

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Ken Jacobs, Marc Siegel, Rinaldo Censi, Toni D'angelo, Enrico Camporesi, David E. James, Marc Siegel, J. Hoberman, Andrea Lissoni, Jerry Tartaglia, Benjamin Léon, "Jack Smith Report," *La Furia Umana*, 2016



Jack Smith Report



KEN JACOBS / An Email About Jack Smith (and the Cheap Shoes)

Dear Ken,
how are you?

I just wanted to say that I am gonna to publish that special dossier on Jack Smith (with J. Hoberman, Jerry Tartaglia, Marc Siegel, David E. James, and others). Next week.

I also hope we can do a big special dossier about you, next year, with your cooperation.

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Best, Toni
October 8, 2016

Dear Toni,

I super-approve, time for another realization of Jack's genius. Writing on me next year, most appreciated.

My only regret, I would've liked to write something regarding Jack. Something without objectivity, personally pissed and in every way off the deep end. I would've written about the cheap shoes we saw for sale placed with others on wooden crates on Second Avenue on the old Lower East Side. No, they weren't shoes, that was the whole point! They were rubbers, made to imitate shoes, with every detail copied from shoes in relief and standing out or sinking in but all made of rubber -shoelaces! molded of rubber- and big enough to fit Jack. I urged him to buy it, thinking it would amuse him but he shot me down, choosing not to be amused and accusing me of dreadful taste. He was probably pretending he could afford them and was choosing not to, the pretentious bastard.

Best, Ken

Ditto.
October 8, 2016

MARC SIEGEL / Jack Smith Is an Ordinary Name[1]

Jack Smith is an ordinary name for an extraordinary, if not mythical, figure in the American avant-garde of the second half of the twentieth century. To describe Smith's singular importance, artists, filmmakers, critics and scholars typically turn to the superlative. For Andy Warhol, Smith was the «only person I would ever try to copy »[2]. Filmmaker John Waters referred to Smith as «the only true “underground” filmmaker»[3]. For playwright and theater innovator, Richard Foreman, Jack Smith is «the hidden source of practically everything that's of any interest in the so-called experimental American theater»[4]. Photographer Nan Goldin, whose slide shows owe much to Smith's precedent, described him as «the high priestess of the Babylon of Lower Manhattan during its greatest era»[5]. Finally, critic J. Hoberman, who has conducted the most thorough research on Smith's films to date, offers the following exuberant description of the filmmaker's most famous work, *Flaming Creatures*:

At once primitive and sophisticated, hilarious and poignant, spontaneous and studied, frenzied and languid, crude and delicate, avant and nostalgic, gritty and fanciful, fresh and faded, innocent and jaded, high and low, raw and cooked, underground and camp, black and white and white on white, composed and decomposed, richly perverse and gloriously impoverished, *Flaming Creatures* was something new under the sun. Had Jack Smith produced nothing other than this amazing artifice, he would still rank among the great visionaries of American film[6].

Although Smith's work received rapturous praise from such illustrious figures in art, film, theater and photography, it still – over twenty years after his death in 1989 – remains somewhat inaccessible for most audiences. There have only been a handful of film retrospectives, art exhibitions, essays and books focusing on the artist in the past two decades[7]. The inaccessibility of Smith's films has as much to do with financial and logistical problems of preservation, distribution, and exhibition, as it does with the

GLADSTONE GALLERY

innovative form and content of the works themselves. A Jack Smith retrospective, therefore, provides a welcome opportunity for audiences to familiarize themselves with a central figure in the American and international avant-garde of the second half of the twentieth century.

Jack Smith initially surfaced in the American avant-garde arts scene as a performer in films by Ken Jacobs. Smith met Jacobs during a brief stint studying film at the City College of New York in the mid-1950s. The two commenced on an immensely fruitful collaboration that resulted in numerous performance-driven films such as *Saturday Afternoon Blood Sacrifice* (1957), *Little Cobra Dance* (1957), *Little Stabs at Happiness* (1960), *Blonde Cobra* (1963) and Jacobs's over seven hour magnum opus *Star Spangled to Death* (1958–60/2004). In many of these films, Smith is featured clowning around in various forms of assemblage costuming with other performers or children on the streets of Lower Manhattan. In an essay about the various ways in which post-war American artists depicted and engaged with urban space, Juan Suárez links these Jacobs films to other city films of the 1950s, such as Rudy Burkhardt's *Under the Brooklyn Bridge* (1953) and Helen Levitt's *In the Street* (1952), and argues that they «register the spontaneous theatricals of everyday life»[8]. For Suárez, Smith's odd, seemingly improvised antics in the Jacobs's films «exemplify the creative manner in which urban dwellers occupy public space, appropriating it to uses that go against habit and social sanction»[9].

While working on *Star Spangled to Death* in the construction site of what would become New York's Lincoln Center, Smith borrowed Jacobs's camera to make his short film *Scotch Tape*. The three-minute film captures three costumed performers (Jacobs, Jerry Sims and Reese Haire) climbing, moving, mugging for the camera, and dancing frenetically in a jungle-like web of wires, cement slabs, and wooden posts. The sound track, Tony Conrad's edited version of 1930s American bandleader Eddy Duchin's rendition of the Brazilian choro, *Carinhoso*, lends a tropical touch to the performer's urban frolicking and to Smith's ornate images of debris and jovial vitality. *Scotch Tape*, therefore, appropriates both urban space for “uses that go against habit and social sanction” and South American rhythms for depictions of contemporary New York shenanigans. Actually, since Duchin's choro is itself already an appropriation of a Brazilian musical form by a North American bandleader, Smith's musical choice can be seen to express his early fascination with Latin America as filtered through American popular culture, a fascination that reaches its apogee in his life-long obsession with Dominican-born, 1940s Hollywood actress María Montez (more on Miss Montez shortly).

Hoberman points out that despite the film's brevity «*Scotch Tape* anticipates the epic quality of Smith's later films and theater pieces»[10]. The short film is also an interesting example of Smith's attempt to translate to moving images the idiosyncratic sense of framing that he honed in his still photography. Smith had regularly been taking color and black and white photography since the mid-1950s. In 1957, he opened the Hyperbole Photography Studio in a storefront in Lower Manhattan. The studio was less an opportunity to take commercial photos, than a chance at incorporating passersby into Smith's elaborately staged, exotic and erotic photo shoots. As curator Lawrence Rinder notes, «Smith relished the complexities of human character and the peculiarities of human form, especially when that form was languorously posed, draped in chiffon, or transformed by mascara and rouge»[11]. In many of Smith's early photos, the frame delimits an unidentifiable fantasy space in which partially clothed and disguised bodies are entwined with swaths of fabric, thrift store objects and the body parts of others. Such dense formal compositions of body parts, fabric, and found objects permeate Smith's films as well, whether in the tableaux vivants in *Flaming Creatures*, the striking interior shots in *No President*, the close-ups in *Song for Rent* or the enigmatic ritual scenes in the *Unedited Film Rushes*.

GLADSTONE GALLERY



Respectable Creatures (Jack Smith, 1950s/1966). Courtesy Arsenal Institute for Film und Video Art, Berlin Copyright Jack Smith Archive and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels.

Smith had early art world success with his photographs, exhibiting them in 1960 at the Limelight Gallery, a prestigious photography gallery, and even selling one to the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Although his interest in still photography never waned – he made literally thousands of art photographs in his lifetime, most of which have yet to be printed and exhibited – Smith shifted focus in the mid-1960s from displaying photographs as art objects in publications and galleries to incorporating still images into slide show presentations. As early as 1963, he presented production stills from *Normal Love*, his spectacular color follow up to *Flaming Creatures*, in a slide show presentation accompanied by a recording of a speech by Antonin Artaud. Smith's slideshows became increasingly complex and lengthy throughout '60s and '70s, often combining hundreds of images in carefully arranged sequences accompanied by his beloved exotica music (for example, Martin Denny, Les Baxter, and Alfred Lyman).

Smith's visual style developed neither through direct engagement with classical figures in the fine arts, like Delacroix, Bosch, or Odilon Redon with whom his work has understandably been compared, nor – despite a few key exceptions – in close conversation with the work of other avant-garde filmmakers[12]. Instead, as a member of “the movies generation” – the term his friend and collaborator, the dramatist Ronald Tavel used to characterize himself and others who grew up in the United States of the 1940s and 1950s on a steady diet of Hollywood narrative films – Smith found aesthetic resources in “the secret-flix” of his youth. He provides a list of some of these (today somewhat obscure) films in his brilliant essay “The Perfect Filmic Appositiveness of Maria Montez”,

the whole gaudy array of secret-flix, any flic (sic) we enjoyed: Judy Canova flix (I don't even remember the names), *I Walked with a Zombie*, *White Zombie*, *Hollywood Hotel*, all Montez flix, most Dorothy Lamour sarong flix, a gem called *Night*

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Monster, Cat & the Canary, The Pirate, Maureen O'Hara Spanish Galleon flix (all Spanish Galleon flix anyway), all Busby Berkeley flix, *Flower Thief*, all musicals that had production numbers, especially Rio de Janeiro prod. nos., all Marx Bros. flix. Each reader will add to the list.[13].

While Smith found redeeming social and aesthetic qualities in all of these undervalued genre films that allowed visual spectacle and exotic settings to trump narrative and character development, he reserved a special place in his personal pantheon for the films of director Josef von Sternberg and actress María Montez. Sternberg's films, as Smith wrote in his brief essay, "Belated Appreciation of V.S.", "had to have plots even though they already had them inherent in the images"[14]. For Smith, the rich, visually and erotically charged fantasy world of Sternberg's Marlene Dietrich films – *Morocco* (1930), *Shanghai Express* (1932), and *The Devil is a Woman* (1935) for instance – seemed to emerge directly from the director's own psycho-sexual makeup, without the interference of professional writing, directing, or acting technique. In fact, technique and professionalism were qualities that Smith abhorred, preferring instead the vagaries of chance and the personal expression of autonomous individuals. The escapist fantasy films of María Montez, such as *Arabian Nights* (John Rawlins, 1942), *Cobra Woman* (Robert Siodmak, 1944), or *The Siren of Atlantis* (Greg Tallas, 1949), provided him with inexhaustible proof of the powerful creative vision of a single individual – in this case not the director, but the undervalued female star. Against those critics who labeled Montez, "The World's Worst Actress", Smith countered, "Wretch actress – pathetic as actress, why insist on her being an actress – why limit her? Don't slander the beautiful womanliness that took joy in her own beauty and all beauty – or whatever in her that turned plaster cornball sets to beauty"[15]. Montez's exuberant belief in her own beauty – one of the star's most cited lines was, «When I see myself on the screen, I look so beautiful I want to scream with joy! » – and in her embodiment of such mythological figures as Scheherazade, the Cobra Woman, and the Siren of Atlantis, inspired Smith to recognize the power of individual conviction to transform ordinary objects, lines of dialogue, garbage and paper mache sets into the elements of a magical fantasy world. "Trash", as he put in the Montez essay, "is the material of creators"[16].

Smith's Montez worship manifests itself in the exotic aesthetic (and titles) of his films, photography, collages, and performances, and in numerous writings; it so permeates his world-view that it is nearly impossible to enumerate every manifestation of The Holy One's presence in his work. One of the most significant and lasting expressions of his 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. Mario Montez also became one of the most important figures in underground film and theater in the '60s and '70s[17].

Smith's very first film, *Buzzards over Baghdad*, shot in Los Angeles in the early 1950s and later reedited and incorporated into the film *Respectable Creatures*, is a relatively straightforward restaging of scenes from the Montez vehicle *Arabian Nights*. With *Flaming Creatures*, Smith transformed his interests in costumes, body parts, Montez, Sternberg and a whole range of secret-flix into an utterly unique cinematic experience. The film is a transcendent black and white vision of exoticized and eroticized gender and sexual play set to the tune of Latin American, classical and pop music, Tony Conrad's minimalist drone, and excerpts from the soundtracks of *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* (Arthur Lubin, 1943, with Miss Montez of course) and Sternberg's *The Devil Is a Woman*. The film's unusual camera angles and framing, cloudy, ethereal images due to the outdated 16 mm film stock, episodic as opposed to narrative development, and fragmented presentation of extravagantly clothed bodies and alternately veiled and exposed body parts created a sensation that reached well beyond the confines of Smith's small group of like-minded friends[18]. He had made the film specifically to entertain himself and the regulars at Jonas Mekas's underground film showcases at the Charles Theater in the early '60s.

