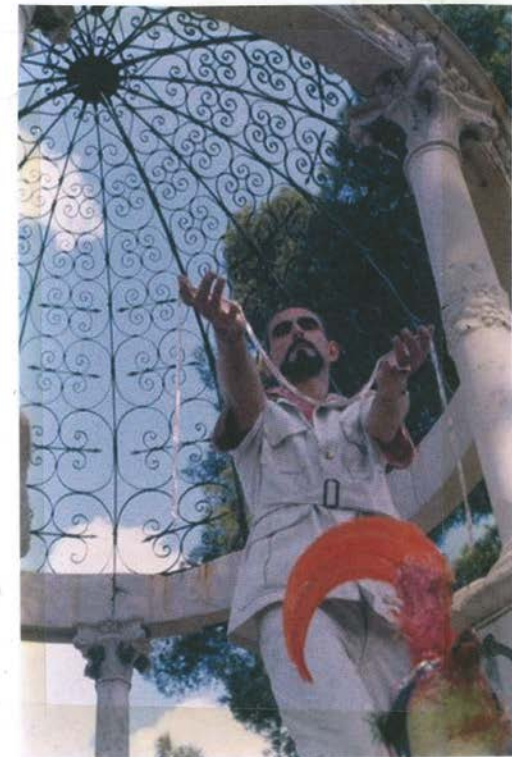
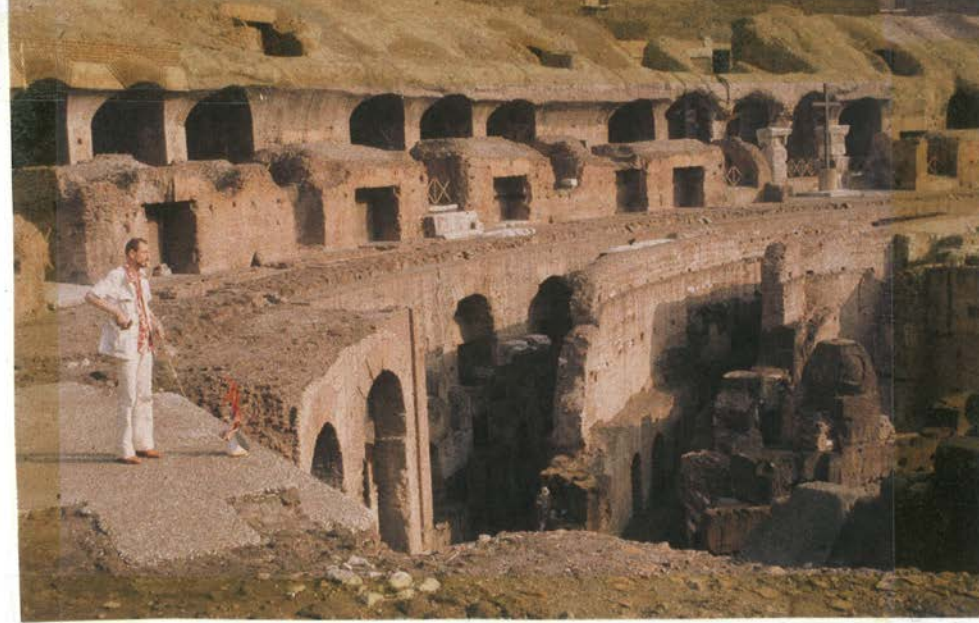


