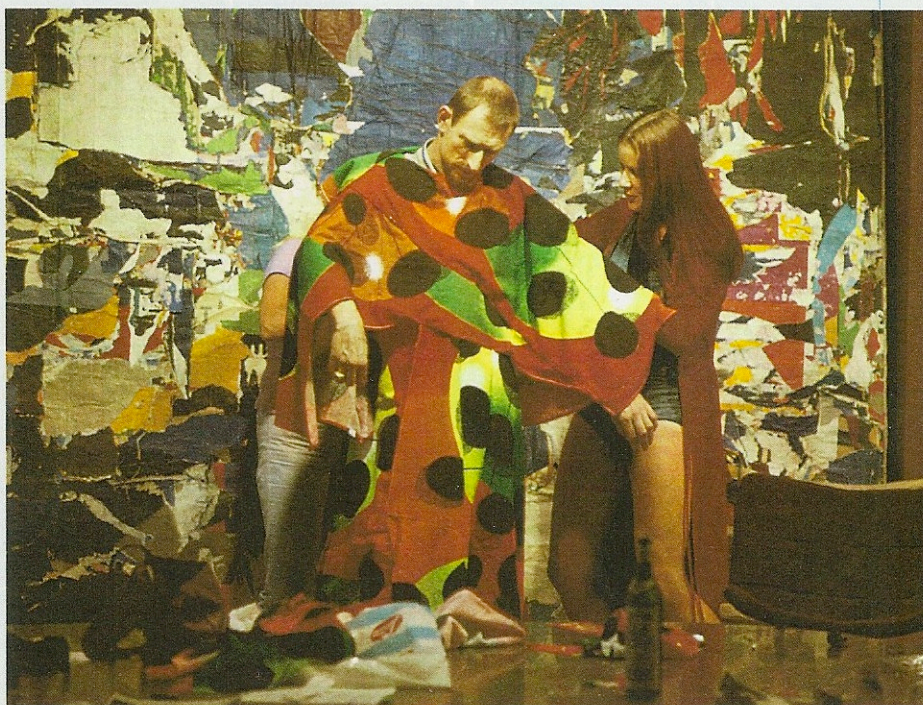


Berlin
Live Film! Jack Smith!
Five Flaming Days in
a Rented World
 28 October — 1 November
 Various venues

If you listened up a bit, which is to say, if you stayed put for the duration, for the not-newly commissioned stuff, for some of the more cranky or inefficiently-told tales, the material reality of pre-suburbanised pre-professionalised downtown NYC of the 1960s and 1970s, and the conditions, rage, un-archived anarchic output (not to mention the sexual militancy) it produced, was very much in evidence.

Fortunately, Berlin remains a city in which vitriol has not yet been displaced by enthusiasm, politeness, grateful inclusion or optimism, as the tools of the culturally industrious. Thus, the following were less displaced along the time-space continuum than you might imagine: Penny Arcade's performance 'Denial of Death' – including a diatribe against Roselee Goldberg for ignoring Jack Smith in the 1980s, flinging equal rancor at Performa 2009 for excluding Penny Arcade herself and by extension the NYC underground; Mario Montez' projected photo album from 1960s and 1970s theatre flyers and programmes, studio photos, and film stills accompanied by minimal verbal description; the re-staging of Ronald Tavel's 'The Life of Juanita Castro' with Mario Montez finally appearing in the title role; the Skype session with Ken Jacobs, the late night screenings of 'Normal Love'; Mario Montez' 'Screen Tests'.

A few of the works commissioned for the event confirmed my suspicion that such radicalising aesthetics and grandiose visions are better objects of homage than of belated mimicry. Marie Losier's film 'Slap the Gondola!', in which Tony Conrad flapped about in a mermaid suit aboard a ship overrun by prancing cross-dressed young individuals slapping each other with kilos of dead mackerel, left me to ponder at not having ever noticed dead animals in a Jack Smith film or performance. Evidently, the morbidity of Smith's work is harder won, the excesses of his practice having little to do with such rational biological dynamics, with recognisably efficient routes to 'perversity'. The artifice and baroque ornamentation derived from the natural world in Smith's work provides a more active threat, on equal and irresolvable footing as anything human; Smith rarely used anything from the natural world to



stand for itself in any case. 'Trash is the material of creators.'

'If Jack were here –' Jerry Tartaglia, peering down from the podium that first evening, 'If Jack were here, he would be mortified – at a cinema full of art- or film-school graduates, curators, theorists, film programmers, archivists, academics, in a few words, all that Jack Smith raged against with his immense person and the gathered force of his creative output. All the same, the intentions of artists are thankfully disregarded in the interest of historical dialectics. The standout lectures in the program were Callie Angell on the Smith and Warhol collaborations, Douglas Crimp on Paul Swan's dance aesthetics, and Diedrich Diedrichsen on Smith's protracted gestures of delay and failure.

Tartaglia has never been sparing in his estimation of the vultures descending on this particular body of work, the remnants and props of his performances – stating the urgency, some years ago at the Arsenal (likely during the battle with Smith's sister or the Mary Jordan doc) of 'keeping the films out of the hands of the heterosexuals'. Here his brief introductory comments described the last 20 years restoring and presenting Smith's films as that of an underground/experimental film undertaker: working and working on the body, only to face the puzzled assemblage of 'people who knew Jack' and who would lean in to say, 'Yeah, that looks like Jack' or, 'Doesn't look a bit like him'. Tartaglia vowed, "This is the last time I am going to introduce 'Flaming Creatures'."

The opening program's gem was Birgit Hein's 10-minute video for German television, 'Kino '74 – Jack Smith', a press conference of sorts for Jack Smith's participation in the *Kunst bleibt Kunst* project in Cologne. Jack Smith strutting in Orientalist plumage at the Cologne zoo, delivering a severe monologue against the institutionalisation of creativity, musing, turbaned, against a backdrop of large desert-dwelling creatures, roaming, the film cutting occasionally to the puzzled German art public.

Something must be said about the iconic and reticent Mario Montez, whose disarming reappearance at the Arsenal pre-emptively paralysed any onstage queer-theorising. Montez' most enlightening moments had less to do with gowns and lipstick (that's what his photo album was for) than with having explained NYC in the 1960s and 1970s in about 15 words. When asked about his sudden disappearance from the underground film/theatre scene, he mentioned the frequency of blackouts and electrical failures in NYC at the time, which would, you know, zap or fry your home appliances (hair dryer? hell's kitchen?).

Over an especially cold winter when Mario had a bad flu and the electricity acted up one too many times, he just couldn't take it and up and left for Florida. He did not leave a way to be reached. End of story.

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Above: Jack Smith preparing for Rome, Cologne, 1974

Right: Alenka Kraigher and Elina Lowensohn in *Idiot Savant*