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Rediscovering The Avant-garde Filmmaker Who Got US Senators All Hot and Bothered

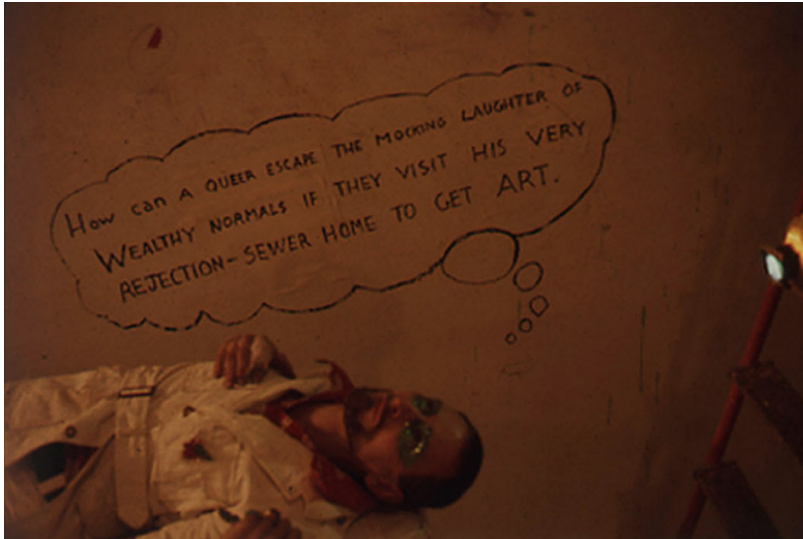
Meg Whiteford July 16, 2018

In Rediscovery, GARAGE trains its eye on a creator who has hitherto been lost to the sands of time. This week: the flamer magic of radical auteur Jack Smith.

Jack Smith has a reputation as an “artist’s artist,” or someone who was “before his time,” which is to say that during his lifetime he was often broke and struggling to keep a roof over his head. He committed himself fully to the politics of pleasure and hedonism, and while he admittedly adored artifice, his acidic vulgarity was political and his transgressions were pointedly anti-capitalist. In an untitled, undated, and fuzzy clip displayed in the retrospective Art Crust of Spiritual Oasis at Artists Space, the first major show of his work in New York in over twenty years, the artist shouts in his signature, nasal drone: “Real magic! Don’t you understand? Real magic!”

Though Smith worked in theater and performance until his death in 1989, he became infamous for the last piece he would ever finish: the film *Flaming Creatures* (1963). Banned throughout most of the US after being seized by NYPD from a 1964 screening in New York, the film was embraced by the local queer punk scene for its vignettes of, as Strom Thurmond would describe for the congressional record on September 4, 1968 when he showed the movie to fellow senators, “homosexuals dancing together and other disconnected erotic activity, such as massaging the female breasts and group sexual activity.” Its textural, sparkling, decorative, and soapy mien was rooted in the telenovela genre and Technicolor B-movies of 1940s Hollywood, but its influence on the avant-garde was outsized: Smith’s campy aesthetic and freewheeling production style resounds in the films Andy Warhol made with Paul Morrissey later in the 1960s and 1970s, Mike Kelley’s videos and installations, John Waters and his star Divine’s personas, and even Federico Fellini’s films *Satyricon* (1969) and *Juliet of the Spirits* (1965) display a debt to Smith’s hallucinatory and outlandish flair.

After the upheaval of *Flaming Creature’s* reception—a subsequent obscenity case *People of New York vs. Kenneth Jacobs, Florence Karpf and Jonas Mekas* ended up with the projectionist (Jacobs) and manager of the aforementioned screening (Mekas) each given sixty days in the New York City workhouse, although their sentences were later suspended—an unsurprisingly paranoid Smith refused to create anything that could be misconstrued as complete or replicable thereafter.



Jack Smith, Untitled (Performance at Galleria L'Attico), 1974, 35mm slide. Copyright Jack Smith Archive. Courtesy Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels.

Artists Space is a germane venue for this collection—the institution was one of the first to show the artist's work in the 1970s, alongside other experimental galleries, ad hoc theaters, the artist's own loft, and street corners. Spanning two floors, visitors find Smith's later work in the basement of the venue. A basement is a subterranean hot spot for domestic taboo, a place where incongruities are stowed away and forgotten, and therefore totally apropos to the arc of Smith's career. Toward the end of his life he could no longer accommodate the collaboration necessary in filmmaking, so he took to fashioning slide show presentations with a sidekick, a puppet penguin named Yolanda la Penguina, who sits on a pedestal in the basement's corner.

The artist always maintained that he worked with "creatures," though, never actors. His films, shot on Kodak stock nicked from dumpsters, featured ecstatic sexual deviants writhing in the grass or on Smith's apartment floor with props and costumes pulled from garbage bins. For rescuing trash and turning the discarded into erotic props, is there any doubt that his magic was real?

Jack Smith: Art Crust of Spiritual Oasis is on view at Artists Space through September 9, 2018.