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REVIEWS & PRESS
J. Hoberman. *On Jack Smith's Flaming Creatures (and Other Secret-Flix of Cinemaroc).* Granary Books, & Hip's Road, 2001.

**Grubbs, David. "Review of *On Jack Smith's 'Flaming Creatures.'* " *Bookforum* 9.1: 15.**

It's a shame that Ted Turner dropped out of the film-colorization business before tackling *Flaming Creatures*. I'm trying to imagine Jack Smith's washed-out, defiantly low-contrast 1963 film being given the full treatment.

*Flaming Creatures* is the work for which Smith is best known, a film that landed exhibitors in a vortex of legal trouble and quickly became the most reviled of '60s underground features. As J. Hoberman writes, "*Flaming Creatures* is the only American avant-garde film whose reception approximates the scandals that greeted *L'Age d'Or* or *Zéro de Conduite*." Smith's self-described comedy in a "haunted movie studio" is a forty-two-minute series of attractions that include false starts, primping, limp penises, bouncing breasts, a fox-trot, an orgy, a transvestite vampire, an outsized painting of a vase, and perilous stretches of inactivity. The sound track juxtaposes Bartók, Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves, the Everly Brothers, and an audience-baiting minutes-long montage of screams. Still, one suspects that the greatest trespass may have been putting Smith's queer "creatures" on display.

If Hoberman's monograph makes Smith's filmic demimonde less other-worldly—colorizes it, if without the Turner motive—it does so in a manner more akin to the 1995 restoration of Jacques Tati's 1948 *Jour de Fête*. Tati's film was shot simultaneously in color and in black and white; had the experimental Thomson-Color process worked at the time, it would have been the first French full-length color film. When the restored version appeared, it prompted awe and disbelief in rendering 1947 France—and a film previously experienced in black and white—in rich, odd hues.

Take it down a few notches, and that's the effect achieved by combining Hoberman's research with Norman Solomon's previously unpublished color photographs from the set of *Flaming Creatures*. In one, Sheila Bick—pictured on the book's cover mid-scream as Delicious Dolores—smiles and waves between takes of the Rape-Earthquake-Orgy scene. A similarly beatific Creature grasps her from behind. It's not as if you've never seen color photographs of the Lower East Side from the early '60s; it just seems that way, given *Flaming Creatures* powers of defamiliarization. Hoberman's description of the film as "richly perverse and gloriously impoverished… something new under the sun omits that *Flaming Creatures* is itself a sunless world."

And yet we discover that *Flaming Creatures* was shot atop the Windsor Theater on Grand Street, sometimes in blazing sunlight. Lord knows it's impossible to tell from watching the film. *Flaming Creatures*'s murky, elusive images owe much to the use of various outdated film stocks that Smith had shoplifted. Solomon's production photos now reveal, for example, that the film's action took place within the modest confines of a drop cloth. A catwalk was created with two ladders and an adjoining roof.

*On Jack Smith's "Flaming Creatures"* tends toward completism and trivia of an exceptional quality. I'm glad that someone has tracked down and published a list of the uncredited music used in the film, not to mention the facsimile reproduction of a nuttily lurid New York Mirror clipping that details Sheila Bick's drug arrest (''Beats' Panic, Toss Out Dope Kit, Bop a Cop").

Hoberman's arguments about the film's significance and its significations are brief and to the point. In 1968 Strom Thurmond screened *Flaming Creatures* as part of an effort to block Abe Fortas's nomination for chief justice of the Supreme Court. An unnamed senator who attended the Fortas Film Festival told *Newsweek*, "That movie was so sick... I couldn't even get aroused." Hoberman concludes—though it has the feel of a starting point—that *Flaming Creatures* "was something worse than pornography itself": "In so casually representing the male organ," *Flaming Creatures* "is guilty of a criminal disrespect more serious than burning the flag."

The further we are from the time of *Flaming Creatures*' early reception, the more we need a contextualizing work such as this. Filmmaker Ken Jacobs was arrested during a screening of *Flaming Creatures* at the New Bowery Theater on February 20,1964: "One of the detectives who arrested me told me, at the theater, that he did not know why they were taking me to the station: I should be shot right there in front of the screen." *On Jack Smith's 'Flaming Creatures* ' helps explain the furor that greeted the film, as well as why today the film can fail to shock. People too often expect a Lower East Side version of Pasolini's Salò—they expect the most graphic of all New York underground films—when instead detumescence, assorted means of mocking desire, and general pastiness (one of Smith's defining terms) prevail.

Much as there is to appreciate about Hoberman's documentation of Smith's films and *Flaming Creatures*' reception, this material feels light when collected as a book. Matters are not helped by an excessively snazzy design that thwarts sustained reading. These difficulties are compounded when you consider that there are already two essential-if-you're-interested books on Smith's work. The first is the marvelously funny, all-around inspiring *Wait for Me at the Bottom of the Pool*, a collection of Smith's writings coedited by Hoberman and Edward Leffingwell. The second is *Flaming Creature: Jack Smith, His Amazing Life and Times*, published on the occasion of P.S. I's 1997 Smith retrospective, which not only contains numerous writings that Hoberman cites, but also Hoberman's own "The Big Heat: Making and Unmaking *Flaming Creatures*"—an essay that, recast, comprises a large portion of the current book.

