peter Hujar," *The Village Voice*, April 14 1980, Peter Hujar Papers, Morgan Library and Museum.

photograph. This emphasis on the idea of wearable art illuminates the importance of fashion in the punk/new wave scene of the East Village.

Lankton would marry her artistic collaborator Paul Munroe in 1987, and in her wedding portrait (Figure 38) she wears strange but fascinating jewelry, which she likely made in collaboration with Munroe at their East Village workshop/storefront, named Einstein's. It was located at 96 East 7th Street, and was also a popular neighborhood hangout.¹³⁴

Paul Munroe wrote that, "Fashion as Art was Einstein's' main goal, and New York was the perfect grey background to splatter with neon paint."¹³⁵ The boutique, which was part workshop, part storefront, featured Greer and Munroe's clothing and accessories, as well as Greer's artwork. Her dolls sat in the window to bring the wares from the shop alive, thus reinforcing the connection between art and fashion in the East Village.

Getting ready to go out each night was a very real ceremony in the punk scene, where much emphasis was placed on makeup and fashion, and do-it-yourself clothing alteration was encouraged. Outlandish, retro, and otherwise interesting clothing, like that sold at Einstein's, was exceedingly popular. In an essay entitled "Feral City" written for *Panic Attack: Art in the Punk Years*, the ceremonial concept of getting ready to go out was addressed by Tracey

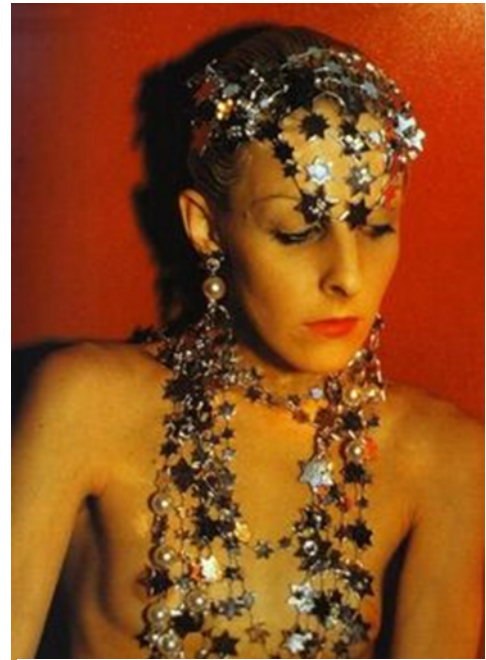


Figure 37. Nan Goldin, *Greer Modeling Jewelry*, 1985, Cibachrome print.

¹³⁴ Paul Munroe, "EINSTEINS... a pearl in a sea of tuna," 1987, The Blitz Kids, accessed 18 October 2015, <http://www.theblitzkids.com/einsteins/einsteinsinfo.html>.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

Warr, who argues that by means of constructing punk identities via fashion choices, members of the punk/new wave communities both in New York City and London were expressing resistance to middle-class society and traditional sex roles.¹³⁶



Figure 38. Nan Goldin, *Greer and Paul's Wedding*, 1987, Cibachrome print.

In their wedding portrait (Figure 38), Greer's necklace and Munroe's lime green hair and eye shadow are evidence of their position within a punk counter culture that embraced outlandish fashions. Their dress is otherwise traditional, but embellished with

punk details that allowed Goldin's photograph to serve as a testament to the importance of fashion to the people in the East Village scene.

In Greer's own artwork there was a strong emphasis on making and remaking the body. Her dolls would undergo costume changes, surgeries, makeup application and removal—and they were often set up in popular places in the East Village.¹³⁷ Like her idols Patti Smith, the famous proto-punk musician and Candi Darling, one of the Warhol Superstars, Greer Lankton was part of a culture in New York City that placed a strong emphasis on fashion, photography, and clubs. This interest, combined with her transsexuality, translated into constantly contorting, dressing, and altering her dolls. One could interpret this obsession as a contemporary answer to Hans Bellmer's *Poupées* portfolio

¹³⁶ Warr, "Feral City," in *Panic Attack!* 117-118.

