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Jack Smith, *Jack Smith: Art Crust of Spiritual Oasis* (June 22 - September 16, 2018), installation view. Courtesy Artists Space, New York. Photo credit Daniel Pérez.

JACK SMITH: ART CRUST OF SPIRITUAL OASIS

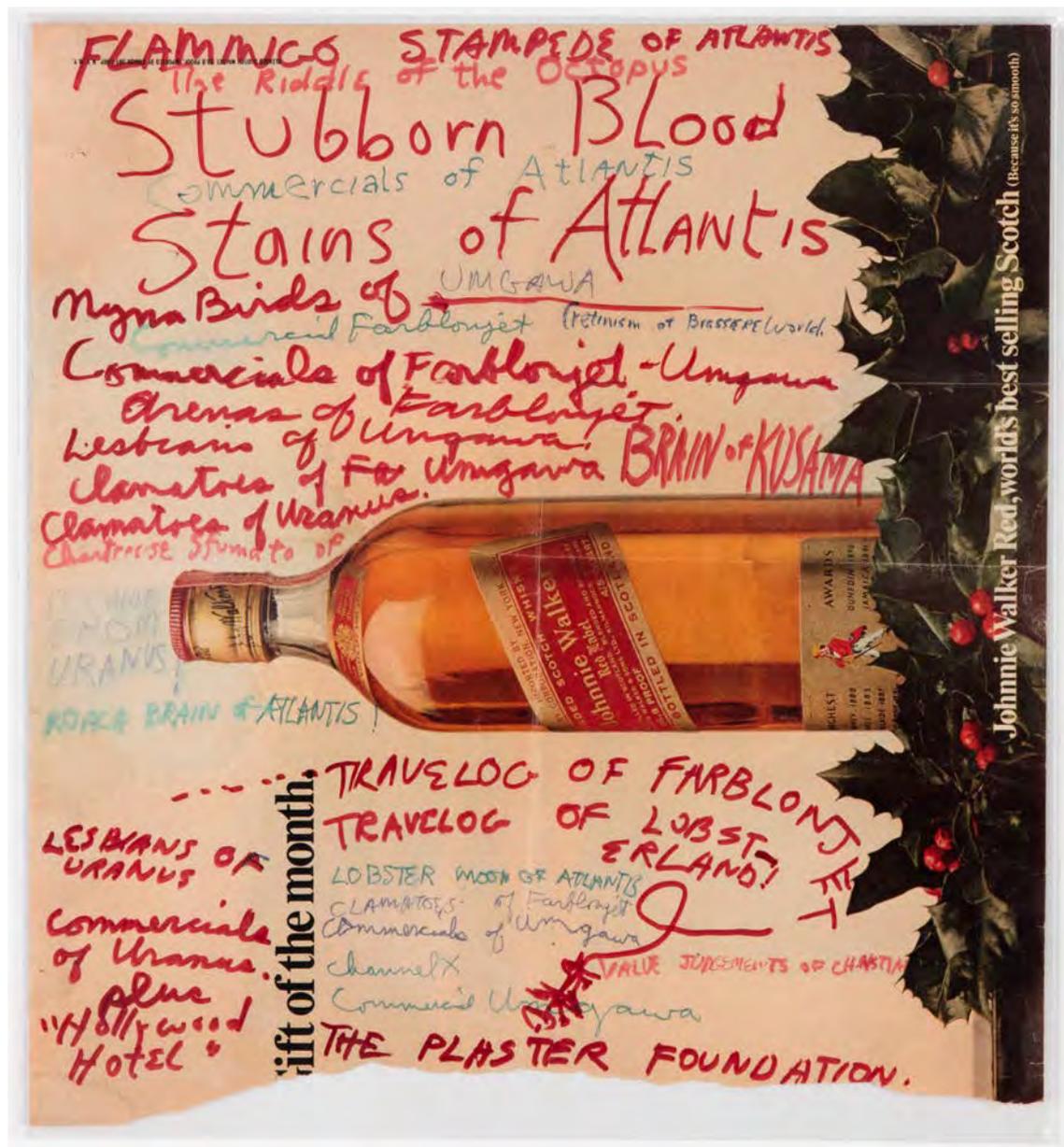
Artists Space, New York

June 22 - September 16, 2018

Entering *Art Crust of Spiritual Oasis*—the recent survey of Jack Smith's work at Artists Space curated by Jay Sanders and Jamie Stevens – one is greeted by Smith's iconic hollow-throated voice reading one of his many diatribes about the plight of artists against art's institutions (and their scions). On the wall are a series of Smith's headshots hung in pyramidal formation. They form something of an altar—like the many Smith made to the “Technicolor Goddess” Maria Montez, his muse, whose star-quality Smith's work attempted to embody, eventually in his later years casting a stuffed penguin named Yolanda La Penguina in Montez's place. But the images also memorialize Jack Smith, who died in 1989 of AIDS-related illness—a strange gesture given the artists unceasing demands that neither he nor his art should be “cemented into a museum treasure.” Split between these