GLADSTONE GALLERY



Song for Rent (Jack Smith, 1969) Courtesy Arsenal Institute for Film und Video Art, Berlin Copyright Jack Smith Archive and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels

When *Flaming Creatures* found itself at the center of a legal battle over pornography, Smith's "comedy" quickly became "a sex issue of the Cocktail World" and began to circulate independently of its intended cultural context[19]. In reaction to this development and as a critique of such an instrumentalization and commodification of art, Smith never completed his epic *Normal Love* and chose instead to present it – and all subsequent films – as part of live performances, which sometimes incorporated slides, ever-changing, exotic music from Smith's scratchy record collections, and other live performers. As Smith explains in a 1987 letter to the director of a German cinema,

Since *Flaming Creatures*, I've been involved in a working method that might be called LIVE FILM. Some of the work goes on through the screening itself. Someday this might be imitated for there is almost no other way to dislodge film out of the bankrupt state it is now in which can only be goosed up by more and more violence and synchronized chatter[20].

Hence, with the exception of *Scotch Tape* and *Flaming Creatures*, all of Smith's films may be better understood as *film material*, the visual remnants of earlier live performances.

Smith died from AIDS-related complications in the fall of 1989. He left no will and reportedly asked the performer Penny Arcade to burn all his work. Fortunately, for those of us interested in Smith's work today, Arcade betrayed her friend and chose instead to solicit film critic J. Hoberman's help in establishing the Plaster Foundation to save and store the artist's extensive and diverse body of work. They in turn enlisted the help of filmmaker Jerry Tartaglia to restore Smith's films. (Tartaglia has the distinct honor of having found the camera original of *Flaming Creatures* in a dump at a sound lab he worked at in

GLADSTONE GALLERY

the 1970s. He returned it to Smith, who first accused Tartaglia of being an agent of Uncle Fishhook before recognizing the well-meaning act by thanking him)[21]. Restoring the films of one who attempted to perfect the art of LIVE FILM performance is a difficult and thankless task. That Smith experimented with the sequencing of his films during these performances—sometimes removing the take-up reel from the projector so as to edit the film live and reinsert strips into the projector—meant that different audiences experienced different “films”. From Smith’s perspective, as he argued in the above letter, “this could be turned to advantage as a glamorous selling point. Often, there is repeat business because people can see the film gaining power as corrections are made and that is a new kind of film excitement”[22]. Tartaglia’s restoration project did not seek to produce “authentic” and “definitive” versions of films that never existed as such, but to preserve the material as it was left at Smith’s death. For the film’s soundtracks, he relied on notes on Smith’s records and discussions with collaborators so as to compile sound CDs that accompany most of the films.

With each new screening of Smith’s work, the mythology constructed around this artist with the ordinary name can be modified or reconceived through new concrete analyses and political and theoretical interpretations. “At this point”, as Juan Suárez noted in 2014, «we have a number of Jack Smiths to choose from or combine»[23]. Suárez offers four compelling possibilities: the queer underground pioneer; the anarcho, anti-capitalist; the anti-art artist; and the subversive tropicalist. One can only hope that the critical appreciation for Smith’s work will continue to manifest itself in a combination and permutation of interpretive approaches apposite to the unfinished and open-ended nature of the work itself.

Marc Siegel

[1] This essay was written to accompany a retrospective of Smith’s films that I co-curated with Ewa Szablowska for the New Horizons film festival in Wroclaw Poland in 2011. See *11th Era New Horizons Film Festival Catalog* (Wroclaw, Poland, 2011): 372-76.

[2] David Ehrenstein, “An Interview with Andy Warhol”, in *I’ll Be Your Mirror: The Selected Andy Warhol Interviews*, Kenneth Goldsmith (ed.), New York: Carrol & Graf, 2004, p. 67.

[3] Blurb on the back cover of *Jack Smith, Flaming Creature: His Amazing Life and Times*, Edward Leffingwell, Carole Kismaric and Marvin Heiferman (ed.), New York–London: Serpent’s Tail–P.S.1, 1997.

[4] Blurb on the back cover of *Wait for Me at the Bottom of the Pool: The Writings of Jack Smith*, J. Hoberman and Edward Leffingwell (ed.), New York–London: Serpent’s Tail–P.S.1, 1997.

[5] Blurb on the back cover of *Jack Smith, Flaming Creature*, Edward Leffingwell (ed.).

[6] J. Hoberman, *On Jack Smith’s Flaming Creatures (and Other Secret-Flix of Cinemaroc)*, New York: Granary Books, 2001, p. 10.

[7] This situation has changed only slightly in the five years since I first published this essay. In 2008, the Barbara Gladstone Gallery in New York City purchased the Jack Smith estate from his sister. The Gallery financed the restoration, color correction, and digitization of Smith’s 16mm films and sold eleven prints in analogue and digital formats as a limited edition to museums and private collectors. In an unusual move for a commercial gallery, one which I hope will become an artworld standard, Gladstone also deposited editions of the 16mm prints with select film institutions that have distributed Smith’s work for decades, including the Arsenal Institute for Film and Videoart (Berlin) and Lux (London). Recent publications on Smith include Marc Siegel, ed., *Jack Smith: Beyond the Rented World* [Special Issue] *Criticism* 56.2 (2014): 153-418; Sophie von Olfers and Mark Schlegel, eds., *Hamlet, mise-en-scène (EXTRA TROUBLE—Jack Smith in Frankfurt)* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2014); Johan Kugelberg and John Zorn, eds., *Wait for Me at the Bottom of the Pool—Artwork, Ephemera and Photography by Jack Smith* (New

GLADSTONE GALLERY

York: Boo-Hooray, 2013); and Dominic Johnson *Glorious Catastrophe: Jack Smith, Performance and Visual Culture* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2012).

[8] Juan A. Suárez, “Styles of Occupation: Manhattan in Experimental Film and Video from the 1970s to the Present”, in *Mixed Use, Manhattan: Photography and Related Practices, 1970s to Present*, Lynne Cooke and Douglas Crimp (ed.), Madrid–Cambridge: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía–MIT Press, 2010, p. 132.

[9] Suárez, *Styles of Occupation*, p. 133.

[10] Hoberman, *On Jack Smith’s Flaming Creatures*, p. 80.

[11] Lawrence Rinder, “Anywhere Out of the World: The Photography of Jack Smith”, in *Jack Smith, Flaming Creature*, p. 139.

[12] That said, Ken Jacobs’s interest in trash, an impoverished aesthetic, and images from popular culture were of course of fundamental importance to Smith. Both Jacobs and Smith were fascinated by American artist Joseph Cornell’s found-footage film *Rose Hobart* (1934), in which the artist reedited the jungle movie *East of Borneo* (1931) to focus on the gestures, moods, and expressions of its female star, Hobart. Cornell projected the film through blue gels and to the accompaniment of Brazilian music. Smith also cherished the work of fellow underground filmmaker Ron Rice, who featured Smith in two of his films, *The Queen of Sheba Meets the Atom Man* (1963) and *Chumlum* (1964).

[13] Jack Smith, “The Perfect Filmic Appositeness of Maria Montez”, in *Wait for Me at the Bottom of the Pool*, p. 32. *The Flower Thief* is the exception here; it is Ron Rice’s seminal underground beat film from 1960.

[14] Smith, “Belated Appreciation of V.S.”, p. 4.

[15] Smith, “Perfect Filmic Appositeness”, p. 25.

[16] *Ibid.*, p. 26.

[17] Montez not only starred in numerous Andy Warhol films, and films by, among others, Ron Rice, José Rodríguez Soltero, Takahiko Iimura and the Brazilian artist Hélio Oiticica, but he also was an important stage presence in the Theatre of the Ridiculous, the groundbreaking queer theater movement spearheaded by Ronald Tavel, John Vaccaro, and Charles Ludlam. See my essay on Montez in this same issue.

[18] See Hoberman’s extensive account of the production, exhibition and reception history of the film in his *On Jack Smith’s Flaming Creatures*, p. 8–51.

[19] Jack Smith, “Pink Flamingo Formulas in Focus”, in *The Village Voice*, July 19, 1973, p. 69.

[20] “Jack Smith Film Enterprises, Inc.”, in *Wait for Me at the Bottom of the Pool*, p. 149.

[21] ‘Uncle Fishhook’ was one of Smith’s many names for Jonas Mekas, filmmaker and founder of the Anthology Film Archives and the Filmmaker’s Coop. Smith blamed Mekas for capitalizing on the scandal over *Flaming Creatures* and for keeping a tight lock on films deposited in his archive.

[22] Smith, “Smith Film Enterprises”, p. 149.

[23] Juan A. Suárez, “Jack Smith, Hélio Oiticica, Tropicalism”, *Criticism* 56.2 (2014): 295.

RINALDO CENSI / However, JACK SMITH invented it - interview with Jerry Tartaglia

Jerry Tartaglia is a filmmaker; after the death of Jack Smith (1989), he works on the restoration of his films. He’s finishing a film document, *Escape From Rented Island: The Lost Paradise of Jack Smith*, that will be out in 2017. (r.c.)

It was in Albright College that you first were introduced to the work of Jack Smith, by your professor, Harry Koursaros; then, in 1977 you discover the lost camera original of Flaming Creatures. Had you

GLADSTONE GALLERY

already met Jack, or the discovery gave you the chance to meet him? Can you tell me something about your first meeting with him?

While in college I saw many underground films and made the acquaintance of Tony Conrad, and after graduation I helped Tony paint his “Yellow Movies.” I went home to NYC and made films, and had a job in a film supply house. I was involved with the U-P Film Group, where Jack sometimes did a “Live Film” performance. While working at the film supply house, I discovered the camera original of *Flaming Creatures* in a pile of discarded Laboratory print material. At that time, I had not met Jack Smith but my friend Rafique Azzouney from the U-P Group was his friend and he brought me to Jack. It took three attempts as Jack would not open the door – even to Rafique. The third time worked and Jack met me and I told him what happened and, of course he was paranoid and didn’t believe me. Rafique attested to my truthfulness, and Jack acquiesced after a long conversation. The whole story is given in more detail in the book *Jack Smith: His Amazing Life and Times*.

That’s how I met him and over the years as I traveled around the U.S. we remained rarely in touch and he once tried to contact me when I lived in San Francisco because he wanted me to travel with his films to Europe. He told Rafique that I was the only person he would trust with his films.

When did you first see Flaming Creatures? Which was your reaction?

I first saw *Flaming Creatures* when I was a student at Albright College. I was born in Brooklyn and my home was there in NYC. My teacher and mentor, Harry Koursaros, was a painter of the Abstract Expressionist School and a friend of Gregory Markopoulos. He regularly brought Underground Films to the College. F.C. was among the many films that inspired me in that period (roughly 1970 – 72) to envision both a poetic filmmaking and a gay identified cinema. Harry purchased a 16mm camera and editing setup ostensibly for the Art Department which he ran, but in practice, it was for me to begin to hone my production skills. That’s how I began. Also during that period, I approached Jonas (Mekas) and he put me in touch with Tony Conrad and from him I met other filmmakers and artists. After graduation I helped Tony paint his many *Yellow Movies* while he and his wife, Beverly Grant travelled in Europe.

I have the book you quoted in the first answer (Flaming Creatures: Jack Smith. his amazing Life and Times), and – talking about paranoia –, what do you think about the quarrel with Mekas ("Uncle Fishhook").

Jack was a very difficult person to deal with. Some of this was affectation but there was a real basis in reality for it as well. Jack had certain expectations about how his films should be distributed – mainly about income and presentation format. Jonas was wearing many different hats: filmmaker, writer for *The Village Voice*, chief of the Filmmakers’ Cooperative, founder of Anthology Film Archives, and often not remembered as Lithuania’s Poet Laureate. It is also little known how much Jack Smith was involved in early Queer Theater with John Vaccaro and others. Some of the more colorful descriptions of the FC matter are on the tapes that I am using in my new film – *Escape From Rented Island: The Lost Paradise of Jack Smith*. He incorporated this anti-Mekas story into his “Live Film” Performances.

Do you think that the whole Flaming Creatures affair (Knokke Le Zoute + the trial in USA + Mekas' defense and the way some "intellectuals" like Susan Sontag wrote about the film) changed the way the film was experienced? («I started making a comedy about everything that I thought was funny. And it was funny. The first audiences were laughing from the beginning all the way through. But then that writing started – and it became a sex thing. (...) The film was practically used to destroy me.» - I quote from Sylvère Lotringer's interview – “Uncle Fishhook And The Sacred Baby Poo Poo Of Art”, in Semiotext(e) 3, n. 2, 1978). Was this a turning point in the way Jack Smith worked and thought about "films"?

