

Jack Smith

Art Crust of Spiritual Oasis

June 22 – September 9, 2018

Artists Space



This exhibition is dedicated to our co-founder and friend Irving Sandler. His unwavering commitment to art and artists is a legacy that will continue to guide our work.

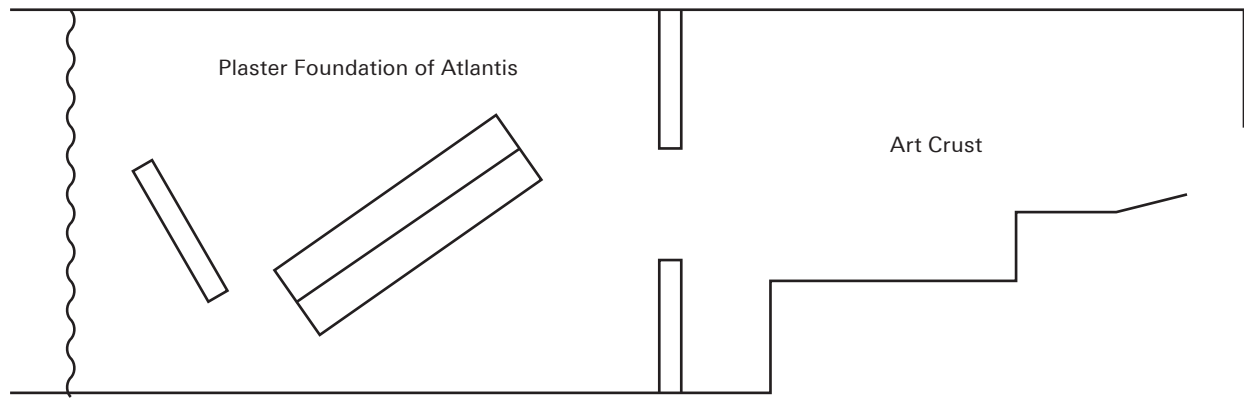
With his shadow looming over the development of avant-garde film, performance, photography, and critical discourse in New York between the 1960s and 1980s, Jack Smith nonetheless remains an outlier among the many artistic contexts within which he played an important role. This includes the downtown artistic community from which Artists Space emerged, where Smith performed four times, presenting: *Life with Mekas*, *Thanksgiving Show of Lucky Consumer Paradise* (both 1974), *How Can Uncle Fishhook Have a Free Bicentennial Zombie Underground?* (1976), and *Art Crust on Crab Lagoon* (1981). Smith’s virtuosic output is revered for its caustic humor, self-invention, and debasement of institutional authority, which intensified throughout his ever-evolving work. Yet, since his death from AIDS-related pneumonia in 1989, his artistic legacy has proven to be similarly recalcitrant and resistant to clean-cut narrativization. In history, as in life, Smith’s comprehensive oeuvre exists in renegade defiance of the capitalist imperatives of commodification and containment, as vilified in his ideas of “lucky landlordism,” “rented island,” “claptailism,” “art crust,” and so forth. Smith’s vision is one that consequently imbues art into life, to the point of rendering assumed distinctions between the two as absurd and elitist.

This exhibition marks the first time that many of Smith’s performances—composed and chronicled in drawings, scripts, film fragments, “boiled lobster color slideshows,” audio recordings, and costumes—have been articulated. Following restorations by Jerry Tartaglia and assembling selections of slides from the thousands in Jack Smith’s archive, *Art Crust of Spiritual Oasis* is the most comprehensive gathering of Smith’s work since the 1997 exhibition at MoMA PS1 and focuses particularly on the largely overlooked period of the 1970s and early 1980s. It frames Smith’s time “in exile,” as described by film historian and Smith archivist J. Hoberman. This period was marked by the artist’s eviction from his legendary SoHo loft, the Plaster Foundation of Atlantis in 1971 and, consequently, by a movement toward performances staged in ad-hoc theater spaces, cinemas, nightclubs, and notably in the literal outside of a morphing urban environment, as the artist found himself at the margins of a professionalizing art world, with the city of New York transformed by a bullish real estate market.