David Grubbs' most recent recordings are *Act Five, Scene One* (Blue Chopsticks, 2002) and *Rickets & Scurvy* (Drag City, forthcoming).

**McDonagh, Maitland. "Off the Shelf." *Film Comment* (November/ December 2001).**

Championed by Susan Sontag and Allen Ginsberg, reviled by the Citizens for Decent Literature and Strom Thurmond, and at times compared to Josef von Sternberg, outsider auteur Jack Smith occupies a

notoriously marginal space in the history of American cinema. Smith's no-budget films—often shot on stolen expired stock and featuring his own star system of Lower East Side divas and transvestites—gained contentious popularity in mid-Sixties New York. J. Hoberman's *On Jack Smith's Flaming Creatures and Other Secret-Flix of Cinemaroc* (Granary Books, 144 pp.) is itself an art object—frame enlargements, oral histories, newspaper clippings, and ornate illustrations compiled in a beautiful typeset monograph—a documentary account of the tumultuous glory days of New American Cinema.

**Erickson, Steve. "Interview with J. Hoberman." *Senses of Cinema* (December 2001).**

In his 24 years as a film critic for the New York weekly. *The Village Voice*, J. Hoberman has been one of the most consistently adventurous American critics. In addition to his weekly columns, he's used books to explore an eclectic range of interests, always encompassing a dimension of cultural criticism and historical perspective. *Midnight Movies* (Da Capo Press 1983), co-written with Jonathan Rosenbaum, explored the '70s phenomenon of cult films, while *A Bridge Of Light* (Temple University Press 1991) examined the equally curious and evanescent sphere of Yiddish-language films. *Vulgar Modernism* (Temple 1991) compiled his best pieces of the '80s, and *The Red Atlantis* (Temple 1998) reworked some of his writing from that period into a fragmentary, wide-ranging history of the culture produced by—and in reaction to—Communist Eastern Europe and Russia. His latest book, *On Jack Smith's "Flaming Creatures"* (Granary Books 2001), is an ornate monograph centering on Smith's 1963 avant-garde landmark, which analyzes its contents, describes the censorship battles it gave rise to and examines the oeuvre of unfinished work Smith left behind.

This interview, conducted in November at Hoberman's *Village Voice* office, concentrates on that book.

**Steve Erikson:** How long was your idea for a book on Jack Smith percolating?
**J. Hoberman**: This book comes directly out of the 1997 retrospective on Jack Smith at the American Museum of the Moving Image (AMMI). It's based on notes I prepared for the retrospective. I had also written about some of the films previously. I was given a series of photos by stills photographer, Norman Solomon, which he had taken during the making of *Flaming Creatures* (1962). They're the only production stills of the film that exist. I really wanted to get those out to the world. In a way, the book became a means to do so. By this time, I also had accumulated a lot of information on *Flaming Creatures*, since I had interviewed many of the surviving cast members.

**S**: Smith comes up a number of times in *Midnight Movies* and *Vulgar Modernism*, including a review of *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (Steven Spielberg 1984).
**H**: He used that review for publicity! I discovered that after he died. I was very influenced by Smith's theater work and slide shows in the early '70s. I used to do theater work at that time, although the theatre pieces I was involved in were not much like his. His were like watching him just live. You would show up in his loft, which was in Soho[1] when it was still an industrial neighborhood. The only notice would be a little one in the *Village Voice* in the Off-Off-Broadway theatre listings. They all had these crazy names like Gas Stations Of The Cross Spectacular. Sometimes there were no actors but him. Jonas Mekas has a great description of one of them in *Movie Journal*. I was actually there that night. Some nights he would do theater pieces, and sometimes he would just show slides and play records.

**S**: Were you already working on this book when you and Edward Leffingwell edited the collection of

Smith's writings, *Wait For Me At The Bottom Of The Pool* (Serpent's Tail 1997)?
H: No, I did that first. That's also something I wanted to do for a long time. I interviewed Jack... we were never really friends, which was OK. I much preferred being a fan, rather than a friend. He was a difficult guy. I was asked to interview him by *The Drama Review* when they were planning an issue on "auto-performance." It was before the term "performance art" became popular, but it meant work by a single artist. They wanted a piece on him. I was recruited by Richard Foreman's wife, Kate Mannheim. There were several months where she was Jack's best friend. We spoke on the phone for about an hour, which is the longest I ever did, and had this conversation about his writings. I thought the work he did for *Film Culture* was amazing, especially his essay on Maria Montez. It's so full of ideas.

**S**: What's interesting about his writing is that the ideas he expressed are the exact same ones expressed in his films. Did that attract you?
**H**: I guess. P. Adams Sitney made that point right away. I can't put the chronology together. It's possible that I had read these pieces before I saw *Flaming Creatures*. For a time, it was very hard to see. He withdrew the film from circulation in the late '60s, then it didn't turn up again until Anthology Film Archives opened and included it as part of the Essential Cinema program. The whole time when I was going to underground films in high school and college, you couldn't see it. After it popped up at Anthology, Smith withdrew it again, but you could continue to see it for a few years in the early '70s on a regular cycle.

