

The Serial Portrait

Photography and Identity
in the Last One Hundred Years

September 30 – December 31, 2012

Introduction

Alfred Stieglitz
(1864–1946)

Emmet Gowin
(born 1941)

Milton Rogovin
(1909–2011)

Lee Friedlander
(born 1934)

Francesca Woodman
(1958–1981)

Ann Hamilton
(born 1956)

Nikki S. Lee
(born 1970)

Plates

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References

Introduction

Alfred Stieglitz, one of the most influential photographers of the twentieth century, argued that “to demand the [single] portrait . . . be a complete portrait of any person is as futile as to demand that a motion picture be condensed into a single still.” Stieglitz’s conviction that a person’s character could not be adequately conveyed in one image is consistent with a modern understanding of identity as constantly changing. For Stieglitz, who frequently made numerous portraits of the same sitters — including striking photographs of his wife, the painter Georgia O’Keeffe — using the camera in a serial manner allowed him to transcend the limits of a single image.

Drawn primarily from the National Gallery of Art’s collection, the *Serial Portrait* exhibition features twenty artists who photographed the same subjects — primarily friends, family, or themselves — multiple times over the course of days, months, or years. This brochure presents a selection of works by seven of these artists. Like Stieglitz’s extended portrait of O’Keeffe, Emmet Gowin’s ongoing photographic study of his wife, Edith, explores her character and reveals the bonds of love and affection between the couple. Milton Rogovin’s photographs of working-class residents of Buffalo, New York, record shifts in the appearance and situation of individuals in the context of their community over several decades.

A number of photographers in the exhibition have made serial self-portraits that investigate the malleability of personal identity. Photographing themselves as shadows, blurs, or partial reflections, Lee Friedlander and Francesca Woodman have made disorienting images that hint at the instability of self-representation. Ann Hamilton has employed unusual props and materials to transform herself into a series of hybrid objects. Finally, work by Nikki S. Lee takes the idea of mutable identity to its logical conclusion as the artist photographs herself masquerading as members of different social and ethnic groups.

Alfred Stieglitz

1 Alfred Stieglitz (1864–1946) was already an accomplished photographer, publisher, and champion of modern art when he first encountered the work of Georgia O’Keeffe in 1916. He made his first photographs of her in 1917 and sent them to her with the note, “I think I could do thousands of things of you — a life work to express you.” Over the next two decades Stieglitz made more than three hundred photographs of O’Keeffe, whom he married in 1924, creating what he called a “composite portrait.” This extraordinary body of work charts the couple’s relationship and expresses Stieglitz’s conviction that portraiture should function as a kind of “photographic diary.”

2 Many of the photographs Stieglitz made of O’Keeffe in the early years of their relationship, including *Georgia O’Keeffe*, c. 1918 (fig. 1), are palpably erotic, reflecting the intense passion they shared. Revealing herself to the lens with a bewitching vulnerability, O’Keeffe exudes a tenderness and seductiveness that belie the strain of holding the pose during the long exposures required by Stieglitz’s large-format camera. Often, his photographs express both his desire and admiration for O’Keeffe, at times verging on idealization of the person he called “Nature’s child — a Woman.” Yet his portraits also look beyond her face to find eloquence in all parts of her body, as in the print *Georgia O’Keeffe — Hands and Thimble* (fig. 2), where her hands display an almost tactile physicality. Here, Stieglitz used a printing technique that resulted in tonal reversal, causing deep shadows to print as bronze tones and creating the dark outlines that dramatize O’Keeffe’s graceful fingers and emphasize the metallic gleam of the thimble.

3 After Stieglitz exhibited more than forty portraits of O’Keeffe, including some provocative nudes, in 1921, the painter was dismayed to find that her own art began to be interpreted in a sexualized way, and she rarely posed unclothed after 1923. O’Keeffe’s desire to control her image, along with the increasingly attenuated nature of their relationship after 1929, when she began spending several months a year working in New Mexico while he stayed in New York, further strained their partnership. In *Georgia O’Keeffe*, 1930 (fig. 3), the artist stands before one of the paintings she had made in New Mexico. Gazing steadily at the camera, she appears as a monumental force at one with her art, confident yet untouchable.

Emmet Gowin

Emmet Gowin (born 1941) met Edith Morris in 1961 in their hometown of Danville, Virginia, just as he had decided to abandon business school to study art. Several years later at the Rhode Island School of Design, his teacher Harry Callahan, who made numerous photographs of his wife, Eleanor, encouraged Gowin to photograph the subject he knew most intimately — his family and in particular Edith, whom he married in 1964.