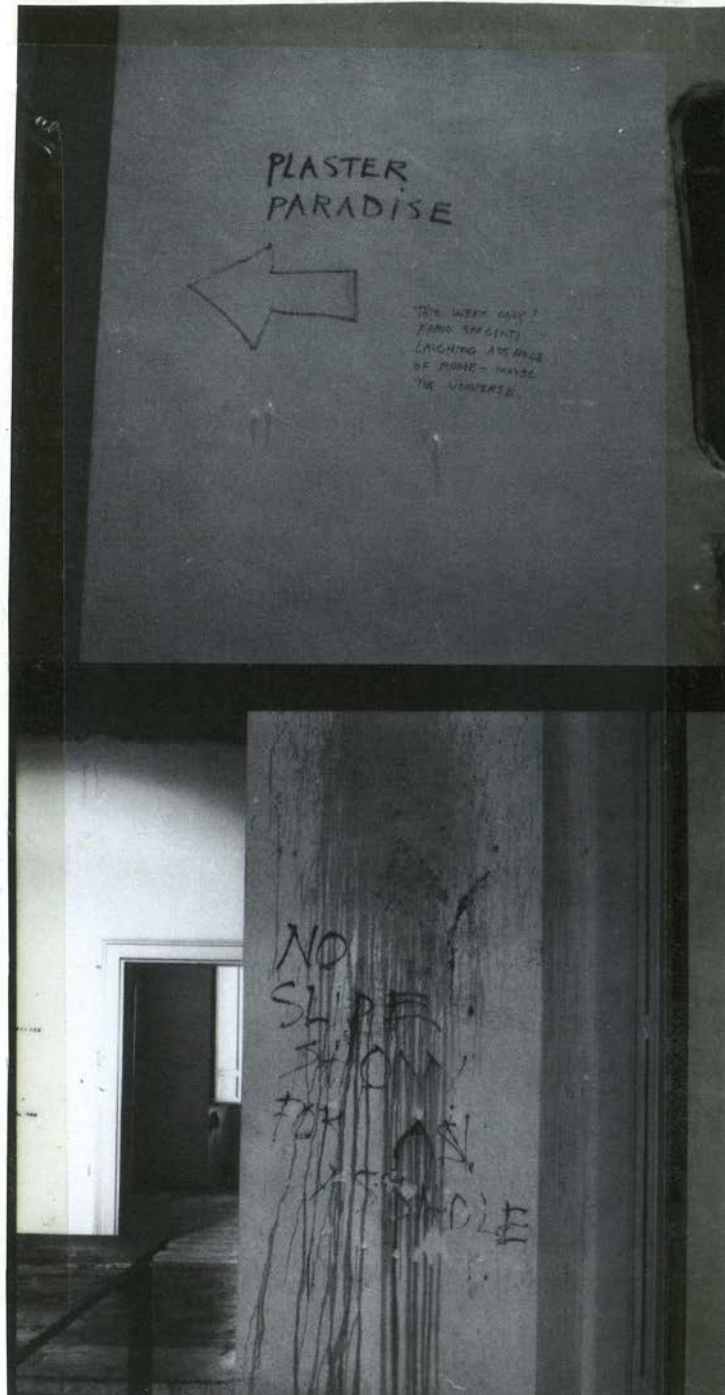
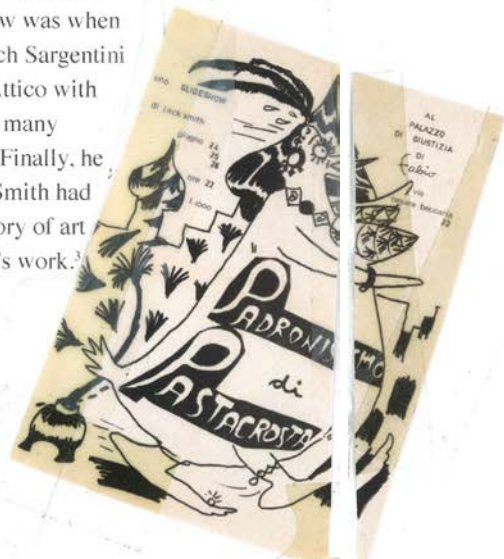
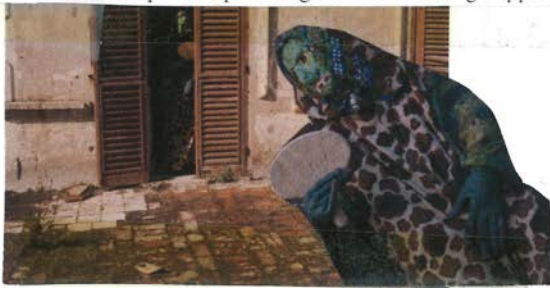


Jack Smith's pet penguin Inez a.k.a. *Yolanda La Pinguina* made her official debut on a trip to Rome in 1974. Earlier that year, dealer Fabio Sargentini had visited Smith in his East Village apartment. In it, he found an exotic jungle atmosphere. A wild secret garden with green vegetation erupted out of the bathtub, and across the living room, Smith had meticulously arranged ancient-looking piles of trash into spectacular junk montages. Sargentini remembers it like a fairytale. Baroque drapery hung over the windows and Smith's dazzling hand-made costumes were strewn throughout the space. His junk had even descended down into the building's basement where he was busy building a set for his play *Hamlet*. Decorating the dirty concrete floors with additional debris, Smith scattered trash along the basement's narrow walls, which were already protruding with "scabby irruptions... peeling in the most opulent manner imaginable."¹ Sargentini invited Smith on the spot to do a project at his L'Attico gallery in Rome.