GLADSTONE GALLERY

One of the several obstacles to appreciating the work of Jack Smith is the unwillingness to move forward in our critical understanding of the work. I encountered this many times in the years in which I worked on the restoration and showed the films around the world. Of course – the turn of events surrounding the trial and the early writing about FC affected the way the film was viewed. However, everything that occurs affects the way that a film is viewed. And, in addition, just because Jack said that the film was a comedy, doesn't mean that we, sixty years later, are supposed to find it funny. It now exists in the context of film history. So to bemoan the fact that it "should have been" something else is, frankly, one of the many absurdities that I've had to address over the years about his work.

You find the camera original of Flaming Creatures in 1977. How many copies of the film in your opinion were circulating at that time and in which conditions? And concerning the camera original: which kind of film he used for the shooting? Different kinds? Can you go a bit deep in this technical aspect?

We are talking about 16mm filmmaking here. The camera original reel was never projected because it had no optical soundtrack "married" to it. Only a "release print" could have the soundtrack on it. This is, by the way, an error in Dominic Johnson's book, *Glorious Catastrophe*, in which he states that the "print" that I found was one that was circulating in Europe. I did not find a print. I found the actual material that had been exposed in Jack's camera, processed in the lab, and edited by him into a single strand of film containing the images in the order in which we know them to be *Flaming Creatures*.

In that era for most poverty based, underground filmmakers, the single strand form rather than the "A & B" Roll form of editing was commonplace. The soundtrack was recorded on ¼ inch audio tape, then transferred to 16mm magnetic film, synched with the picture reel and then an optical negative reel was printed from the magnetic film. The optical negative was resynched with the picture at head and tail and from there the first "answer print" was made. The filmmaker checked the timing (that is the word to describe the exposure settings for the first print, also called the "answer print.") If the timing needed correction, those changes were made and a new answer print was struck. If all was good, then the release prints were made. Therefore, what I found was a camera original that contained splices, and consisted of several different outdated film stocks including Agfa Gaevert, Kodak, and Ferrania. The camera original reel and the optical negative soundtrack (called "elements") were usually stored at the laboratory. Jack probably lost track of which lab held these elements and after a decade or so of being unclaimed, the lab probably discarded them by selling them to a film supply house for "slug." That's where I found the picture reel, only.

The quality of the prints that were first made depends entirely on the timing decisions and who made them. There is no way of knowing how many prints were struck, nor who paid for them, nor what their image quality was. Release prints do not have splices.

Can you tell me somethin about Normal Love? I think that this work reveals a shift in the way Jack Smith worked with film. And what about his restoration, given that the material was never finished, concluded. Always showed in different ways.

One of the important truths about Jack's work that I have been trying to extol over the past decades is that he moved past the notion of "filmmaker" and expanded his form into Queer Theater. The celluloid film, the slides, the costumes, set, objects became part of what we now call "Performance Art." However, JACK SMITH invented it. Cindy Sherman and Robert Wilson acknowledge this. *Normal Love* was an ongoing performance. By the 1980s he had named this whole process "LIVE FILM."

There never was any *Normal Love* movie in a complete form that he preordered. His life and his art were an ongoing process of mixture and reinvention. That is the point. The "restoration" was not a scientifically ordered procedure. It was a preservation of the works *in the state that they were in at the time of his death*.

GLADSTONE GALLERY



Normal Love Courtesy of Jerry Tartaglia and the Jack Smith Archive, Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels

About the sound: it was done by Tony Conrad, if I remember well. Did you have notes, documentation, about the sound? Was Conrad involved in the restoration?

I used a timing sheet that was written by Tony Conrad who was going to do the soundtrack before Jack and he had a fight and Jack fired him. I culled through the record collection, and using the timing sheet and the notations that Jack made on the album covers, I made choices for the sound.

But remember, there never was any “official” sound to picture relationship. The film material was always shown as part of a performance.

Tony Conrad was not involved in the restoration. He wanted to recreate *Normal Love*, reedit it and bring in contemporary musicians to create a new soundtrack. I refused his offer, citing my intention to preserve the work in the state it was in at the time of Jack’s death. He then broke off our friendship which had begun when I was a student and was his assistant in painting most of his *Yellow Movies* in 1973-74. His ire was so great that he chose to attempt to “write me out of the history.” He mounted several shows of the *Yellow Movies* and never told me, and went out of his way to delete the fact that I painted them for and with him. They were his work, of course, but he foolishly felt that he would punish me by erasing me from the *Yellow Movie* project.

I tell you this so that you understand some of the crazy and egotistical behaviors that surrounded (and probably continue to do so) the preservation work. Everyone had their own particular idea of what Jack Smith and his work meant. The problem is that Jack’s personality was so huge that he took many different forms to many different people. This is something that I hope becomes clear in my film, *Escape From Rented Island: The Lost Paradise of Jack Smith*. His friends and former friends want desperately to hold onto the image that they held of him. But he was none of these and all of these. That is part of his genius!

Also, one clarification: the only film that I found was the camera original of *Flaming Creatures*. After his death, Penny Arcade and J. Hoberman saved the material under the auspices of The Plaster Foundation. They engaged me to do the restoration of the films. I did. Later, Barbara Gladstone purchased the Estate from Jack’s sister. The Gladstone Gallery owns the work and is the rights holder, and they engaged me to continue the restoration, make new prints, and complete all the work or preservation. That was done in

GLADSTONE GALLERY

2014 with the preservation of the audio tapes that were discovered in the Gladstone Warehouse with the costumes. I am making *Escape From Rented Island: The Lost Paradise of Jack Smith* using those tapes, along with the film archive, by arrangement with The Gladstone Gallery.

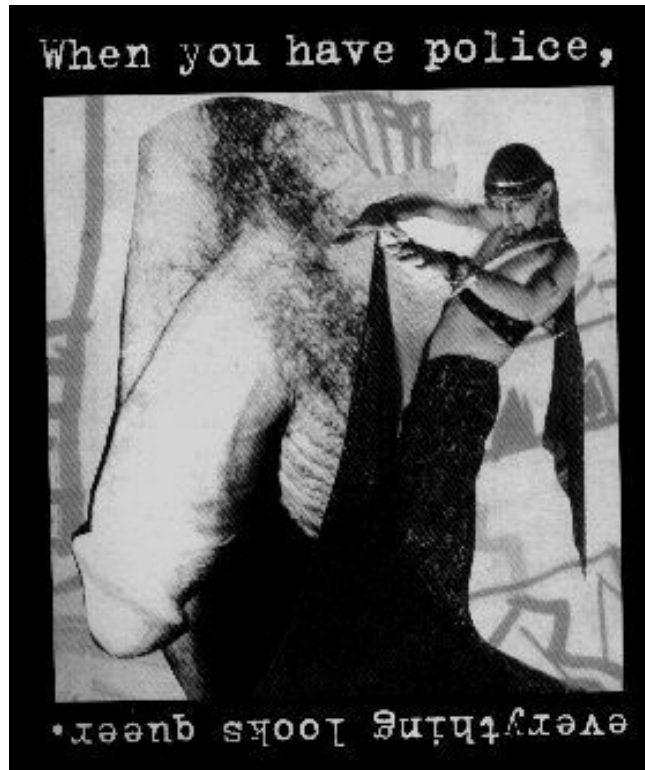


Image from *Escape From Rented Island: The Lost Paradise of Jack Smith* by Jerry Tartaglia, 2017

Can you tell me something more about the film you're finishing?

Escape From Rented Island is a Film Essay that considers the work of Jack Smith. It is not a documentary nor is it a conventionally structured film about an artist. The entire film document, as I also call it, includes *only* film and audio material that Jack created and used in his films, *Live Film!* Performances, and other artwork.

I am making the film because I gave more than twenty years of my creative attention to the restoration of Jack's celluloid film work. This experience gave me the opportunity to view his work in the 16mm form in which Jack worked. Most importantly, because I am skilled in 16mm Film production, I was able to view the work using the technology that Jack himself used.

I saw, firsthand and frame by frame, the beauty of his visual composition, and the adept manipulation of TIME: the essential element of his Cinema. Towards the end of my restoration work for The Gladstone Gallery in New York, which now houses the Jack Smith Archive, his ¼ inch magnetic audio tapes were digitally preserved. These tapes are documentations of his performances as well as informal recording sessions of his Superstars and friends. Together with excerpts from his own films and *Live Film!* visuals, my film, EFRI, will introduce the viewer to Jack's aesthetic principles and his exotic world. I hope that it will add to the scholarship on his work, as well as the enjoyment of his vision.

Rinaldo Censi

GLADSTONE GALLERY

FMBusby

9 10 81

Spent the day with Jack Smith

#33- 21 First Avenue, 254 791L

Tall, thin, in good shape, red pants and a floppy grey sweater, totally distracted, an almost continuous monologue a-l day. His apartment full of Junk, day glow painted in green and blue, like a cross between a tropical island (plastic palm trees everywhere) and a sultan's palace. I'm only allowed into the entrancekitchen. the rest is separated off by veils.

Yes, he did expect to make money, an independent localized cinema of friends, acquaintances that wd be a place you cd go to escape the moronic, capitalistic Hollywood system. But, he and all others were sold out by Mekas, a fish hook, who controlled it all. Mekas did his travelling for him, made a reputation and a name for himself and then turned it into a museum a dead thing. Jack thinks that art should be produced consumed done with and gone on to something else (Sontag is a dyke magazine writer, wrote about his work as if it were Hollywood)

He now sees himself as "un commercial" wants to make money but without selling out

Now working on Sinbad. Will take him many years he has time and that's the thing whic allows him to compete with Hollywood. Since he doesn't like to do artist release forms he cant use other actors because they may sue him in the future, so he is going to be the only actor. Its an Arabian Nights movie, even more beautiful than the theft of Bagdad. There is a Hamlet part in it that will allow him to play Hamlet. Its going to be psychological in a new way, miles ahead of anything hthat has ever been don before. e.g. his kitchen will be both Sinbad's kitchen and the deck of his boat.

Previous films No President? President Wilkie kidnapped and sold at aucion by Sicilian love bandits.

Scotch Tape. 1 roll, three people jumping around in a junk yard.

Normal Love Under influence of Mekas higher technical than Creatures. Its in color and so is hard to edit only fragments completed.

He is "an exception to this country" but is convinced that one day he will find a country where his kind of art wd be appreatiated. (Can't rent his movies because he is afraid people will duplicate them. Thinks Mekas has copies of all his films in a safe. He didn't know about the Knokke Le Zoute thing till after... Mekas used it for his own fame.)

The American actress is only capable of playing prostitutes. They had to import an English actress like Debra Kerr to play anything else.

Father a Hillbilly, mother a Hungarian peasant, who was turkish but didn't know it. She forced him into film. He wanted to be an architect. But she took him away from the cardboard boxes he was building and stopped that. His hatred of technology and Chrisia

GLADSTONE GALLERY

GLADSTONE GALLERY

These destroy everything.

If you want to be an artist the only way to survive is by allying yourself with one of the currents. This he failed to do. When he has finished Sinbad, will go round the world to find a non technological non Christian country. Must have a beach where he can build in the sunshine.

Absolute influence of Maria Montez. In spite of the commercialism she was able to deal with both intellectual and aesthetic issues.

Opposed to intellectualism in the cinema. Only way to deal with it is like Abbot and Costello and the mad scientist. It is science that has destroyed the world.

The US at the end of a precipitous 80 year decline. The only civilization to have created and destroyed itself in 200 years. No one in his right mind wd live in the states....cement jungles

Has changed his glamor really glamorous is a real oyster rather than the pearl.

Warhol totally ripped him off . . . even to the point of stealing his actors

Creatures was nothing like its image. It was supposed to be a comedy and people all laughed all the time until the writing, which destroyed it and turned it in to something it wasn't . . . fed into the country's need for se magazine sex.

