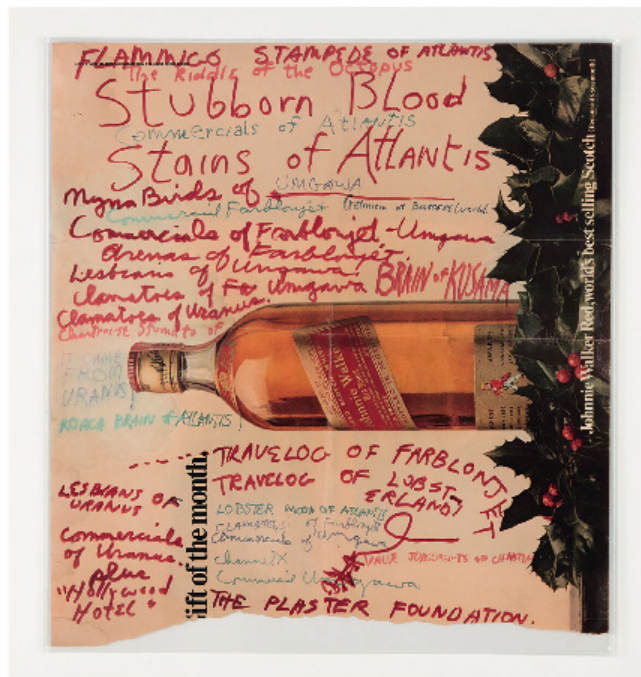


TEXTE ZUR KUNST

REVIEWS

THIS IS THE RENTED MOMENT

Nicolás Guagnini on Jack Smith at Artists Space, New York



Jack Smith. Notes on oversized ad for Johnnie Walker, c. 1970, Pen on magazine cut-out. Courtesy of Artists Space, New York and Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University. Photo: Jean Vong

Lists and anecdotes. List of lists: film genres, film periods, and actresses that exerted influence; types of music employed, filmmakers he influenced, artists he influenced, genres he pioneered, expansions or outright creation of art forms that became departments at institutions, popular culture figures he influenced, enemies, collaborators, allies. The people on the lists tell or write down anecdotes, form camps. I have anecdotes with many on the lists but not with Jack Smith. He died of AIDS in the fall of 1989, ten years before I made it to New York. Another 20

years have since passed and now I face "Art Crust of Spiritual Oasis," curated by Jamie Stevens and Jay Sanders at Artists Space. Sanders devoted some 15 years to the material, testifying to Smith's cult status, and previously curated, with Olivia Shao, a Jack Smith show in a garbage can placed on Canal Street.¹

From the lists: the narcissistic orientalist iconography of Luigi Ontani; Helio Oiticica's coinage of the terms "Quasi-Cinema" and "Tropicamp," with attendant artworks;²

Lady Gaga's anti-essentialist reverse drag. All super(b) queer. Susan Sontag in *The Nation*, April 1964, discussing Jack Smith's only finished freestanding artwork, a film currently banned in 22 US states: "What I am urging is that there is not only moral space, by whose laws 'Flaming Creatures' would indeed come off badly; there is also aesthetic space, the space of pleasure. Here, Smith's film moves and has its being."³ Sontag's opposition echoes Freud's account of the reality principle, defined as the consciousness of the actual world intruding in on and destroying the fantastic world of the pleasure principle; therein lurks the quintessential link between the self-repressive emergence of morality and trauma (and somehow, the precise and successful curatorial effort to stage a return of the remnants of Smith's fantastic flowing universe in the reality of an exhibition space darkly traumatizes as much as it enlightens). Sontag's article on Smith appeared the same year as her "Notes on Camp," which she defined as an "aesthetic sensibility" with the notational aid of a list of varied cultural objects, ranging from Aubrey Beardsley's drawings to "women's clothes of the twenties (feather boas, fringed and beaded dresses, etc.)." It must be noted that her argument is also a moral distinction. Discussions in and of queer and camp cultures and their pleasures benefit from such lists as inventories of de-hierarchical genealogies, transgressive indexes, and complicit acknowledgments. There is by now something of a canonical collective diagram articulating these lists and anecdotes as an idea of Jack Smith. I'm in no camp.

Jack Smith was an anarcho-nihilist, and a fetishist. Jean-Luc Godard once said that art's permanent struggle was trying not to instantly become culture. Smith's output had two cultural spaces to go to in his lifetime, which were being self-institutionalized as they were demarcated: experimental film and gay theater. In an interview with Sylvere Lotringer in 1978, Smith records his rejection of both.