Arriving with his mute companion, Smith captured Rome *through the eyes of a Penguin (that was Jack)*.² Smith's fascination with ruins—previously located in the debris of New York's crumbling infrastructure and in the churned out, discarded products of daily consumer culture—must have been sated by the sights of Rome. An entire city structured by the material remnants of its great fall. The setting was already veiled in a near-mythological ancientness, strangely reminiscent of the crusty scenes he had constructed in his NYC apartment out of trash. The photographs picture Smith and Yolanda walking the city as tourists or drifters, with Yolanda closely trailing Smith on her leash. Together, they take in expansive vistas from the crumbling steps of the Colosseum (then, in a state of disrepair) and strike poses under the wrought iron temple of Villa Sciarra. In some photographs, Yolanda appears in the frame alone, peeking through the eroding cracks of stucco walls into abandoned gardens with human curiosity. Those photos are taken from Smith's vantage. Others photos picture the pair together, taken from the vantage of an omniscient third party. Shot from below looking up, they seem to imply the purview of a small penguin. Though the series is largely without plot, some mini-narratives reveal themselves: like the story of Smith's tragic love affair with Inez and her subsequent abduction by an evil green witch (also played by Smith). In isolated settings, these scenes were acted out just for the camera and a photographer, and perhaps an occasional passerby, but Smith would eventually organize the pictures into a one-night-only slideshow, *Padronismo di Pastacrostà*, on June 24, 1975 at Gallery L'Attico.



Smith's experience in Rome was turbulent, to say the least. Sargentini had been well aware of Smith's reputation as an unreliable and self-destructive individual, but also, of his genius as an artist. He had inspired the early filmmaking of Warhol and was perhaps the single most important figure of underground performance in NYC. Prior to arriving in Rome, Smith had asked Sargentini to fly out his agent, a blonde Russian woman, to photograph the shoots. Once there, Smith did not like the results and promptly fired her. He demanded Sargentini import a different photographer: this time, the artist and dealer Tony Shahfrazi, who had previously shot some of Smith's photographs amongst the rubble of New York's City's Lower East Side (which Smith had approved of). Sargentini reluctantly flew Shahfrazi out for, what was, at the time, an exorbitant airfare. But shortly after Shahfrazi arrived, his and Smith's working relationship fell apart due to a number of disagreements about the framing of the photographs. Smith was maniacal about the frame. Sargentini arranged for a third photographer, a local named Ivan Galletti, who was a member of the Italian Avant-Garde theater group Beat '72. Smith and Galletti clicked. Galletti was humble and talented, and Smith could easily direct him to get the exact shot he had in mind. Apart from Smith's obsessive anxiety about photography, Sargentini recalls a number of chaotic episodes that ensued during the shoots. Most memorable was the time Smith and Galletti were arrested in Trastevere. When the police found Smith hiding behind some shrubbery outside of a bank, wearing a camouflage costume and a shiny green mask, they assumed he was robbing the bank. Sargentini, who Smith had called to bail them out, struggled to convince the police that Smith was not actually robbing a bank. He was making an artwork. Over the course of his time in Rome, Smith and Sargentini's relationship deteriorated. The final straw was when Smith refused to hand over any of his negatives or dupes, which Sargentini had paid for. In a fit of rage, Smith desecrated the walls of L'Attico with slanderous quips aimed at Sargentini and then disappeared for many months, finding refuge with members of the Beat community. Finally, he returned to perform his slideshow, but the damage was done. Smith had sequestered his host, like many presenters before, to the category of art world vampire despite Sargentini's enduring support of Smith's work.³