Since he spent the whole day with me, tomorrow I must go and do office work for him

GLADSTONE GALLERY



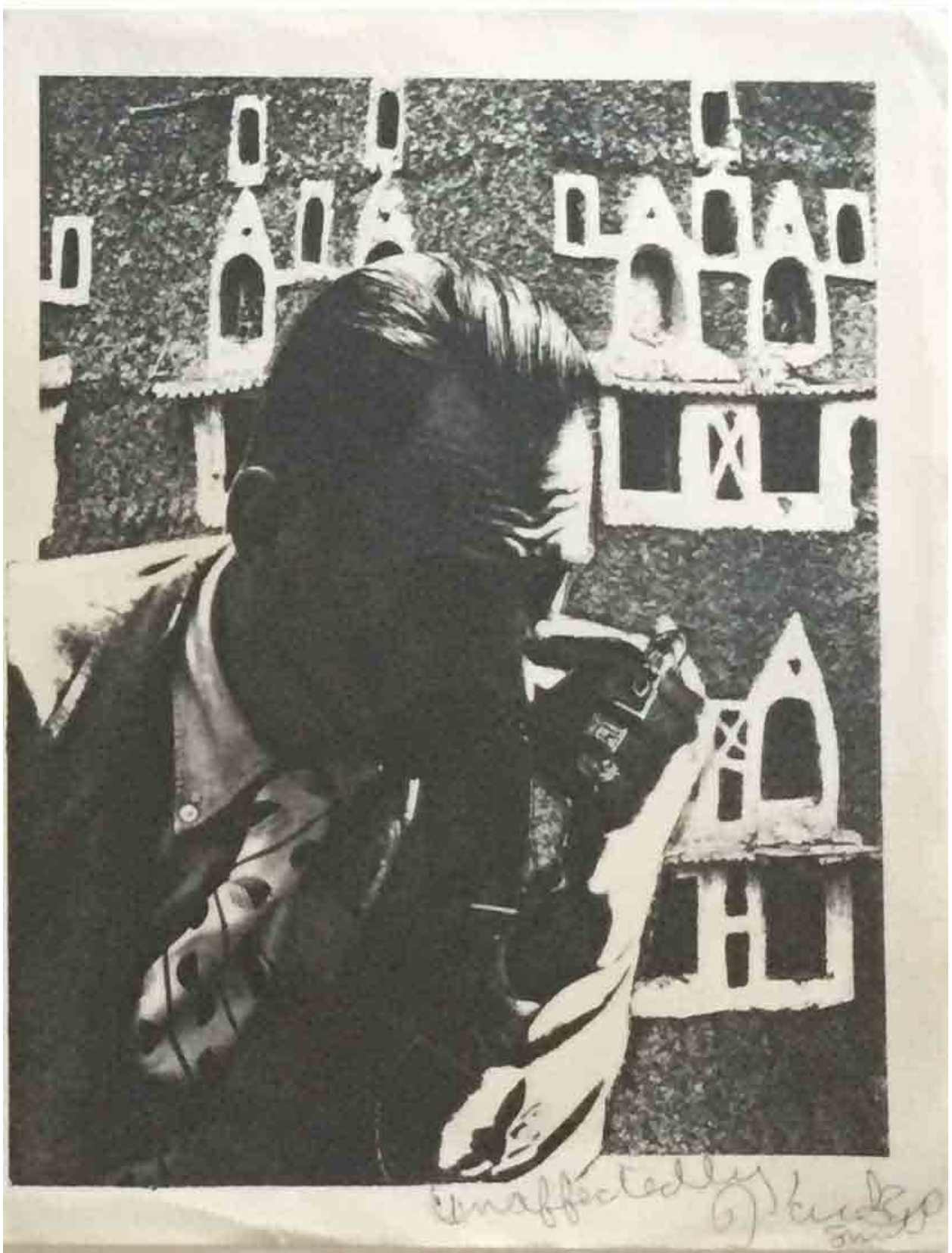
July 24, 1982

Dear David,

Thank you for your letter. I would be interested in coming to L.A. if I could emerge from the visit with \$7,000. Please let me know of your thoughts on how to approach the Foundation for Art Resources. We could also rent a theatre for a long run of my project and make the money that way. The theatre could be just about anything, but it should have a private entrance and some architectural interest.

Jack Smith

GLADSTONE GALLERY



GLADSTONE GALLERY

On 10 August 1981, I visited Jack Smith at his apartment, # 33, 21 First Avenue, New York, hoping that he would screen *Flaming Creatures* for me. I spent the whole day eagerly listening to his nearly continuous monologue and taking notes on it. He told me that his father was a hillbilly and his mother a Hungarian peasant, who was actually Turkish though she didn't know it. He saw himself as "an exception to this country", but was "convinced that "one day I will find a country where my kind of art will be appreciated" He was then working on a new film called *Sinbad*, "an Arabian Nights movie, more beautiful even than the *Thief of Baghdad*". It had a part in it that would allow him to play Hamlet. He knew it would take him many years, but when it was finished he planned to "go around the world to find a non-technological, non-Christian country." Since he had spent the day with me, he asked me to return the next day to do some office work for him. I did so and prepared a draft of his Lifetime Résumé. After I returned to Los Angeles, we corresponded for a couple of years. He wanted me to approach Universal Studios on his behalf, and agreed that if I could raise \$7,000, he would come to LA. He also sent me the self-portrait.

David E. James

MARC SIEGEL / Call Me Mario Montez[1]

«Gerard Malanga: Who is your greatest super star?

Jack Smith: Mario.

Gerard Malanga: Why?

Jack Smith: Because he immediately enlists the sympathy of the audience»[2].

Mario Montez was the great drag Superstar who reigned over the New York underground film and theater scene from the early 1960s until the mid-1970s. In 1977, Montez quietly disappeared from the public eye, and his whereabouts remained a mystery to scholars and most of his former colleagues and friends for almost thirty years. In 2006, he resurfaced momentarily for an appearance in Mary Jordan's documentary *Jack Smith and the Destruction of Atlantis*. The return of Mario Montez, once again on screen in drag, alongside his longtime friend, performer Agosto Machado, would seem to have warranted a documentary of its own. It wasn't until 2009, however, that Montez at the age of 74 finally made the commitment to cultivate once again his public persona and pursue stage, film, and modeling work. He made a number of public appearances and granted interviews at festivals, universities, and retrospectives in Berlin, Frankfurt, New York City and Wroclaw until his death at age 78 on September 26, 2013[3].

I was fortunate enough to have been able to facilitate most of Montez's recent appearances and to conduct many interviews with him since his return to the public eye. I naturally took advantage of these discussions to inquire about the inherited wisdom about the Superstar. Montez had only agreed to a few interviews during his roughly fifteen years of continuous work in film and theater, so there was very little available—and reliable—information about him[4]. The existing accounts in the film and theater literature tend more toward half-truths, projections, and whimsy than accurate representations of Montez's real-life experiences and perspectives. In what follows, I provide a brief summary of Montez's career with the main goal of highlighting the development of his performance identity. At the same time, I hope to suggest the scope of this unique artist's involvement in and contribution to the 1960s and '70s

GLADSTONE GALLERY

underground art scenes and to clarify some of the myths and falsehoods about Montez and his work that emerged in the absence of his own account. Montez's reappearance in the final years of his life afforded him the opportunity to weigh in on the body of writing about him and his work that emerged over the last four decades. While Montez's recent memories were certainly as selective and partial as anyone's, they nevertheless brought clearly into focus a dynamic image of an ever-evolving performer variously involved in the queer, film, and theater subcultures of his day. Unless otherwise noted, all quotes in this essay are from my discussions with Montez[5].



Dolores Flores (Rene Rivera) in *Flaming Creatures* (Jack Smith, 1962-63). Courtesy Arsenal Institute for Film und Video Art, Berlin Copyright Jack Smith Archive and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels

Mario Montez was born as Rene Rivera in Ponce, Puerto Rico on July 20, 1935. When he was nine years old, his family relocated to the United States. “My father had left us six months earlier to get a job and an apartment in New York City. He got a job with the city doing pipe maintenance for the water works”. Rene lived with three younger siblings and his parents in El Barrio, on East 111 Street between Third Avenue and Lexington Avenue. Throughout his childhood, he was the family photographer, taking hundreds of photos of family members and gatherings over the years. He attended the New York School of Printing to study graphic arts and graduated in 1954. “Then I worked as an apprentice in a shop in Manhattan for about six months. And then I quit...It was too messy, cleaning up. I didn't mind setting up the tiles. But you had to clean your own press. Ew!”. He went on to work as a photo finisher and shipping clerk before finding regular work as an office clerk. Contrary to many published accounts about his life, Rivera never worked for the post office, “maybe just one year for Christmas when they needed extra help”.

While cruising in Union Square in the early 1960s, he connected with an African American man named Reese Haire who introduced him to Jack Smith. Haire was a model in a number of Smith's early photo

GLADSTONE GALLERY

sessions and also appeared in *Scotch Tape* (Jack Smith, 1959-62), as well as Ken Jacobs's *Star Spangled to Death* (1956-60/2001-04), the film that Smith was working on when he borrowed Jacobs's camera to shoot *Scotch Tape*. Haire and Rivera took free ballet courses together through a program for low-income residents and Rivera became more thoroughly involved in Jack Smith's orbit as his photo model, collaborator, lover and, eventually, his temporary roommate. Prior to meeting Smith, Rivera had never performed in drag or experimented with female costumes, even as a child. It is therefore perhaps all the more surprising that for one of their very first photo shoots, Rivera suggested to Smith that he appear in female costume. As he recalled,

I don't think Jack was expecting me to be a female. But I suggested it to him. At that point they were releasing *Cleopatra* [Joseph Mankiewicz, 1963] with Elizabeth Taylor. And there were these wide-screen posters in the subways in New York City. (I stole one. I used to steal posters and things like that.) I said, "Jack, why don't we do a version of *Cleopatra*. And we'll title it 'Cleo Pot Roast'. So I made a costume in a hurry and a headpiece. He took shots, with his Rolleicord camera...But that's all we did. We never filmed *Cleopatra*. He didn't want to. He wasn't into that. He was pleasing me with [the photo][6].

In the summer and fall of 1962, Rivera joined Smith and his friends on the roof of the Windsor Theater for a few of the weekend film shoots for *Flaming Creatures*. In his striking screen debut, Rivera appears towards the end of the film as The Spanish Lady, a dancer who, clad in a black dress, was reminiscent of Marlene Dietrich in *The Devil Is a Woman* (Josef von Sternberg, 1935), fluttering a fan and moving seductively with a plastic flower between his lips. Having not yet created the performance identity Mario Montez, Rivera agreed with Smith's choice of the name Dolores Flores for the film's credits. «“He had different names” and then he said, “Well, what about Dolores Flores”. I think the reason he chose it was because he used to like the recordings of Lola Flores from Spain». On one of the shooting days when Rivera was away at work, Smith clothed someone else in his dress and black wig and shot some of the Busby Berkeley-esque overhead shots in the final dance sequence with this Spanish Lady stand-in. For aficionados, this explains why the controlled, graceful movements of Rivera's character in other shots suddenly acquire a dangerously chaotic quality in the overhead shots[7].

Rivera's involvement in *Flaming Creatures* extended beyond his admittedly brief appearance in the film's final section. He also supplied one of the overenunciating voices for the mock radio advertisement in the smirching or lipstick sequence— “I was trying to pronounce the English perfectly” – and some of the shrieks on the recording of earthquake screams. The recordings for the film were made by musician Tony Conrad, who was Smith's roommate at the time and the person responsible for compiling (and composing) the film's soundtrack. In the fall of 1962, Conrad and Smith were living in an apartment building at 56 Ludlow Street on New York's Lower East Side, where Angus MacLise and Kate and Piero Heliczer also lived. Rivera moved in when an apartment became available. Smith, Conrad, and Rivera soon began spending evenings together staging impromptu recording sessions, which often included other friends like MacLise. As Conrad recalls,

Jack sort of dominated situations. If you gave him a chance, then it was his scene. And it didn't take much. Suddenly there would be a Bagdadian moment and there would be a Tangier fantasy. So we recorded some of these. Jack would invite Mario to come upstairs and [he] would bring some clothes or put something on. That would take only a few hours. We would adjust the lights...My job was usually controlling the recordings and playing the music. I would get the 78s in a row, turn on the tape recorder. We loved recording[8].

In addition to the film and photo sessions with Smith, these informal, yet costumed and lighted performances for Conrad's tape recorder attest to Rivera's growing artistic and personal involvement in

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Smith's bohemian scene. Moreover, such staged and impromptu performances enabled Rivera to hone the performance identity that blossomed in the coming years as Mario Montez. This is perhaps nowhere more evident than in Conrad's recording titled *The First Memoirs of Maria Montez* dated February 24, 1963, in which Smith tells a hilariously morbid story about a melancholic Universal Studios digging up the corpse of their glamorous 1940s star from the Dominican Republic, “who brought them gilded profits during the war years”, in order to make a new film directed by «Jack Smith, the raging movie director»[9]. Smith plays various characters throughout the recording's twenty-two minutes, including that of a Maria Montez fan and a hysterical reporter, while Rivera, of course, assumes the part of the 1940s star herself. As Maria Montez, Rivera riffs on lines from the star's films and interviews (“Whenever I look into the mirror, I just scream with joy. I am so beautiful. Even though I use Helena Rubenstein's makeup, I am still beautiful”) and improvises a hilarious discussion in character with Smith (“I love your pearls dear”. “My purls...”).