**S**: You were a filmmaker yourself, but you stopped making films around the same time you began writing for the *Village Voice*. Did you have trouble reconciling theory and practice?
**H**: Well, I went the usual way in reverse. I was making films, then I started writing about them. I began writing as a way, partially, to make a living, and I got a lot of positive reinforcement as a writer. It took the edge off. Making avant-garde films is a completely thankless task. I was never someone who wanted to make Hollywood films. I'm probably the only film critic who's never written a screenplay. I had some specific things that I wanted to do, some films I planned but never made. I'm sorry I wasn't able to do them, but I lost the kind of fanatical drive that you need to make films in that world.

**S**: In some of your books, like *A Bridge Of Ligh*t, you seem to be interested mostly in your subject as a means of cultural criticism, whereas your enthusiasm for *Flaming Creatures* really comes across in this book. In the books you've written, how do you see the balance between the two? In *A Bridge Of Light,* I didn't get the impression you think all the films you covered are masterpieces.
**H**: There are some Yiddish films I like very much, but I was interested mostly in the whole phenomenon. The same thing is true of Midnight Movies, although there are some individual works that I really care about. But I also wanted to put them in a social context. I guess I go back and forth. There were certain movies I responded to early in my life that I can't get a historical perspective on. I know that Godard's films are artifacts of the '60s, but I don't really see them that way. The same is true of *Flaming Creatures*.

**S**: The response to *Flaming Creatures* at the time was very homophobic, but if you look at the film now, it seems very sexually inclusive: queer in the '90s sense of the term. Do you think that actually pissed people off more in the '60s than if it only included gay sex?
**H**: At the time it came out and in the milieu where it was shown, it would have appeared as

polymorphously perverse. The audience would have been very mixed in terms of sexual preference. That was part of the Bohemian atmosphere, and partially because there was a general sexual revolution going on. There were a lot of sexual issues that the film seemed to address. Certainly, the examples I quote in the book are homophobic, but I think it was perceived as liberating in a variety of ways. There's been very little of analysis of what's actually going on. The fantasy is queerer than queer. You can't call the men in dresses drag queens, except Mario Montez. None of the other ones are trying to really look like women. The actual women are sexualized too. All kinds of people could relate to and be shocked by it.

Also, it was a desecration of form too. People either loved the way it looked or hated it. There aren't really any precedents for movies that are this raw. I remember when it was shown in the 1990 New York Film Festival after he died, some of his friends saw it. While he was dying, Richard Peña[2] asked to show it, but Smith wanted it colorized. They showed it on a triple bill with a Ken Jacobs film and John Greyson's *The Making Of Monsters* (1990). A number of Jack's friends came there, and I don't think they had ever seen it. It was embarrassing for them to see it next to *The Making Of Monsters,* this slick National Film Board of Canada production. To them, *Flaming Creatures* looked so amateurish that they blamed Anthology for a terrible restoration. It was fortunate that Jacobs was on a panel then, because he was around when it was made and could testify that it always looked like that. It doesn't look any worse now. That aspect of the film is tied in with the sexual provocation.

**S**: How was Smith able to keep on working when he didn't complete any other films and kept turning on people who had supported him?
**H**: Evidently he had some small family income, which people only found out about after he died. He lived in... squalor might be too strong a word, but his last apartment was a 6th-floor walk-up. For a time, he had patrons. It's hard to remember now what an amazing sensation *Flaming Creatures* was. If you asked Andy Warhol in 1964 or 1965 what his favorite movie was, he'd always say *Flaming Creatures*. A lot of people loved the film, which probably kept him going into the 70s. Jonas paid for the film stock for *Normal Love* (1964). After that, he occasionally got grants and gigs. He had an audience in Europe and went there several times. But he used to live on oatmeal. He was the total antithesis of a careerist. It's so different from how any artist would operate now. He never went to college and didn't really function in the art world. In that context, *Flaming Creatures* was almost a negative career move.

**S**: How involved were you with the book's graphic design?
**H**: The designer [Chippy] pretty much did her own work. My personal taste would be for a less aggressive design. I was responsible for the selection of the images. There are certain ones that she then used as design elements. That was her decision, but I supplied all of them. I'm very happy with how Solomon's photos came out. The vertical footnotes might have been my idea, but I certainly wanted something that wasn't a linear book. It's not really a systematic book. I included all the information I had on the other films as a long addendum to the essay on *Flaming Creatures*. I felt a responsibility to do that because I'm working on their preservation.

**S**: Did you approach the BFI about publishing it in their "Classics" series? Although they're less graphically oriented, it reminds me of their monographs.
**H**: No, but I think it's in the same vein, and I enjoyed doing a book for that series.

**S**: Do you have any other books in the works?
**H**: I have a collection that I'm putting together for Temple. It's a sequel to *Vulgar Modernism*, containing another ten years' worth of pieces from *The Village Voice*. I'm giving them all the material in January, so the earliest it'll be out is next fall. I've been working on another book for a long time. It's about Hollywood films of the '60s, but it's as much history or cultural criticism as film criticism. There are some movies I write about that I like a lot, but many others that I only appreciate as artifacts. That's currently between publishers.

