

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Hoberman, J., "Jack in the Box," *ARTFORUM*, September 2011

## Jack in the Box

J. HOBERMAN ON JACK SMITH'S POSTHUMOUS CAREER

**AMONG THE MANY EVOCATIVE ELEMENTS** to be found in "Thanks for Explaining Me," the recent exhibition at Gladstone Gallery in New York devoted to the work of Jack Smith (1932–1989), was the unmistakable sound of the artist's voice, at once somnolent and hysterical. Even before one had fully entered the show, Smith could be heard loudly complaining about art-world corruption.

Smith was famous long ago for his scandalous 1963 film *Flaming Creatures*, and like an insanely protective parent, he took steps to ensure that none of his subsequent work would ever leave the nest. Thus, as positioned by curator Neville Wakefield, Smith's recorded screed—like the exhibition's rubric (a Smith koan found scribbled on an index card)—served as both introduction and inoculation. The terminally underground, wildly uncommercial photographer, filmmaker, performance artist, and all-around difficult personality's resistance to a show such as this was . . . part of the show.

How do you commodify an artist so temperamentally, if not pathologically, opposed to commodification? It

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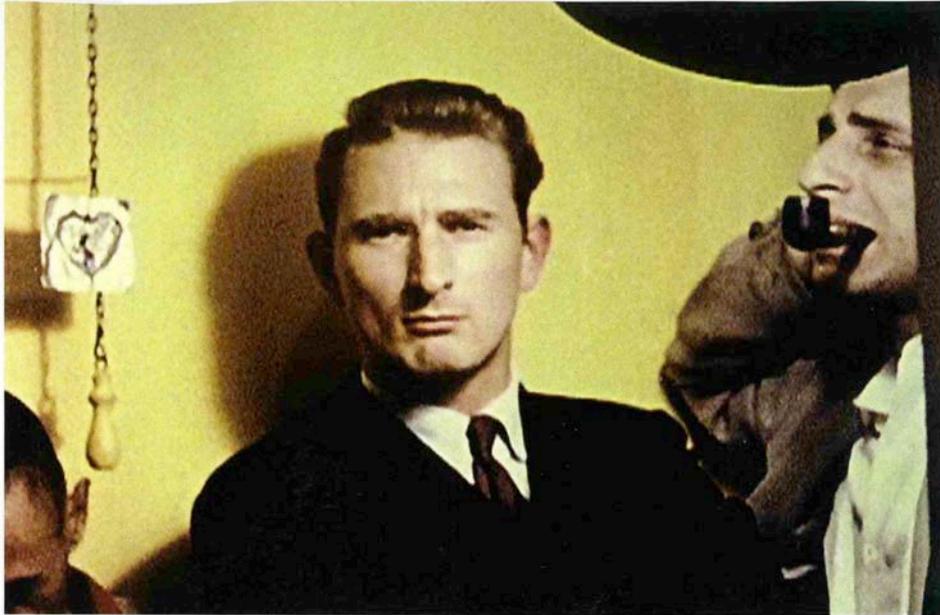
helps if the artist dies, as Smith did, intestate—willfully leaving no will, despite the efforts of his friends. Smith may even have wanted his work destroyed. His failure to complete a movie following *Flaming Creatures*, while endlessly recutting the footage to its putative follow-up, *Normal Love* (1963–), was itself a form of autodestruction. One of Smith's most caustic insults was to call someone a "walking career." His own suggests that of the creatures in *I Walked with a Zombie*: It's posthumous.

Posthumous, convoluted, and Kafkaesque, literally. The reader will recall that Kafka explicitly instructed the executor of his will, Max Brod, to burn all his unpublished papers upon his death and that, when the time came, in 1924, Brod refused to do so. Unfinished novels were published, while the writer's papers (including letters, notebooks, and handwritten manuscripts) were locked up, for decades, in bank vaults in Zurich and Tel Aviv. Last year, a judge in Jerusalem ordered the safe-deposit boxes opened so their contents might be assessed by literary experts; the manuscripts' fate remains in dispute. While most people are grateful for Brod's decision not to destroy Kafka's papers, few would regard the publication of unfinished stories or their reconstruction, from drafts or notes, as unproblematic. All of the writer's novels remained incomplete at his death—*The Castle* famously stopping short midsentence. If the posthumous disposition of Kafka's papers poses a legal, literary, and moral conundrum, the dilemma is even more acute in the case of Jack Smith.

