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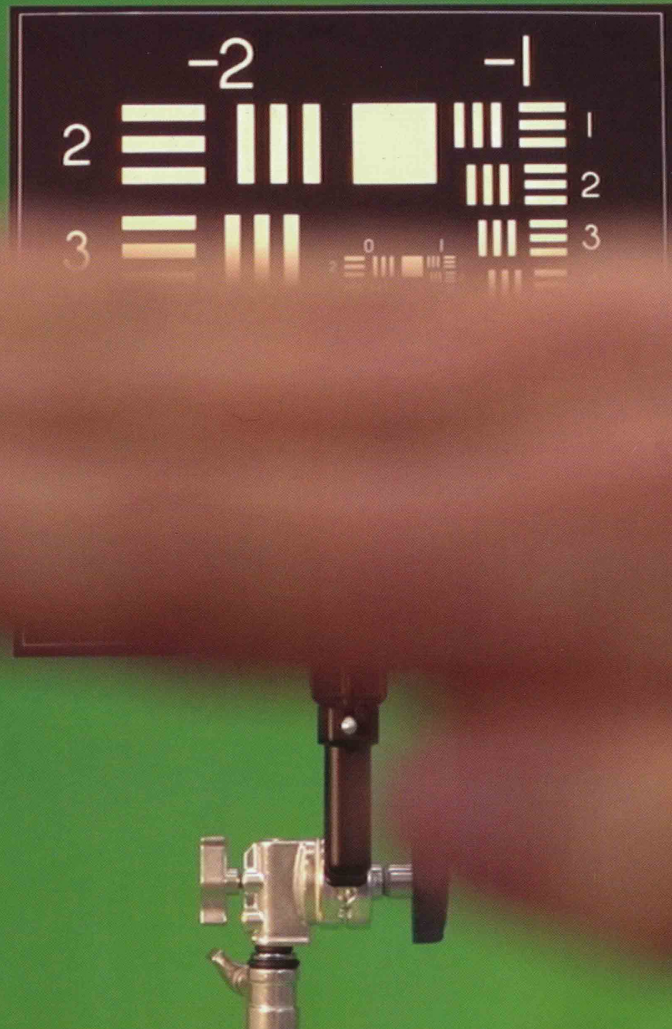
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IN CONVERSATION



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JACK'S LAST TAPES

J. Hoberman on Jack Smith's *Hamlet in the Rented World*

Three stills from Jack Smith's *Hamlet in the Rented World (A Fragment)*, 1970-73, 16 mm, color, sound, 27 minutes. Hamlet (Jack Smith).

GIVEN THAT JACK SMITH never actually completed another movie after *Flaming Creatures* (1963), that most of his theater pieces concern the impossibility of their coming into existence, and that many all-but-identical drafts of the same scripts were found among his papers, it's hardly surprising that he should have been fascinated by the most famously indecisive character in world literature.

Hamlet in the Rented World (A Fragment) is a twenty-seven-minute assemblage put together by Jerry Tartaglia on behalf of the Gladstone Gallery in New York from materials discovered in the Jack Smith Archives, including five quarter-inch audio reels and four rolls of 16-mm film (two of them untouched camera originals), all dating from the early 1970s. Guided by Smith's scripts, Tartaglia's reconstruction may be considered the artist's last, posthumous word. (Hundreds of slides, the material for scores of the slide shows Smith presented during the '70s and '80s, remain—but we won't go there.) Tartaglia, an avant-garde filmmaker whose deep involvement with Smith's movies began when he discovered *Flaming Creatures'* camera original in a laboratory discard bin in 1978 and who has labored over restorations of all Smith's other film projects, knows this material better than anyone on earth.

The fullest account of Smith's *Hamlet* project (which anticipates Robert Wilson's solo *Hamlet* by more than twenty years) may be found in Stefan Brecht's *Queer Theatre* (1978). Sometime during the spring of 1971, Brecht visited Smith's basement studio at 18 Mercer Street (where the artist briefly relocated after his eviction from the nearby Plaster Foundation, as he had dubbed his former duplex loft—*cum*—performance space at 36 Greene) and took notes on the encounter. According to Brecht, Smith had spoken of staging *Hamlet* for years, possibly at La MaMa: "He feels the play is very badly written, no structure, more like a

radio or tv series, but can be salvaged by much cutting."