Smith's paranoia towards his presenters had been building for over a decade. He was still reeling from the fate of his infamous flick *Flaming Creatures* (1964) and its "sickeningly pasty reception" determined by its most major champions: Susan Sontag and Jonas Mekas, who he felt had made the move all about sex—just a "sex issue of *The Cocktail World*." Even worse, they elevated the work's status to high art, praising its advanced formal techniques.⁴ The film is a "brilliant spoof on sex," Sontag writes in her seminal book *Against Interpretation*. "Very studied visual effects... (lacy textures, falling flowers, tableaux) are introduced into disorganized clearly improvised scenes in which bodies, some shapely and convincingly feminine and others scrawny and hair, tumble, dance, make love."⁵ When Smith had wanted to edit the film, fueled by both its misinterpretation and its praise, he was denied access to the master copy by his former collaborator Jonas Mekas, who had "locked it" in the "vault" of his newly established cinema Anthology Film Archives.

This refusal, tantamount to artistic theft, triggered in Smith an enduring antagonism towards NY's underground scene, "so uncommercial it's ultimately commercial."⁶ In his eyes, the underground and its predominant figures did not inspire imaginative play. Rather, they harnessed the energy of its "baby filmmakers" and ejected their inventions into the rotten pit of the art market.⁷ A system from which Smith, of course, would never profit. This continual process of extraction became an ironic and self-defeating conundrum for Smith. He was, on the one hand, a widely celebrated cult figure. On the other, he was fatally allergic to the confining expectations of his primary audience. As a result, he pushed himself further into isolation and financial squalor. "How can a queer escape the mocking-laughter of wealthy normals if they visit his very rejection-sewer to get art," Smith had inscribed onto the wall of Sargentini's gallery. Smith was struggling financially and was eventually evicted from his loft on Greene Street. In this space, known as the Plaster Foundation, Smith had been honing his stagecraft, performing for a dwindling, but devoted audience outside an official, institutional context. He organized his stage around a junk heap in the center of his apartment with piles of "metallic and plastic street refuse...a toilet with junk in it, including a crippled, perhaps headless doll. Old small, Christmas trees with hardly any needles left. Feathers, wire netting, and a string of colored lights." Critic Stefan Brecht provides the most complete account of Smith's productions at the Plaster Foundation in his book *Queer Theater*: "The assembly of reject artifacts is tawdry," he observes. "Even with some glitter from the light there is no glamor, even momentary. Nor any kind of beauty, nor the interest of the concrete... Smith seems to have picked up these things by an attraction to the definitely squalid, a sentiment for orphanage among the merest means. The disruption of function defines the heap."⁸



The basis of Smith's world view is landlordism—an idea built around his comprehension, or mis-comprehension, of rent. "Smith thinks rent is magic, doesn't understand it—the fact that you have to keep paying: you are paying for time itself, for your very life. Landlordism in his view is the origin of all the current crimes and troubles."⁹ Smith's hostility towards the wealthy, exacerbated by his ongoing economic crisis, was compounded by the "vampiric" nature of the underground scene, whose actors he associated with the elite class regardless of their economic status. It was from this antagonistic position that he would carve out a wildly original and transcendent aesthetic and political vision. Smith describes a utopia, organized around a pile of bric-a-brac, much like the one he built in his homespun theater: "I can think of other types of societies . . . in the middle of the city should be a repository of objects that people don't want anymore, which they would take to this giant junkyard. . . I think this center of unused objects and unwanted objects would become a center of intellectual activity. Things would grow up around it."¹⁰ Smith knew this auxiliary world was not possible, but he remained wholly committed to its ideal regardless.