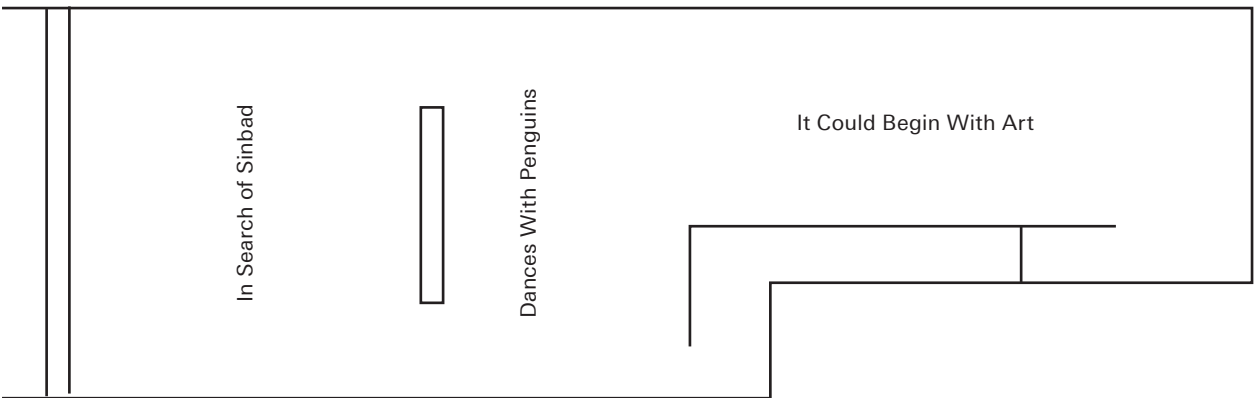
Smith’s live appearances were commonly accompanied by slideshows and silent film rushes, while the artist played sound effects and LPs from his collection. Known for their trailing duration and provisional rehearsal-like nature, these events saw relatively small audiences, though the marquee-esque flyers that announce them promise entertainment on a spectacular scale. At times the only remaining documents of these performances, Smith’s hand-drawn flyers and evocative titles employ excessively orientalist and erotic fantasies rendered in his typically opulent vocabulary. These stylized promotional works are presented throughout the exhibition.

Cover image: Jack Smith photographing the penguin for the slide show *Padronismo di Pastacrosta* at L’Attico, via Beccaria garage, June 24, 1975. Courtesy of Fabio Sargentini - L’Attico Archive, Rome

Upstairs

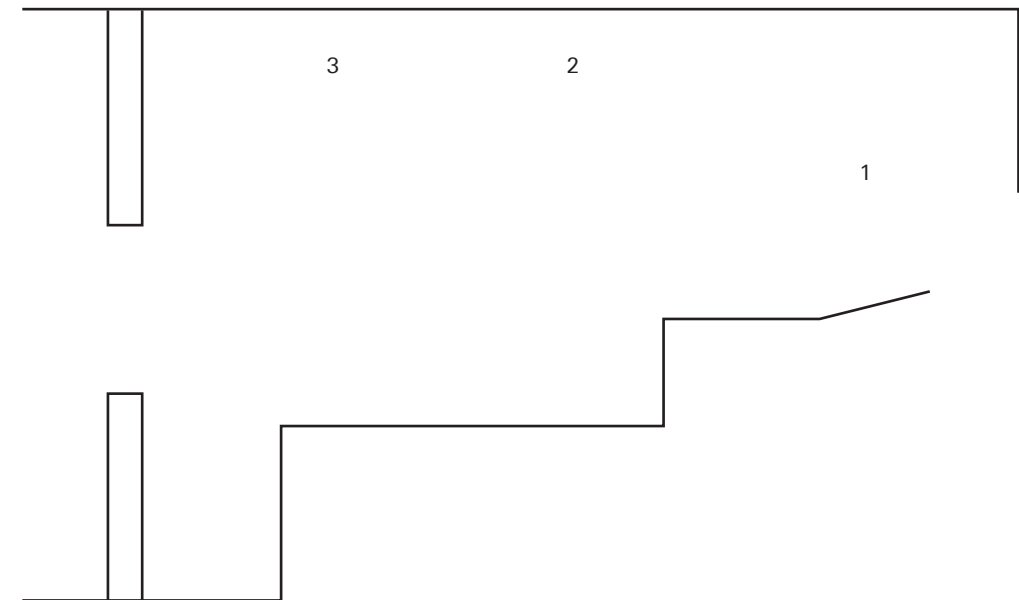


Downstairs



in *What's Underground About Marshmallows?*, a monologue that Jack Smith presented as part of a film series at the Theatre for the New City in October 1981, he chronicles what he saw as the instrumentalization of his early films by Jonas Mekas, key founder of the Filmmakers' Coop and Anthology Film Archives, and a longtime champion of Smith. In Smith's version, the recognition he received for his film *Flaming Creatures* in the early 1960s is colored as a period of induced forced-labor in a sugar-hungry netherworld, the benefits of which were reaped by Mekas (characterized as the villain Uncle Artcrust or Uncle Fishhook). In contrast, Smith imagines a fantasy, faux-Polynesian movie-set in the sun—an environment of ongoing, open-air artistic creation for the public to witness. The combination of such hyperbolic anti-careerist rhetoric with relentless self-fashioning and myth-production (as seen also in his classic studio-style headshots) was at the heart of Smith's endeavor. *What's Underground About Marshmallows?* was later re-performed by Ron Vawter in *Roy Cohn/Jack Smith* (1992), which was paired with a fictional speech by the closeted, right-wing attorney Roy Cohn.