**S**: When you first started writing about film, your beat, so to speak, was the avant-garde. Do you still follow it as much as you did then?
**H**: No, and I'm sorry it's not being covered as much. When Manohla Dargis started at the Voice, it was great to see her cover it. Now other people occasionally write about it. When I started working here, there were a lot of areas that weren't being covered: the avant-garde, documentaries, museum retrospectives, huge amounts of foreign films. Andrew Sarris and Tom Allen, who was a former student of Andy's, were the main critics. So I got to review amazing things, like *Celine & Julie Go Boating* (Jacques Rivette 1974), although it didn't even run for a week. Neither of them wanted to review it. I made up a beat out of all this stuff.

**S**: There are a lot of critics who do good work when they're excited by a film, but the rest of the time, their boredom is visible in their writing. On a weekly basis, you're bound to be bored a lot of the time. No matter what you're writing about it, your prose always seems fairly enthusiastic. How do you sustain it?
**H**: I don't know. I'm glad you said that, because some weeks, it's an effort to have an opinion. I always look for some angle to cover a film. There are some people—and I'm not passing judgment on them—who like being adversaries and attacking something. Once in a while, I'll get angry at something and want to attack it. It's more fun for me to write about something I like, but you don't get that every week.

1. Now a neighborhood dominated by expensive boutiques and restaurants.
2. Director of the NYFF.
http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/01/18/hoberman.html

**Spayde, Jon. "Review of *On Jack Smith's Flaming Creatures*." *UTNE Reader (*January/ February 2002).**

*On Jack Smith's Flaming Creatures (and Other Secret-Flix of Cinemaroc)* by J. Hoberman (Granary Books/ Hips Road). Madcap gay film pioneer Jack Smith's lighthearted 1963 epic of poly-sexual perversity, *Flaming Creatures*, is the most scandalous movie ever made in America. The battle over banning it reached the Supreme Court. In this detailed, sumptuous book, *Village Voice* critic Hoberman evokes a world of delirious, courageous queer creativity in the dangerous years before Stonewall.

**Blair, Elaine. "Flaming Revival." *The Village Voice* (November 14-20, 2001).**

Credited with essentially jump-starting American avant-garde cinema, Jack Smith is not nearly as well known as the filmmakers he allegedly inspired—Fellini, Warhol, and John Waters, among others. Nor is it easy nowadays to track down his opus, *Flaming Creatures*—42 minutes of painstakingly arranged

black-and-white tableaux of orgies, earthquakes, vampires, and transvestite flappers, set to pop songs and cheesy Hollywood soundtracks—despite the fact that its 1964 release led to a censorship ruckus and a denunciation on the floor of the Senate by Strom Thurmond.

Perhaps Smith's relative obscurity is not surprising. The nudity and orgies and pansexual queerness now inevitably seem tame. The creatures' shenanigans are still funny, but the subversive implications are no longer immediately intelligible.

Yet there are signs of reviving interest in Smith's work: A number of major Smith retrospectives have been held in the last five years, and one of them, a 1997 celebration at the American Museum of the Moving Image, has spawned *On Jack Smith's Flaming Creatures (And Other Secret-Flix of Cinemaroc). Village Voice* critic J. Hoberman curated the retrospective and turned his program notes into this slim, illustrated compendium of Smithiana. The book recounts the making of *Flaming Creatures* (on the roof of a Lower East Side theater, with outdated film stock that Smith shoplifted from the discount bins at Camera Barn) and its explosive screening (police raided theaters, made arrests, confiscated film). It also describes Smith's other films and his collaborations with various avant-garde filmmakers, evoking an exuberant Lower East Side bohemia at its creative peak.

Hoberman previously coedited a collection of Smith's writings, and *Flaming Creatures* is copiously annotated with background information about Smith's artistic influences and quotes from his own essays. Indeed, with its footnotes, elaborate black-and-white design, reproductions of original documents, and general labor-of-love obsessiveness, *Flaming Creatures* looks and feels like that genre of underground art preferred by a later generation—the fanzine. What's charming when mimeographed by teenagers, however, seems a little schlocky and overdesigned as an art book with a $29.95 price tag. Smith is well worth rediscovering, and there's much interesting background and trivia here. But underground filmmakers and would-be bohemians after Smith's own heart will probably do best to take it from the library, if not from unguarded bins of the bookstore.

Original URL: http://www.villagevoice.com/books/0146,blair,29881,10.html

**Carr, C. "Flaming Intrigue: What's happening to the legacy of an avant-garde legend?" *Village Voice* (March 10-16, 2004): 36-38.**

On January 30, Surrogate Court Judge Eve Preminger ruled that the archive of Jack Smith belongs, in effect, to the artist's younger sister, a 70-year-old Texas housewife named Mary Sue Slater.

Auteur of the notorious *Flaming Creatures*, performance artist before such a term existed, photographer of unlikely incandescences, "the Alfred Jarry of the East Village," Smith died without a will in 1989.