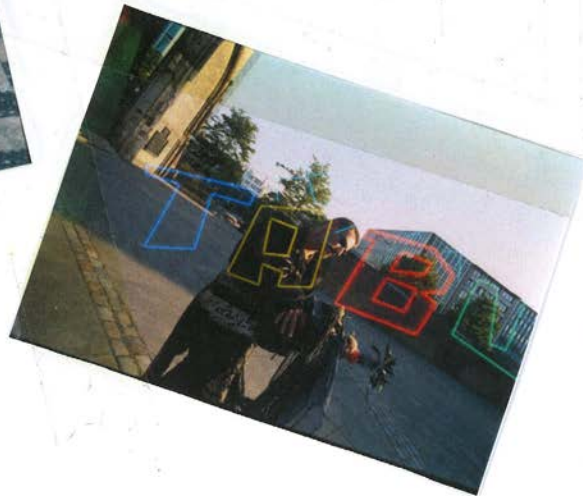
Smith's turn to performance in the 70's was practical, as funding for his movies became scarcer over time. At a certain point, he was routinely rejected for grants as the parameters for his projects became more elaborate and financially unattainable. But, even more so, his embrace of performance was compulsive and reactionary. The format allowed him to revel in the low; in a heap of discarded things that he could endlessly amass and re-arrange in any given context. In making his work reliant on his presence to be seen, he might also evade interpretation or co-option. "Why would you need the moldy films when you've got me?"¹¹ Smith replied, in exasperation, to a presenter who was surprised to learn that Smith had arrived to his own screening without any movies. But Smith never lost faith in the ineffable and excessive power of film's image—personified by Hollywood muse and failed actress Maria Montez, for whom he had undying devotion.¹² His final two films, *Normal Love* and *No More President* had no fixed form. Instead, he would alter the number and order of the film rushes in front of his audience, as well as the music to be played with them and their titles, so that no two screenings were ever similar.¹³ And just as they were constituted, the films would disappear after Smith, himself, departed. Slides were even more malleable than film rushes and could expedite filmmaking, allowing for "maximal mobility, since he could easily reorder their sequence, stringing them through loosely scripted or half improvised narratives that would metamorphosize with each presentation," notes Juan Antonio Suárez.¹⁴ By the late 1970s, Smith had become increasingly frustrated with the perceived incompetence of his actors, who he felt could not adequately follow his instructions. He was prone to irritation and sometimes resorted to violence. Yolanda had helped relieve him from this burden. For his next play, *Secret of Rented Island* (produced shortly after returning from Rome), he whittled the cast down to a plush pig and two toy monkeys. Eventually, he reduced the play to just a slideshow. He would no longer need assistance from his actors, who doubled as his technicians. His slides were an assembly kit—a "one-time-only, do-it-yourself movie."¹⁵



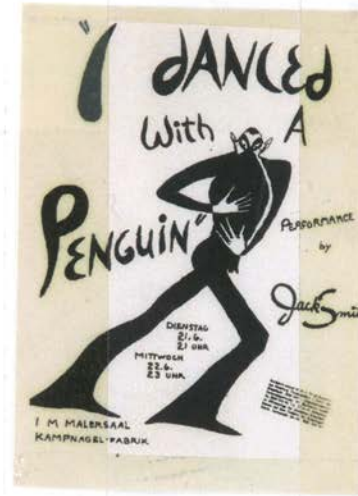
Smith began incorporating 35mm slides into his early theater productions, but later used the format almost exclusively in one-off events, reconstructing performances or "photographic excursions" that had occurred outdoors or in private spaces.¹⁶ All of the slides that appear in this room are shot on location in Rome, Sperlonga, Cologne, Genoa, Hamburg, New York City, and other unidentified places. Across these cities, Smith scouted decrepit urban environments or vividly pastoral landscapes to use as his sets. Amongst them, he created series of *tableaux vivants* saturated in a magnificent light resembling technicolor—an artificial exposure which approximates naturalness rather than reproducing it.¹⁶ Even in these isolated situations, the trouble of accessing a location, a treacherous climb up the broken stairs of an abandoned tenement, were as important as the photograph itself. So too, was the extended process of preparation once there; Smith would spend hours adorning himself and his "actors" in costumes and makeup and arranging all of his toy and handmade props (carried to shoots in trash bags). Smith often made use of the environments existing elements, like a live lamb found in the rolling hills of Sperlonga, Italy. Sargentini accompanied Smith on this particular shoot and recalls taming the animal in his arms in preparation for Smith's reenactment of Moses and the lamb. A particular cast of props—Smith's objects-as-co-stars—reappear across the photographs, each with their unique symbolism: Yolanda, a glittery crab, a red plastic lobster, a gilded round hand mirror, and a rent check addressed to "the lobster." The most pervasive character throughout Smith's work is the lobster, his stand-in for the evil landlord. On sandy beaches and atop the rubble of multiple cities, Smith grips the envelope (sans rent), melodramatically thrusting it in the air or shooting it with a toy gun. In these comically unrentable settings, he offers the check to no one in particular.



