

ARTFORUM

Jack Smith

ARTISTS SPACE

In Artists Space's final exhibition at 55 Walker Street, a hulking television monitor screened mottled, mid-1970s footage of Jack Smith standing outside the Cologne Zoological Garden, resplendent in a feathered turban. "The Museum is filled with a lot of stuff chosen from artists who represent the artist as the playmate of the rich," he intones. "These artists suck art out of everyday life and transfer it to paintings and other kinds of crusts and sell it to galleries—who in turn sell it to museums and the rich so that the art eventually ends up in penthouses and storage warehouses of museums." A quivering energy infuses his voice with helium hilarity—maybe even a hint of violence—until it reaches a fervor that, in our Twitter-tantrum era, calls for all caps: "Make that goddamn place open till MIDNIGHT—OR PUT something interesting in it and keep it open till FIVE IN THE MORNING!"

New York audiences have heard this rant before. Back in 2011, the audio of the Cologne film, *Kino 74*, 1974, played from a speaker over the door of Gladstone Gallery during "Thanks for Explaining Me," a selection of Smith's work, curated by Neville Wakefield, that



View of "Jack Smith," 2018. From left: *I Danced with a Penguin*, 1983; *Yolanda la Penguina*, date unknown.
Photo: Daniel Pérez.

commemorated Gladstone's acquisition of the deceased artist's estate. The strategic placement of Smith's impassioned harangue seemed to acknowledge the ambivalence surrounding the occasion. Few artists were ever so hostile as Smith to commodification, careerism, and other epiphenomena of *landlordism*, to use his preferred term for capitalist enterprise. Following the *succès de scandale* of his 1963 masterpiece, *Flaming Creatures*, Smith never completed another work, ensuring that nothing else of his would ever be sold or ceded from his control. Instead, he projected his films in person, choosing reels and LP soundtracks on the fly, or staged theatrical performances with an ever-shifting kaleidoscope of scripts, props, costumes, and collaborators. In 1970, for instance, the production *Boiled Lobster Easter Pageant* morphed into *Withdrawal from Orchid Lagoon*, then *Miracle of Farblonjet*. The all-but-explicit agenda of "Thanks for Explaining Me" was to bring this fluidity to a close, to sort and seal Smith's marvelously moldy trash heaps into prim rectangular frames.

Artists Space's "Art Crust of Spiritual Oasis," curated by Jay Sanders and Jamie Stevens, offered a counter to the Chelsea makeover of Smith in "Thanks for Explaining Me." (Perhaps it would be more accurate to call "Art Crust" a complement, as the exhibition would not have been possible without Gladstone's contributions to preserving the artist's legacy.) The show focused on Smith's theatrical work from the late 1960s onward, beginning with the hallucinatory late-night fantasias held in his loft, aka the Plaster Foundation, at 89 Grand Street, and then, following his exile by eviction, through the performances he staged in spaces both abroad and across Manhattan. The curators tracked Smith's path through a judicious sampling of flyers, scripts, sketches, and "slides of burning beauty," along with extant film footage looped on small monitors. Each scrap attested to how Smith treated everything he touched as an extension of his *mise-en-scène*, yet the exhibition made no attempt to proffer these objects as fungible surrogates for Smith's own aura. In the slideshow *I Walked with a Penguin*, ca. 1974-75, Smith's stuffed-animal costar Yolanda looks absolutely alive, and stunning in her bejeweled brassiere. Here on display, the prop appeared well cared for, but matter-of-factly drab, another casualty of the disenchantment of the world.

More crucially, "Art Crust" showed us another Jack Smith: the oddball utopian that the late performance scholar José Esteban Muñoz sought out in his important study of queer futurity. In many accounts, most prominently Mary Jordan's documentary *Jack Smith and the Destruction of the Atlantis*, 2006, Smith's rejection of commercial success is chalked up to the romantic stereotype of the self-destructive, isolated genius. By contrast, "Art Crust" revealed how Smith fused his antipathy toward capitalism with his predilection for camp, trash, and the Orientalist aesthetic of 1940s B movies to forge a vision of social transformation. Keeping museums open until five in the morning would be just a first step toward a civilization set free from landlordism. In an undated film treatment for the never-realized *Sinbad in the Rented World*, Smith wrote, "Only exoticism can produce a socialistic effect." Forget Bernie Sanders; in 2020, vote Maria Montez.

—Colby Chamberlain