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Subjects	Tartaglia, Jerry (1950), Brooklyn, New York, United States Sims, Jerry Waters, John Cornell, Joseph Fellini, Federico (1920-1993), Rimini, Emilia-Romagna, Italy Crawford, Joan (1908-1977) Zorn, John (1953), New York, New York, United States Montez, Maria (1917-1951), Barahona, Dominican Republic De Carlo, Yvonne (1922), Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada Von Sternberg, Josef (1894-1969), Vienna, Austria Hall, Jon (1913-1979), Fresno, California, United States Hayworth, Rita (1918-1987), Brooklyn, New York, United States Smith, Jack (1932-1989), Columbus, Ohio, United States

Weegee (1899-1968), Ukraine

Film Subjects

Satyricon, Fellini, Federico, 1969

Blonde cobra, Jacobs, Ken,

Hot air specialists, Smith, Jack,

Star spangled to death, Jacobs, Ken, 2004

Putting litter in pool, Smith, Jack, 1977

Frankenstein meets the Wolf Man, Neill, Roy William, 1943

Normal love, Smith, Jack, 1964

Flaming creatures, Smith, Jack, 1963

Rose hobart, Cornell, Joseph, 1936

The trap door, B., Scott, 1980

JACK SMITH AT P.S.1

Ah, Jack, Jack. It's fallen to me to review you and I must now face doing so. This big P.S.1 spread of your works and days doesn't stop with your things but aims, correctly, to present you as your ultimate creation, and, like everyone you attached yourself to, I still have such problems with you. For starters, with your only half-joking Montez Mariolatry. Jon Hall. Yvonne De Carlo! I figure you were- as you advised- glamourizing your messes, sending-up not so much these feeble luminaries as the general human capacity for foolish devotion, the longing for the unattainable ...Tootsie Roll. You fell hard for 1940's sat. matinee junk. Infuriating, maddening, wasn't it? when you came to discover that you, too, had been "betrayed by Rita Hayworth". So how it is having come to see that Montez was a real nothing, you then chose to devote a lifetime to arranging her seven veils?

I recall nine year old Nisi telling us that five year old Aza had turned nasty during their flight to visit grandparents. "People lied to me! We're above the clouds and I don't see God. Do you see angels? Do you see Heaven?" Aza at twenty five remains as lie-sensitive but has outgrown God and Heaven. Jack may've chosen to let disappointment, the pain of betrayal, fester and keep festering into one great colorful open sore, his art.

A friend describes being in the 80 Saint Mark's sanctified fleabag, the audience wisecracking at Joan Crawford overreaching her modest resources, when Jack stood up to tonguelash them. No way to behave in

page two

church, in the presence of a diety. I was also told he was sneaking out to Christian Science meetings till the end of his days. Hanging on. Like those experiments with baby chimps, hanging onto the wirecage pseudo-mothers designed to repeatedly electro-shock them.

I'm ratting on you, Jack, but this comes nowhere near your ratty moves. Besides, you'll come off heroic again, that's your gift.

FLAMING CREATURES, his one great film, and there is no greater, mocks the devotees of glamour as it proclaims the faith. Faith flashes its neon promise as the flesh fails. Screeching queens circle a bobbling breast ("Homosexuality", Jack had said, "is ludicrous"). God punishes... the errant appetites: the roof caves in. But desire rises again to sublimate into eternal moviedom.

THE GREAT PASTY TRIUMPH was the first title of his intended followup film, though he settled on NORMAL LOVE, which as a film wasn't and never would be a great pasty triumph, attaining meta-glamour, possibly because FLAMING CREATURES had done all the triumphing necessary. Uncorked, Jack was at loose ends.

In connection with P.S. 1, the American Museum Of The Moving Image in Astoria showed Jack's filmwork, with insightful and extensive notes by J. Hoberman, who curated. Smart money is investing in Jack's photographs now, but it was primarily as the cinematographer/director/editor of a single film that Jack entered legend, derailed Fellini (SATYRICON, shown

page three

in conjunction, as was the 1947 FRANKENSTEIN MEETS THE WOLFMAN, an influence on Jack), fertilized many a John Waters. His camerawork for the film is of a piece with his still-work of the period, which at their best achieve both stillness and seem plucked from continuities, from phantom, suggested, lost, aching absent movies.

The creatures are cavorting, a skeleton dance of desire; sneering, sudden clutches. Von Sternberg imbedded in the tense gauze-cordoned-off intervals of depth. Observing the screen, breathtakingly, each image jells, holding to the four sides in miracles of surface tension. Jack's slightly atremble handheld camera lets us in on the secret drama within the apparent commotion, as we feel along with him ever so sensitively for optimum framing positions. The camera and the scene are making love.

