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BEYOND THE RENTED WORLD: AN INTRODUCTION

Marc Siegel

In conversation with Austrian avant-garde filmmaker Peter Kubelka in 1973, American underground artist Jack Smith shifts the focus of the censorious reactions to his film *Flaming Creatures* (1962–63) from its possible obscenity to its anticapitalism.¹ Reflecting back, after almost ten years, on what is certainly the most notorious legal battle in American avant-garde film history, Smith posits that the authorities at the time could not accept the film’s “attitudes towards commercialism.” *Flaming Creatures*, he maintains, “depicts poor people without any sort of agreement with commercialism that any authorities would want to see.” Asked by Kubelka about the film’s depiction of poor people, Smith offers the following lengthy, considered, and fascinating response:

It’s not a story in which the son is going off to college or whatever . . . or in which, uh . . . there are no automobiles in it. No automobile worship. Or anything that depends on—or the family try to raise their children comfortably. Things like that. No refrigerators. No refrigerator worship . . . the values depicted in the film are not especially a set of people achieving financial status in some way or other—which is basically what commercial film would depict. For instance, a story about a widow clinging to a home or all of these plots really have at their basis property in one way or another, clinging to property, attaining property. I don’t think that you can think of a commercial film that didn’t have at its basis the—uh—subject of landlordism.²

Smith thus offers a political reading of the narrative and visual aspects of his seminal underground film, which is rarely described in such terms.³ Moreover, he adds depth and substance to what is obviously more complex

than a mere “hatred of capitalism.”⁴ The subject of *landlordism* very likely became part of Smith’s aesthetic agenda as a result of his difficulties paying rent for his various Manhattan lofts and apartments. But the financial, emotional, and psychological burden of regular rent payments can hardly be reduced to an individual problem. For Smith, “landlordism” is the ultimate evil, “the one problem,” he explains to a seemingly unconvinced Kubelka, “that’s crushing life everywhere in the world.”

Smith is certainly most famous for that cinematic burst of aesthetic innovation and sexual and gender transgression known as *Flaming Creatures*. Critic and Smith specialist J. Hoberman maintains, “Had Jack Smith produced nothing other than this amazing artifice, he would still rank among the great visionaries of American film.”⁵ Fortunately, and despite his chaotic lifestyle, from the mid-1950s until his death in 1989 from the complications of AIDS, Smith made a great deal of additional work, including films, photos, performances, collages, drawings, costumes, audio recordings, and written texts. Over slightly more than three decades, Smith worked with and influenced some of the most significant figures in the postwar American avant-garde in film, music, theater, and performance—for example, Tony Conrad, Beverly Grant, Ken Jacobs, Charles Ludlam, Angus MacLise, Judith Malina, Mario Montez, Ronald Tavel, Carmelita Tropicana, Andy Warhol, Robert Wilson, LaMonte Young, Marian Zazeela, and John Zorn.

Initially, Smith’s work was not inspired by an anticapitalist critique. As he explains to Kubelka, *Flaming Creatures* emerged simply from a desire to film “all the funniest stuff he could think of” and to represent “different ideas of glamor.”⁶ It was in the early 1970s that Smith became increasingly focused on the difficulties of negotiating a world dominated by capital and motivated by profit. “A year ago,” he tells Kubelka in early 1973,

I made a very strong conscious effort to make a play that dealt with the subject of landlordism. I tried to rewrite the Hamlet story so that it was a family of landlords instead of royalty. This was called *Hamlet in the Rented World*. I got the play ready. It was mostly produced. And then I was evicted from my studio, so the play was never done as a play. But since then I’ve made a movie of some of it.⁷

Hamlet was not the only classic play that Smith subjected to his own brand of landlordist critique. *The Secret of Rented Island* (aka *Orchid Rot of Rented Lagoon*), for example, was the title of his 1976–77 version of

Henrik Ibsen's play *Ghosts* (1881).⁸ Landlords, landladies, and the problem of rent are referenced in the titles and texts of many of his later films and performances, from *Exotic Landlordism* (1964–69), *Song for Rent* (1969), and *Boiled Lobster of Lucky Landlady Lagoon* (1969–72) to *Spiritual Oasis of Lucky Landlord Paradise* (1969–70) and *Irrational Landlordism of Bagdad* (1977). By recasting classical stage plays and his own earlier films as explicitly—or extravagantly and exotically—anticapitalist, Smith urges us to consider the connections between, say, existential angst (as in *Hamlet*) and capitalist exploitation, or between the struggle to attain glamour (as in *Flaming Creatures*) and the pressures of living with no or minimal capital.