The Gowins' artistic and marital collaboration has endured for half a century, yielding an extraordinary series of quiet, attentive portraits. In some photographs, such as *Edith, Danville, Virginia*, 1963 (fig. 4), Edith appears contemplative, even reserved. The somber beauty of this work stems in part from Gowin's use of a tripod-mounted, large-format camera, which requires a lengthy exposure but produces photographs with exquisite details, such as the delicate shadow of a twig that falls across Edith's face. To make the dramatic circular shadow that surrounds her in *Edith, Danville, Virginia*, 1971 (fig. 5), Gowin attached a lens meant for a 4 × 5 camera to a large 8 × 10 camera. This focus draws our attention to her figure, but the screen door simultaneously frames and obscures her form, resulting in a play between presence and elusiveness. While Gowin's photographs are born of a deep intimacy, they refuse to lay bare his wife's soul or expose the couple's private passions.

The same delicate balance between revelation and reserve marks a group of portraits made during the couple's travels in Central and South America. *Edith and Moth Flight*, 2002 (fig. 6), made at night using a ten-second exposure, combines Gowin's enchantment with natural beauty and his interest in the nuances of his wife's gestures and moods. Placing a pulsing ultraviolet light behind Edith's head, Gowin recorded the luminous traces left by moths as they danced around her blurred face, transforming her into a ghostly and even otherworldly presence, visible yet just out of our reach.

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Milton Rogovin

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Milton Rogovin (1909 – 2011) belongs to a rich photographic tradition of documenting the social and personal histories of people who would otherwise be forgotten. He did so serially, returning over many years to encapsulate not just single moments but entire lifetimes. Rogovin started his career as an optometrist in Buffalo, New York. In 1957, after he refused to testify before the House Committee on Un-American Activities about his association with the Communist Party, the local paper labeled him the “Top Red in Buffalo.” His optometry practice folded as a result, leaving his family of five to survive on the salary of his wife, Anne. With free time suddenly available, Rogovin turned to photography with a strong sense of purpose. “My voice was essentially silenced,” he recalled, “so I decided to speak out through photographs.”

8

Rogovin’s candid, powerfully direct pictures gave voice to those who traditionally had none: immigrants, minorities, and working-class people. Even though he traveled around the world making photographs of workers, his best-known work was made closer to home. In 1972 he began photographing residents of Buffalo’s Lower West Side, the city’s poorest and most ethnically diverse neighborhood. With his bulky twin-lens Rolleiflex camera, the photographer was sometimes suspected of working for the police or the FBI. Over time, however, Rogovin gained the trust of his sitters by visiting regularly and by giving them prints of their portraits. Dignified and occasionally tender, these photographs depict the circumstances of each subject with sober honesty.

9

Several times over the next three decades, Rogovin sought out and re-photographed many of his original subjects, capturing the changes wrought by time and circumstance. The series *Samuel P. “Pee Wee” West* (figs. 7–10) registers changes in the sitter’s situation over the course of twenty-eight years, from 1974 to 2002. In 2003 the oral historian Dave Isay, working alongside Rogovin, interviewed West, who related the story of his decades of heavy drinking. Reflecting on a photograph Rogovin had made of him in 1985 (fig. 8), West said, “That . . . picture actually changed my life”; it prompted him to stop drinking for six months before relapsing. A later brush with death led to permanent recovery and the founding of a program to help local youth reject drugs and alcohol. In this and other serial portraits, Rogovin honored the everyday lives of his subjects, offering a powerful visual legacy of a community he respected and loved.

10

Lee Friedlander

In the 1960s Lee Friedlander (born 1934) sought, by his own account, to create images of “the American social landscape and its conditions.” Other photographers in his New York circle, including Diane Arbus and Garry Winogrand, also explored the chaotic beauty and contradictions of modern life. Friedlander, however, was the only member of this group to turn repeatedly to self-portraiture in order to understand the world around him. He stalked city streets with camera in hand, recording not only the haphazard incidents of daily life but also his own presence, often as a shadow or a reflection.

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In the shop window of *Westport, Connecticut*, 1968 (fig. 11), for example, a reflection of Friedlander’s legs appears to merge with the shapely limbs of a woman in a bathing suit who points a camera at the viewer. The woman is an illusion, a cutout advertisement — but she is also a stand-in for the camera-wielding Friedlander, whose torso and head also appear faintly, as a shadow cast against her legs.