Mario Montez and Diana Baccus in *Normal Love* (Jack Smith, 1963-65). Frame Grab. Copyright Jack Smith Archive and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels

If these private performances for Conrad's tape recorder paved the way for the invention of Mario Montez's persona, his public coming out, of sorts, occurred in the context of the shooting of Smith's *Normal Love* (1963-65) and Ron Rice's *Chumlum* in the summer of 1963. *Chumlum* was filmed predominantly in Rice's Manhattan apartment, where Smith, Montez, Beverly Grant, and the other performers from *Normal Love* would often gather to clown around after their daytime shoots in the swamps of New Jersey. In both of these films, Rivera is credited for the first time as Mario Montez. «I said [to Jack Smith], “We need to think of a name. Because I worship Maria Montez and you do too, why not just change the a to an o and call me Mario Montez”, I like being known as Mario Montez, even though it's a male, but it doesn't matter to me». In addition to his captivating performance as the Mermaid in Smith's *Normal Love*, Montez makes a rare appearance as a man in one of the film's sequences. Clad only in pink ballerina tights, he pushes Diana Baccus on the swing and then prances around—displaying

GLADSTONE GALLERY

some dance moves Rivera learned at ballet lessons—while she and the creatures enjoy colorful beverages. Since Rice premiered *Chumlum* already in 1963 and Smith preferred to present *Normal Love* in stages, as part of his evolving format of live film performances, we might even refer to Rice's film as the first Mario Montez film[10]. Be that as it may, it was clearly the context of Rivera's steady close collaboration with Smith that led to the construction of this unique performance identity that Joan Adler describes as «the Rene version of Marilyn Monroe as Maria Montez »[11]. In 1969, Rivera told an interviewer that Mario Montez is «my drag name. It's in honor of Maria Montez, the famous actress...and I have Marilyn Monroe's initials; they are my idols, you might say»[12].

Smith's celebrated mobilization of his own Maria Montez worship for his artistic production obviously inspired others to do the same. Smith and Rivera's friend, writer Ronald Tavel, therefore might have been speaking for a whole generation of 1960s underground artists when he noted that

the importance of Smith for me is that he said, “Don't forget your childhood. Exploit it...Take all the childhood fears, anxieties, impressions, loves and all of that and use that for art”. That was a new idea. I would never mention Maria Montez in public before I met him, because that would seem like talking about a very private thing; it was nobody else's business. They wouldn't understand. And it was somewhat embarrassing too. In that way, he freed me up[13].

As with Tavel, Rivera's interest in Montez and other Hollywood stars, including Monroe and Hedy Lamarr, predated his first encounters with Smith. But it was not until he began collaborating with the artist on shooting sessions, performances, films, and audio recordings that he discovered the means of constructing out of his star worship both a performance identity and a sense of self. In 2012, Montez stated clearly, “I owe everything to him. Without Jack Smith I wouldn't be here today”.

That said, Montez, in turn, was obviously quite central to Smith's work and aesthetic vision throughout the 1960s and early '70s. The artist's writings and notes are littered with references to and ideas for projects with Montez. In addition to his roles in *Flaming Creatures* and *Normal Love*, Montez performed in such Smith films and film fragments as the recently restored *In the Grip of the Lobster* (1966), *Reefers of Technicolor Island/Jungle Island* (1967), and *No President* (1967-70). Montez also appeared in a number of Smith's live performances, most likely beginning with *Rehearsal for the Destruction of Atlantis* (1965). Furthermore, he modelled for numerous photo shoots and slide shows for about a decade, beginning in the early '60s. According to Tavel, Jack Smith claimed that Montez «never took a bad picture. His concentration was complete and a legible, specific idea arranges his features in every print which survives today»[14]. Although Smith worked across media with a varied and changing stable of performers in the '60s—Superstars of Cinemaroc, he called them—which included Marian Zazeela, Beverly Grant, Francis Francine, Joel Markman, Arnold Rockwood, and Irving Rosenthal, it was Montez who came to epitomize the artist's aesthetic vision. A New York Puerto Rican performer whose drag identity paid homage to the Dominican star of Hollywood's orientalist '40s fantasy films, Montez both embodied and anchored Smith's exoticist and tropicalist investments. Smith's tropicalism, as Juan Suárez convincingly argues, embraces difference within contemporary New York City and also projects difference onto an unspecified, vaguely other time and space—one filtered through Latino cultures[15]. Both Montezes then—Maria and Mario—seemed to function for Smith as prime catalysts for conceiving and proliferating his tropicalist vision[16].

GLADSTONE GALLERY



Mario Montez in Ronald Tavel's 1965 play *The Life of Juanita Castro* during the festival LIVE FILM! JACK SMITH! Five Flaming Days in a Rented World at HAU1, Berlin, October 30, 2009. Also pictured (from left to right): Diedrich Diederichsen (Raul), Bruce LaBruce (Che), Rainald Goetz (Director), and Bibbe Hansen (Fidel). Appearing as Extras (from left to right): Marie Losier, Susanne Sachsse, Tim Blue, Marc Siegel, Oliver Husain, Herbert Gschwind, Heide Schlüpmann, and Matthias Haase. Photograph by Andrea Novarin.

While there is no denying that Smith's Maria Montez worship nourished and inspired his artistic collaborators, Rivera's own—lesser-known—fan practices were crucially important not only for Smith's work but also for that of many others in the New York underground film and theater scene. For example, in the late 1950s or early '60s, Montez bought mail-order, reel-to-reel sound-recording equipment and jury-rigged his television set so that he could record soundtracks from the movies that played on TV, including beloved films by Maria Montez, such as *Arabian Nights* (John Rawlins, 1942) and *Cobra Woman* (Robert Siodmak, 1944), and 1930s musicals such as *Hollywood Hotel* (Busby Berkeley, 1937). These well over a hundred soundtracks provided many a pleasureable evening for Montez and his friends throughout the 1960s who, in lieu of frequent opportunities to see the films, would gather in Montez's apartment to listen to them. Montez's recorded film soundtracks were an important source of inspiration for his and Smith's work in film and performance, as well as Charles Ludlam's later work in theater. Not only did these artists lift bits of dialogue from Maria Montez films for use in their work, but they also occasionally directly appropriated excerpts from these recordings for their own film and performance soundtracks[17]. It was likely Montez's recordings of *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* (Arthur Lubin, 1944) and *The Devil Is a Woman* that Tony Conrad borrowed for use in the soundtrack to *Flaming Creatures*. Furthermore, the dialogue in Ludlam's first play, *Big Hotel* (1967), are substantially borrowed from other sources, including *Hollywood Hotel* and *Cobra Woman*, the soundtracks of which he accessed through Montez.

In the summer of 1964, Montez appeared with Smith on Andy Warhol's unfinished, over-five-hour film *Batman Dracula*[18]. Later that year, Montez starred as Jean Harlow in Warhol's first sync-sound

GLADSTONE GALLERY

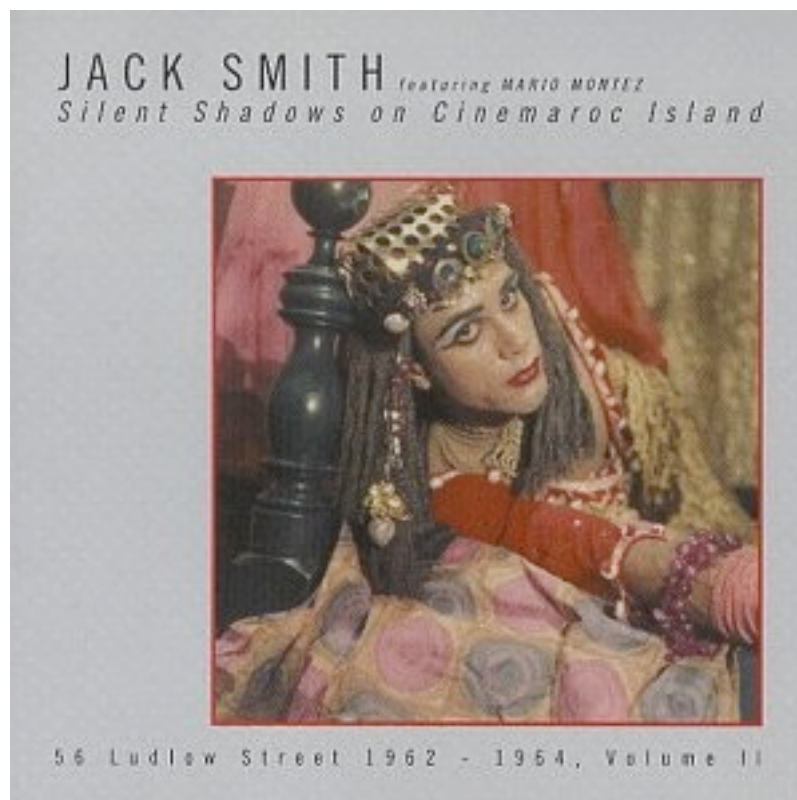
film, *Harlot*, and also appeared in Warhol's two *Mario Banana* short films, as well as his short *Mario Montez Dances*. Warhol noted, «Mario is very, very good and no one moves all the muscles in his face the way Mario does. He really knows what to do in front of a camera. He has an instinct for it»[19]. Montez quickly became one of Warhol's most important screen personalities, with his appearance in *Harlot* inaugurating the star system in underground film[20]. Given the deserved attention directed towards the later celebrated transgender figures associated with Warhol (Candy Darling, Jackie Curtis, and Holly Woodlawn)—it is important to recall that Mario Montez was the Factory's first drag Superstar. His performances in *Screen Test #2* (1965) and *The Chelsea Girls* (1966) cemented his underground and—increasingly—mainstream fame. As critic John Gruen noted in 1967 in the *New York/World Journal Tribune*, «In each film Mario becomes the unmistakable center of attention»[21]. In 1965 and 1966, Montez appeared in a number of other Warhol films, as well, including *Camp* and *More Milk Yvette* (both 1965), *Hedy*, *Ari* and *Mario*, and *Bufferin Commercial* (all 1966). Despite Montez's centrality to lore about the diversity and eccentricity of the Warhol scene, he rarely socialized with the Factory crowd and solely came around to work on a film (usually accompanied by his close friends Smith or Tavel)[22]. He claimed that he didn't feel comfortable there because “they all had college educations”. Moreover, Montez felt distanced from the Warhol scene because he never took drugs. He tried pot only once: “But it made me cough and cough. And it made me lose track of time. So I said I would never touch it again... Who wants to lose track of time?” As he recalled: “I was never invited to these parties. I only went to one... Probably Jack Smith made me go and I went with him. That's where I met Jean Pierre Aumont, Maria Montez's husband. I didn't know he was there. Someone told me, probably Jack. I was surprised. So I went up to him and I said, “Oh, I'm sorry. You probably think I'm doing something bad with the image of your wife”. And he said to me, “It's alright, my boy, as long as you do that with your heart”.

Montez was one of the few in the bohemian underground arts scene to maintain a full-time day job throughout his entire performance career. Whereas many of the other creatures who appeared, for instance, in Smith's legendary photo shoots, which could last over ten hours and continue into the early morning, slept it off the next day, Rivera had to arrive punctually at his day job. Sometimes he would even go directly from the early-morning conclusion of a weekend shoot to the office. “Well, I took off the makeup and costume, went home, took a shower, and went to work at 9 o'clock”. In the late 1960s, Montez made extra money by working as a male model and regularly took out ads in the *Village Voice* to attract customers. All of this extra work was necessary because Montez received no payment at all for his many performances in underground film. In 1967, he claimed, «I could be happier if I didn't have a daytime job. I've so much to do for the filmmakers»[23].

Throughout the intense two-year period of making films with Warhol, Montez continued to collaborate regularly with Smith and other filmmakers. He appeared, for instance, in *Dirt* (Piero Heliczer, 1965), *MM for MM* (Bill Vehr, 1966), and *Life, Death and Assumption of Lupe Velez* (José Rodríguez Soltero, 1966). Montez considered fellow Puerto Rican artist Rodríguez Soltero's film, in which the Superstar gives a spectacular performance as Mexican silent-movie heroine Lupe Velez, one of his best films, “one of the really Hollywood type of films”. In 1968-69, Montez appeared in *Face* (Takahiko Imura, 1968-69) as well as two films by Avery Willard, *Flaming Twenties* (1968) and *Gypsy's Ball* (1969). He also makes a special guest appearance in a blonde Marilyn Monroe wig with a fur wrap while being wheeled down the aisle in a French bath tub and singing “Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend”, in *The Queen* (Frank Simon, 1968), a seminal documentary of a New York City drag pageant. In the early 1970s, the Brazilian artist Hélio Oiticica devoted a series of projects to Montez, including the Super 8 film *Agripina é Roma Manhattan/Agrippina is Rome-Manhattan* (1972)[24]. Oiticica dedicated a brief essay to the underground Superstar in which he coined the term “tropicamp” to characterize both Montez's drag persona and, in the words of Max Jorge Hinderer Cruz, «a resistant element in the gradual commercialization of queer aesthetics at the time»[25].