Jack Smith's work, however strange, queer, utopian, exotic, or tropicalist it may appear, does not exist beyond a rented world. By engaging with, watching, studying, or experiencing it, however, we may very well discover essential political and aesthetic resources for seriously, yet humorously and joyously, critiquing the landlordism that continues to crush life everywhere in the rented world.

* * *

Most of the essays in this issue were initially presented as lectures and discussions at two events that I co-organized. In March 2009, actress Susanne Sachsse, film curator and codirector of the Arsenal Institute for Film and Video Art Stefanie Schulte Strathaus, and I invited over fifty artists and scholars from around the world to Berlin to watch and discuss Jack Smith's films, which had recently been deposited at the Arsenal by the Plaster Foundation.⁹ Six months later, we organized a festival showcasing the results of the original participants' research, *LIVE FILM! JACK SMITH! Five Flaming Days in a Rented World*. Throughout this two-part event, copresented by HAU/Hebbel am Ufer Theater, we worked closely with filmmaker Jerry Tartaglia, who restored the films. The essays by Callie Angell, Diedrich Diederichsen, Juan A. Suárez, and José Esteban Muñoz came directly out of this event. Ann Reynolds and Dominic Johnson participated in *LIVE FILM!* but their work in this issue represents significantly altered contributions.

In the wake of the Jack Smith event, Susanne Sachsse and I decided to stage a festival exploring the contemporary relevance of the term *camp* to describe a range of queer performance and artistic practices, from Taylor Mead and Holly Woodlawn to Narcissister, Vaginal Davis, and Hélio Oiticica. *Camp/Anti-Camp: A Queer Guide to Everyday Life* took place in

Berlin in 2012 and included a festival focus on Oiticica's suggestive notion of "tropicamp" that was curated by Max Jorge Hinderer Cruz.¹⁰ Juliane Rebentisch first delivered her essay "Camp Materialism" as a lecture at *Camp/Anti-Camp*.¹¹ During this event, I had the pleasure of meeting philosopher and former Smith collaborator John Matturri, from whom I solicited the extended version of his reflections on Smith. The section of Interviews/Archival Materials about Smith's collaborators and contemporaries attempts to situate his work within a wider artistic and cultural context.

Soon after *LIVE FILM!* Jonathan Flatley, then editor of *Criticism*, asked me to guest-edit a special issue on Jack Smith. Many thanks to Jonathan, who helped me conceive this project and who remained dedicated to it over the past four years, even after he stepped down as editor. I am very fortunate that *Criticism's* current editor, renée hoogland, stayed committed to this issue, and I thank renée and *Criticism's* former and current managing editors Chinmayi Kattamalavadi and Judith Lakämper, respectively, for their cordial and efficient stewardship. Finally, I am grateful to the contributors for their patience and their willingness to publish their work in this issue.

The publication of *Jack Smith: Beyond the Rented World* is marked by the tragic deaths of four of the contributing authors. I dedicate this issue to the memory of my dearly missed colleagues and friends: Callie Angell, Mario Montez, José Muñoz, and Ronald Tavel.