"L: What do you think of the gay movement?
S: They've become a ghetto, already; they just want to talk about gay things. They're trying to cut it off from being in any context.
L: Don't you think it's becoming something of an industry too?
S: Oh sure, of course. It's just one of the unexpected bad side developments of it that's making it possible to be so happily ghettoized. [...] I took my program to a gay theater and he couldn't understand how it was gay because he was unable to see it in a context. If it wasn't discussing exactly how many inches was my first lollipop, well then it wouldn't be anything they'd be interested in. And so I couldn't get this gay theater."⁴

A good section of the interview is devoted to exploring the implications of Smith's long feud with Jonas Mekas over the exhibition, distribution, prohibition, and attendant trial of "Flaming Creatures." Mekas, prolific filmmaker and writer, paradigmatically embodies the discursive and physical normative institution as the founder of the Filmmakers Coop and Anthology Film Archives, chief editor of *Film Culture*, and avant garde film critic for the *Village Voice*. In his pre-war life, Mekas was a poet laureate of Lithuania. Smith dubbed him Uncle Fishhook.

"S: [...] I have to struggle against Uncle Fishhook, that's my job, and I'm not running away from it. Everybody else that has been worked over by Uncle Fishhook has just faded out, folded and creped out of the city. But I won't do that. Usually in life nothing is ever clear cut.

How many people are lucky enough to have an archetypal villain for an adversary?

L: You can find Uncle Fishhook everywhere.
S: When an Uncle Fishhook falls into your life



Installation view of Jack Smith: Art Crust of Spiritual Oasis, June 22 – September 16, 2018. Courtesy of Artists Space, New York. Photo: Daniel Pérez

you have to fight it till the end. It's been given to you to struggle against. [...] Uncle Fishhook represents the idea of expectations from authority, which is perfect for me since I can spend the rest of my life demolishing it very happily."⁵

Smith's anarchism wasn't merely anti-institutional, anti-cultural, and anti-authoritarian. His real and absolute enemy was capitalism itself, and he identified its operational ability to extract money and labor from the fragmentation of time over space in the form of rent. To describe the connection between property and time that underwrites the capitalist state he coined the term "landlordism." It is in the monthly rent check due that the reality principle ruled by capitalism pervades everyday life in a rhythmic way, a pulsation of oppression. Smith's radical clarity of formulation precedes decades of analyses of the gig economy, Uberization, and the attention economy; that is, of the algorithmic and post-Fordist conditions of human subjugation through time fragmentation under late capitalism.

"L: What do you mean exactly by landlordism?

S: Fear ritual of lucky landlord paradise. That's what supports the government.

L: You mean property?

S: How money is squeezed out of real estate. It supports the government. When is a building ever paid for? The person that built the building is dead long since, and yet it can never be paid for, it has to be paid for all over again, every month. [...] We have to spend the rest of our time struggling against the uses they make of our money against us."⁶

Denunciation of landlordism as a poignant critique of the fragmented commodification of human time also implied that the finished artwork - the art product to be subsequently and periodically bought and sold - was unacceptable. This creates a fertile conundrum for any posterior exhibition or discourse on Smith's work. The Artists Space show reveals in its dense accumulation of slide shows, film clippings, photographs, drawings, notes, costumes, props, pamphlets, ads and posters, and other ephemera, that all that remains of Smith's output is unquestionably art, but one nearly impossible to delimit disciplinarily. The show operates as a fractal cacophony, in which every part remits to the whole and, in turn, anytime something approaches wholeness, it becomes part again



Installation view of Jack Smith: Art Crust of Spiritual Oasis, June 22 – September 16, 2018. Courtesy of Artists Space, New York. Photo: Daniel Pérez