GLADSTONE GALLERY

In addition to his work on film, Montez also played a seminal role in the development of the Theatre of the Ridiculous, New York City's legendary innovative, gender-queer theater movement. He appeared in John Vaccaro's productions of Ronald Tavel's plays *Screen Test*, *The Life of Lady Godiva* and Indira Gandhi's *Daring Device* (all 1966) and went on to become a central performer in Ludlam's Ridiculous Theatrical Company, appearing in the company's productions until the mid-1970s. Montez also performed in off-off Broadway stage plays, including Jackie Curtis' *Vain Victory* (1971), Harvey Fierstein's *In Search of the Cobra Jewels* (1972) and productions by the Hot Peaches. Throughout his performance career, Montez was known both for his creativity and skill with costume and makeup design and for his generosity in assisting fellow performers with their stage appearance. With his particular brand of thriftstore glamour—and his designs marketed under the imprint “Montez-Creations”—Montez contributed substantially to the aesthetics of 1960s and '70s underground film and theater in New York.



Mario Montez as Cleopatra, Photograph by Jack Smith. CD Cover of Tony Conrad, 56 Ludlow Street 1962-64, Volume 2: Jack Smith, *Silent Shadows on Cinemaroc Island* (Table of the Elements, 1999).

After his performance in Ludlam's *Caprice* (1976), Montez retired from the stage and soon thereafter, during the winter of 1977, relocated to Orlando, Florida. He referred to a number of personal and professional factors that motivated this decision to withdraw from New York and the cultural scene he had helped forge. Apparently, his final stage collaboration with Ludlam was marked by frequent sparring: “It was a very small part. I wanted to change some of my lines and he wouldn't allow me”. Montez also no longer received regular calls to work with other filmmakers and artists. His sense of a waning interest in his artistic skills was coupled by a personal frustration with life in Manhattan, particularly with the extremely harsh winter. «I felt that nobody wanted me. I had a bad flu. I was living in a place in Greenpoint in Brooklyn. I thought, “I'm not going to stay here”, When I got better, I [looked] for clerical

GLADSTONE GALLERY

work and low rents. And the lower rents were in Orlando». Rivera moved to Orlando in January 1977 and worked at various jobs until landing a longtime position as a greeter and ticket-taker at Disney World. Throughout the next three decades, the memorabilia from his performance career—including his heavily illustrated scrapbook—remained (literally) in his apartment closet. In 2009 Montez made his first public appearance since the 1970s in Berlin at the festival LIVE FILM! JACK SMITH! Five Flaming Days in a Rented World[26]. At LIVE FILM!, Montez not only granted a number of public and private interviews but also took on the role of Juanita Castro in Ronald Tavel's 1965 play *The Life of Juanita Castro*, appearing for the first time in the part that was written for him over forty years earlier[27]. In 2012, Montez received a Lifetime Achievement Award at the Teddy Awards at the Berlin Film Festival. In the final four years of his life, Montez was not only able to revisit and comment on his prolific work in the New York underground but also to begin anew with performances, films and photo shoots. At the time of his unexpected death, he was preparing for a series of performances, in New York City, as part of Performa 13 called “Mario Montez Returns”[28].

Marc Siegel

[1] This text is a slightly altered version of my essay, "...for MM", *Criticism*, 56.2, 2014, pp. 361-374.

[2] Gerard Malanga, "Interview with Jack Smith", *Film Culture*, 45, Summer 1967, p.12.

[3] See the obituary I wrote for Montez at <http://artforum.com/passages/id=43473>, *Artforum*, September 27, 2016.

[4] Most writing on Montez relies either on Gary McColgen, "The Superstar: An Interview with Mario Montez", *Film Culture*, 45, Summer 1967, pp.17-20, or Warhol's observations in Andy Warhol and Pat Hackett, *Popism: The Warhol '60s*, Harcourt, Brace and Jovanovich, New York 1980. As far as I know, only two other interviews were published in the 1960s. See John Gruen, "The Underground's M.M.—Mario Montez", *New York/World Journal Tribune*, January 22, 1967, (Reprinted in John Gruen, *Close-Up* - Viking Press, New York 1968, pp. 28-31; and Frank Keating, "...and Lace", *Queen's Quarterly*, Summer 1969, pp.16-19, 44. Avery Willard has a brief biographical statement about Montez in his fascinating book *Female Impersonation*, Regiment Publications, New York 1971, pp. 11-15. In 1971 Brazilian artist Hélio Oiticica engaged Montez in discussion as part of his series of Héliotapes. An English-language transcription of their exchange was first published as Hélio Oiticica, "Héliotape with Mario Montez (1971)", *Criticism*, 56.2, 2014, pp. 379-404.

[5] This text is based on my research in the existing literature and in Montez's personal archives, as well as on numerous private conversations that I had with Montez in Berlin, Orlando, Frankfurt, Wrocław and New York between 2009 and 2012. Gerard Forde and David Kratzner were present at some conversations conducted in August 2011 in Berlin. I benefitted additionally from the public discussions Montez and I staged at Künstlerhaus Mousonturm in Frankfurt on Nov. 22, 2012, with Agosto Machado, and on Nov 24, 2012; at the New Horizons Film Festival in Wrocław with Jim Hoberman, Uzi Parnes, Ela Troyano and Ewa Szablowska on July 26, 2011; at the Arsenal cinema in Berlin on July 30, 2011; at New York University with Lola Pashalinski and Ela Troyano on April 1, 2010; at Columbia University with Agosto Machado on March 31, 2010; and in the context of LIVE FILM! JACK SMITH! Five Flaming Days in a Rented World at the Arsenal and the Hebbel am Ufer Theater in Berlin on October 30, 2009 and with Tony Conrad on November 1, 2009.

[6] I've yet to confirm exactly when *Cleopatra* posters began appearing in New York subways to advertise the Mankiewicz film. Given the scandal around Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor's much publicized

GLADSTONE GALLERY

romance during the film's production, the film was certainly on people's minds much earlier than the New York premiere on June 12, 1963. I mention this because Rivera definitely appeared in female costume in many of Smith's photo sessions prior to 1963, perhaps as early as 1961.

[7] Of Francis Francine's starring role in *Flaming Creatures*, Tony Conrad notes: "The part was actually played by the costume. There are two or three different people playing the Francis Francine part. Frankie was a little bit unreliable. So if he didn't show up, then someone else would play his part. So there's this odd way in which the Francis Francine character changes shape from shot to shot", "Superstars of Cinemaroc", Tony Conrad in conversation with Mario Montez, moderated by Marc Siegel, Arsenal, Berlin, Nov. 1, 2009. One can say the same thing about Dolores Flores's role in the film, except for the significant fact that Rivera was extremely reliable. As I mention above, he simply had a day job and couldn't be at every shoot.

[8] Ibid. For more on these recordings and their significance for Smith and Conrad's later artistic work, see Branden Joseph, *Beyond the Dream Syndicate: Tony Conrad and the Arts After Cage*, Zone Books, New York 2008, pp. 229-234 & 271-274 and Scott MacDonald's interview with Conrad in *A Critical Cinema 5: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers*, University of California, Berkeley 2006, pp. 64-65. Conrad released some of these recordings on two CDs: *56 Ludlow Street 1962-64, Volume 1: Jack Smith: Les evening gowns damnées & Volume 2: Jack Smith, Silent Shadows on Cinemaroc Island*, Table of the Elements, New York 1997 & 1999. There are also over one hundred reel-to-reel audio recordings located in the Smith archive at the Gladstone Gallery in New York, some of which likely feature Montez.

[9] See *56 Ludlow Street 1962-64, Volume 2: Jack Smith, Silent Shadows*. This recording provides Smith a chance to try out some of the ideas he pursues in his brief essay, "The Memoirs of Maria Montez or Meet Me at the Bottom of the Pool", which was published later that same year in *Film Culture*, 31, Winter 1963/1964, pp. 3-4.

[10] Montez himself even claims as much in his 1971 discussion with Hélio Oiticica. See Oiticica, "Héliotape with Mario Montez (1971)", *Criticism*, 56.2, 2014, p. 381.

[11] Joan Adler, "On Location", in Stephen Dwoskin, *Film Is: The International Free Cinema*, Overlook Press, New York, 1975, pp. 12-13.

[12] Keating, "...And Lace", *Queen's Quarterly*, 44, Summer 1969, p.17. Keating asked Montez if he minds being referred to as a drag queen and he replies, "No...It's okay. I used to like the term costume—but drag is alright...It's used and understood by everyone these days" (17, ellipses in original). Apparently Montez changed his mind about the term "drag" between 1967 and 1969 because in an earlier interview, he says: "I don't like the use of the term 'drag' because it has other meanings...it means something bad. I'll wear costumes for films or plays—but not at home—because I'm creating something for art". See McColgen, "The Superstar," 18 (ellipses in original). In this earlier discussion, Montez attributes his affection for Marilyn Monroe to the fact that "she's always sweet".

[13] Matthias Haase and Marc Siegel, "Do It Again! Do It Again! An Interview with Ronald Tavel", *Criticism*, 56.2, 2014, p.348.

[14] Ronald Tavel, *Andy Warhol's Ridiculous Screenplays*, Fast Books, Silverton, OR, 2015, p.22.

[15] Juan A. Suárez, "Jack Smith, Hélio Oiticica, Tropicalism", *Criticism* 56.2, 2014, pp. 295-328, particularly pp. 305-6.

GLADSTONE GALLERY

[16] Brazilian artist Hélio Oiticica argues similarly when he refers to a "MARIA MONTEZ-MARIO MONTEZ condition", meaning the analogous position of each Latin American performer in relation to their North American context—Hollywood and underground cinema, respectively. For Oiticica, Mario Montez is an "actor-personality-materialisation" of Smith's critical look at Latin American clichés. See Oiticica's brilliant short essay "Mario Montez, Tropicamp", trans. Max Jorge Hinderer Cruz, *Afterall*, 28, Autumn/Winter 2011, pp. 17-21, quotes on pages 17 & 18.

[17] Montez's artist friends borrowed not only from his audio recordings. Interestingly, Ken Jacobs has noted that he couldn't have done the soundtracks for his films with Jack Smith, like *Little Stabs at Happiness* (1958-60) and *Blonde Cobra* (1963), if he wasn't able to borrow René Rivera's phonograph. Skype conversation with Ken Jacobs, Arsenal cinema, Berlin, November 1, 2009.

[18] See Callie Angell, "Batman and Dracula: The Collaborations of Jack Smith and Andy Warhol", *Criticism*, 56.2, 2014, pp.159-186.

[19] Qtd. in Gruen, "Mario Montez," p.29.

[20] This is Ronald Tavel's claim. See Tavel, "The Banana Diary: The Making of Andy Warhol's Harlot" (1966) in *Andy Warhol: Film Factory*, ed. Michael O'Pray, British Film Institute, London, 1989, pp. 66-86.

[21] Gruen, "Mario Montez", p. 29.

[22] This fact stands in obvious contrast to claims in many Warhol biographies that link Montez to regulars in the Factory social scene. For instance, Tony Scherman and David Dalton ponder the presence of amphetamine users in the Factory by quoting John Cale to the following effect: "if you look at those characters that were in the Factory—Ondine, Mario Montez, Joe Campbell—in New York at that period of time...where the hell else were these people going to go where they'd be able to express themselves and not just get treated like the looneys they would be if they were in the outside world? There was safety at the Factory." Since Montez neither used drugs, nor dressed in drag in his daily life, he was hardly a "looney" outside the Factory, but simply an ordinary working class Puerto Rican New Yorker. See Scherman and Dalton, *Andy Warhol: His Controversial Life, Art and Colourful Times*, JR Books, London 2010, p.195. See also page 225 for another reference to Montez that implies he was a regular "flamboyant" presence at the Factory.

[23] McColgen, "The Superstar: An Interview with Mario Montez", *Film Culture*, 45, Summer 1967, p.19.

[24] Montez made brief appearances in other films as well, including *Occhio privato sul nuovo mondo* (Alfredo Leonardi, 1970) and *Underground and Emigrants* (Rosa von Praunheim, 1976). He also appeared as an extra in *Candy* (Christian Marquand, 1968).

[25] See Oiticica, "Mario Montez" and Max Jorge Hinderer Cruz, "TROPICAMP, PRE- and POST-TROPICALIA at Once: Some Contextual Notes on Hélio Oiticica's 1971 Text", *Afterall*, 28, Autumn/Winter 2011, p. 4.