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NOTES

1. This was one in a series of conversations between filmmakers organized by Gerald O'Grady at the University of Buffalo in 1972–73 as part of the project *Oral History of the Independent American Cinema*. The recording of the Kubelka–Smith discussion comes from the Gerald O'Grady Archive, Center for Media Study, University of Buffalo, Buffalo, New York. A copy is also held at the Austrian Film Museum in Vienna, where I was granted access. I thank Alexander Horwath, director of the Austrian Film Museum, both for alerting me to the recording and for making it available.
2. In my transcription of this audio recording, I have chosen to retain the mannerisms, the "uh"s, characteristic of Smith's speech, in the hopes of allowing their interruptive presence in the written text to gesture towards the dramatic pauses that structure Smith's process of expressing himself.
3. Most descriptions of *Flaming Creatures* emphasize the film's formal and aesthetic innovations and/or its radical vision of sexual and gender transgression. For representative

- examples, see J. Hoberman, *On Jack Smith's "Flaming Creatures" (and Other Secret-Flix of Cinemaroc)* (New York: Granary Books/Hips Road, 2001), and my essay "Documentary That Dare/Not Speak Its Name: Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures*," in *Between the Sheets, In the Streets: Queer, Lesbian, Gay Documentary*, ed. Chris Holmlund and Cynthia Fuchs (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 91–106. See also Dominic Johnson's book, the first monograph on Smith's work not to focus solely on his films (reviewed by Jon Davies in this issue), *Glorious Catastrophe: Jack Smith, Performance and Visual Culture, Rethinking Art's Histories* (Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 2012).
4. "Hatred of Capitalism" is the pithy new journal title proposed by Smith to Sylvère Lotringer to replace Lotringer's "dry academic one": *Semiotext(e)* (see Jack Smith, "Uncle Fishhook and the Sacred Baby Poo-Poo of Art," interview by Sylvère Lotringer, in *Wait for Me at the Bottom of the Pool: The Writings of Jack Smith*, ed. J. Hoberman and Edward Leffingwell [New York: High Risk Books, 1997], 107–21). Lotringer responded to Smith's suggestion by republishing his 1978 interview in a *Semiotext(e)* reader titled "Hatred of Capitalism"—see Chris Kraus and Sylvère Lotringer, eds., *Hatred of Capitalism: A Semiotext(e) Reader*, Double Agents Series (Semiotext[e]: Los Angeles, 2001).
 5. Hoberman, *On Jack Smith's "Flaming Creatures,"* 10.
 6. Peter Kubelka, "Discussion with Jack Smith," 18 January 1973, audio recording, in Gerald O'Grady Archive, Center for Media Study, Buffalo, New York, and the Austrian Film Museum, Vienna.
 7. *Ibid.* The restorer of Smith's filmic work, filmmaker Jerry Tartaglia, premiered the 30-minute unfinished film *Hamlet in a Rented World—A Fragment* (1970–73) in the Forum Expanded section of the Berlin Film Festival on 14 February 2014.
 8. For more on this piece and the broader artistic and cultural context of Smith's 1970s performances, see Jay Sanders, with J. Hoberman, eds., *Rituals of Rented Island: Object Theater, Loft Performance, and the New Psychodrama—Manhattan, 1970–1980* (New York: Whitney Museum of Modern Art, 2013).
 9. The Plaster Foundation was the name of the informal organization initiated by performer Penny Arcade and critic J. Hoberman to save and present Jack Smith's work after his death. In 2008, the Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels, bought the estate from Smith's sister, who had resurfaced to claim her legal rights to her brother's work.
 10. See Hélio Oiticica, "Mario Montez, Tropicamp," trans. Max Jorge Hinderer Cruz, in *Afterall*, no. 28 (Autumn–Winter 2011): 17–21; also available at www.afterall.org/journal/issue.28/mario-montez-tropicamp (accessed 18 March 2014).
 11. Rebentisch, with Matthias Haase and others, also co-organized an important event around Smith's work at the Steirischer Herbst [Styrian Autumn] in Graz in 1999. See their essential German-language publication: Diedrich Diederichsen et al., eds., *Golden Years: Materialien und Positionen zu queerer Subkultur und Avantgarde zwischen 1959 und 1974* [Golden years: Materials and positions on queer subcultures and the avant-garde between 1959 and 1974] (Graz: Camera Austria, 2006).