As his promotion for *What's Underground About Marshmallows?* describes, Smith felt that the artist-filmmakers of his time were lorded over by a “landlord class who irrationally operate theatres in the style of the passive executive, as just more of the old sacrifice-betrayal context, the continuing betrayal of the socialistic impulse....” Landlordism, the “fear ritual” of extracting rent each month and a stand-in both for the profiteering of art institutions and the capitalist laws that squash life in general, served as Smith’s recurring arch-enemy. A series of slides taken in the 1970s and 1980s dramatizes this ceaseless requirement to pay, with Smith’s outstretched, envelope-clutching arm struggling through various locations. This anti-rent fixation was a prescient one, given the visible pressures of real estate development on artistic survival and urban life under an increasingly parasitic economy, and the heightened debates over gentrification that are leveled at art spaces themselves today.



1
Audio recording of Jack Smith's
performance *What's Underground
About Marshmallows?* (1981), 51 min
57 seconds.

Paste-ups made by Jack Smith for posters advertising his performances *What's Underground About Marshmallows?* (1981), *Boiled Lobster Color Slideshow* (c. late 1970s) and *I Was A Mekas Collaborator* (1978).

Framed portraits (c. 1981).

2
35mm slides (loosely chronological)
of Smith in numerous photo shoots
in which he poses with rent checks.
Below, a notebook drawing and a rent
check envelope prop (c. 1970s).

3
35mm slides featuring two distinct performances: *Gas Station of the Cross* (1977) and an untitled photo shoot featuring Smith as the Lobster (c. 1970s). Below, an adorned crab prop used in numerous photo shoots.

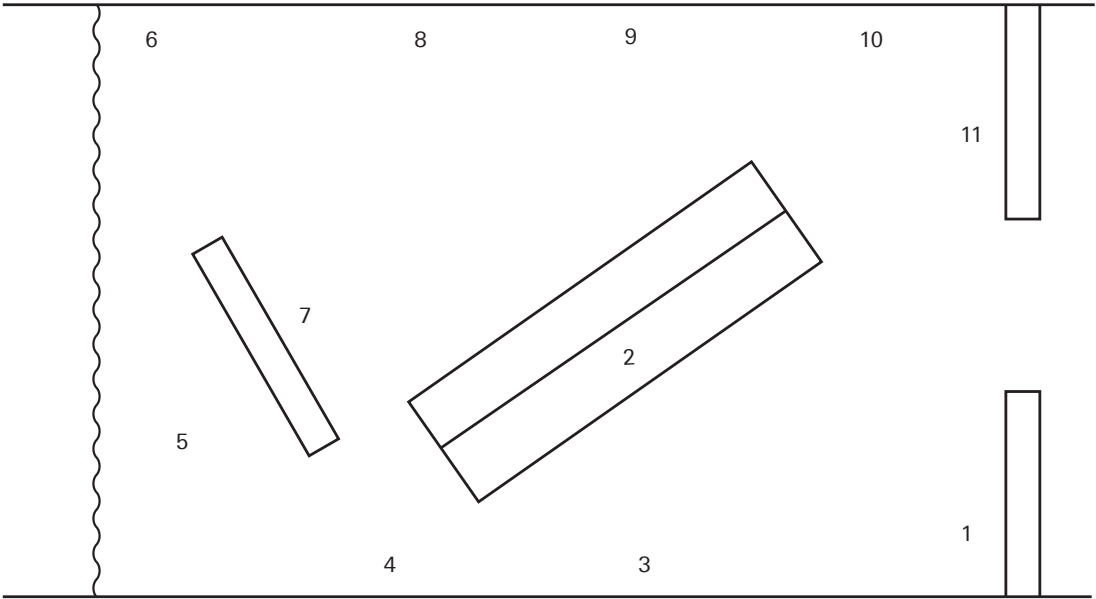
In December of 1969, Jack Smith moved to a two-floor loft space at 36 Greene Street / 89 Grand Street, which he called the Plaster Foundation of Atlantis. The roughly 15 x 50-foot space became a twenty-four hour film set, theater, living space, and trash heap. Smith removed the ceiling, which provided rafters for lighting the central stage where he hosted a free (or for a dollar or less) performance every Saturday at midnight until he was evicted two years later due to unpaid rent. At least nine different titles were applied to these sessions, including *Wait for Me at the Bottom of the Pool*, *Lobster Sunset Christmas Pageant: Bubble of Atlantis* (both 1969), *Boiled Lobster Easter Pageant*, *Withdrawal from Orchid Lagoon*, *Miracle of Farblonjet* (all 1970), *Claptailism of Palmola Christmas Spectacular* (seen in the video *Midnight at the Plaster Foundation*, 1970), *Gas Stations of the Cross*, and *10 Million B.C.* (both 1971).

Much like a further-underground and far less package-ready version of Warhol’s Factory (Warhol was influenced early on by Smith and included him in three of his own films), the Plaster Foundation was a queer Hollywood-esque studio and lounge-space for frequent collaborators including New York Puerto Rican performer Mario Montez who starred in many of Smith’s productions (at times as the “Crab Ogress,” the costume of which appears here). Other prominent actors in Smith’s work include Native American actress Maria Antoinette (who starred in *Brassieres of Atlantis*, 1969), Ronald Tavel and John Vaccaro of the Playhouse of the Ridiculous, poet Piero Heliczer, filmmaker Joel Markman, Tally Brown, Irving Rosenthal, Mary Woronov, Abbe Stubenhaus, Tosh Carillo, and other “creatures.”