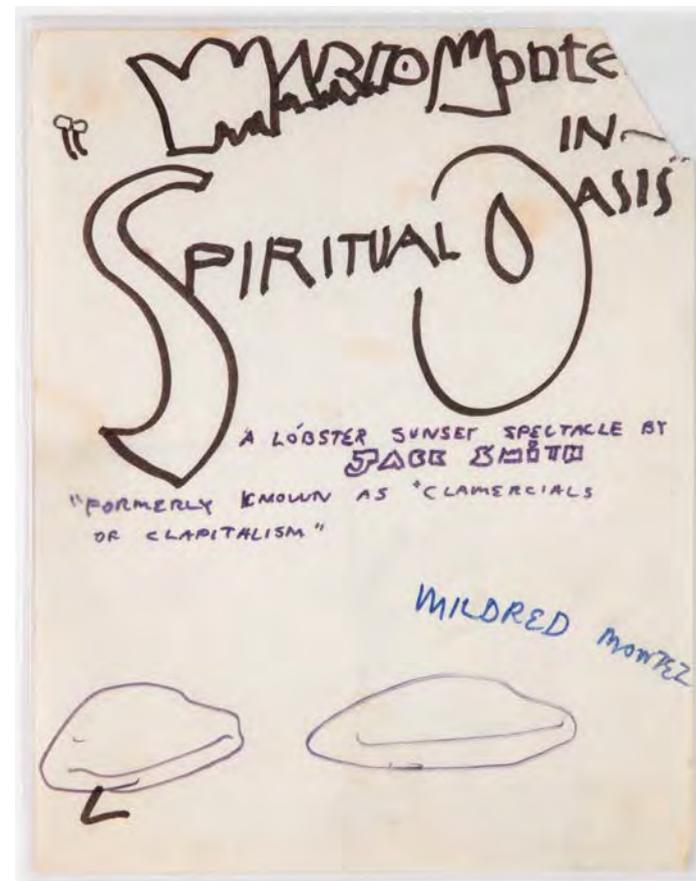
charming photos and the sounds of an aggressive speech—the tension of this first moment marks the (ir)rational logic one must adopt in order to enter the world Smith created for and out of his art, surging as it does with a desire to unearth the contradictions we tend to conceal from ourselves. “Struggle though we may to keep all this out,” he writes, “it is in our own rooms, in our walls that the plaster of religion, the cement of the courts and the icing of art meet—in those very pie crust walls...It is as difficult as the art of Andy Warhol to be critical of—because it surrounds us.”

Jack Smith is best known for *Flaming Creatures* (1963), but *Art Crust of Spiritual Oasis* attends to his lesser known artworks of the 1970s and 80s when his efforts were largely in performance. Much of this work began at The Plaster Foundation, a two-story live/work loft at 89 Greene Street (not



five blocks from Artists Spaces former location), which Smith transformed into a landscape of detritus, filled with remnants of New York's deindustrialization, against which he performed "midnight lobster pageants" for nearly two years until he was evicted in 1972 owing to the rising rent. Rent begins *Art Crust* as well—next to the Smithian alter is a slideshow of color-saturated images showing the artist sending, writing, receiving, delivering rent checks in various found locations throughout New York City. Trespassing on demolitions sites or simply performing in the street, these works mark a period in of Smith's color photography when he would coordinate the shoot but insist on performing for the camera. These works are about the literal demands to pay

rent, as well as about broader rentier economy (what Smith called "landlordism") and its ramifying effect of creating sinkholes, cities of debt, in which not only money, but art's political imaginary and capacity is trapped. The results of these photoshoots were rarely prints, but rather an archive of thousands of slides used in Smith's theatrical slideshow performances—ephemeral actions which, though they were suffused with props, costumes and concepts, attempted to avoid leaving any property behind. No prints to be sold, or official films to be circulated, only the sprawling array of art/ephemera/trash—categorical divisions that Smith's art seems to intentionally leave opaque.



FAR LEFT Jack Smith. Notes on oversized ad for Johnnie Walker (c. 1970), pen on magazine cut-out.