¹³⁷ Paul Munroe and Andrew Durbin, "Unalterable Strangeness," *FlashArt Online*, accessed October 2, 2015, <http://www.flashartonline.com/article/unalterable-strangeness/>.

of photographs from the 1930s. Bellmer's *Poupees* were dolls shown in contorted and strange positions, often bound and missing parts. Lankton acknowledged in her artist's statement for *It's All About ME, Not You*, that Hans Bellmer was her favorite artist.¹³⁸

In *Greer at Einstein's* (Figure 39), 1987 Greer is shown in a eccentric, surreal



Figure 39. Nan Goldin, *Greer at Einstein's*, 1987, cibachrome print.

environment. She is surrounded by peculiar baubles from the storefront, including jewelry and trinkets, and clouds seem to have been painted on the walls. The table in front of her is covered with her creations, and she wears the same necklace and bracelet from her wedding photograph. She faces the camera with wide, eyeliner-rimmed eyes, and with a Marilyn Monroe styled mole drawn on her face. Her slightly parted lips are painted red. Greer holds a cigarette in her right hand. She appears to be punk update of archetypical old Hollywood starlet, similar to many such photos of, for example, Marlene Dietrich, a prominent actress in the 1930s through the 1960s (Figure 40).

Nan Goldin's Greer Lankton is not only captured in fashion poses but actually embodies the importance of fashion to the community in which Goldin lived in. We can observe both appropriations from fashion photography and the underground fashions launched by artists of the East Village, which eventually would filter into the mainstream.

¹³⁸ Greer Lankton, "It's all about ME, Not You: Artist's Statement", Mattress Factory: Active Archive, accessed October 2, 2015, <http://site.mattress.org/archive/index.php/Detail/collections/114>.



Figure 40. *Marlene Dietrich*
Publicity Shot, 1950s.

Goldin's urge to photograph those who transform themselves and transgress gender boundaries included framing them in ways that were influenced by the reigning fashion photographers at the time. Her open declaration that she "wanted to put the queens on the cover of *Vogue*" gives the viewer insight into her thought process when photographing, and allows us to connect her work directly to the aesthetics of fashion magazines.¹³⁹

Goldin's references to famous female figures in her photographs of gender-nonconforming people, such as *Ivy with Marilyn* and *Cody at the Boy Bar*, question the nature of the authenticity of traditional gender roles. They also draw attention to the process of actively defining gender with makeup, hair, clothing, or lack thereof, a process that every human participates in each day. Goldin's appropriation of popular fashion photography inspires reflection about conventions governing gender and appearance. Peter Hujar pursued similar themes, although their specific sources of inspiration stand in sharp contrast. By photographing friends, such as Lankton, who were gender-nonconforming artists and fashion icons of the East Village community, she drew attention to the interchange between art and fashion.

Goldin saw gender-nonconforming individuals as a third gender, one that "makes more sense than the other two." In her celebration of gender nonconformity, she creates work that, by virtue of its popularity, has changed the way the art world views sex and gender.

¹³⁹ Goldin, Armstrong, and Keller, *Nan Goldin: The Other Side 1972-1992*, 3.

CHAPTER IV: CONCLUSION

Peter Hujar and Nan Goldin's photographs of gender-nonconforming people celebrated their difference, and employed stylistic choices from popular fashion photography. This appropriation of fashion photography highlights the linkage between the worlds of art and fashion, and the role fashion plays in gender nonconformity. Susan Sontag asserted in 1978 that "what people understand of fashion is now mostly set by photographic images. More and more, fashion *is* fashion photography."¹⁴⁰ Therefore, Hujar's and Goldin's work in the style of mainstream fashion photographers promoted not so much the fashions that those photographed were wearing, but elevated gender-nonconforming people themselves to the arena of fashion—an area that was previously dominated by cisgender conventions.

The East Village was the perfect place for this phenomenon to occur, because it attracted artists and performers. Its open attitude and celebratory vibe allowed for a proliferation of drag, experimental theater, punk and new wave music, do-it-yourself fashion, and a thriving art market. Eventually, the media interest in the area changed its character fundamentally, but not before these two photographers left their mark on the scene and the history of art.

