

Art Facts: Jack Smith's outrages-in-progress

For all that his has been one of the most celebrated names in underground film and theater for over 20 years, Jack Smith is an awfully difficult artist to pin down. Determined not to be commoditized and devoured by the "culture vultures," he has raised performance-as-process, and even film-as-process, to unprecedented levels. A film, to him, is never really finished, as the oft-changing titles and sound tracks of his works amply suggest. He insists on being physically present at each showing of his films (which makes such showings relatively rare), with the intention of re-editing, readjusting, and altering the sound track to come ever closer and closer to what the idea of the film really is.

First there was **Scotch Tape**, a "standard junkyard film" shot on so minuscule a budget that the film itself was literally held together with Scotch tape. Next came the notorious **Flaming Creatures** (1963), a scandal and a cause celebre, and the first underground film to be banned in New York State. Surreal, lyrical, and outrageous, the film is a quasi-documentary of androgynes, homosexuals, and transvestites in which limp penises and bouncing, flabby breasts are so ambiguously equated as to disarm any distinction between male and female flesh—a quality, its defenders argued, that removed it from the realm of pornography altogether. Film critic P. Adams Sitney was arrested for attempting to show the film at Filmmakers Cinematech in New York, and Belgian authorities canceled its showing at the Third International Experimental Film Competition, though admitting "the selection jury... recognized the aesthetic and experimental qualities of the film..."

In the years since, Smith has removed himself even further from the commodity market by turning to live theater and performance art, performing bizarre minimalist works (though not conceptual works, which he claims are made only to make the artist feel good)

that often grow and develop in unexpected directions from performance to performance. For instance, there was his Toronto performance of **Dance of the Sacred Foundation Application** in which, with maddening logic, he spent quite some time apparently waiting for an application for a foundation grant to assemble itself as three seamstresses in the background stitched together the gigantic "Brassiere of Uranus."

The coming two weeks will finally bring Chicago its first chance to see Jack Smith perform live, and to view three of his films. On Tuesday, March 12, the School of the Art Institute will present a public screening of **Scotch Tape** and **Flaming Creatures**, both considered classics of underground film. Also included will be excerpts from a work that has been in process since 1965, originally titled **Normal Love**, now after several other changes called **Exotic Landlordism of Crab Lagoon**.

Following these, on March 14 through 17, Smith will perform four versions (guaranteed to differ radically) of a work variously called **Brassieres of Uranus**, **Glass of the Brassiere Goddesses**, and most recently **Death of a Penguin**. Although Smith has ample time between now and then to restructure the work completely, the action will ostensibly begin with a cocktail viewing of the mortal remains of "La Penguinina," the world's wealthiest, most glamorous, and most powerful penguin, largely because of her amorous relation to the fabulously wealthy Larry the Lobster. After the cocktail viewing, Smith, dressed in his usual Arabic veils, dances and converses with the "Mop-girl of Baghdad" (whose given name is Maidenform) in a surreal sequence whose undercurrents contain a Marxist commentary on wealth and opulence.

Understandable for someone so intransigently dedicated to the fluidity of constant process, Smith is rampantly misunderstood. Of the ruckus raised concerning **Flaming**

Creatures, Smith says, "It's just a comedy, with everything I thought was funny. When it was first shown, there was laughter all through the film. When... it was turned into a sex issue by the writers... overnight the laughter stopped. If they had been left alone by the writers and critics, they would have seen it for what it was." Jonas Mekas, whom Smith now derides as "Uncle Vulture," claimed that **Flaming Creatures** represented an unprecedented departure in the history of film; Susan Sontag lists Smith in a tradition in which he was preceded by Bunuel, Eisenstein, Tod Browning, Jean Rouch, and others. There seems to be unanimous consent, though, that experimental film and theater would not be what they are today without Smith's wide-ranging influence. **Film Culture** magazine said of him that "he has attained for the first time in motion pictures a high level of art which is absolutely lacking in decorum; and a treatment of sex which makes us aware of the restraint of all previous filmmakers. He has shown more clearly than anyone before how the poet's license includes all things, not only of spirit, but also of flesh; not only of dreams and of symbol, but also of solid reality. In no other art but the movies could this have been so fully done; and their capacity was realized by Smith."

The three films will be shown Tuesday, March 12, at 7 PM at the School of the Art Institute Auditorium. **Death of a Penguin** will be performed first on Thursday, March 14, at 8 PM at the School of the Art Institute Performance Space. Both events are \$3.50 for general admission, \$2.50 for students. Remaining performances of **Death of a Penguin** will take place at Randolph Street Gallery, 756 N. Milwaukee, at 8 PM Friday through Sunday, March 15, 16, and 17. Admission to these is \$4, students \$3. Information, call 443-3736 or 666-7737. All events are guaranteed to be outrageous.

— Kyle Gann

Gertrude Blom, who opened at the Chicago week, will present an honor being held for Restaurant, 1901 S. Blom will also discuss the March meeting 7:30 Monday, March Lake Shore Drive. I to believe that Blom terrific speaker.

Celebrate International musical entirely w life on the farm in memories of a tour Band. It knocked 'e first produced. Pre tonight and contin Building, 1225 W. 1 tix at \$9.50-\$14. R

Barbara London, v Art in New York, v the U.S. and abroa S. Michigan Adm

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Chicago Filmmake The Commission, means it's not over of Paganini, at 8 to **Heartbreakers** per details at 329-086

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The Lincoln Park Z continues today wi noon today in the Cannon. Jane Good