Known to the cognoscenti but incapable of promoting himself, Smith influenced many who became more famous. He gave Robert Wilson his glacial pacing. He gave Andy Warhol the idea of using non-actors for his films and incorporating mistakes. Smith was the original DIY artist, scavenging on the streets to get material for props, sets, and costumes. A chapter called "The Sheer Beauty of Junk" in Stefan Brecht's *Queer Theatre* sets Smith up as the forefather to Charles Ludlam, John Waters, and others who dared to mix the sublime with the Ridiculous. Richard Foreman called him "the hidden source of practically everything that's of any interest in the so-called experimental American theater today."

Born in 1932, Smith came of age with other cultural rebels, but he wasn't so much unwilling as genuinely unable to conform. What interested him was that state of mind one enters while creating, and that's what he wanted to show on stage or screen. He didn't care about finished products. He made the most important avant-garde film in America, then never completed any of his other films. He was known for actually re-editing during screenings. As for performances, no two were alike. He did not believe in acting, which was "hoodwinking," or in memorizing lines, which rendered one "a mynah bird."

In his manifesto, "The Perfect Film Appositeness of Maria Montez," Smith explained that the B-movie actress became his muse because she could not act. Instead, she believed—in her own beauty, infusing her dreadful filmography with what Smith saw as "imaginative life and truth." Emulating his idol, Smith made his own persona the center of each performance, and dressed for Montezland, usually a faux desert, as a sheikh or a pharaoh. Smith had a consistent worldview, and his shows, for all their exoticism, came from his daily obsessions. Many dealt, for example, with landlordism, "the central social evil of our time." He did not understand why people had to keep endlessly paying. Thus, his Hamlet (never realized, sadly) would have been titled *Hamlet and the 1001 Psychological Jingoleanisms of Prehistoric Landlordism of Rima-Puu.*

Since Smith's death, his film, scripts, costumes, photos, drawings, posters, props, slides, and ephemera have been looked after by performance artist Penny Arcade, a friend of his, and J. Hoberman, *Voice* film critic (author of the Jarry quote above) and long a champion of Smith's work. In 1997, Arcade and Hoberman formed an entity to preserve and promote Smith's art—the Plaster Foundation, named after the Greene Street loft where the artist once lived and staged many a midnight show.

Currently, the parties are trying to reach a settlement, so the story would appear to be cut-and-dried. But no. It's been a strangely Smithian drama of indirection. An old friend of Smith's actually set the sister's lawsuit in motion from behind the scenes. After years of caring for Smith's work, unpaid, Hoberman and Arcade have been rewarded with attacks on their integrity.

Mary Sue Slater last saw her brother in 1956. In the deposition she filed to recover the archive, she testified that her husband 'did not approve of Jack's homosexual lifestyle and did not want our sons to be tainted by it'—though Slater now seems troubled by this characterization. One of her sons clarified: "That goes back to the '50s and '60s," adding, "Jack chose to alienate himself." Indeed, Mary Sue Slater does not remember ever getting a letter from her brother.

Their mother passed information to her—though not, for example, about the *Flaming Creatures* scandal that made Smith infamous. (The film was banned as obscene in 1964 and denounced on the Senate floor by Strom Thurmond.) By the time their mother died in 1976, Slater did not even know where her brother lived. She came to New York to look for him, "went around to the addresses I had, and no one had ever heard of him." Smith did not turn up at his mother's funeral, but the lawyer for her estate located him about a year later by running an ad in the *Voice*. Brother and sister had a last talk, on the phone, in 1980.

"He turned against me because I was normal," Slater speculates. "That's the only thing I can think of. Because he hated normal people." Still, she was distraught at her brother's death from AIDS. She hadn't even known he was ill. "I just went into a funk because it brought up all the way our life turned out. It's sad."

Her first visit to Smith's sixth-floor walk-up the day after his memorial must have been bewildering. The

artist had been in the process of turning his East Village railroad flat into a set for his never-to-be-filmed Sinbad in a Rented World. He'd converted door frames into Moorish arches, camouflaged the bathroom as a Tahitian garden with thousands of plastic vines and plants, and painted a Scheherazade figure with three breasts (and embedded custom-made bra) on his living room wall. Here Mary Sue Slater first encountered Penny Arcade (a.k.a Susana Ventura).

At that point, all Arcade knew about the family was that Smith had not wanted them contacted during his illness. She remembers the sister as keen to get jewelry she could sell at a flea market, when all Smith had was the "junk jewelry" he had altered for use with his costumes. Slater says she sells at antique shows, not flea markets, that Arcade told her she had "a bushel basket of costume jewelry," then didn't produce it, and, worst of all, couldn't find the jewelry Smith had inherited from their mother.

Ultimately, Slater got her brother's end table ("the only thing of beauty that he had") and a small box of jewelry. Arcade also handed over $50,000 in bearer bonds—Smith had told her where he'd hidden them in the floor—but this does not impress Slater now as proof of Arcade's honesty. 'Wouldn't you give up $50,000," the sister asks, "if you thought you could make millions?"

Millions? We'll get to that.

"The family didn't know Jack's importance in the art world," one of his friends observed. "So it's possible that the stuff would have been destroyed or disappeared somewhere in Texas, while the wimpish friends, including me, did nothing. So the intentions of Penny were good."