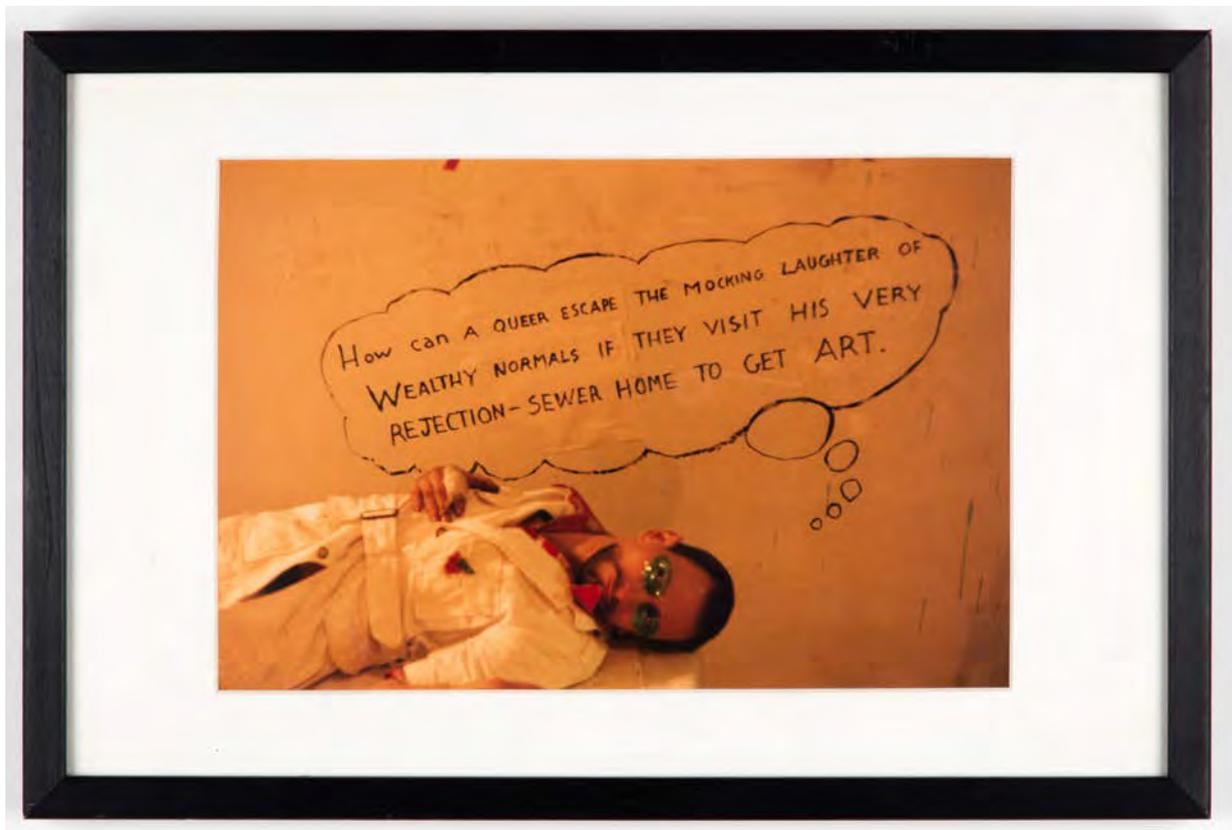
LEFT Jack Smith. Mario Montez in *Spiritual Oasis* (c. 1969), original drawing, marker on paper, 8 1/2 x 11 inches.

ABOVE Jack Smith. *Miracle of Farblonjet or Technicolor Sunset Easter Pageant at The Plaster Foundation, 36 Greene Street* (n.d.), original poster, photocopy, 8 1/2 x 11 inches.

Images courtesy Artists Space, New York and Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University. Photo credit Jean Vong .

The rest of *Art Crust* unfurls with the brilliant chaos one has come to expect of a Jack Smith production. Instead of boiling down Smith's legacy to certain quintessential objects, or reducing his trajectory to a more traditional chronology, Sanders and Stevens organized an overwhelming array of drawings, writing, photographs, videos, and other materials into palimpsests that highlight the recursive, obsessive, thoughts that animate Smith's practice. Walls and vitrines are filled with materials which repeat the same critique, each time repeated slightly differently, of a world gripped by capitalism and normalcy. Crustacean metaphors abound across this period of Smith's work, most notably in the figure of the lobster, at once a culinary delicacy and oceanic

bottom-dweller. Lobster drawings, writing and references suffuse the walls and vitrines of the first floor. Among them, drafts of letter to some unspecified "John" read: "Why is it that theaters and auditoriums of schools are closed tight as clams at 3:00? ... for the same reasons museums and galleries close at 5:00pm." Is this a (bad) joke? A riddle? A "Dear John" letter that complains about the daytime-only hours of theaters and museum? Maybe, especially if one considers to whom those hours cater and what it means for art's accessibility to be circumscribed to the working day. Smith's work never failed to critique the ever-tightening grip of both cultural and capitalist institutions. Alongside the letter, a drawing suggests the nightmare of this lobster city—a parking lot