The film rushes, photographs, costumes, and drawings exhibited here show the shipwreck-like trash utopia that Smith accumulated at the Plaster Foundation out of commercial goods scavenged or stolen from his urban environment. Two film fragments in the gallery show long, lavish close-ups of these materials themselves, seamlessly transitioning between discarded left-overs, packaging, objects, and body parts, both real and

fake. Smith referred frequently to “plaster” as the stuff that holds up the entirety of a crumbling, sham society; people he revered in his writings, such as Maria Montez and artist Walter De Maria, were able to bring “dead plaster” to life, or to transcend the “plaster smothered architecture” of their surroundings. He felt that Art Deco and ancient Arabian and European Baroque techniques of built-in decoration (such as architectural moldings, frescoes, and ceramic work) holistically intertwined art with life, and he aspired to live by this example, combatting “ugly” rectangles, the “preferred shape of capitalism,” which otherwise dominated.

The melodramatic devotion to embellishment and to creating what he termed a “moldy aesthetic” world was inspired by tiki-themed Americana, from his screen-goddess Maria Montez to the exotica of Les Baxter and Martin Denny. The glacial pace of his live events, their late hours (often beginning long after midnight), and a general refusal of his work to congeal into a finished product, were, for Smith, lived modes of anti-capitalist opposition to mercenary behavior in the art world and to a police society of enforced normalcy and property rights. Viewers recall prolonged preparations by Smith and his actors, and an experience characterized more by its visible seams and sensational breakdowns than by its coherence as narrative performance. With exaggerated mimesis of the poses and mannerisms of Hollywood starlets such as Theda Nara and Gloria Swanson, Smith embraced their (bad) acting techniques in order to prioritize the capacity of affectation and gesture over realism or plot. Smith’s aesthetic figured crucially in Susan Sontag’s formulation of her 1964 *Notes on Camp*, though Sontag’s depoliticized conception of the term has been acknowledged as poorly suited for a project as polemical as Smith’s. The homoerotics and gender confusion in his work provoked federal censorship (*Flaming Creatures* is technically still banned in twenty-two states) and presented a transgressively unassimilable picture of sexual identity. Invoking orientalist and tropicalist fantasies, Smith’s Plaster Foundation hosted an erotics of exoticism as languorous glamour and queer liberation.



1 Wall mounted vitrines and table tops with drawings, notes, and scripts related to “claptailism,” “roach crust,” “boiled lobster” and to the performances *Claptailism of Palmola Economic Spectacle* (1970–71), *Clamericals of Claptailism* (1970), *Wait For Me at the Bottom of the Pool* (1968), *Miracle of Farblonjet* (1970).

2 Large vitrine presenting Jack Smith’s scrapbook, a character drawing (c. 1970), a fan used in many performances, and an envelope note addressed to Maria Antoinette (c. 1970). Opposite are drawings by Jack Smith (c. 1966–1970), a drawing and film class notes, and framed portraits of Jack Smith with domestic products (all c. 1970).

3 Monitor presenting *Midnight at the Plaster Foundation*, filmed by Hans Breder (1970), sound, black & white, 17 min 18 seconds. Above, two framed photographs from *Withdrawal from Orchid Lagoon* (1970) and a wall mounted vitrine with five undated drawings.

4 Four framed drawings related to *Brassieres of Atlantis* and the “Brassieres Museum” (c. 1970). Table with hand-drawn flyers, script for *Crab Ogress of Jingola* (c. 1970s), drawings and notes for *In the Grip of the Lobster* (c. 1969).

5 Six framed drawings related to the Plaster Foundation set and the “Crab Ogress of Mu” (c. 1970). 35mm slides featuring photographs of the Plaster Foundation including Mario Montez as the “Crab Ogress,” details of the loft and set, staged photographs of Jack Smith and Maria Antoinette, images of *Withdrawal from Orchid Lagoon* (all c. 1970). Monitor presenting shoots of the unfinished *In the Grip of the Lobster* (1969), silent, color, 34 min 7 seconds, featuring Mario Montez. Original costume of the “Crab Ogress.”

6 Monitor presenting *No President* (1968), sound, black and white, 45 min 48 seconds, filmed at the Plaster Foundation, alongside a framed poster for a screening at the Elgin Theater. Three framed collages by Jack Smith (c. 1969).

7 Projection featuring Jack Smith, Tally Brown, Maria Antoinette and others performing at the Plaster Foundation of Atlantis (c. 1970), silent, black & white, 13 min 32 seconds.

8 Framed photographs of the performance *Brassieres of Atlantis* (1969). Below, wall mounted vitrine with casting call, script, and the poster for *Brassieres of Atlantis*, and Jack Smith notes on cards.

9 Five framed character drawings (c. 1970).

10 Three monitors (left to right): *Song for Rent* (1969), sound, color, 6 min 44 seconds, and an untitled clip showing Mario Montez as a nun (c. 1970), silent, color, 9 min 22 seconds. Interior of the Plaster Foundation (c. 1970), silent, color, 19 min 54 seconds. A performance in the same space (c. 1970), silent, color, 9 min 54 seconds.