Acrimony against Arcade runs high enough among Smith's friends, though, to persuade that one to request anonymity. Not only did Smith have friends from different eras who didn't know each other, but according to a couple of them, he reveled in compartmentalizing people and creating suspicion among them. Some still resent Arcade for getting Smith's keys and taking control. Arcade says Smith gave her permission to use the keys "when he told me where to find the bonds."

Smith's first wish for his work: "Burn everything!" Arcade asked him to consider the future. "The future?" he replied. "It will only get worse!"

If she thought she had to guard the work from Smith's despair and then his family, Arcade intended to guard it just as tightly against one old friend of Smith's in particular, writer Irving Rosenthal. Rosenthal had appeared in *Flaming Creatures* and *No President* and has his own collection of *Smithiana* in San Francisco. "Jack made me swear," says Arcade, "that if I did not destroy his work, which was his main wish, at least I would not let Irving get it." (Smith had a horror of going into anyone's collection or "vault.") This eventually prompted Arcade to write a will that Smith never signed, but first she suggested institutions that might take his oeuvre. Smith rejected all of them. Rosenthal says he actually wanted the same institutional protections for Smith's archive. He'd encouraged him early in 1989 to donate his work to a museum where it could be properly cared for.

By the time Rosenthal got to New York, Smith was in a coma, and Arcade was primed for battle. She confronted Rosenthal when he walked into Smith's hospital room, declaring, "Jack told me what an incredible control freak you are" and "his work is not going into your vault." According to Arcade, Rosenthal stormed back out, while she followed him into the hall, screaming, "Talk to Jack! He's not dead yet!" It was the first time Arcade and Rosenthal had ever met.

For his part, Rosenthal says, "It was absolutely clear to me that the worst thing that could happen to the archives would be for them to end up in Penny's ownership." In his own account of Smith's death, he wrote of finding Smith surrounded by unnamed "death managers," who wanted only to call attention to themselves and then acted irresponsibly with Smith's artifacts. For example, Smith's own slides were projected at his memorial, when Rosenthal thought they should have been duped.

Everything Smith owned eventually went to a storage space in Arcade's building, where it remained unpacked until the boxes were moved to P.S.1 for archiving in 1991. Arcade spent a couple of years in court trying to save Smith's apartment so it could be turned into a museum. The day the landlord gutted the place, she was there pulling things out of a dumpster.

Back in San Francisco, Rosenthal wrote a couple of long letters to Mary Sue Slater, whom he'd met at the memorial, urging her: "Get the stuff. Don't leave it in their hands."

"My husband was strongly opposed to my taking possession of the artistic materials my brother had created," Mary Sue Slater testified in her deposition, 'because my husband objected to their sexual orientation, and I did not want to defy him." Her son, Jack's nephew, was to administer the estate. The Nephew requested anonymity here, claiming that for a couple of years after Smith's death, he was called "almost nightly" by Smith's friends.

Hoberman was not part of Smith's circle. Arcade called him in to add legitimacy to an artist still considered "underground." Hoberman says he was "wary" of Arcade at first, but came to trust and respect her.

In January 1990, the Nephew authorized Hoberman "to act as my representative in matters of artistic development concerning the cataloging, transporting, and storing" of Smith's materials. This was the last time anyone associated with the Plaster Foundation heard from the Nephew. He moved without leaving a forwarding address, then ended his involvement with the estate late in 1991, though neither Hoberman nor Arcade ever knew this.

For a couple of years, Hoberman continued writing to the Nephew, in care of Mary Sue Slater, mostly about the fundraising he had organized to restore, first *Flaming Creatures*, and then the contents of 47 film cans found in Smith's closet.

In 1990, Arcade called the Slaters, reached the husband, and was told never to call again.

In November 1992, Hoberman wrote Slater: "For nearly three years, I have been trying to place Jack's artistic effects with various not-for-profit institutions—a matter which has consumed considerable time and no small expense... In each case, however, the institution would need to own this material outright. Would you be willing to relinquish your claim to these effects?" No one from the family ever replied to any of Hoberman's letters, sent by registered mail.

Hoberman had told the family in 1989 that Smith's work was both "priceless and worthless," a statement Mary Sue Slater and her son now cite in their depositions as if it had been said to mislead them. But the fact is that when Arcade and Hoberman began working with Smith's oeuvre, they found little art-world interest. Among the nonprofits Hoberman was referring to in his 1992 letter, only Anthology Film Archives was willing to take everything, and that wasn't exactly the optimal place. Aside from Smith's legendary animosity toward Anthology director Jonas Mekas, says Hoberman, "I didn't

think they had the resources to conserve non-film material" New York University had expressed interest in the papers, and the Museum of Modern Art in the films. But even if Arcade and Hoberman had been willing to split up the work, they needed the Slaters to sign off on the agreement.