Yet within the scene: yucky losers (excepting Jack's voluptuous actual-female object of desire) with delusions of stardom, womanliness, beauty. It's all so cheap, so down, elusive *and* tangible: look! on the screen, it's the creeps next door. Cheap black and white filmstock invites abstraction as tonal areas separate from objects and merge into larger patterns. Overexposure often stresses the gossamer nature of *film*, struggling to maintain some resistance to the projector-light so as to keep the show going.

His naive prior and then confused post-FLAMING CREATURES film-efforts are a sorry mess, with here and there (PUTTING LITTER IN POOL) an amusing moment, despite filmmaker Jerry Tartaglia's best efforts to

page four

restore and reknit from Jack's notes. Drugs... notoriety... Warhol's takeover of his esthetic... who knows? NORMAL LOVE wasn't cooking right from the beginning, however promising seemed some of the raw ingredients, the unedited filmrolls shown publicly during the wave of anticipation for the film. NO PRESIDENT is a bleary bummer, a fumbling imitation of my own STAR SPANGLED TO DEATH starring Jack. John Zorn thinks maybe Jack lost interest in composing films, lost interest even in making good shots, but retained the love for dressing up his performers for the shots, photographs as well as movieshots, and indeed some wonderful stray creature-apparitions are to be seen, all dressed up with no place to go.

The screenings included some neat comic performances by Jack for other filmmakers: in monster-crone drag for HOT AIR SPECIALISTS (unlike his created star, *Mario Montez* -a star as seen in reflection in a puddle in the street, way down there- he never attempts to crossdress prettily, only to excite revulsion, as more savaging -by proxy- of Mom); performing brilliantly, with keen screensense, as a balmily menacing shrink in the otherwise void THE TRAP DOOR; closer to himself as a bizarre derelict in the sensitively photographed loose collection of shots that make up WINO.

These films are all narrative or/and photographic-subject driven, off-color off-Hollywood movies of a sort. Off-Hollywood being as far-out, cinematically, as Jack ever got. Suggestion: radical surgery to salvage the tenth of the cinematography for NORMAL LOVE that is vital composition would be a kindness, cutting it loose from the "outrageous" bore that is

page five

the rest. Happily, what followed the grim scuttling of NORMAL LOVE (intended by Jack as "The first color film", meant to loom even greater in his own eyes than Joseph Cornell's ROSE HOBART) is that Jack's formal capacities turned to enliven/engender a territory of experimental theater, while he increasingly distanced himself from and became actively hostile to -as he grew in ignorance of- avantgarde cinema.

One sees, moving through the thick of Jack's invention filling the walls and vitrines and floorspaces of the generous P.S. 1 exhibiton, in the form of photographs and writings, assemblages, collages, drawings, sculptural figures, stagesets, fashion designs and manikins, videos and audiotapes, how thoroughly, relentlessly full-time an artist Jack was. Scurrilous, witty, transgressive: a fount of today's fashionable transgressiveness in the arts. Time will tell if his transgressive energies can surmount acceptance, and what -formally, as *works*, beyond impact as gestures within a particular social time and place- will remain.

Certainly the still-photography.

Many photographs are chronologically arranged from room to room, from the latter 'Fifties -when Jack and I hung around, and so he appears in my early filmwork and I appear in his photographs (unhappily for me, no exhibitionist, but we had this deal: in front of the other's camera, you did what you were told)- on into the late 'Eighties when Jack died, age 57 (honest, kid that's on the early side), of AIDS. (He told Penny Arcade that he thought he *should* get AIDS, and sought it out in the public parks. If it

page six

hasn't been made clear: Jack was *into* betrayal, and here he betrayed himself. And betrayed a promise to himself: back in '56 or '57, having difficulty getting old people, with faces gone into fascinating rot, to pose for his camera, he promised that when the years had made him decrepit and interesting he'd let anyone photograph him any which way. Jack, that was terrible, you murdered yourself. One more unforgivable hurt.) For his first decade of photography the quality soars. Still a question for me is a headshot of a cheerily soused old woman that Jack met in a cafeteria, one of his first pictures after saving for and acquiring his Rollei (shrewdly he'd gotten officework in a photo supply wholesaler's). To me, a nothing picture then and nothing now, one of those goddam peeks into picturesque misery that Jack himself usually despised. (The closest I witnessed to a display of compassion on his part was Jack turning in a fury from a photo by Weegee of a Puerto Rican mother caught while her children were burning to death. The photo hadn't repelled him; death... well, that's life, we can live with death: bullshit was intolerable. The self-serving caption read, "I cried when I took this picture.") Then, suddenly, he springs from recording to creating, veering from what he probably initially construed as fashion shoots -he had fashion photographer ambitions: "Where else", he'd ask, "do you see acceptance of pictorial design, abstraction, objects isolated in whiteness? People look at it, you get paid for it." "Content counts", I countered- to unmarketable fantasy splendours. Unmarketable as soon as the burlesque crossdressing entered to stay, and as Jerry Sims (we see him in STAR SPANGLED TO DEATH, fittingly, as a prisoner of Camp Concentration) came to dominate the images, not to mention Jack adapting Jerry's cacophonous madness as his