Much of the pruning involved the dramatic personnel. Smith envisioned a cast of four. He planned to play Hamlet ("an art student") with his then muse, the downtown actress Marie Antoinette, cast as Gertrude, and a drag queen named Sylva (or "Sylya") in the role of Ophelia. Smith offered Brecht the part of "Plodius," an amalgam of Claudius (Hamlet's uncle) and Polonius (Ophelia's father), thus strengthening the family ties by converting Ophelia into Hamlet's cousin. Smith conceived his Hamlet as "a fop, and very very queer—why otherwise would he have turned on both his mother and Ophelia?"

Smith further reoriented *Hamlet* to reflect his post-eviction obsession with the "rented world," telling Brecht that "the whole family will be landlords—modern royalty." Although the setting was the American Middle West ("Jack is looking for some corn stalks," Brecht noted), the *mise-en-scène* would be Hollywood Middle East, "Universal Pictures 1940s exotic." More-over, "the action will take place under water—Plodius will also be an octopus." *Hamlet* was to be Smith's first "talking movie, in lush colors"; the U-P "film studio" (a funky loft and film store on Broadway below Union Square that was Smith's major performance venue for much of the 1970s) was set to "help with the sound."

In an extravagant and quintessentially Smithian maneuver, the artist may have made his first talkie without bothering to use recording equipment during the shoot.

According to the chronology devised by Edward Leffingwell for the catalogue to the seminal P.S. 1 exhibition "Flaming Creature: The Art and Times of Jack Smith" (1997), Smith did not begin production on *Hamlet* until 1972—although, based on my own recollection of 18 Mercer Street (where I recall being one of only two or three spectators for a Smith slide show at which the artist shared a joint with the audience and extended an offer, politely declined, to drop some acid), the extant footage suggests that he had already begun filming around the time Brecht visited the set or would soon after. (Brecht reports helping to construct the set but says nothing about any actual film production.) In any case, during the late summer and early fall of 1971, Smith may have staged an alternate version, enacted by the Reptilian Theatrical Company, at the so-called SoHo Theatre, 131 Prince Street, titled *Hamlet and the 1001 Psychological Jingoisms of Prehistoric Landlordism of Rima-Puu*.

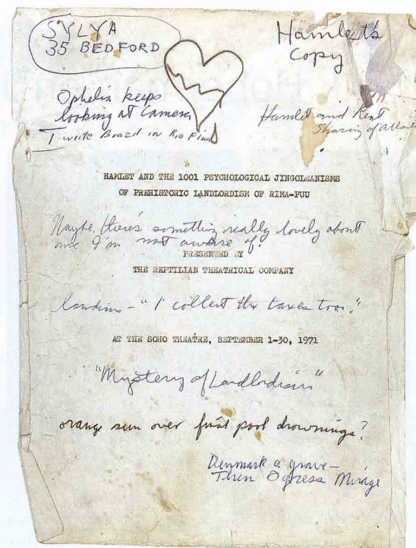
The sole record of this event, the script aside, is a press release that attributes the company's Reptilian Acting Technique to "the realization that thinking is interesting on stage"—a pithy description of the hesitations, breakdowns, and recoveries that characterized the typical Smith performance. The release further explains the production's attention to *Landlordism* as "the central social evil of our time," a form of "magic, like paying sacrifices to the gods for protection to be left alone to do whatever it is you want to do." A cast of five is listed: Hamlet is played by Rodney Werewolf (one of Smith's aliases), Gertrude by Appalachia Alien, Claudius the Ghost by Douglas Desmond, Polonius by Kitchenette del Casino (who also signed the press release), and Ophelia by Florence Luck. The film, however, has only one human performer: Jack Smith.

The surviving material used for *Hamlet in the Rented World* consists of footage from two or more

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Above: Jack Smith, *Hamlet in the Rented World (A Fragment)*, 1970-73, 16 mm, color, sound, 27 minutes. Hamlet (Jack Smith).
 Right: Page from Jack Smith's script for *Hamlet and the 1001 Psychological Jingoleansisms of Prehistoric Landlordism of Rima-Puu*, ca. 1971.



shooting sessions, apparently at 18 Mercer Street, and an indeterminate number of rehearsal readings. Inasmuch as the voice of U-P's proprietor Rafic Azzouni is heard periodically on the tape, these sessions may have been recorded at U-P—but they could have been recorded anywhere. Although the film footage is slated, as though to be synchronized to a sound recording, Tartaglia was unable to find a viable sync point and ultimately concluded that there was none: Either the tapes synced to the surviving film footage (or vice versa) were lost or, in an extravagant and quintessentially Smithian maneuver, the artist made his first talkie without bothering to use recording equipment during the shoot.