Over the years, my work has brought me into contact with all three members of the Plaster Foundation. I am no longer employed by *The Village Voice*, but Hoberman was once a colleague, and Arcade is part of the downtown performance scene I covered. Attorney Mary Dorman, who joined the foundation board in 1997, is the lawyer who represented Karen Finley in the artist's lawsuit against the National Endowment for the Arts—an issue I wrote extensively about for the Voice. So I was surprised and disturbed to learn that rumors were circulating through the art world about the Plaster Foundation selling Smith's work. I should also disclose that I first heard these rumors from Hoberman and Arcade themselves, who wanted to know where they came from. They say that they have sold, for example, prints of *Flaming Creatures*, but vehemently deny selling any original work. Since my own credibility is at stake here, I set out to track every rumor and print the facts, no matter how it made them look.

Hoberman and Arcade incorporated as the Plaster Foundation in 1997, needing a legal entity that could loan Smith's work to P.S.1 for the artist's first retrospective. According to Hoberman, who keeps the books, the foundation took in as much as $12,000 in the years when prints of Smith's films were first made available. (They had not been in circulation before.) And restoring the films was the first major expense. When Smith re-edited during screenings, he'd remove the take-up reel and re-splice footage on the spot, sometimes with masking tape or even duct tape. This had taken its toll on the celluloid. Restoration could not be done by volunteers.

Currently, Plaster Foundation expenses run about $8,000 to $9,000 a year (mostly to rent storage space), and film rentals have stabilized at $3,000 to $4,000, so they are operating in the red. Copyrights on four completed books (the P.S.1 catalog, for example) also belong to the Plaster Foundation, which will earn any royalties.

Rumors about the Plaster Foundation selling work proved hard to track, however, because most amounted to "they're selling work," with no specifics provided. Specifics that were provided did not check out. The Smith photo sold at auction at Swann Galleries (for $3,680) on February 17 came from a European collector. Shows at Mitchell Algus and Marianne Boesky featured Smith artwork owned by his friends. (Only the Algus work was for sale.) The Smith pieces exhibited at Matthew Marks last summer were on loan from the Plaster Foundation and not for sale. No one I spoke to knew of any original work sold by the Plaster Foundation.

A couple of years ago, Hoberman and Arcade were approached by a collector who has a relationship with two prominent museums. Because the foundation was broke, they actually considered selling a couple of pieces—on condition that the collector place the work in one of the museums. They didn't know what price to ask, so they consulted Jeffrey Peabody at Matthew Marks. "My answer was, there's nothing to go on," said Peabody. "There's no sales history. Nothing's ever been sold." In the end, they didn't sell anything.

If the Plaster Foundation made any mistake, it was in not keeping the Slater family connected. The P.S.1 show, for example, changed Smith's image from cult figure to visionary, and no doubt enhanced the value of his work. But the Slaters never even knew about it.

After nearly four years of no response from the family, Arcade and Hoberman turned to Dorman, and

she focused her attention on the public administrator, an official who represents those dying intestate. (No response there either.) Hoberman and Arcade then filed notices of claim against the estate totaling $250,000—now used by the sister's supporters as evidence of their greed. But there was no money to be gotten. The claim was Dorman's idea, a way to get the P.A. to respond. But the P.A. never responded.

The family came back into the picture indirectly through Mary Jordan, director of a documentary in progress about Smith called You Don't Know Jack. Jordan had once lived in Irving Rosenthal's San Francisco commune. She learned about Smith when Rosenthal showed her the photos in his "vault," and, says Jordan, "They burned a hole in my heart." Her relationship with the Plaster Foundation has been "strained" (Hoberman's word) from the start, though he and Arcade had no idea she was close to Rosenthal.

In the autumn of 2002, Rosenthal called Mary Sue Slater after learning that the Plaster Foundation intended to charge Jordan $10,000 to $13,000 for up to 40 minutes of Smith's footage. (In contrast, Warhol's footage costs about $6,000 a minute.)

"I was so outraged by that contract that I called Mary Sue Slater at home," says Rosenthal. "I said, 'Look, Jack's stuff is really worth an enormous amount of money, and it's in the hands of these crooks.' " Rosenthal is the one who thinks the archive is worth millions, and maybe it is, but the Plaster Foundation has never been able to afford an appraiser.

In November 2002, Slater wrote her first letter to the Plaster Foundation, asking for an accounting and requesting that it "please send us our share." Hoberman sent an exasperated reply, asking why the Nephew had never been in touch, detailing all the work done, and explaining that the foundation operated at a loss.

Rosenthal then decided that the sister needed a New York attorney and called an old friend, Al Podell. Last spring the Plaster Foundation was ordered to turn over all of Smith's work. Convinced that the Slaters would sell it to private collectors, the foundation refused. That's the Cliffs Notes version of how this ended up in court.

Before one court appearance, flyers were sent from Jordan's production office urging "community support" for Smith and his sister against the "vampires." Jordan says that to her, "vampire" means "the system," even if the people in her office meant Arcade and Hoberman. She also rallied Smith's friends to come to court, where the Plaster Foundation argued that the Slaters abandoned the work. But the judge didn't buy it.

Hoberman learned from this reporter that part of the sister's agreement with Podell was that the work be sold intact to a museum or cultural institution. (This was Rosenthal's suggestion.) Surprised, Hoberman said that if a museum took it, he'd jump for joy. Arcade seemed skeptical that this could really be true. But it's the final irony. After all the rancor, both sides apparently want the same thing.