11 Three framed studio portraits of Jack Smith (c. 1970).

An excerpt from a lecture given by Jack Smith at Artists Space.

...This all came about because of the uh, irrational way that money is distributed, ah, by the government in grants, and ah, by foundations. Ah, if, ah, it only creates a situation in which the uh, mamas and papas, ah, er. . . . But the, in other words the money is granted to the most aggressive, and ah, it seems where we have all this, we have this crust around the theatre of the mamas and

interest it is to present art as a failing thing, ah, that needs so much protection they wouldn't, none of them would protect, would ever present anything that could stand on its own in the theatre, they don't want that because then it wouldn't need them, I, it creates the worst, ah, possible situation in the theatre, um. When I was a, when I was being evicted from my theatre on Grand Street where I presented a play for two years at midnight, ah, I went to Mekas and asked him, I

noticed that somebody, the projectionist was taping the soundtrack. The thing was, the ah, I was really tired and sick, and there was no screening the next day, and ah, I was too tired to carry all the film home, and at one point when I was feeling most tired and trying to think of what to do, I looked up, and there was Uncle Roachcrust, and he was saying. . . *"don't you want to keep the film in the safe here for the night?"* So not thinking of what I was doing, I did.



Photo:

Jack Smith: Excerpts from a Talking Performance

papas and a. . . ; its, ah, it all seems to produce the worst possible theatre, I think, I'd like to suggest that some other way, ah of distributing the money from the foundations should be ah worked out possibly ah some incredible elaborate paper mache stairway, and so people felt, and ah, each applicant would throw themselves down the stairway and whoever rolled the most impressionistically or whatever would ah be givin money and all, and they would do that and show that they you know really weren't int that they were really . . . and you know . . . but ah, as, ah, the way its handled it creates this crust of ah, ah, of um, what is the word that means, ah avuncular, it creates this crust of avuncular, ah, mamas and papas, and uncles ah, whose

was desperate, I asked if some kind of screenings or anything and he said, ah, No, unless you sell the Mausoleum the rights to show "Creatures" for seven years you will be out on the street, ah, well, we went ahead with, we had a screening of "Normal Love," what there was of it then at the Mausoleum, and Uncle Pawnshop was supposed to put an ad in the paper, but then the uh I watched the paper it didn't appear, then before the screening started I said but where is the ah ad, and he said oh my rules don't permit me to have such an ad. Ah, so we went ahead with the screening, and it wasn't too good. . . ah. then during the screening, this was my last episode with Uncle Pawnshop, m, ah, during the screening I



Pieces on Pieces 19



Right: from Art-Rite (No. 6, Summer 1974)
Following spread: from Art-Rite (No. 19, June-July 1978)