12

By letting the reflection in a window obscure what is inside, or allowing his shadow to intrude into the frame, Friedlander violates many of the rules of “good” photography. Works such as *New York City*, 1966 (fig. 12) testify to Friedlander’s ability to transform such “mistakes” into witty, ironic juxtapositions. In this case, the startling intrusion of Friedlander’s shadow onto the back of a fellow pedestrian is visually confusing, simultaneously threatening and humorous, as Friedlander’s spiky hair merges with the woman’s fur collar. A sly commentary on the predatory nature of such street photography, the looming shadow that engulfs the subject is also an effect of Friedlander’s equipment, a 35mm Leica with a wide-angle lens. In order to fill the picture frame with his chosen subject, Friedlander had to make the picture at close range, resulting in the inclusion of his own shadow.

13

Even in self-portraits in which Friedlander makes himself fully visible to the camera, the artist often makes humorously self-deprecating deadpan images, appearing, for example, as a disheveled driver on a manic mission in *Haverstraw, New York*, 1966 (fig. 13). Edgy but unpretentious, brimming with pictorial detail, Friedlander’s self-portraits are visual puzzles that explore the place of the self in the chaos of contemporary urban life.

Francesca Woodman

14

Francesca Woodman (1958 – 1981) began making photographs at age thirteen, and by the time she entered the Rhode Island School of Design in 1975, she was already a skilled photographer. Using herself as the subject of nearly all her work, Woodman put her body in the service of exploring such themes as feminine identity, sexuality, mythology, and the relationship of the body to its surroundings. Conjuring visions of a complex inner world, Woodman's photographs are powerful for their ability to suggest psychic turmoil within images of serene, ethereal beauty.

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Woodman's interest in the emotional affect of space can be seen in *House #3, Providence, Rhode Island*, 1976 (fig. 14). Using an abandoned house as a makeshift studio, Woodman often photographed herself merging with her surroundings, including doors, walls, and windows, dissolving physical or psychic boundaries. She also frequently moved during long exposures or allowed the camera to record only part of her body in order to obscure her figure. By invoking a ghostly presence, Woodman's photographs often present her as someone who refuses to commit to a solid image of herself.

Woodman's lush and intimate photographs thus offer a tantalizing glimpse of a mysterious, private world. Yet they are more than romantic expressions of a young woman's subjective experience. Notes in Woodman's diary suggest, for instance, that *Untitled, Providence, Rhode Island*, 1975 – 1978 (fig. 15), alludes to the Greek mythological story of Leda, who was seduced by the god Zeus in the form of a swan.

Toward the end of her brief but prolific career (Woodman committed suicide when she was twenty-two) the artist began working on a much larger scale, using her body more as a structural element. *Caryatid, New York*, 1980 (fig. 16), made as part of a monumental photo-installation called *Temple Project*, draws both its title and inspiration from the columns carved in the shape of women that were used in ancient Greek and Roman architecture. Although Woodman displays her figure in a more expansive and direct manner than in her earlier work, the gesture that obscures her face and leaves her partial and unknowable is typical for the artist, who always preferred suggestion over declaration.

16

Ann Hamilton

An artist known for multimedia environments, performances, and videos, Ann Hamilton (born 1956) made the first photographs in the *body object series* in 1984 with objects left over from an installation she had presented as an MFA student at Yale. Later images from the series were based on subsequent performances and installations, documenting both the objects used and the actions performed with them. Hamilton appears in each photograph with objects attached to or touching her body, her face only rarely visible. The results are striking, unsettling, and often witty.

17

Despite emerging from Hamilton's installation and performance practice, the photographs in the series stand on their own as works of art. Paying close attention to the material qualities of familiar objects, Hamilton models creative new uses for them, changing their function and meaning. In *body object series #13, toothpick suit/chair*, 1984 (fig. 17), for example, thousands of toothpicks transform Hamilton's clothes into a porcupine-like hide while a chair becomes a burdensome instrument of torture. The image elicits visceral emotions — alienation, hostility, fear — though it does so with a dose of absurdist humor.