Smith surely identified with Yolanda, who is also his lover and muse. Yolanda is a star in exile. A communitarian species by nature, penguins live in exile, their remote Antarctic home constantly threatened by man-made destruction. They are flightless birds, too. Yolanda, then, experiences a double inertia, reinforced by her stuffed animal status. With no home to speak of, she is a transient creature, eternally undervalued, undercompensated, and alienated from her creative contributions, always subject to the cannibalistic forces of art ambition. Shortly after Smith returned from Italy, he formally introduced his penguin co-star, 'the most famous penguin in the world!', to a New York audience in his slideshow *Horror of the Rented World* (1976), memorializing her important status within his repertoire. Smith continued to obsessively reference her in his titles (*Penguin Rustling Out by the Old Archives* and *Penguin Panic in the Rented Desert*), and hand-drawn renderings (some cute and others menacing), featured in promotional materials well into the mid-80s.



Smith remained faithful to his penguin collaborator up to her death in 1985. But from the start, she would be his martyr, a pure embodiment of Smith's unwillingness to compromise artistry in order to survive in the pasty rented world of normals. In 1983, Yolanda joined Smith in Hamburg for their final duet *I Danced with a Penguin*. These photographs were shot by prominent German filmmaker Helmut Herbst, and are strikingly different in their visual clarity and cinematic beauty. Nearly ten years after her Roman debut, a visibly tattered Yolanda appears in a shabby sequined shawl, almost identical to the one Smith is dressed in. Her white belly and the regal orange feathers she proudly wore on her head like a crown in Italy have been painted black. She is well worn by the world. In some photos her body lies limp on the ground, crumpled over a piece of cardboard. In others, she lays face-down in a gutter crushed by the weight of Smith's body. Throughout the streets and parks of Hamburg, Smith serenades her, desperately clutching the penguin's lifeless body. He is in mourning, for this would be her last dance. Two years later, Smith staged *Death of a Penguin* at the Millennium in New York, officially putting his collaborator, lover, muse, and surrogate-self in a coffin to rest.





There is almost no documentation of Smith's slide performances, so the original sequences of his slideshows could never be reproduced, nor would it make sense to without him there. What is known, via the collective memory of his core audience, is the unnerving effect Smith produced while handling his materials. People who were there recall waiting long spans of time, sometimes four or five hours, while Smith set up his equipment, meticulously arranged the carousels, and sequenced and re-sequenced the slides as they were being projected: "changing one slide for another, he stops pulling the first one while a corner of the image is still (dimly) on the screen, then pulls it out."¹⁷ The slideshows, like his theater, were precariously arranged and operated hesitantly by Smith, who was always figuring out how to do things in front of his audience. Playwright Richard Foreman, who attended many performances in the early '70s, remembers an "extended slowness, combined with the continual (and somewhat calculated) going wrong of every performance" which "brought the audience into a state of present attention that is precisely what other theater avoided."¹⁸

What remains of Smith's slideshows is the massive image bank he pulled from to construct his carousels, currently held in his archive at Gladstone Gallery in New York. The slides, which document an overwhelming number of performances and shoots in a variety of locations across the world, only came together as an artwork when Smith put them to use in performance, which also occurred in a precise location at the perfect time. In the period represented here, loosely bracketed by Yolanda's lifespan (1974–1983), Smith imagines the possible identities of objects in place of people. These objects remain, like him, in a situation of "metaphorical homelessness," ceaselessly traversing expansive public space. Whether symbolic or literal (as Smith was unhoused at various moments throughout his life), the condition of homelessness serves to "maintain an anarchic openness by resisting the regimentation of his work into a final form."¹⁹ Smith's performance begets a restlessness that prevents finality, and aspires to a transformation that always ends in a kind of failure. The chaotically organized images in the archive remain endlessly arrangeable, with no instructions on how to exhibit them without Smith here.