Hamlet in the Rented World opens with a black screen and sounds of preparation, plus some strummed Kabuki samisen music. "Living?" Smith asks and answers himself, "Here, I guess," before adding, "Maybe I could sit in the phone booth." These lines are repeated three times without variation, followed by another question (also repeated three times), "But . . . how would I . . . pay the rent?" Explanatory titles, accompanied by a burst of "Happy We" from Handel's *Acis and Galatea*, are followed by a shot of fireworks, and suddenly Smith's Hamlet fills the screen, posed against a concrete basement wall left unadorned except for signs reading UNFURNISHED APARTMENT and ROOMS: It is the Rented World.

His head is wrapped in a homemade bedouin bur-noose, and he is wearing a purple, polka-dotted cape. (Brecht described the costume Smith showed him as "slightly Harlequin, stage-renaissance, black-and-white checkered, striped, and ruffled.") Their lids encrusted with glitter, Smith's eyes glare out from under massive

greasepaint eyebrows and over an equally fearsome mustachio. A hirsute assistant darts into the frame and slates the shot. Jack stands before a desiccated corn-stalk. He fidgets. There's a close-up of his ring and occasional close-ups of his face as we hear him declaiming lines that occasionally transpose Shakespeare into his own particular idiolect: "Not so, my lord. I am too much in the sun. . . . I have just crossed the Desert of Exoticism from the bus stop."

The mismatch turns the supposed talkie into a new sort of silent film: While visible Smith crouches before some enigmatic plaster construction and seems to (silently) complain, audible Smith keeps repeating his line readings and interrupting himself. A woman is heard to announce the fifth take. "As you were kneeling at the wishing pool, reading the lease, Plodius, your brother, sneaked up behind you and shoved your head into the pool. Oh, horrible. Oh, horrible! Most horrible. My mother. No, this take is no good." He tries again: "Father? Oh, God. Uh, let me start over again, let's see . . ."

Another setup shows Hamlet behind a sort of fish-net—under the sea? He is writing, and on the sound track Smith is heard saying, "On my tablet I'll set it down that one may smile, and smile, and be a villain . . . at least it may be so in Jingola." Candles appear. In the background one can see several strange plaster constructions and a petrified ear of corn. In the film's most thrilling moment, a lit candelabra sets the net aflame. The movie apparently ends with the death of Plodius, played not by Stefan Brecht but by a stuffed Santa Claus doll in shades. (Brecht had noted the "christmassy" detritus on the set.)

Clutching a plumed hat, Hamlet stares at Plodius, then slowly drags the doll across the floor to bury it under

the rubble. The whole movie is a setup for this splendid image, given additional color by a red Christmas-tree ornament, some blue tinsel, and a bottle of Orange Crush. Frenzied music by a Syrian ensemble, the Gomidas Band, rises on the sound track. The movie ends with a demented freeze-frame close-up of Smith—Tartaglia's sole "personal intrusion" into the material.

Hamlet in the Rented World may be the first Jack Smith film since *Flaming Creatures* to have a definite ending, but it is not the first portrait of Jack Smith to have been fashioned from the debris of an unfinished project. In the early '60s, Ken Jacobs combined abandoned footage from a film vehicle that Smith had begun with their mutual friend Bob Fleischner and audio tapes of Smith's monologues to create *Blonde Cobra* (1963). You might say that *Hamlet in the Rented World* is *Blonde Cobra's* sort of sequel.

But while the inclusion of black leader—indicating the beginning and end of each film roll—acknowledges a formal strategy used somewhat differently in *Blonde Cobra*, Tartaglia is practicing a stricter kind of conservation. Every scrap of film is precious (as indeed it was in the early '70s for an impoverished filmmaker). As with the restoration of an ancient artifact, the intentionality recedes behind an archival logic. In trying to bring into existence the derangement of a classic text—a project that Smith himself had abandoned—*Hamlet in the Rented World* is not a preservation but the reconstruction of a deconstruction. □

Hamlet in the Rented World, which premiered at the 2014 Berlin Film Festival, was presented by Jerry Tartaglia at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts this past February.

J. HOBERMAN IS A FREQUENT CONTRIBUTOR TO ARTFORUM.