18

As self-representations, the photographs in the *body object series* depart radically from any traditional notion of portraiture. Instead of insisting on Hamilton's uniqueness as an individual, these images present her body almost as an object on a par with other objects. Some of the photographs are linked directly to her biography: Hamilton had studied textile design before getting her MFA, and the toothpick suit refers to her love of fabrics. In other photographs she makes abstract concepts more graspable through the senses. Sound is given tactile and visual form as tissue paper in *body object series #14, megaphone*, 1986 (fig. 18), while in *body object series #15, honey hat*, 1989 (fig. 19), Hamilton wrings her hands in honey to suggest the idea of washing one's hands of guilt. Based on an installation in which the artist embedded money — 750,000 pennies — in a layer of honey, this image also gives new meaning to the phrase “sticky fingers” and highlights the connections between language, images, and objects that Hamilton explores in both her photographs and installations.

19

Nikki S. Lee

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Nikki S. Lee (born 1970) had recently arrived from South Korea and was working on her MFA at Yale when she began her *Projects* series in 1997. To make this body of work, she first transformed herself into a member of a particular subculture or ethnic group and then documented her experiences with a camera. Ranging from a young Hispanic woman (fig. 20) to a punk rocker, a yuppie, an exotic dancer, a hip-hopper (fig. 21), a lesbian (fig. 22), and a tourist, Lee's temporary personas map out a wide range of possible identities while questioning the stability of any one identity — even when it is defined by such seemingly unalterable categories as race and ethnicity.

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In preparation for each of her self-transformations, Lee first observed a community and then recreated the characteristic “look” of its members by mimicking their clothes and makeup, adopting their body language, and even learning such skills as exotic dancing or skateboarding. She also colored her hair and added extensions to it, dieted, tanned, and used prosthetics to alter her facial features. Lee immersed herself in the group for several weeks, during which time she asked her new acquaintances or passersby to record her interactions with a basic “point and shoot” camera. The resulting photographs look like straightforward snapshots, many of them even stamped with the date and time they were made. Although Lee inhabits each identity convincingly and the “snapshot” look endows the photographs with an air of authenticity, the artist's ruse is revealed when the different series are seen together and viewers come to recognize Lee as the recurring subject.

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In making *Projects*, Lee acted as part performance artist and part anthropologist. Her images blur the lines between traditional categories of artistic, documentary, and snapshot photography while raising questions about the relationship between appearance and identity. For Lee, the ability to slip into — and out of — the skin of others reveals the chameleon-like nature of social identity and its dependence upon the company we keep.

Alfred Stieglitz, *Georgia O'Keeffe*, probably 1918, platinum print, National Gallery of Art, Washington Alfred Stieglitz Collection



**Alfred Stieglitz, Georgia
O'Keeffe — *Hands and
Thimble*, 1919, palladium
print, National Gallery
of Art, Washington,
Alfred Stieglitz Collection**



Alfred Stieglitz, *Georgia O'Keeffe*, 1930, gelatin silver print, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Alfred Stieglitz Collection



Emmet Gowin, *Edith*,
Danville, Virginia, 1963,
gelatin silver print, printed
1980s, National Gallery of
Art, Washington, Charina
Endowment Fund