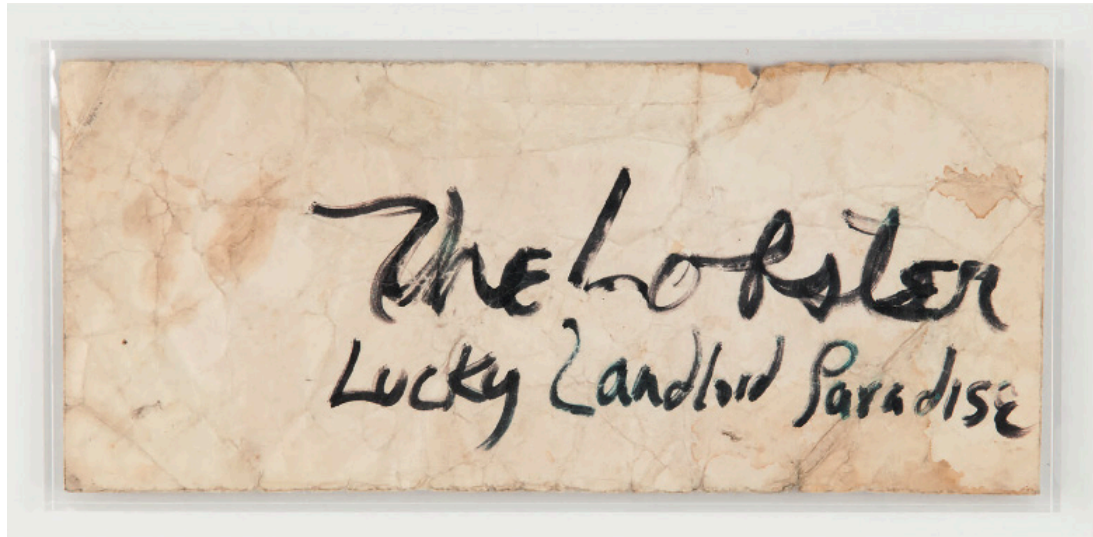
by virtue of a fragmental nature and order at the molecular level. In fractals, as in Smith's leftovers, which he wanted burned, similar patterns recur at progressively smaller scales. It's a punctiliously and fastidiously precise chaos. All these fragments came together in Smith's ongoing performances (for lack of a better term), which took place late at night, in downtown lofts or apartments from which he would inevitably be evicted for non-payment of rent, and they had no defined time frame. A conjugation of music played in records, acting, and slide and film projections would last several hours, and there was never a clear-cut distinction between preparation and work proper. Equally diffuse was the limit between spectatorship and participation, and the bossy and perfectionist Smith would often assign tasks to each of the few people present to reach a point in which everyone in the space was engaged in the production of the situation, becoming a part in his organic machine, and thus also an image. The most detailed account of these excruciatingly demurred events is Stephan Brecht's:

"The simplest lifting of an object or securing of a string is a serious task which he will accomplish, but which he does not seem quite to know how to go about.

He is figuring out how to do it while doing it....Changing one slide for another, he stops pulling the first one while a corner of the image is still (dimly) on the screen, then pulls it out. Any performance of his contains many such episodes of change of approach to a simple practical task."⁷

The slide show (one of the art formats that proceeds from Smith, who of course never designated one as a freestanding piece) is particularly exemplary in its critical relationship to time. If photography freezes time, its placement in a sequence, in the contingency of a projection in intervals of an actual situation, the eternalized and separated fragment of time, is once again liberated and reentered into the slow flow of Smith's psycho-physical time-space.⁸ The slides themselves are mostly from shoots staged by Smith, and he appears -or rather acts - in many of them while strictly controlling the framing. This is evidenced by the compositional consistency and the usage of non-professional photographers.

The shooting sessions were improvisational and evolved from his immediate interaction with the sites.



Jack Smith. Envelope prop addressed to "The Lobster," n.d., Ink on envelope. Courtesy of Artists Space, New York and Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University. Photo: Jean Vong

Smith was an accomplished photographer and the settings on the camera, and the distance of the subject to the camera in accordance with the lens used, are clearly accounted for in what firstly appear to be spontaneous and outrageous situations often staged in public spaces. The manipulation of the slides during projection thus constitutes some sort of squared performance, a new layer of contingency added to the frozen photographic record of the "original" improvisational situation. In the slides we see a world of trash. Not only is the city of New York a wasteland but Smith has an unending capacity to reinvent thrown-away items. As Diederich Diederichsen astutely put it, "Smith edits the commodity out of the commodity fetish."⁹ The discarded commodities come alive again in a poesis governed by two entwined and reversible dialectical alchemical transformations that impregnate Smith's brand of fetishism: man into woman and human into animal. The trash-props that negotiate these transformations at times acquire fetish status themselves, at other times they distribute fetishistic agency between performers, and yet at others, they stage a splendid world of reimagined animist eventuality. The creatures that transit between genders and between the human