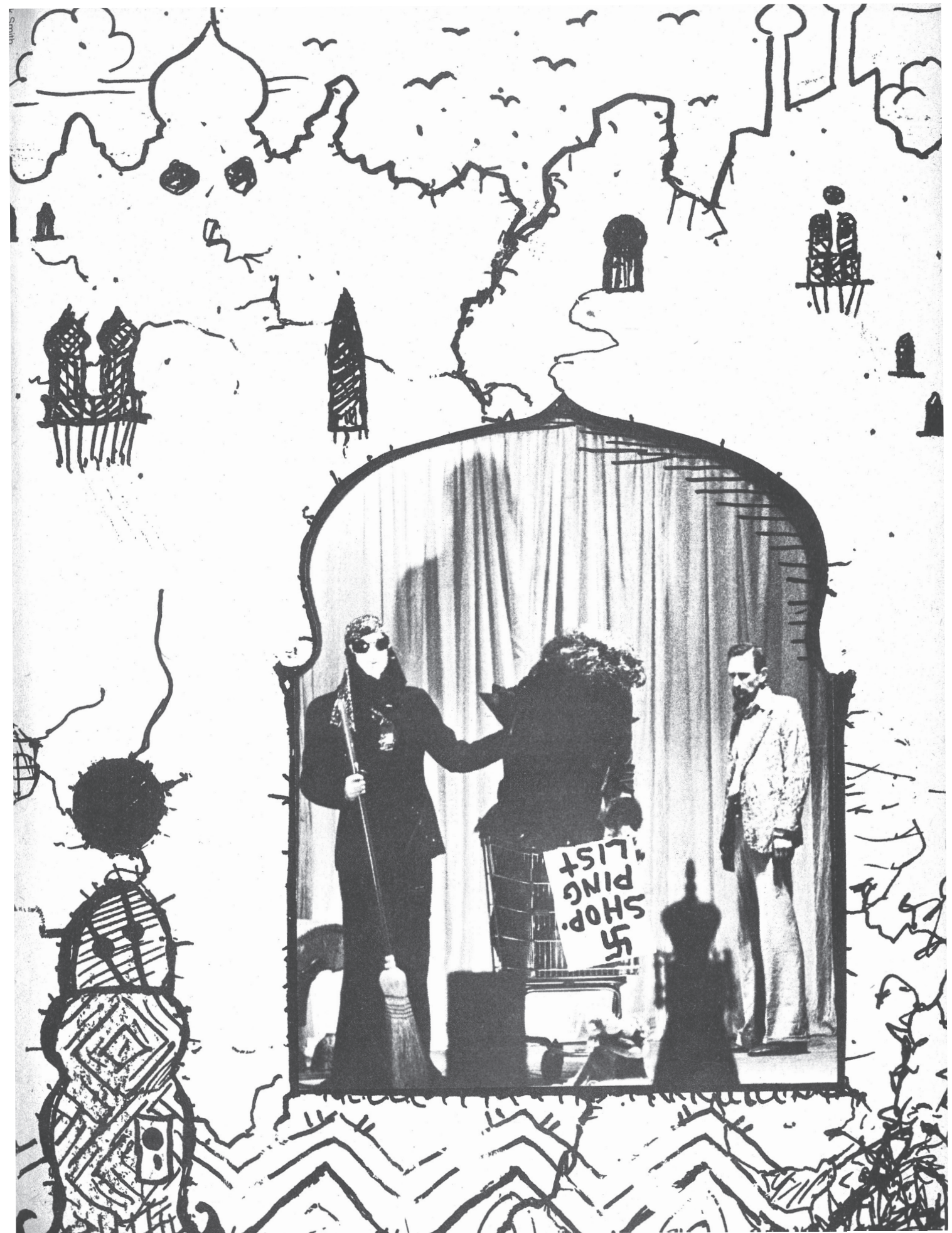
Capitalism of Lotusland

Jack Smith

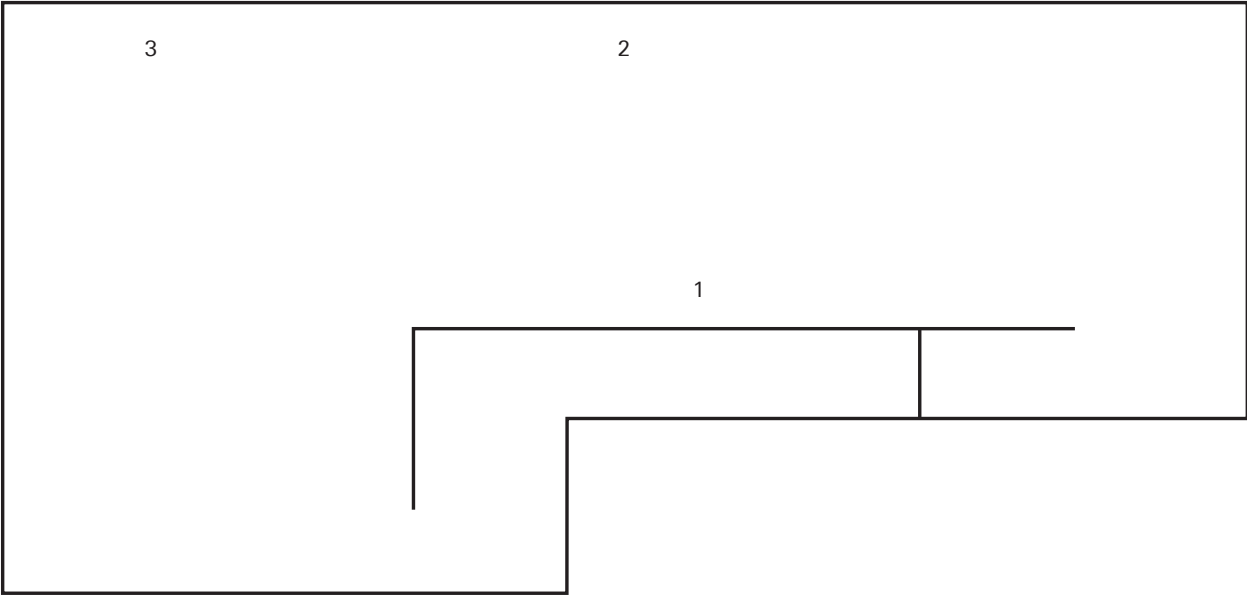
Could art be useful? Ever since the desert glitter drifted over the burnt-out ruins of Plaster Lagoon thousands of artists have pondered and dreamed of such thing, yet, art must not be used anymore as another elaborate means of fleeing from thinking because of the multiplying amount of information each person needs to process in order to come to any kind of decision about what kind of planet one wants to live on before business, religion, and government succeed in blowing it out of the solar system.