Peter Hujar, once almost completely unknown outside of New York City, is now posthumously gaining notoriety in the art market due to the work of his archive director, Stephen Koch, and the growing interest in photography from the East Village art scene. In 2017, a monograph exhibition of his work is scheduled to go on display at The Morgan Library and Museum in New York City, the location of his papers. Many of these photographs will likely be included, as they are part of the 100 prints The Morgan purchased

¹⁴⁰ Sontag, "Looking With Avedon", in *In Vogue*, 211.

along with Hujar's papers. Art Pop musicians Antony and The Johnsons immortalized Hujar's most famous photograph, *Candy Darling on Her Deathbed*, on their album cover. No biography of Hujar exists to date, but there is a chapter on him in the recently released biography of David Wojnarowicz, and rumors of a biography to come. Hujar's work is now in the Museum of Modern Art, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The New Orleans Museum of Art, The Leslie Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art, and many more.

Nan Goldin still lives and works, and has finally reached her goal of becoming a fashion photographer, shooting some commercial work in 2011.¹⁴¹ Due to the popularity of her photos of gender-nonconforming persons, she released *The Other Side* in 1993, and again in 2000. Next to *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, in which some of the same photos are featured, *The Other Side* is her most notable work.

Perhaps what is so important about this work is its life-affirming quality, and the celebration of the beauty of those who are brave enough to transcend traditional gender boundaries. Both artists were working in this vein before contemporary gender theory became widespread. Goldin and Hujar were able to capture and reflect the performative nature of gender and the important role that fashion plays in the formulation of identity in their photographs. The images they produced of gender-nonconforming individuals resonate deeply with many.

The elevation of drag and Trans culture to high art has also had profound implications for pop culture. One of the queens from the East Village scene, RuPaul, burst into millennial generation's imaginations in 2009 after landing a show on the LGBTQ-themed network

¹⁴¹ Ann Binlot, "The Ballad of Shoe Dependency: Nan Goldin Shoots a New Ad Campaign for Jimmy Choo," *Blouin ArtInfo* (2011), <http://www.blouinartinfo.com/visual-arts/article/38892-the-ballad-of-shoe-dependency-nan-goldin-shoots-a-new-ad-campaign-for-jimmy-choo>.

LOGO entitled *RuPaul's Drag Race*, a combination competition of fashion design and drag performance.

In the wake of the East Village art scene's demise, the musical *RENT*, an updated version of the opera *La Boheme*, with an East Village setting and narrative, included a character named Angel, who is an East Village drag queen and musician. *RENT* became a sensation in popular culture, culminating in a movie released in 2005 after a stint on Broadway and a national tour of the musical. It was the first time many spectators outside of New York had heard of the East Village.

More recently, the musical *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* hit Broadway, whose main character, a transsexual rock singer from East Berlin, is modeled after a combination of gender-nonconforming celebrities—Jayne County, Holly Woodlawn, Candy Darling to name a few—who were in the East Village scene and were pictured by Hujar, Goldin, or both. In the story, Hedwig teaches a young American musician about punk rock and fashion. He then steals her songs and punk sensibility, and dumps her when he discovers she is transgender. Ultimately, she is vindicated. It was the first Broadway musical with a transgender main character.

In the past year, a transwoman, Andreja Pejic, was indeed featured in *Vogue* magazine, as the May 2015 model profile. Two months later, Caitlyn Jenner graced the cover of *Vanity Fair* to reveal her true identity, separating herself from her past. Annie Leibovitz, perhaps the most famous fashion photographer of this decade, shot the cover. The world which Goldin and Hujar anticipated and helped to build is materializing.

The pictures taken by Peter Hujar and Nan Goldin provide a valuable record of a vibrant culture that happily included gender-nonconforming people, and also helped shape

the trajectory of fashion and pop culture. As the prevalence of transgender people and characters in popular culture continues to increase, further interest in these photographs will certainly follow. The link between gender-nonconforming people and fashion continues to grow.

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VITA

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