and their morose movement and accumulation in Smith's ritualistic scenarios impede any essentialism; this is perhaps what animates the core of the social fears of amorality that led to the banning of "Flaming Creatures," much more than the exposed limp dicks or the overexposed breasts. There is a slow-motion plasticity of metamorphosis, eternally returning. Smith echoes Asger Jorn, who observed in "The Human Animal" that the gods of Egypt, India, Persia, America, and Europe who were represented as half-human and half-animal transform in the Middle Ages into devilish representatives of evil, going on to explain that the truth of the human animal is a "continuous movement from state to state, from good to evil and back again."¹⁰ Maria Montez returns as Mario Montez;¹¹ a phallic cigarette has zebra stripes; a man carries around an equally phallic elephant tusk; there is the cobra woman and the siren of Atlantis; in an imagined and never realized Hamlet, Polonius and Claudius get consolidated as Plodius, an octopus; Smith dances with a penguin and pays rent to a lobster.

The lobster rent checks are the subject of one reconstructed slide show. The lobster as the figure of the archetypal landlord and the self-defeating ridicule of documenting decades of payment and enslavement epitomizes

Smith's self-consciousness of his own fatalistic stance. Smith articulated the ethics and poetics of his anarchism with supreme clarity, and his despondent commitment to opposing landlordism could only result, as in deed it did, in his own annihilation. His nihilism was programmatic. The pleasures found in giving time to his work are terrifying. An experiential immersion into Smith's remnants provides a glimpse of what it would be to evade capitalism, to escape the rented island. It equally implies staring at our own annihilation.

"Jack Smith: Art Crust of Spiritual Oasis," Artists Space, New York, June 22 - September 16, 2018.

Notes

1. "Gutja Hai Sum Been Lop Sop," William Gallery, New York, January 28, 2012.
2. "Mario Montez Tropicamp" was a text published by Helio Oiticica in *Presencia*, no. 2, Rio de Janeiro, December 1971 following "He liotape 1" (1971), a recording of a conversation with Mario Montez, Smith's fetish actor; Oiticica then moves to film in "Agrippina e Roma Manhattan" (1972), an 8 mm film in which Montez plays Agrippina. During 1973 and 1974 Oiticica developed the "Cosmocas," a series of nine environments that incorporated music and slide shows, irrevocably influenced by his visits to Smith's loft.
3. The Nation article was retitled and republished two years later in: *Against Interpretation*, New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1966, pp. 226-31. Reproduced from *The Nation*, April 13, 1964.
4. Jack Smith, "Uncle Fishook and the Sacred Baby Poo-poo of Art," in: *Semiotext(e)*, vol. 3 no. 2, New York 1978, pp. 196-198.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 203.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 199.
7. Stephan Brecht, *Queer Theater*, Frankfurt/M. 1978.
8. Smith began incorporating slides into his performance as early as 1963 -and did so increasingly in the '70s and '80's as he was moving away from a notion of art as a static finished product and toward embracing it as an ephemeral process. He also used slides in his ongoing screenings of "Normal Love," his unfinished epic film. Often during his live performances he would display carefully constructed slideshows alongside footage and stills from his unfinished films. Later he termed these sessions in which he engaged multiple forms of media "live film."
9. Diedrich Diederichsen, "Not Being Able to Work that Way as an Endangered Ability: Jack Smith, *Das Kapital*: Volumes I, II, and III," in: *Criticism*, vol. 56, no. 2, "Jack Smith: Beyond the Rented World," 2014.
10. A 1950-51 text mostly on Kafka, translated into English by Niels Henriksen: in *October*, 141, 2m2, pp. 53-58.
11. The most detailed account of the Montez/Smith relationship is to be found in the extensive work of Mark Siegel on the subject: "One of the most significant and lasting expressions of Smith's devotion to Montez (and of a broader queer male interest in the star) was, of course, the invention of drag Superstar, Mario Montez. Montez, a Puerto Rican office clerk who had worked as a model in Smith's photo shoots as early as 1961, made his screen debut in 'Flaming Creatures' (under the name of Dolores Flores). He went on to become Smith's greatest star, appearing in the films 'Normal Love,' 'Reefers of Technicolor Island,' 'No President,' in stage performances and numerous photos." From "Jack Smith Is an Ordinary Name," published in "Jack Smith Report" in *La Furia Uma*, 2016.