End notes

1. Suárez, Juan Antonio. "Bike Boys, Drag Queens & Superstars: Avant-garde, Mass Culture, and Gay Identities in the 1960s Underground Cinema," p. 201. *Choice* (Chicago, Ill.) 34, no. 01 (September 1, 1996)
- 2-3. As told to me in an interview with Fabio Sargentini conducted in 2018.
4. Smith, Jack, Jonas Mekas, and Johan Kugelberg. *Wait for me at the Bottom of the Pool: Artwork, ephemera and photography by Jack Smith*, p. 55. New York: Boo-Hooray, 2013.
5. Leffingwell, Edward G., Carole Kismaric, Marvin Heiferman, and Nayland Blake. *Jack Smith: Flaming creature: His amazing life and times*, p. 66. London: Serpent's Tail, 1997.
6. Smith, Jack. "Jobbing Critics Visit Trailer Camp Pink Flamingo Formulas in Focus." *The Village Voice*, July 19, 1973.
7. In Smith's essay on John Waters' film *Pink Flamingos*, Smith provides a biting critic of NY's avant-garde, taking aim at its most notable critics and drawing a parallel between the reception of Waters' film and his *Flaming Creatures*. In the essay, he asks: "Aren't movies a little too important to us to permit their meanings to be endlessly obscured by professional attention bandits, who, if they ever had anything to say must have said it better long ago?" Smith, Jack. "Jobbing Critics Visit Trailer Camp Pink Flamingo Formulas in Focus." *The Village Voice*, July 19, 1973.
- 8-9. Brecht, Stefan. *The original theatre of the City of New York: From the mid-60s to the mid-70s*, p. 17-18. London: Methuen, 1986.
10. Smith, Jack, *Uncle Fishhook*, p. 115.
11. Johnson, Dominic. *Glorious Catastrophe: Jack Smith, Performance and Visual Culture*, p. 70, 2012.
12. In his essay "The Perfect Filmic Appositeness of Maria Montez," Smith articulates a filmic ideal via his passionate love for the ineffable and magical qualities of "queen of technicolor" Maria Montez, whose rise to fame in the 1940s was quickly followed by her unceremonious fall. Panned by critics for her "atrocious" acting, Montez represented the outrageous beauty of cinema, spoken through its image alone, against language or content. In "Montez-land... there is a (unsophisticated, certainly) validity there—also theatrical drama (the best kind)—also interesting symbolism, delirious hokey, glamour—unattainable (because once possessed) and juvenile at its most passionate." *Wait for Me at the Bottom of the Pool*, 27.
13. Suárez, Juan Antonio. "Bike Boys, Drag Queens & Superstars: Avant-garde, Mass Culture, and Gay Identities in the 1960s Underground Cinema," p. 197. *Choice* (Chicago, Ill.) 34, no. 01 (September 1, 1996)
14. Suárez, Juan Antonio. "Bike Boys, Drag Queens & Superstars: Avant-garde, Mass Culture, and Gay Identities in the 1960s Underground Cinema," p. 198. *Choice* (Chicago, Ill.) 34, no. 01 (September 1, 1996)
15. Brecht, Stefan. *The original theatre of the City of New York: From the mid-60s to the mid-70s*, p. 175. London: Methuen, 1986.
16. Matturri, John. "Jack Smith: Notes on Some Homeless Objects," p. 280. *Criticism* 56, no. 2 (2014): 279.
17. Brecht, Stefan. *The original theatre of the City of New York: From the mid-60s to the mid-70s*, p. 18.
18. Leffingwell, Edward G., Carole Kismaric, Marvin Heiferman, and Nayland Blake. *Jack Smith: 18. Flaming creature: His amazing life and times*, p. 26. London: Serpent's Tail, 1997.
19. Matturri, John. "Jack Smith: Notes on Some Homeless Objects," p. 279. *Criticism* 56, no. 2 (2014): 279.

Carousels:

1. *Lobster Rent*

(New York, Genoa, Cologne, and other unidentified locations (1969-1981)

2. *I Walked with a Penguin / Monster Mirror #1*

Rome, Sperlonga, Cologne, and other unidentified locations (1974-1975)

3. *I Walked with a Penguin / Monster Mirror #2*

Rome, Sperlonga, Cologne, and other unidentified locations (1974-1975)