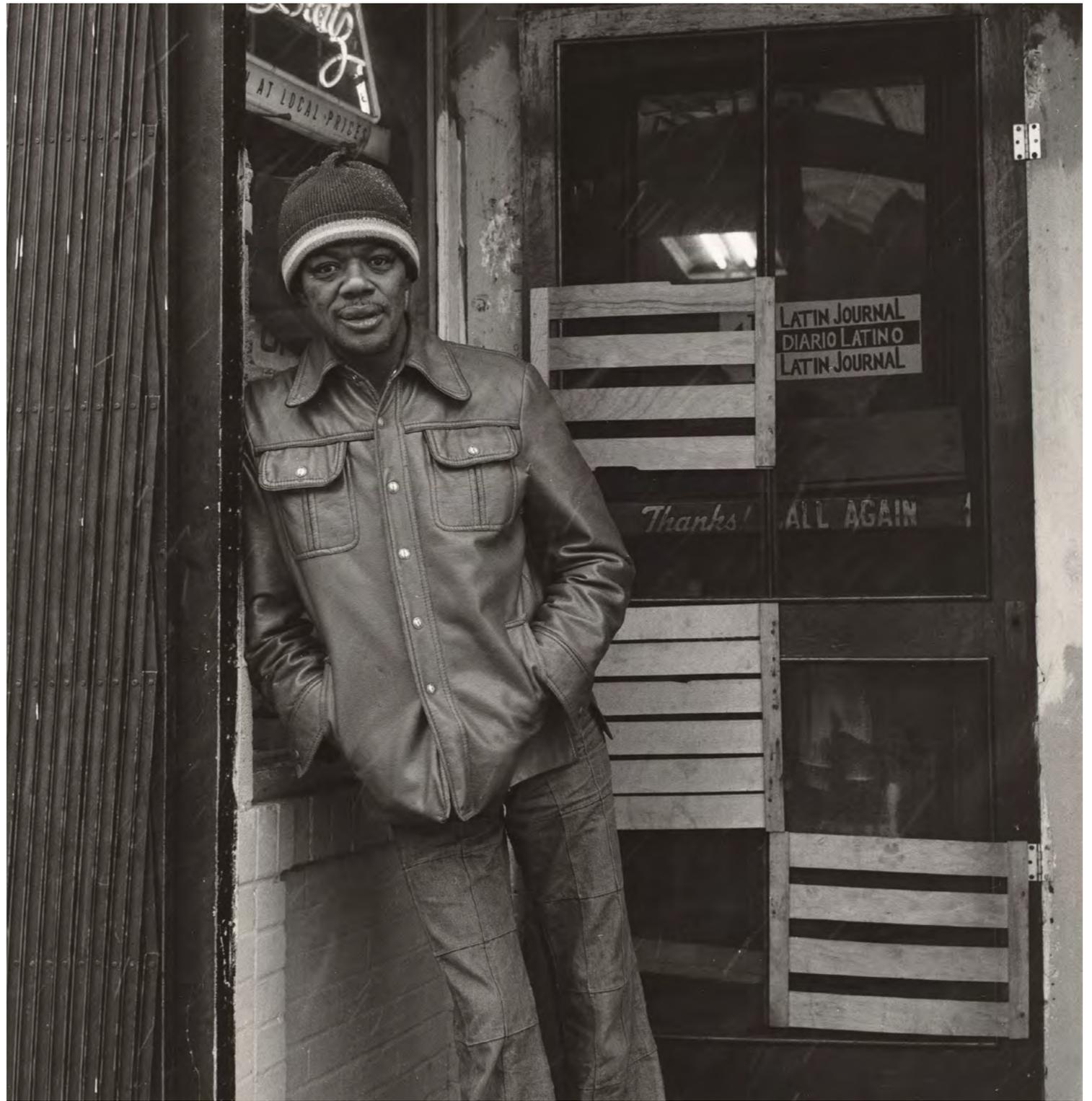
Emmet Gowin, *Edith*,
Danville, Virginia, 1971,
gelatin silver print,
National Gallery of Art,
Washington, Patrons'
Permanent Fund