[26] This two-part festival curated by Susanne Sachsse, Stefanie Schulte Strathaus, and Marc Siegel for Arsenal – Institute for Film and Video Art, e.V. and HAU/Hebbel Theater am Ufer involved over fifty international artists and scholars and took place in Berlin on March 20 & 21, 2009 (for festival

GLADSTONE GALLERY

participants only) and October 29-Nov. 1, 2009 (public events).

[27] See my brief article, "How Not to Lose Track of Time: Remembering Mario Montez", *Texte zur Kunst*, 92, Dezember 2013, pp. 248-250.

[28] These performances were conceived by artist Conrad Ventur as the culmination of his ongoing work with Montez. In 2010, Montez began a regular collaboration with Ventur that resulted in numerous short videos and photos, including a contribution to Ventur's series of video Screen Tests. Montez also worked with John Edward Heys on the short film *A Lazy Summer Afternoon with Mario Montez* (2011) and appeared in Karel Radziszewski's documentary film *America's Not Ready for This* (2011).

J. HOBERMAN / Performance Notes

MIDNIGHT AT THE PLASTER FOUNDATION: "It's Free to Come Here But You Have to Pay 50¢!"

Jack Smith, circa 1970, 17 mins. B&W.
With Jack Smith and Abbe Stubenhaus
Unknown videographer
Restored through the generosity of VidiPix (New York)

THE SECRET OF RENTED ISLAND a/k/a Orchid Rot of Rented Lagoon

Jack Smith, 1977/1997, 80 mins. Color.
Adapted from Ghosts by Henrik Ibsen
Cast: Jack Smith (Oswald)
Slides by Raffe Azzouny, sequenced by Edward Leffingwell and Joseph Santarromana.
Produced with the assistance of the Estate Project for Artists for AIDS

Few recordings exist of the live performances Jack Smith presented from the late 1960s into the mid 1980s. Indeed, far more people have seen Ron Vawter's interpretation of one such piece, the 1981 *What's Underground About Marshmallows?* that formed the basis for the second act of Vawter's 1991 production *Roy Cohen/Jack Smith*, than saw all of Smith's performances combined!

From the spring of 1970 until his eviction two years later, Smith staged midnight performances—pitched between a ritual and a rehearsal— at the Plaster Foundation of Atlantis, a duplex loft at 36 Greene Street. Half of the loft's middle ceiling had been removed. The remaining portion sheltered a collection of old chairs and sofas—eventually a rickety wooden grandstand—for the audience. At the center of the loft was the performance area, a fantastic accumulation of refuse and junk. This assemblage surrounded a simulated lagoon, made from an inflatable pool, with plastic tubing providing a small waterfall. Further back was an upright victrola, encased in a coffin, from which issued a steady selection of scratchy Latin, Hawaiian and exotic mood music, Hollywood scores, occasional pop songs or educational records. Behind this a few flats stood propped against each other to create a murky backstage area.

Like Kurt Schwitters' legendary merzbau, Smith's monumental assemblage was both specific to its location and continually growing. It incorporated all manner of material, much of which must have been

GLADSTONE GALLERY

found on the streets of the still industrial neighborhood where the Plaster Foundation was located. Included were empty bottles and tin cans, old magazines and fallen pieces of plaster, a toilet, crutches, ‘a number of commercial signs (“Free All Day,” “U.S. Gypsum”), a large heart shaped candy box and several dried out Christmas trees, feathers and streamers, a rubber dinosaur, a teddy bear, various dolls and parts of mannequins. The assemblage was festooned with Christmas tinsel, glitter, and candles, and bathed by colored theater lights from above. Smith encouraged contemplation of his set’s structure by spending a minimum of thirty to forty minutes of each performance making minor adjustments in its composition, or pretending to vacuum it while wrapped in a shawl².

The Plaster Foundation was both Smith’s home and his theater, and the spectator often had the feeling that what one saw enacted there was no more or less than Smith’s daily existence, framed by an audience’s presence. The spectacle began with one’s arrival and ended several hours later when Smith disappeared into his loft’s upper reaches. The play, which varied wildly from performance to performance, involved, in a general sense, listening to music, waiting for the performers to finish dressing up, and watching the slow burial and exhumation of artifacts from the set. It was performed under a number of titles including *Withdrawal From Orchid Lagoon* and *Capitalism of Jingola*. The cast, sometimes referred to as the Reptilian Theatrical Company, also varied and Smith occasionally performed alone. On those nights when there were actors, much of the presentation revolved around their preparations. They often appeared to be unrehearsed and confused, reading from the script whose pages were passed around the stage. Typically, Smith gave them cues and direction while they were performing.

Although some Plaster Foundation productions had an unmistakable aura of menace, others were light and relaxed, characterized by the ironic juxtapositions and Smith’s deadpan clowning. The evocative music, the lateness of the hour, the slowness of the action, the joints that occasionally circulated through the small (and serious) audience, combined to create an elastic framework that successfully encompassed all mishaps and delays—in fact, anything that happened—into the framework of Smith’s art³.

Although the Plaster Foundation served as the studio for No President and was documented in numerous Smith shooting sessions (both 35mm slide as well as super-8), the videotape called for convenience *Midnight at the Plaster Foundation* and most likely shot in early 1970, is the only known record of a performance piece. To judge from the derelict Christmas trees and other seasonal detritus glimpsed in the loft, it may be *Gas Stations of the Cross Religious Spectacular*.) Not surprisingly, given the contaminating effect of the alien video technology, the performance is unusually disastrous. Even before the image has stabilized, Smith can be heard ordering the crew to “restore” some toppled debris and yelling at his assistant Abbe Stubenhaus to yell out his greeting to the few patrons who have climbed the four fire-trap flights to his loft, «It’s free to come here—but you have to pay fifty cents»⁴.

After a while, Smith takes center stage and ponderously informs the audience that “if anyone needs to go to the bathroom, please ask for the Lucky Nun of Noa Noa and give her a dime and she will show you where the bathroom is.” Reading from a script, Smith repeats the injunction that “you must have your dimes ready.” Soon, this solo performance—interspersed with instructions to the unseen crew—breaks down. The artist waves and walks off camera, complaining and muttering, a proud failure.



Made some seven years later, *The Secret of Rented Island* documents Smith’s legendary, gloriously eccentric restaging of Ibsen’s *Ghosts*. The play was one in which the artist had a longstanding interest although, as he told Gaby Rodgers, «it is timely doing *Ghosts*. There are new strains of VD which will not respond to penicillin, you know»⁵.

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Perhaps the most radically pragmatic staging Ibsen has ever received, *The Secret of Rented Island* (a/k/a *Orchid Rot of Rented Lagoon*) was performed at the Collation Center, a loft on Park Place near City Hall. Like all Smith productions, it was in a state of constant flux. At the performance I attended, Regina was played by a large pink plush hippo suspended in a pulley-operated basket, Engstrand and Pastor Manders by a pair of toy monkeys, each placed on a little wagon, while Mrs. Alving had a human interpreter (NYU drama professor Ron Argelander) who sat inside a supermarket shopping cart, swathed in scarves and a thick, black veil. A stage-hand, made up as a hunchback, dressed in a kimono and wearing high, cumbersome wedgies, wheeled the animals and Mrs. Alving on and off stage, positioning them (and also climbing up and down a step ladder to work the lights) as directed by Smith, who played Oswald.

Most of the dialogue was pre-recorded on tape by Smith, using voices of different pitch that varied between a garbled hysteria and a ridiculously slow drone. Smith delivered his lines live, reading from a tattered script which eventually littered the stage along with the handfuls of glitter he produced from a pouch inside his pants. In Smith's adaptation, Oswald was transformed from a failed painter into a forgetful actor. Thus, despite the script he held in his hands, he would repeatedly ask Mrs. Alving to remind him of his place in the play. Although the tape appeared to contain the entire play (with interpolations concerning Uncle Pawnshop and the Lucky Landlord Paradise), it was frequently inaudible, having to compete with the phonograph records of ocean sound-effects and exotic music⁶.

The Secret of Rented Island opened on Hallowe'en 1976 and ran into the new year. Performances began with the burning of an enormous quantity of incense and ended, several intermissionless hours later, with the playing of Doris Day's recording "(Once I Had A) Secret Love" and the ceremonial parting of Mrs. Alving's veil to reveal what Smith described as "a hideously grotesque mask of diseased decay." Purists should know that, in sequencing these slides, an hour of taped pre-performance preparation has been condensed to six minutes.

J. Hoberman © 2000

¹¹ By the early 1970s, Smith's emphasis shifted to performance and he became, in effect, his own creature. Cinemaroc Nickelodeon productions were supplemented—if not supplanted—by a series of impossible-to-recreate slide shows and so-called live films. "A program of mine" means "extra trouble," Smith promised one Hamburg venue. "I am experimenting with various records as the film is projected and making other small corrections. This could be turned to advantage as a glamorous selling point. Often, there is repeat business because people can see the film gaining power as corrections are made and that is a new kind of film excitement." "Jack Smith Film Enterprises, Inc.," *Wait for Me at the Bottom of the Pool: The Writings of Jack Smith* ed. J. Hoberman and Edward Leffingwell, Serpent's Tail/High Risk Books, London 1997, p.149.

²² Several images which Smith employed outline his ideas for an improved society, inescapably bring "The Plaster Foundation" to mind:

In the middle of the city should be a repository of objects that people don't want anymore, which they would take to this giant junkyard. This center of unused objects would become a center of intellectual activity. Things would grow up around it.

GLADSTONE GALLERY

“Uncle Fishhook and the Sacred Baby Poo-Poo of Art,” *Wait for Me* op.cit. p.115.

3 See the detail descriptions by Jonas Mekas and Stefan Brecht in *Jack Smith: Flaming Creature—His Amazing Life and Times* ed. Edward Leffingwell, Serpent’s Tail/PS 1 Museum, London 1997.

4 Abbe Stubenhaus, who regularly participated in a number of these pieces, provides his first-hand testimony in David Reisman’s dossier, “In the Grip of the Lobster: Jack Smith Remembered”, *Millennium Film Journal* #23-24, Winter 1990-91, pp. 69-72.

5 “Casting by Candlelight”, *Soho Weekly News*, 11/4/76, p.29.

6 Although the inanimate actors were given different voices on the tape, Smith sometimes indicated who was speaking by, for example, shutting off a light when Engstrand spoke and turning it back on when Manders delivered his line. I am told by someone who saw the production early in its run that originally there was no taped dialog, but that all the lines were delivered by Smith through a hole in one of the back curtains.

ANDREA LISSONI / What’s Underground About Marshmallows [1]

«What is it we want from a film
?A vital experience
An imagination
An emotional release
All these & what we want from life
Contact with something
We are not, know not
Think not, feel not, understand not,
Therefore: An expansion.»

Jack Smith, “*The Perfect Filmic Appositeness of Maria Montez*”

GLADSTONE GALLERY



Over the last twenty years, I've found myself chasing the ghost of Jack Smith too many times to really be able to write about him with objectivity; above all, without the urge to pile up facts, panicked that I'll forget key aspects or anecdotes. Almost gripped by paralysis at this point, I decided to follow the shining path that the bizarre idol of my late adolescence seemed to point me towards: I gathered all my material around me, heaped on a table and on the floor, in the middle of the living room. I popped the audio collection *Jack Smith - Les Evening Gowns Damnées* – published for Table of Elements in 1997 by Tony Conrad (creator of the soundtrack for *Flaming Creatures*, 1963) – into the CD player and pushed repeat. In the same vein, I put my old, pirated copy of *Flaming Creatures* into the DVD player. And then, all night long, I did nothing at all. Or rather, to be honest, between one eternal pause and another, I watched the film for a bit, I listened for a bit, I thought for a bit, I rubbed my hands together for a bit, remembering my trips with the precious reels of *Normal Love*, *I Was a Male Yvonne DeCarlo*, *The Yellow Sequence* and *Scotch Tape*, carted from train to train in a leather case, from the Paris headquarters of Light Cone, the distributor, to Milan, Bologna, Pisa, then back to Paris, long ago in 1999. And, of course, I read for a bit, getting lost in some article – like Ken Kelman's essay in the original copy of *Film Culture* from the summer of 1963, written just after its screening at the Bleecker Street Cinema, agreeing with him that the film seems to take place in an unidentified location, outside of space and time, in a gorgeous black and white that evokes Gustav Doré's illustrations of Dante, piling legend onto legend, effortlessly, and that it is a hell where these creatures are burning, but their joy also makes it a heaven... Until *Be-Bop-a-Lula* would wake me up, at about forty-minute intervals, reminding me of the end of that tortured masterpiece.