Let art continue to be entertaining, escapist, stunning, glamorous, and NATURALISTIC — but let it also be loaded with information worked into the vapid plots of, for instance, movies. Each one would be a more or less complete exposition of one subject or another. Thus you would have Tony Curtis and Janet Leigh busily making yogurt; Humphrey Bogart

struggling to introduce a basic civil law course into public schools; infants being given to the old in homes for the aged by Ginger Rogers; donut-shaped dwellings with sunlight pouring into central patios for all, designed by Gary Cooper; soft, clear plastic bubble cars with hooks that attach to monorails built by Charlton Heston that pass over the Free Paradise of abandoned objects in the center of the city near where the community movie sets would also be; and where Maria Montez and Johnny Weismüller would labour to dissolve all national boundaries and release the prisoners of Uranus! But the stairway to socialism is blocked up by the Yvonne de Carlo Tabernacle Choir waving bloody palm branches and waiting to sing the "Hymn to the Sun" by Irving Berlin. This is the rented moment of EXOTIC LANDLORDISM OF PREHISTORIC CAPITALISM OF TABU. ■



After his eviction from the Plaster Foundation, Jack Smith lived first in a basement studio apartment on Mercer Street, followed by a 6th-floor walk-up on 1st Avenue and East 2nd Street, relocating his expanded cinema performances to small downtown venues and his photo-shoots to public spaces often in derelict parts of the city. Smith also traveled and produced work abroad, including a trip to Cologne, Germany, for the group exhibition *Projekt '74*. Smith was filmed by Birgit Hein for the German TV program *Kino 74*, styled as a check-collecting eagle named Ronald De Carlo sitting outside of the Cologne Zoo, where he delivers a rant of institutional critique, equating the museum with a prison or morgue for art. The photographs taken by Gwenn Thomas on the same occasion were commissioned for the December issue of the magazine *Avalanche*, with Smith appearing on the cover as De Carlo, and a comic-strip rendition of the narrative in the centerfold.



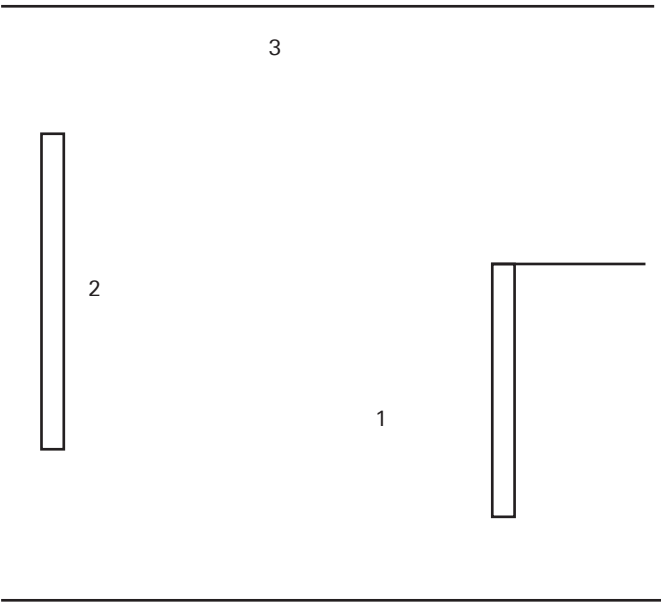
1
Mounted vitrine presenting original script props for *Fear Ritual of Shark Museum* (Cologne, 1974), cut into sections and pasted onto envelopes. Above, photographs by Gwenn Thomas of Jack Smith for *Avalanche* magazine, shot at the same location.

2
Monitor presenting *Kino 74* (1974), German TV program featuring Jack Smith as Ronald De Carlo in *Fear Ritual of Shark Museum* (shot by Birgit Hein in Cologne), sound, color, 5 min 53 seconds.

3
Original paste-up by Jack Smith for *Avalanche* magazine with photographs shot at the Cologne Zoo and nearby locations by Gwenn Thomas. Below, vitrine presenting an original copy of *Avalanche* magazine (1974) and Smith's photo cut-outs.

Given his uncompromising and prickly persona as a director, in his later years Smith often performed without collaborators or was accompanied by toy animals such the diva-starlet Yolanda la Penguina (a.k.a. “Inez”). Similarly, starting in the 1970s, ever-evolving slideshows became a primary medium for him, taking the place of both film and printed photography. In one suite of slides used in the performance *I Walked with a Penguin*, Smith and La Penguina traverse Rome, while in another he dramatically tangos with her dead body. The character of the lobster also figures frequently in Smith’s idiom, as at once a threatening monster demanding payment with its oversized claws, and a svelt, mermaid-like don of the crustacean world.

By the 1980s, Smith bemoaned the fact that “cities, for most people, are things that every drop of every scrap of art has been sucked out of.” He saw a contemporary art world in which “foolishness” had become the prime commodity, where “vampirism,” “fertilization,” and “brain-picking” on the part of other artists and institutions acted as the perennial opponents to evade. The fact that Smith never completed or released a work in finished form after the infamy of *Flaming Creatures* speaks to his deliberate dodging of Uncle Fishhook’s grasp—or its postponement perhaps, as, like many others of his generation, Smith’s work has increased substantially in value in recent years.