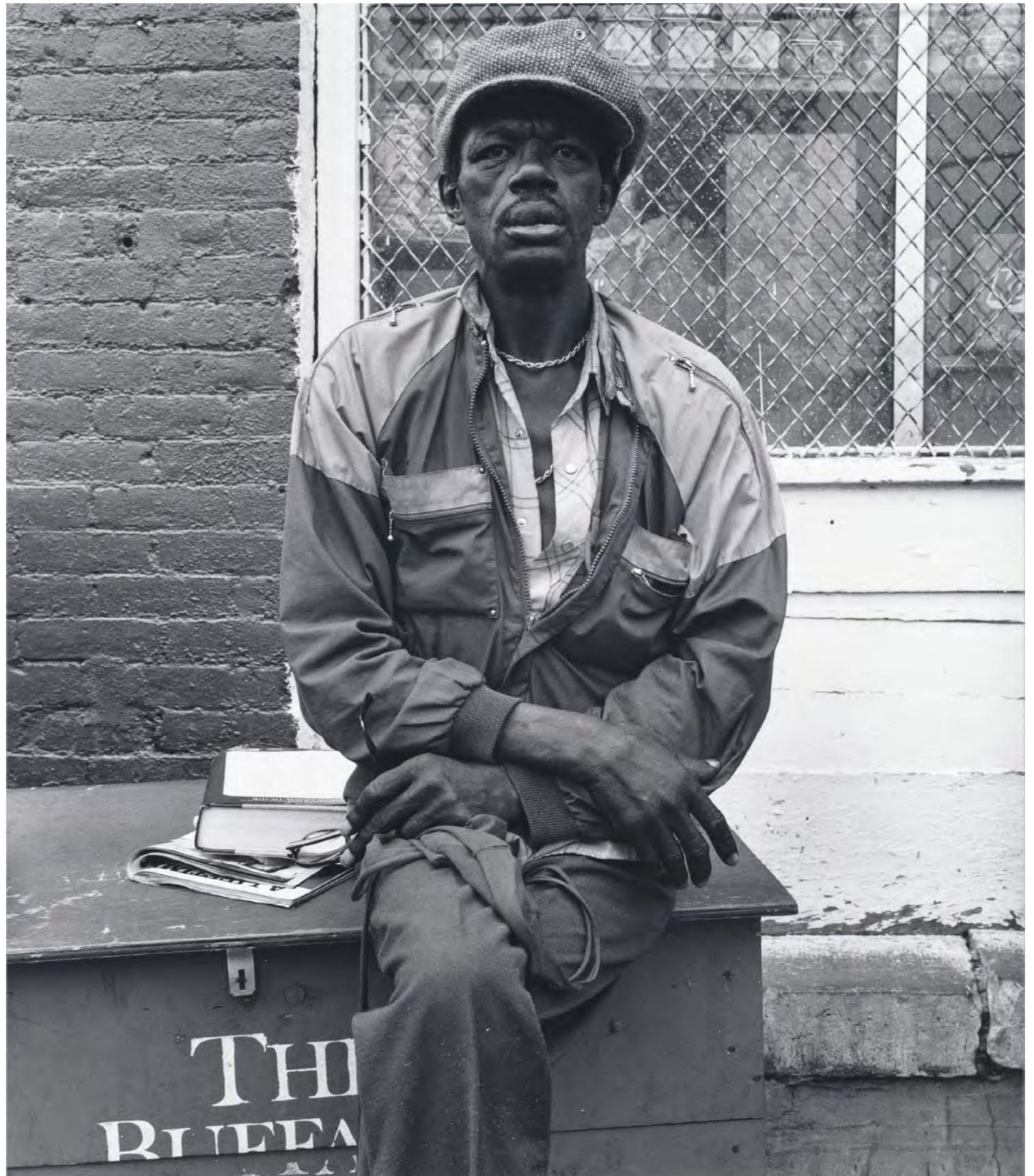
**Emmet Gowin, *Edith and
Moth Flight*, 2002, inkjet
print, National Gallery of
Art, Washington, Charina
Endowment Fund**



Milton Rogovin, *Samuel P.*
“Pee Wee” West (Lower West
Side series), 1974, gelatin
silver print, National Gallery
of Art, Washington, Gift of
Dr. J. Patrick and Patricia A.
Kennedy