page seven

own personal style. Jerry with parasol and deathmask among the New Jersey sunflowers! Jack had found....Jack. And he's unerring. He shoots and himself develops color-roll after color-roll -while art-photography was then almost entirely black and white- and they come up golden. Often every shot on a roll is a dreamily hilarious take. Not snaps of odd behavior; compositions, every edge considered.

My one grief with P.S. 1 (other than projecting a video rather than filmcopy of FLAMING CREATURES at the entrance) was the decision to present most of this early work as enlarged lasercopy proofsheets hanging loosely on the walls! A \$\$ decision, one supposes. Interesting in that it showed the camera-sequence of exposures, and perhaps for some the neighboring pictures set up relational resonances. But I thought the curl of the thin shiny paper trivialized and the crowded proximity of images distracted from each other, and that this magnificence shouldn't be toyed with but is to be accorded its proper -yes, traditional- gallery spread, as *enlarged color photographs*, firmly mounted and spread out for individual perusement. Let the pictures call to each other across a bit of space. They evoke movies, but shouldn't be glommed together into another unintended movie-like thing. And of course proper presentation would've filled the 7 or so rooms and been a different show altogether, and I'm an ingrate for bringing this up. But let's have another show soon, doing right by these whimsical wonders, now 30 to 40+ years old, now that they're free of their moodily distrustful creator. It would help, even, to print the stuff as calendars, one picture per sheet. (A wish he had, way before

page eight

Keith Haring's subway-wall drawings, was to save up to rent a single advertisement space in the subway where he'd place a single beautiful unsigned color enlargement . Merely to brighten lives, no sales pitch at all, and still a lovely idea.)

After the colorwork, made affordable by another well-chosen place of employment, an indulgent photolab,, and after we split as friends and working partners -with the exception of my taping his voice for BLONDE COBRA- he turns to black and white and to ever more nakedness and decorative decadent eroticism (sex being something else). Max Beckmann, as much as Von Sternberg, helps arrange the sets for him, Beardsley serves tea. The best of this phase are interior groupings leading -in a leaping evolvement- to the filming of FLAMING CREATURES, a kind of multi-session photoshoot on one set, again with a voluptuous female tending to center the shots. There's a stab again at fashion, very interesting when he draws and paints over and distortingly collages the figures. But then the photographer wants to be photographed and we see Jack, and its Jack and more Jack, some telling candids of his sober working self amongst the often witty and expressive posturings, before he finally succumbs to his faith and decides to *look* famous and we get direct attempts at Hollywood glamour without the saving complications of irony, and his embroilment with photography as a crucible of personal conflict is over. Great while it lasted.

One might say that he turns to another kind of nakedness ...that of a person abandoned, delusions exposed, like Maria Montez on a cheesy set. Gone is the integration of person and picture. It's aging Jack with his dopy ideas

page nine

pinned against "exotic backgrounds", the remnant of his smarts the self-mocking penguin doll he takes everywhere. Okay, so what's so bad? He saw the world and the world saw him. Let's not fetishize art -including photography- any more than it is. What's important is a life, and in an absurd general predicament Jack chose to localize absurdity to the more manageable strain of glamour worship. He picked up on Maria's similar narcissism; why wouldn't he also want to investigate the reaches of her gullibility?

Afterword.

Jerry Tartaglia concluded a thoughtful and level talk at AMMI with the statement, "Jack was a great gay artist." Fact is, I never bought Jack's homosexuality. His abused friends, men and women, valuing the better times, the liveliness of his company, step forth to speak of him; never acknowledged lovers. (Sexually speaking, "I'm strapped", Jack told me early on.) Homosexuality was a swaggering bluff that he'd achieved objective identity, had graduated infantile narcissism (so much of his appeal was his sudden dependence on you, dropping himself in a basket on your doorstep so that you might pick him up and care for him and allow him to release his hatred for his mother at you.). The polymorphous perverse -bitterly featuring the breast- imbues his art; to consider the work is to participate in his more genuine sex life. He was a desperately inventive social isolate -a sudden stillness follows the conclusion of his bouncing-around pinball career; and, partly proceeding from and partly despite his desperation, he was a great artist.

page ten

So there, Jack, you ill-wisher, I've given you more of my time. Hope you're happy. One of your airy jottings on a P.S. 1 wall reads, "Thanks for explaining me." Fuck you.