Here I must explain my own involvement with Smith's posthumous career. Although I conducted one long interview and had a number of casual conversations with the artist, I can't say that I knew him. Still, having attended (and in some cases written about) several dozen of his performances from the early 1970s through the mid-'80s,

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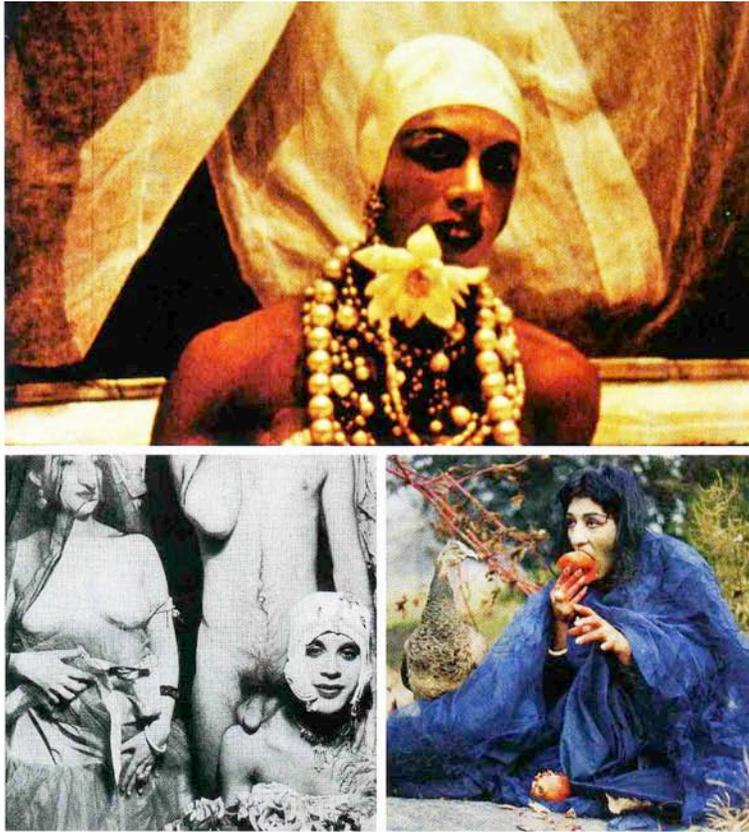


Jack Smith in Ken Jacobs's *Blonde Cobra*, 1959-63.

including slide shows and live presentations of his unfinished films, I was well acquainted with "Jack Smith." Smith invited me to his events and kept me current with his doings. I *was* his press list and thus, some weeks after his death on September 16, 1989, enlisted by a friend of his, performance artist Penny Arcade, to help clear the chaotic mass of drawings, papers, photographs, posters, slides, costumes, and films filling his East Village apartment before the landlord emptied this uniquely renovated hovel (complete with homemade Baghdad cornices, murals painted with mustard, and so on). I was particularly concerned about the fate of the films and, for most of the next decade, worked with Jerry Tartaglia (who had once salvaged *Flaming Creatures*'s original footage from a pile of sound fill at a postproduction house and returned it to a mildly surprised Smith) and Anthology Film Archives in New York (Smith's most loyal institutional supporter and hence his *bête noire*) to preserve, restore, and distribute these; at the same time, responding to Arcade's urging, New York's P.S. 1 (then called the Institute for Contemporary Art/P.S. 1 Museum) took temporary custody of the "archives" (the term can be used only loosely) in advance of a full-blown Smith exhibition. That show, "Flaming Creature: The Art and Times of Jack Smith," organized by in-house curator Edward Leffingwell,

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Clockwise from top: Jack Smith, *Normal Love*, 1963, still from a color film in 16 mm, 95 minutes.  
Jack Smith, untitled, ca. 1958–62/2011, color photograph printed from original color negative, 14 x 11".  
Jack Smith, untitled, ca. 1958–62/2011, black-and-white photograph, 10 x 8".

filled eight galleries on P.S. 1's ground floor when it finally opened in late 1997, in conjunction with the Jack Smith film retrospective that I organized at the American Museum of the Moving Image (also in New York).