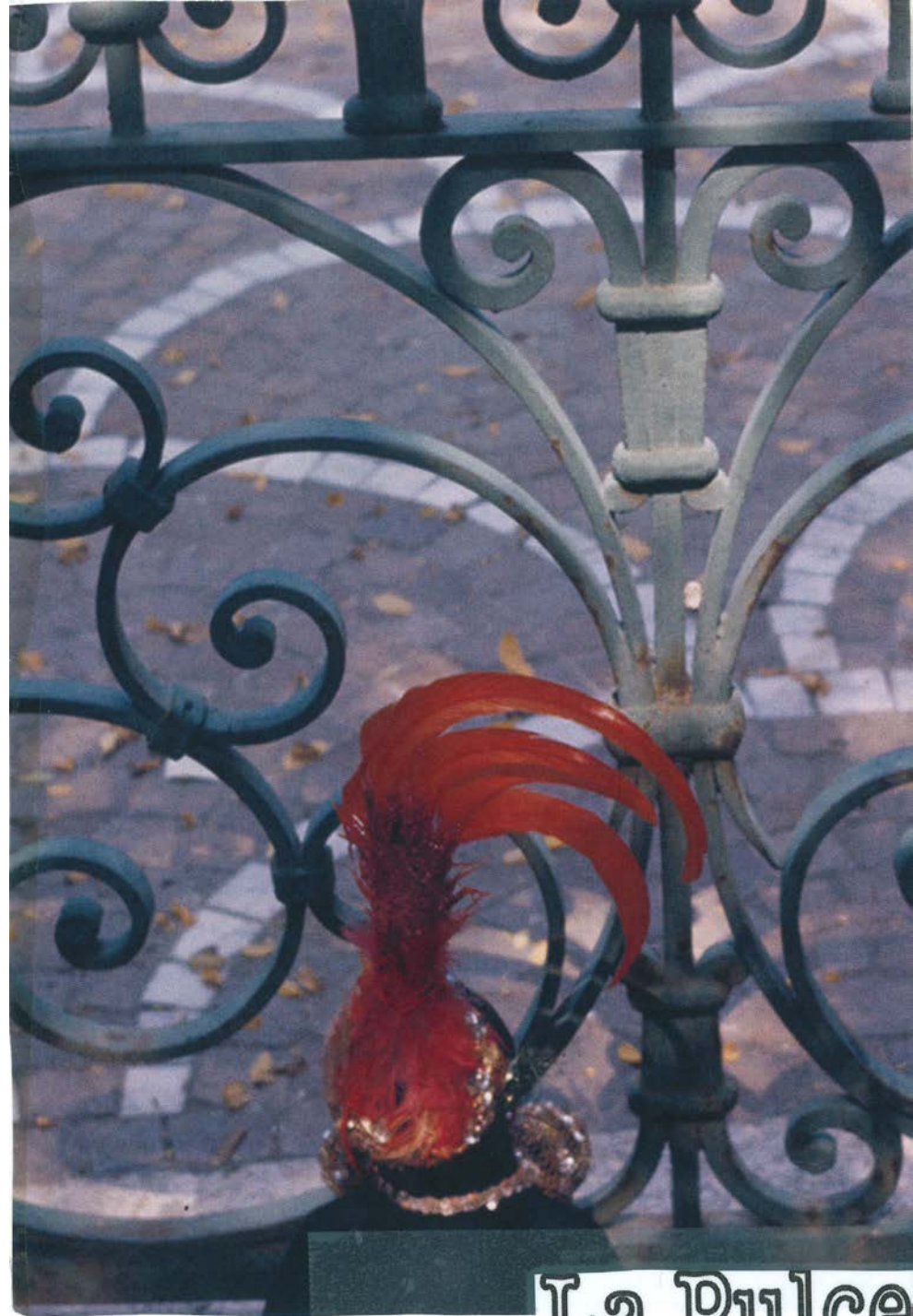
4. *I Danced with a Penguin*

Hamburg (1983)

This presentation, organized by Stella Cilman with the Estate of Jack Smith, includes four 35mm slide shows featuring fragments from performances and outdoor shoots in Rome, Sperlonga, Cologne, Genoa, Hamburg, New York City, and other shot between 1969 and 1983. It is a continuation of her research from Jack Smith: *Art Crust of Spiritual Oasis* (Artists Space, 2018), curated by Jay Sanders.

Special thanks to:

Felix Bernstein, Gavin Brown, Matt Brown MC, ^{Joan Jonas}
Eva Cilman, Eli Coglan, Lenny Giller, Michelle Groat,
Marc Kokogeli, Polina Wasonova, Scott Penik, Giulia Roberti
Jay Sanders, Fabio Sargentini, Robert Snowden, Giampa Surangkarn



La Pulce