

LA PULCE

Jack Smith

Yolanda

Opening: April 12

In 1974, Jack Smith arrived in Rome with his pet penguin Inez, a.k.a. Yolanda La Pinguina. Over the course of many months, the pair walked the city, Yolanda closely trailing Smith on her leash. Together, the co-stars discovered sets amidst the ruins and gardens of Rome, strangely reminiscent of the near-ancient, artificial jungle landscapes that Smith arranged from piles of trash in his New York apartment. Across the city, the pair acted out scenes for a rotating cast of amateur photographers, and maybe the occasional passerby. Smith would eventually organize these pictures into a one-night slideshow, *Padronismo di Pastacrosta*, on June 24, 1975 at Galleria L'Attico.

By this point, Smith had all but given up on the idea of the static, finished artwork; his notorious feature *Flaming Creatures* (1963) was his last. Inside his loft on Greene Street, known as the Plaster Foundation, he re-focused his energy on stagecraft, performing his impromptu theater for a dwindling, but devoted audience. During this period, Smith had become increasingly frustrated by the perceived incompetence of his actors, who, he felt, could not adequately follow his instructions. He also struggled to make rent and was evicted from his loft in 1972. Smith's growing antipathy towards his collaborators, combined with his ongoing financial crisis, compelled him to look for new spaces to sustain his endangered art. By the mid-70s, his practice underwent a revival of sorts: he increasingly moved his performances out into the world and carried with him a more compliant and portable cast: Yolanda, a glittery crab, a red plastic lobster, a gilded hand mirror, and a rent check addressed to "the lobster" (a stand-in for the evil landlord). These objects-as-co-stars, each with their own symbolic significance, suggest the possibility, but inevitable failure, of creative transformation.

Smith surely identified with Yolanda, who is also his lover and muse. 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, experienced a double inertia reinforced by her stuffed animal status. In her role as a performer, she, like Smith, was subject to the cannibalistic forces of art ambition. Her cult stardom had exceeded her agency. Her image was instrumentalized by Smith for over a decade, who obsessively referenced her in titles and depicted in hand-drawn renderings (some cute, others menacing) up to her untimely death in 1985. Yolanda's brief lifespan, beginning with her Roman debut and ending with her funeral at the Millennial Theater in New York, marks a period alienation for Smith—from his art, which, he felt, had been grossly misinterpreted, from his human collaborators, and from his home, where he could no longer afford to live.

The photos in this exhibition capture a heavily ornamented Smith with his props in a number of public, isolated locations: outside of gothic chapels in Hamburg, Germany, within the luxurious countryside of Sperlonga, Italy, and atop the desert-landfills and crumbling tenements of New York City. Like Smith's theater, the laborious preparation for these shoots was as important as the photograph: the struggle to climb a set of broken stairs or the extended process of adorning himself and his stars in elaborate costumes and makeup. Unviewable to a discerning audience in their original context, Smith reconstructed these outdoor *tableaux vivants* in slideshow performances. The format allowed Smith greater flexibility: he could arrange and re-sequence the images as they were projected, strung through loosely scripted narratives that would shift according to his mood. Though Smith never lost faith in the ineffable and excessive power of film's image, the slideshows could accelerate and expand filmmaking; they were an assembly kit, a "one-time-only, do-it-yourself movie."¹¹

Carousels

1. *Lobster Rent*, 1969-1981
(New York, Genoa, Cologne, and other unidentified locations)

2. *I Walked with a Penguin / Monster Mirror #1*, 1974-1975
Rome, Sperlonga, Cologne, and other unidentified locations

3. *I Walked with a Penguin / Monster Mirror #2*, 1974-1975
Rome, Sperlonga, Cologne, and other unidentified locations

4. *I Danced with a Penguin*, 1983
Hamburg

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 unidentified locations, shot between 1969 and 1983.

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