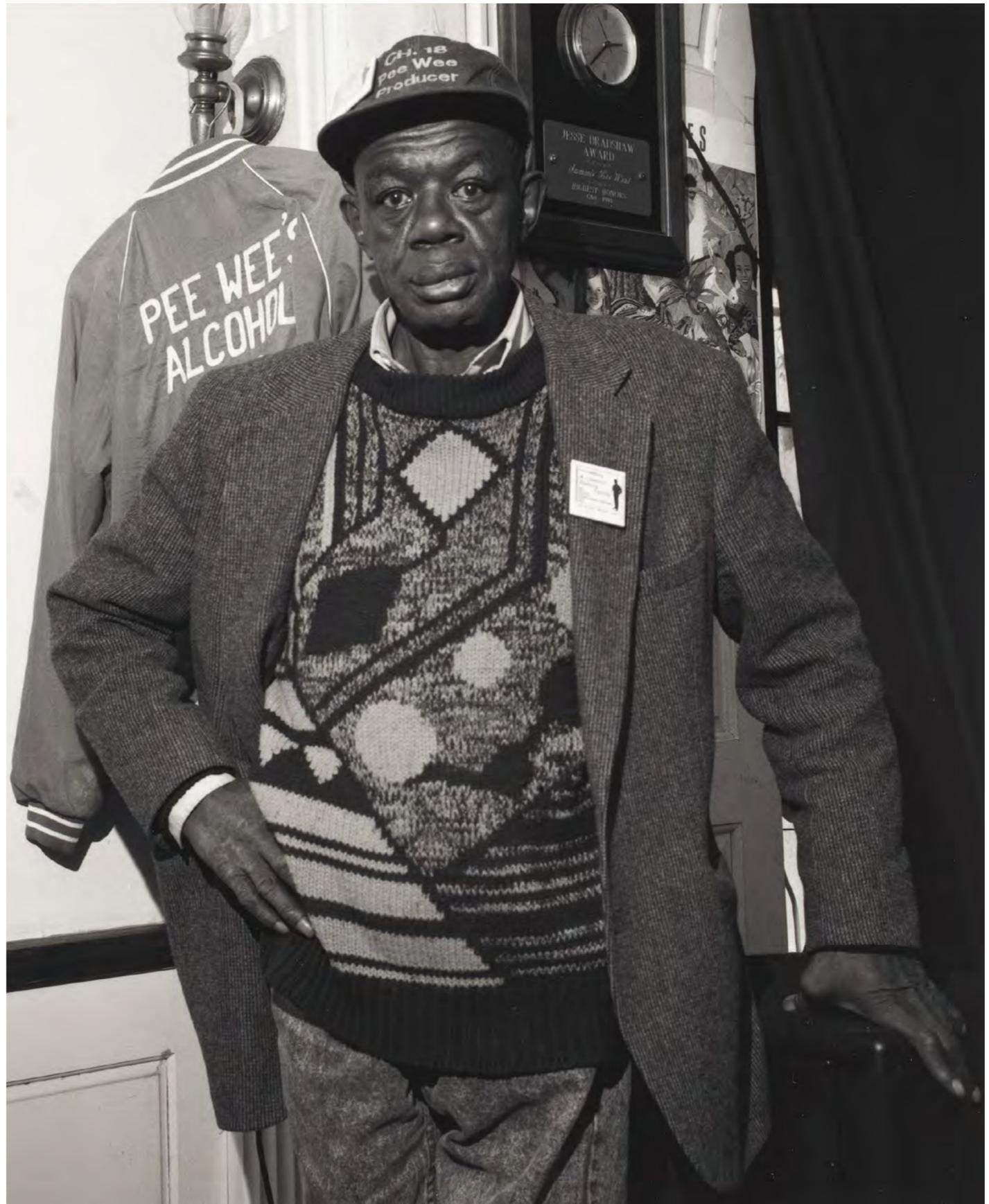
Milton Rogovin, *Samuel P.*
“Pee Wee” West (Lower West
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silver print, National Gallery
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Milton Rogovin, *Samuel P.*
“Pee Wee” West (Lower West
Side series), 1992, gelatin
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Milton Rogovin, *Samuel P.*
“Pee Wee” West (Lower West
Side series), 2002, gelatin
silver print, National Gallery
of Art, Washington, Gift of
Dr. J. Patrick and Patricia A.
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Lee Friedlander, *Westport, Connecticut*, 1968, gelatin silver print, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Trellis Fund



Lee Friedlander, *New York City*, 1966, gelatin silver print, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Trellis Fund



**Lee Friedlander, *Haverstraw*,
New York, 1966, gelatin
silver print, National Gallery
of Art, Washington, Trellis
Fund**



Francesca Woodman,
House #3, Providence,
Rhode Island, 1976, gelatin
silver print, National
Gallery of Art, Washington,
Gift of the Heather and
Tony Podesta Collection



Francesca Woodman,
*Untitled, Providence, Rhode
Island, 1975 – 1978, gelatin
silver print, National
Gallery of Art, Washington,
Gift of the Collectors
Committee and R. K.
Mellon Family Foundation*



Francesca Woodman,
Caryatid, New York, 1980,
inkjet print, printed 2003,
National Gallery of Art,
Washington, William
and Sarah Walton Fund
and Gift of the Collectors
Committee



Ann Hamilton, *body object*
series #13, toothpick suit /
chair, 1984, gelatin silver
print, printed 1993, National
Gallery of Art, Washington,
Gift of the Heather and
Tony Podesta Collection



Ann Hamilton, *body object series #14, megaphone*, 1986, gelatin silver print, printed 1993, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of the Heather and Tony Podesta Collection



Ann Hamilton, *body object*
series #15, honey hat, 1989,
gelatin silver print, printed
1993, National Gallery of
Art, Washington, Gift of the
Heather and Tony Podesta
Collection



Nikki S. Lee, *The Hispanic Project (2)*, 1998, chromogenic print, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of the Heather and Tony Podesta Collection



Nikki S. Lee, *The Hip Hop Project (2)*, 2001, chromogenic print, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of the Heather and Tony Podesta Collection



Nikki S. Lee, *The Lesbian Project (15)*, 1997, chromogenic print, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of the Heather and Tony Podesta Collection



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