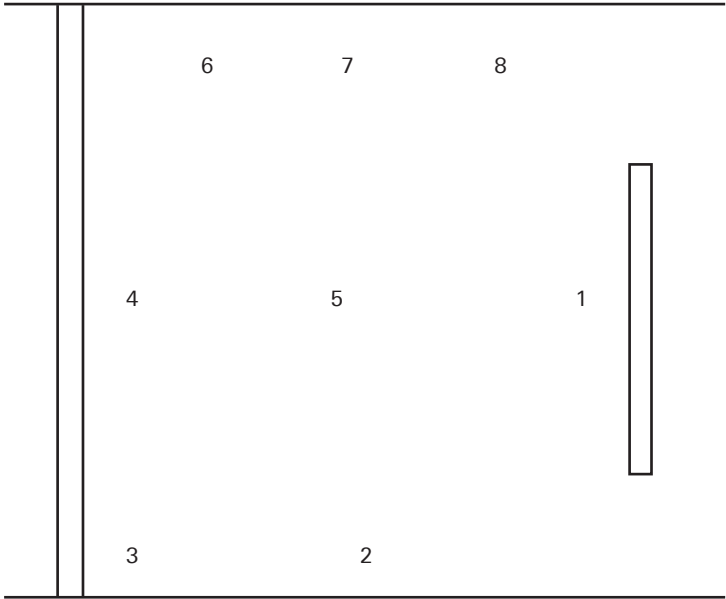


1
Framed poster for *I Danced With a Penguin* (Hamburg, 1983). 35mm slides presenting *I Danced With a Penguin* (Hamburg, 1983). Yolanda La Penguina.

2
Posters and photographs featuring performances of Yolanda La Penguina: *Penguin Rustling Out by the Old Archives* at Club 57, New York (1981), *Penguin Panic in the Rented Desert* (Boston, 1981), *Padronismo di Pastacrosta* (Genoa, 1981), *Death of a Penguin* (New York, 1985). Lobster costume (c. 1970s). On the floor, a monitor presenting a television broadcast of *I Danced With a Penguin* (Hamburg, 1983), sound, color, 3 min 14 seconds.

3
35mm slides presenting *I Walked With a Penguin* (Rome, 1975). Framed paste-up for a poster advertising the “Scum of Bagdad” (c. 1970s).

When Jack Smith died in 1989, he left unfinished an epic feature film, *Sinbad in the Rented World*, for which he had been turning his apartment on 1st Avenue into an elaborate Moorish/Tahitian set, which he hoped might stay intact beyond his life as an example of art made integral and not subject to the machinations of institutionalization and financial speculation. “The film will be a lesson in architecture,” he wrote, “neither in Baghdad nor anywhere else in the ancient world was art put onto crusts. Art was put into architecture, where it belongs and in a form it could stay!” In 1978, he was given a \$10,000 NEA grant for the project, and he applied unsuccessfully for another \$10,000 grant from the organization in 1982, writing that a near “impossible” amount of work remained. In Smith’s Hollywood-Scheherazade epic, the protagonist attempts to sail to “glamorous Roach Crust Island” to participate in a high-profile radio show called “Your Big Moment.” His ship is thrown by “a storm of commercials,” after which he is menaced out of a pearl jewel by Uncle Pawnshop, and later attempts to see a Maria Montez film by taking a dollar from the Crab Ogress, who swats Sinbad away in a “climactic roach stampede.” The film footage included here comprises a shoot at Coney Island circa 1975, showing Sinbad awaking on the shore. Drawings, photographs, and posters introduce Sinbad’s interchanging personas, alternately Sinbad Glick (appropriated from Budd Schulberg’s 1941 film *What Makes Sammy Run?*), Sinbad the Leopard, Donald Flamingo, Hamlet, and an “oily actor” declaring “I would act in anything.”



- 1
13 costume drawings for *Sinbad in the Rented World* (c. 1980s).
- 2
Original leopard hat and four Sinbad the Leopard drawings (c. 1978–85).
- 3
Monitor presenting scenes of *Sinbad in the Rented World* shot at Coney Island (c. 1975), silent, color, 24 min 12 seconds.
- Production still from *Sinbad in the Rented World* by Toka limora (c. 1975).
- 4
Framed drawings, notes, scripts, and a collage by Jack Smith related to *Sinbad in the Rented World* (1970–1983). Below, wall mounted vitrine with script for *Sinbad in the Rented World* (c. 1975).
- 5
Vitrine with grant application for *Sinbad in the Rented World* (c. 1978), brochure: *The Theatre of Jack Smith*, elements from R.B. Sheridan’s *The Critic* used for *Theatrical Crooks* a.k.a.

- Lucky Landlordism of Rented Paradise* a.k.a. *Monkey Business of Atlantis* (1973), notes, flyers, and drawings.
- 6
35mm slides presenting Jack Smith as Sinbad the Leopard, in a gallery performance, in his 1st Avenue apartment, and at South Street Seaport (c. 1970–1980s).
- 7
Audio recording from a lecture at the Toronto School of Art (c. 1984), 60 min 26 seconds.
- 8
Framed Sinbad Glick paste-ups, framed photograph of Jack Smith performing at Galleria L’Attico, Rome (1974).

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An extensive screening program of the films of Jack Smith will be presented at Metrograph in September.

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