The P.S. 1 show was accompanied by two publications (a catalogue and an anthology of Smith's writings), heralded with a cover story in this magazine, and reviewed enthusiastically in the *New York Times*, but it traveled to only one other venue (the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh). Putative partners in Europe and the US never came through. Nor did the art world express much interest, although one well-known painter did offer to purchase the textile prints of Smith's color photographs made for the show. The transaction was never consummated. We felt queasy about such a sale, though had the painter offered free storage for the archives, I daresay we would have accepted. In the absence of further institutional support, Arcade and I, along with lawyer Mary D. Dorman, and with the knowledge of the New York City public administrator's office, created the not-for-profit Plaster Foundation to store and look after Smith's now boxed archives. There were a few other publications, museum

loans, and slide presentations, but plans to donate Smith's papers to a downtown university and produce a book of his photographs were aborted in early 2002, when, thanks to the machinations of a documentary-film production, Smith's long-estranged sister surfaced to demand money and lay claim to the material.

In 2008, after six years of legal entanglements (see C. Carr's *Village Voice* cover story of March 2, 2004, "Flaming Intrigue," for details), gallerist Barbara Gladstone cut the Gordian knot and acquired Smith's estate from his sister as part of a settlement with the Plaster Foundation and its affiliates, including myself. That, at any rate, is the (necessarily) condensed version.

Given this history, a documentary exhibition detailing the twenty-year legal adventures of Smith's never-declared estate might be interesting in a Hans Haacke-ish sort of way, at least as a cautionary tale. That's not "Thanks for Explaining Me," although the show does inevitably raise important questions regarding the artist's intentions. "Thanks" was actually three exhibitions. The first was a smaller, lazier, less coherent version of the sprawling P.S. 1 retrospective. Smith's slides, films, and performances were sampled; a wall was cluttered with his graphic work (a few sketches and collages, a *fumetto*, but mainly Wite-Out-enriched pasteups for posters and publicity flyers).

The "second" exhibition, which might unkindly have been called "Thanks for Exploiting Me," was more successful—as a powerful example of what Smith's admirer Andy Warhol termed "business art." "Exploiting" was a white-box presentation of thirty newly printed photographs (taken between 1958 and 1962): specifically, twenty fourteen-by-eleven-inch color analog C-prints and ten ten-by-eight-inch black-and-white gelatin silver prints. The C-prints, dating mainly from the late '50s, when Smith operated a Lower East Side storefront photo studio,

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included ravishingly beautiful images of pensive odalisques painted blue (MOMA purchased a similar, original print in 1960), at times posed with a rented peacock; wigged, heavily made-up creatures in a field of sunflowers; and dense compositions of shrouded young men cavorting amid the rubble-strewn site of the future Lincoln Center (the "set" for Smith's own single-roll film *Scotch Tape* [1959–62]). The black-and-white images, a few from Smith's 1962 art project *The Beautiful Book*, were no less stylized but more confrontational. These studio shots depict half-naked models of various genders, ages, and body types (some later featured in *Flaming Creatures*), sinuously interlaced amid an impoverished mise-en-scène complicated by veils and textures in the fashion of Smith's favorite director, Josef von Sternberg.

Although tending toward the cautious, the selected photographs were all notable for their sumptuous imagery, as well as for their date of origin. (Who was doing *that* in 1958!) But historical interest is not identical with historical aura: These gorgeously crafted objects are not Jack Smith photographs. Rather, they are photographs printed, in most instances for the first time, from Smith's negatives. Should it make a difference? Even new-minted, they're still relics exhumed from the Mummy's Tomb. (The same is true, mutatis mutandis, of the post-*Flaming Creatures* movies, which are assembled footage scored with records from Smith's collection.)\*

\* Smith's photographs (or rather his negatives) were recognized as the most valuable part of his estate. According to Arcade, even as the artist lay dying, his longtime frenemy Irving Rosenthal wrote from San Francisco, offering to take the material for safekeeping. Smith ignored this, as he did all questions about the disposition of his work. When I met Rosenthal after Smith's death, he immediately asked after the negatives; a decade later, the producer of the Smith documentary (a onetime associate of Rosenthal's) sued the Plaster Foundation for their possession while a lawyer representing Smith's sister (and himself an old friend of Rosenthal's) proposed a deal with the Plaster Foundation by which both sides might profit, striking and selling prints from the negatives. (We declined, as it seemed both counter to the artist's wishes and a distortion of his work.) Gladstone is now offering the thirty photographs in editions of ten, and even if one were to assume a quite modest price per print, with all of the proceeds going to the gallery, it could easily recoup its initial investment on this show alone. This doubtless would have inflamed Smith's well-established "hatred of capitalism," but the fact remains that, despite ample opportunity in the two decades following his death, no museum or other nonprofit cultural institution proved even remotely capable of acting with Gladstone's determination and dispatch to secure and preserve Smith's work.