outrageousness of his actions hampered by the fact that, as his character muses, “rent remains rent—the builder of the building can be dead and the building paid for a thousand and one times but that rent can never be paid must be paid—long after anyone remembers why. I think it must be to pay the taxes that support the scaffolding of the brassiere world and nation boundaries. Otherwise people would be traveling around the world freely and wouldn’t be staying home to support—the rent.” Smith travelled a fair amount, especially after he began to insist that any request to screen *Flaming Creatures* involve flying the artist along with his film. Through the 1980s he continued to perform, rehashing old themes, and working towards one final masterpiece, the never completed filmwork *Sinbad In The Rented World*.

Perhaps it’s true that Jack Smith never completed another work after *Flaming Creatures* (1963), leaving his art unfinished in an attempt to avoid its commodification. But there is another story buried in *Art Crust of Spiritual Oasis*, in an audio recording from 1984 that fills the backroom of the basement gallery. Addressing the notion that his aesthetic was premised on

not giving museums or galleries something they could steal, he doesn’t cite a desire to make unfinished work. In fact, he says, “we live in a world of mostly half finished things . . . but in the process of doing anything completely is where anything can become art. No matter even if it does take an awful lot of time.” Smith’s works look unfinished because the world isn’t finished with the revolution his art tried to foment, a world of socialistic impulses in which “everything could be free and it could begin with art!” The “stairway to socialism” he tried to climb as he was building it remains blocked, and we just kept putting art crust on top of art crust, picking apart the present from the past by covering things over in layers of plaster. Will we get to see Smith’s work when the crust crumbles, when all those layers of plaster come tumbling down? Maybe not, but in another corner of the gallery Yolanda La Penguina is perched. She’s the stuffed penguin, put to death in a number of Smith’s performances from the 1980s, and a star who will undoubtedly outlive us all.

JOSH LUBIN-LEVY

LEFT Jack Smith, *Untitled or How Can a Queer Escape the Mocking Laughter...* (1974), color photograph. Courtesy Artists Space, New York and Penny Arcade. Photo credit Jean Vong.

BELOW Jack Smith, *Jack Smith: Art Crust of Spiritual Oasis*, (June 22 – September 16, 2018), installation view. Courtesy Artists Space, New York. Photo credit Daniel Pérez.

and cocktail lounges are marked on an otherwise generic outline of a skyline. A single high-rise reaches its spire impossibly up into the clouds above, where its vertical line also serves to illustrate the antennae of lobster looming overhead, its monstrous claw plucking the moon from an otherwise starry sky.

More than a critique of Art’s prevailing institutions, Smith sought to build them otherwise. The Plaster Foundation is one example, but *Art Crusts* collects others featuring, for instance, drawings for an imaginary “Brassiere Museum.” Designed as a museum without walls (no plaster allowed) it nonetheless has an arched doorway, on the threshold of which stands an ambiguous figure carved out of negative space. Creating the surreal effect of a portal within a portal, Smith drawing transports the viewer through an impossible passageway. Illuminating moments of dialectical impossibility was something Smith was particularly good at. My own favorite example is a photograph of Jack Smith laying on a table against a wall, a thought bubble drawn in red behind him reads: “How can a queer escape the mocking laughter of wealthy normals when they visit his very rejection-sewer home to get art?” In the photo we see Smith flattened into the very art object he seems to be trying to think his way out of. But the photo also speaks to Smith’s attunement to commercialization

of queerness long before today’s queer theorists, throwing a wrench in idealized fantasies of gay liberation. The world needs its queers, he would say, to love and hate. An index card near the photo reads, “What is more fairy like than normals with their spirituality of miracles and supernaturalism?” Rolodex Cards were Smith’s preferred method for cataloguing such aphoristic insights, particularly about normalcy. Kept in an actual Rolodex, alongside the names and phone numbers of various contacts, one can hardly think of a better way to frame the subtlety often missed in Smith’s work, his way of not merely overthrowing but of inhabiting the indexing, cataloguing and systemizing of the information age that so many conceptual and performance arts of his generation would similarly invoke.

No time to rest—the overwhelming number of works *Art Crusts* displays feels like a deluge even for the initiated Smithian reader—as downstairs the controlled chaos continue. The basement galleries highlighting Smith’s travels through Europe (mostly along the 1970s well-worn line from New York to Germany). *Fear Ritual of Shark Museum* may be the best known, a performance unofficially staged at the Cologne Zoo in 1974. In the performance Smith picks up and delivers rent checks from one caged animal to another—monkey to crocodile to lion—the