In short, I did an awkward, not entirely unconscious re-enactment of what anyone who'd been through New York from the late '60s to the late '80s had told me – prompted by the offhanded questions I'd throw out – that a Jack Smith performance was apt to be: hours of waiting, the artist occasionally appearing, exotic '40s music in the background, and nothing else. Only when the last viewers gave up in exhaustion and started to trickle out would Jack Smith begin. In a similar way, the full-blown rapture of chaotic performative writing came over me and the time came to put pen to paper. How could I summarize the essential traits of such a dense body of work, spanning film, theatre, performance,

GLADSTONE GALLERY

photography, visual art and life? It could all be wrapped up in one word: authenticity. Its authenticity in tracing out a space between art and life where improvisation is wedded to discipline and consistency, the visual language – with the fluidity of camera movements and superimposed images, in the case of his films – grafted onto performances in which gesture plays the key role, the dreamlike, narcotic expansion of time encountering the bodies of transvestites, divas and ant-divas. But then – and Sylvère Lotringer emphasizes this, both in Mary Jordan’s documentary *Jack Smith and the Destruction of Atlantis* (2006), and in his writing – Jack Smith loathed capitalism and its “pasty cheerfulness”, and couldn’t help but cling to authenticity, steering clear of the ideology of “pop” happiness at all costs, of the permanent dictatorship of business, in favour of shared emotion, of community life, of savouring the beauty in everyday existence. And so Susan Sontag, one of his admirers (along with Tony Conrad, La Monte Young, John Waters, John Zorn, et al.), was perhaps exaggerating when she said Jack Smith and his film – the most censored in the history of experimental underground cinema – *Flaming Creatures* (1963), were «pop», but she was spot-on in identifying him as the forefather and pioneer of camp and its surrounding culture (“Notes on Camp”, in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, Farrar, Strass & Giroux, New York 1966). With his intolerance for the rules of consumerism and his blasted authenticity, Jack Smith was naturally destined to become paranoid, obsessed with the irony of having been intellectually robbed (specifically, by Jonas Mekas/Uncle Fishhook, whom he accused of stealing the film that had made him famous).

Whether he was looted or not, Smith was anything but indifferent to the culture that later became predominant in the postmodern era, as the first to devote himself to amassing fragments and rubbish. The accumulation of pop garbage collected directly in the streets, once infused with Hollywood exoticism via slideshows, films and music, became a key theatrical element in his performances (especially the ones at the Plaster Foundation of Atlantis, his first loft in downtown Manhattan from ’70 to ’72). And the contemplation of that flea-market array of knickknacks, garbage and lights, perhaps barely moved around by the artist, was just the preface to a kind of action that would exhaust anyone, an action constantly on the brink of explosion. His lesson did not go unheard, and Bob Wilson in particular would later skilfully develop on the idea of dragging out performance time.

Aside from the obvious (and sometimes stereotyped) queer, camp and kitsch elements, architecture – but above all, ruins, demolition, and deterioration – are themes that may be less visible, but are fundamental to Jack Smith’s creative obsession. *Scotch Tape* (1959-62), his first, very short film, was shot with a 16mm camera borrowed from experimental filmmaker Ken Jacobs, on a set of his own making: a vast expanse of rubble, cables, rusty metal bars and chunks of concrete, in which our hero stages a dazzling group dance. And the nightmare (or beautiful dream, depending on one’s standpoint) of *I Was a Male Yvonne DeCarlo* (1968-70) comes to a brusque end amid the smoke and dust of bulldozers hard at work, tearing down the Broadway Central Hotel.

And then, in addition to the blatant apologia of Hollywood exotica, the myth of the magical, decadent Orient, the inordinate passion for a film like Mario Camerini’s *Maciste in Africa* (1926), the adulation of the disastrous diva Maria Montez, whom Smith adored for the inept acting that brought her identity to the fore (later reincarnated in the transsexual Mario Montez, the star of his films), there is the penguin Yolanda. Yolanda represents the whole bestiary of the animal nature, as a constant reference in Jack Smith’s work, and accompanied him faithfully over the years, putting in an unforgettable appearance in 1974 on the streets of Rome, with a spangled bra and a red feather headdress. One of the reasons for my naive pursuit of Jack Smith over the years is that I had come to see his practice as seminal, in its relation to the mythographic liberality of the early Matthew Barney (especially *Normal Love*, 1963, perhaps his most stunning full-length film), its splendid resonance with the narcissistic, Orientalist iconography of Luigi Ontani, stripped of the collective underground dimension, or with the radiant performative energy of Carmelo Bene’s films, heretical in their own right, with their love of costumes and exaggerated use of

GLADSTONE GALLERY

the full range of the human voice.

Paradoxically, it is the history of experimental film, due to both the censorship of *Flaming Creatures*, with the accompanying scandal at the international festival in Knokke-le-Zoute, Belgium, in 1963, and to Jack Smith's participation in its climatic phase – that of Expanded Cinema, with *Rehearsal for the Destruction of Atlantis* at Jonas Mekas's festival in 1965, which included La Monte Young/Marian Zazeela, Claes Oldenburg, Bob Rauschenberg, Terry Riley, Andy Warhol – that risks giving a two-dimensional impression of the «only true underground filmmaker» (John Waters).

What is obvious today is unquestionably its visual power, the devastating richness of an artistic vision that is eternally original. And, to repeat this one last time, its free creative impetus, clear integrity, and aching authenticity.

In other words, the conditions that – indifferent to the stubborn dictates of consumption – trigger it all, make one take action. Which, on a smaller scale, is just what happened with this nocturnal essay.

Andrea Lissoni

JERRY TARTAGLIA / This Is Just What I Expected!: Restoring the Films of Jack Smith

Jack Smith was not what we would call a “positive thinker.” He expected the worst from people and from life situations. He was cynical, depressing, and generally a pessimistic man. In life and art he expected the worst and invited failure. He was demanding to a point that he believed his friends, assistants and acolytes were “slaves,” as he himself called them. It almost seemed as if he set up himself and his filmic situations for disaster by establishing near-impossible conditions.

He was, on the other hand, a creative genius who intuitively understood the visual potential of his medium, and would *on the spot* design his imaginative play between subject and camera (his play with the mirror in *Blonde Cobra* comes to mind). He was also a confident film editor who seized *the moment of projection* as the time in which to re-edit his work while in performance, using *masking tape* to create impromptu “splices.” And, of course, he was a Director who had implicit trust in the shooting situation, so much so that he allowed the shot to extend in time beyond the “normal” length, and enable the emergence of the sublime.

More than twenty years have passed since I began working on the restoration and preservation of Jack's films. I have often said that I am his last living “slave.” For two decades I have cleaned his films, re-spliced every single one of his makeshift masking-tape “splices,” tried to decipher and respect his editorial decisions and understand his intentions, attempted to ensure that his glorious use of color was reproduced in the exhibition copies of his work, and painfully resisted the temptation to re-edit or re-design any of his work according to my own aesthetic values.

And, despite my best efforts, like all of his “slaves” I inevitably became embroiled in Jack Smith's battles and feuds, and watched as various egos vied for the supremacy of their own perception of who and what Jack Smith and his work “really” is. (YAWN. I continued re-doing his splices.)

Then, in 2008, the Arsenal Institute of Film and Video in Berlin hosted LIVE FILM! JACK SMITH!, in which his complete, restored oeuvre was shown during “five flaming days,” and audiences were treated to the first public appearance of MARIO MONTEZ after several decades of absence. For my own participation In LIVE FILM! JACK SMITH! I created a short video installation piece that uses some of

GLADSTONE GALLERY

the excised masking-tape splices which were removed during the restorations. It's called *Remains To Be Seen*.

Around that same time, The Barbara Gladstone Gallery, NY and Brussels took on the role of custodian of the Estate of Jack Smith. The gallery created an archive for his films, photography and static art works, and, with a firm commitment to upholding the aesthetic integrity of his work, continues the task of restoration, preservation and exhibition, enlisting my help in these undertakings.

Today, in 2013, I find myself once again sitting in front of a MovieScop Viewer, hand-cranking my 16mm rewinds, and executing hot splices and guillotine-tape splices on Jack's Kodachrome camera original and Ektachrome work prints, while listening to his ¼-inch reel-to-reel tape recordings.

This time, however, with the support of The Gladstone Gallery, I have access to his writings, notes and ephemera, as well as *all* of the film and media-related material in one place. This has made the current restoration project much easier. There are several newly restored works that will be coming out of these efforts.

Hamlet in the Rented World is one of these pieces. As early as 1972, Jack had been working on an improved version of the Bard's play. Stefan Brecht notes in his book, *Queer Theater*, that Jack felt the play was:

«...very badly written, no structure, more like a radio or TV series, but can be salvaged by much cutting. Only the good lines are to be retained. It will be in the family: just Hamlet (Jack Smith), Gertrude (Marie Antoinette, one of Vaccaro's actresses), Ophelia (Silva – a drag Queen I don't know), and Plodius (Polonius + Claudius, – to be played by myself). It will be Jack's first talking movie, in lush colors. The U-P film studio will help with the sound...»I

I have found some of the film material in the Smith Archive. The material is largely unedited, and therefore, following my own guiding principle of film preservation, it will remain so. Audiences will see the material in the same form that Jack himself last saw it.

The film, however, is not the only *Hamlet* in the archive. Typical of Jack Smith is his cross-media/cross-art form methodology. (Yes, Jack had a method!) He staged at least one Live Performance of *Hamlet and the 1001 Psychological Jingoleanisms of Prehistoric Landlordism of Rima-Puu* for which there is 35mm slide documentation. He also left behind several different typed scripts (some running to about 40 pages) which were either intended as shooting scripts for the uncompleted film or for the actualized performances. The title on some of these scripts reads *Hamlet in the Rented World* while others are titled *Hamlet and the 1001 Psychological Jingoleanisms of Prehistoric Landlordism of Rima-Puu*. There are also several ¼-inch reel-to-reel tape recordings of Jack as he is reading selected lines from some of these scripts. These tapes reveal themselves to be more than merely “wild sound” (that is, unsynched audio) for the 16mm film. It seems that these tapes are themselves a kind of audio-performance of the scripts. With his usual aplomb, Jack rehearses and repeats a single line over and over again, apparently feigning dissatisfaction with his own delivery, then repeating exactly the same line with the same style of delivery.

At first it was tempting to try to match these reels to the picture, until it became clear there was no narrative connection between the two. As usual, Jack Smith invites us to wade with him into the swamp of uncertainty where we can expect to be surprised by his humor and political acumen.

The current excavation of the archive has also yielded some fascinating shorter films that are being assembled onto a single reel for viewing. This reel, which will be titled *GEMS, CLIPS, AND SHORTS*, is a collection of pieces that are complete executions of a single, cinematic, visual idea featuring one or more of Jack's notorious “Creatures”: Mario Montez, Tally Brown, Irving Rosenthal and Silva, the drag queen mentioned by Stefan Brecht, above. Like almost all of his films, the narrative is obscure or completely dismantled, yet there is a driving filmic purpose in each of them.

Similarly there are several longer films that he may have been used as part of his many “Live Film Performances,” or which he may have screened as stand-alone works. The five that have come to light

GLADSTONE GALLERY

thus far are: *Boiled Lobster of Lucky Land Lady Lagoon* (also identified as *Color Heatwave of Tabu*), *Exotic Landlordism*, *Hatchet Picnic*, and newly remastered versions of *Buzzards Over Baghdad*, and *Sinbad of Baghdad*.

Together these newly-restored films will bring a new understanding and appreciation of the work and life of Jack Smith. Judging by appearances, it would seem that he expected no great outcome from his work. He anticipated failure and sometimes even created the conditions that would invite it. Yet, through his sometimes paranoiac outbursts, he had an unflagging demand for perfection in his creative process, and a willingness to endure the kind of sacrifices in his life that most of us would never tolerate.

Jack's life and work were intertwined in "failure"—described as a *Glorious Catastrophe* by Dominic Johnson in his seminal study of that name:

«He abandons himself to failure, and offers consolations for its inevitability in the spaces between art and the everyday. Such spaces are often sexual, not least because sex is the province of ardour and energy, of intimate exertions, but also of failures, inasmuch as intimacy is frequented by incomprehension, misrecognition, and other meagre humiliations. Smith strays into catastrophe because his work was a persistent attempt to take stock of and attend to the disasters of a life.»²

This was just what he expected!

Jerry Tartaglia

(www.jerry501.com)

published in Otherzine, Issue #25, Fall 2013 -

(<http://www.othercinema.com/otherzine/other-cinema-calendar-circa-1990/>)

1 Stefan Brecht, *Queer Theater*, Methuen Drama, Methuen 1982.

2 D. Johnson, *Glorious Catastrophe. Jack Smith, performance and visual culture*, Manchester University Press, Manchester 2012.