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From top: Jack Smith, untitled, ca. 1971, mixed media on paper, 13 3/4 x 13 3/4". Jack Smith, untitled (business card), ca. 1978, photocopied mixed media collage, 3 3/4 x 4 3/4".

Smith's actual photographs possess another sort of beauty. Although he did have at least two solo gallery shows (one of color prints at the Limelight Gallery in 1960 and another, with photographs pasted on three-and-a-half-inch wooden cubes, at the Ferewhon Gallery some five years later), the artist seems to have been mainly interested in publishing his photographs—not just in Beat zines like *Film Culture* and *Gnaoua* but in *Vogue*! In any case, there are relatively few vintage Smith photographs; those shown at P.S. 1, many of which had been given to friends (or printed by them), are distinguished by a studied indifference to craft (they are typically one-light jobs), as well

as by the casual treatment to which they were subjected (the pictures were folded, torn, and otherwise distressed). The Gladstone images may not be cropped (and are sensitive to scale), but they are unavoidably "improved." The film artist Ken Jacobs, who worked with Smith in the late '50s, recalls the early color photographs as having been fastidiously printed. But by the early '60s, Smith's aesthetic had radically changed:

*The Beautiful Book* was (haphazardly) assembled from two-and-a-half-inch-square contact prints, and the cubes, which languished for years in the bottom of a patron's closet (and may be there yet), featured roughly Instamatic-size commercial prints. Nonetheless, "Thanks for Exploiting Me" was a more straightforward and authentic exhibition than "Thanks for Explaining Me."

During the mid-'60s heyday of underground movies, Smith inspired imitation; in death, he provokes appropriation and impersonation. Far more people saw Ron Vawter portray Smith in the 1992 play (and subsequent movie) *Roy Cohn/Jack Smith* than ever saw Smith portray himself. Several years ago, artist Bec Stupak "remade" *Flaming Creatures* sight unseen on the basis of its descriptions. The Gladstone show acknowledged this urge—in the third exhibition within the exhibition, which might have been titled "Thanks for Inviting Me (to Exploit Him)"—by soliciting three such tributes, two of which actually ended up incorporating the artist's footage (though all were given access to, and encouraged to use in their own work, about an hour of "unedited" 16-mm film shot by Smith). The one that doesn't was the most successful in parodying this premise—Ryan McNamara's push-cart heaped with "flaming merch" (false noses, glitter-encrusted lobster crackers in the shape of a claw), accompanied by a speculative video that seems to reimagine Smith as a photographer of weddings and bar mitzvahs.

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In the absence of the artist, those charged with packaging Smith seem compelled to mimic the profligacy of his imagination (as well as to adopt his evocative patois). The P.S. 1 show, which improved on even as it restored the artist's costumes, and even more so, the catalogue designed to accompany it, practiced a form of sensory bombardment—as does the MTV-style montage of Mary Jordan's 2006 documentary *Jack Smith and the Destruction of Atlantis*, in which the filmmaker herself at one point imitates Smith's voice. The central room at Gladstone was the latest of these Smithologizing freak-outs—a four-wall circus that offered, without significant comment or identification, the simultaneous projection of random slides made by or for Smith in Germany and Italy, a documentation of a 1976 performance piece, and a selection of short films. Smith may have called one of these shorts *Overstimulated* (1959–63), but aesthetic blitzkrieg was not his bag. On the contrary. His performances were glacial in their pacing; his slide shows typically held individual images for a trance-inducing length of time.

These slides, incidentally, are the real flotsam of Atlantis. Smith left hundreds, if not thousands, of them; those from the late '60s and early '70s are as rich and startling as his early photographs, albeit far harder to catalogue and even trickier to exhibit (or sell). How might one share these images with the world? Smith's slide shows were something of a cumulative improvisation. He left no cue sheets. One might program a random assortment with the slide changing every two to three minutes (and the projector intermittently breaking down), accompanied by a wild track of Smith's favorite music (Martin Denny's "Quiet Village," scratched LPs of Rimsky-Korsakov, inane educational presentations found in a Canal Street thrift bin). But even if the gallery were open from 11:30 PM to 2 AM and the air thick with burning incense, such a show could only be an academic re-creation. Thanks for explaining me, indeed: The artist made sure that it's just not possible to have "Jack Smith" without Jack Smith. Or, as Kafka put it, "Some ruses are so subtle that they defeat themselves." □

*"Jack Smith: A Feast for Open Eyes," a series of screenings, readings, symposia, and performances will take place at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, September 7–18.*

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