And what did Smith want? Ivan Galietti, a friend, imitated Smith's high nasal drawl to deliver the last wish and testament he heard the artist make: "Let them fight over it."

Original URL: http://www.villagevoice.com/news/0410,carr,51681,1.html

**Pouncey, Edwin. "Print Run: New Books: Music and Beyond." *The Wire* 78.**

The writing and images in these three books resurrect the work of three major underground artists—film maker, writer and artist Jack Smith, poet and publisher Piero Heliczer, and calligraphic/light artist Marian Zazeela—whose separate and combined vision was directed straight at the palpitating heart of the 60s New York underground movement and is only now being fully recognized. The late Jack Smith is today mainly remembered for his epic of "Baudelairean cinema". *Flaming Creatures*, a film which, at the time of its release, was praised by the likes of Beat poets Allen Ginsberg and Gregory Corso, together with fellow film makers Andy Warhol, Ron Rice and Film Culture magazine editor Jonas Mekas, but branded obscene by the authorities who were scandalized after witnessing the scenes of soft focus genitalia and blurred transsexual bohemian romping. "It was hot enough to burn up the screen," was what one cop who raided a screening of Smith's film would later tell the press.

The star of *Flaming Creatures* was originally intended to have been Marian Zazeela. By the time Smith got round to shooting the film, however, Zazeela had met La Monte Young and her commitment to both her partner and the embryonic Theater Of Eternal Music meant that she would hand over the leading role of Delicious Dolores to Sheila Bick, another member of Smith's Warhol-style Cinemaroc society. Zazeela's main contribution to *Flaming Creatures* was to design the titles for the film, but her early influence as one of Smith's photographic models is seared into the celluloid of his creation. Underground film enthusiast and Village Voice film critic Hoberman's fascinating, meticulously researched account of the making of *Flaming Creatures* and Smith's other, equally extraordinary Cinemaroc productions is an illuminating piece of cinematic scholarship which reveals yet another side of 60s avant-garde New York and ushers in a host of colourful and curious characters who were instrumental in making it happen. Illustrated with stills from the films, and a hitherto unpublished portfolio of revealing photos by Norman Solomon, taken while *Flaming Creatures* was in production, Hoberman's book will remain the last word on Smith's magical masterwork.

At the same time as he was piecing together his *Flaming Creatures* movie, Smith was also experimenting with still photography as a medium to bring his Byzantine New York fantasies to life. His tiny studio would be transformed into a scene from the *Arabian Nights*: he would arrange various members of his coterie to form "plastique" portraits that were both sensual and psychedelic. Smith's main model for these sessions was the young Marian Zazeela who, posing mostly nude or semi-nude, resembles some unattainable siren of mythical legend on the finished contact prints. Smith's other models included Frank Di Giovanni (aka Francis Francine), Joel Markman, Rene Rivera (aka the notorious Mario Montez) and Arnold Rockwood, all of whom would appear in *Flaming Creatures*. Although the authorities screamed pornography, Smith's photographic and cinematic studies were reaching towards an intense level of consciousness rather than mere titillation.

In 1962 Smith and Zazeela put together a selection of these prints, titled them *16 Immortal Photographs* and offered them for publication to Film Culture. The idea was to produce "an abstract visual poem" within the pages of the magazine. When Mekas declined the offer, they approached poet, publisher and film maker Piero Heliczer, who agreed to publish 19 of Smith's original photographs tipped into an artist's book, titled *The Beautiful Book*, with a cover design based on a drawing by Zazeela. 200 copies of the original *Beautiful Book* were handcrafted by Heliczer's dead language press (although due to the technical intricacies involved in its production, fewer were probably produced) and it has since attained a legendary status amongst Jack Smith admirers and collectors of 60s counterculture art. Copies of Heliczer's dead language edition of *The Beautiful Book* rarely come up for sale; a pirate edition with only eight of the 19 photographs present briefly surfaced, but even this inferior version is now scarce. This latest reproduction is a labour of love that goes back to the original negatives and uses an

original copy (from La Monte Young and Marian Zazeela's archive) as its template. The end result is an astonishingly accurate facsimile that has also been printed in an edition of 200 copies. 140 of them are for sale. Despite the hefty price tag (a bargain compared to the thousands of dollars an original would cost) this wondrous glimpse into the secret fantasy world of Jack Smith is irresistible.

*The Beautiful Book*'s publisher, Piero Heliczer, was another intriguing and, until now, relatively unknown member of the New York underground. His independently run dead language press was a vehicle for publishing his own poetry, as well as important work by such fellow literary visionaries as Angus MacLise, Gregory Corso and Anselm Hollo, who co-edited this collection of Heliczer's writings with poet and former Factory employee Gerard Malanga. *A Purchase In The White Bohemia* gathers together all of his dead language press poetry collections, together with his long poem "The Soap Opera", which was published in London in 1969. Heliczer's poems are liberally sprinkled with dreamlike images that wantonly abandon all accepted poetical conventions (much to the annoyance of such old school writers as Robert Graves) to produce the literary equivalent of a primal blast of feedback from The Velvet Underground.