

GLITTERING LOGIC IN A MINOR KEY

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Glorious Catastrophe: Jack Smith, Performance and Visual Culture
by Dominic Johnson. Rethinking
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London-based performance artist and scholar Dominic Johnson's *Glorious Catastrophe: Jack Smith, Performance and Visual Culture* will stand as the definitive academic study of Smith's persona, work, and import to contemporary culture. The book is the result of almost a decade of Johnson's rigorous research and thinking about Smith, who has become an iconic figure embodying a kind of queer performance *avant la lettre*. A wildly influential, downtrodden figure in the New York City postwar underground film and performance milieu, his films—for which he is still best known—were radically provisional both in their form and in their content: sexual decadence verging on collapse. While best known for the infamous *Flaming Creatures* (1963), most of his other titles remained in unfinished, or rather never-to-be-finished, states throughout his lifetime (and beyond), and would be reworked by the artist as live-film performances, their guts mutating in a confoundingly open-ended fashion over the years. Smith embraced the ephemerality and obsolescence of pop-cultural detritus in opposition to the “crust” of staid, frozen tradition. His live and his cinematic performances—not to mention the performance of his life itself—were about the impossibility of their own coming into existence, according to Smith expert J. Hoberman (37).¹

Studies of Smith's practice tend to focus on the films more than on his equally innovative work in durational performance and expanded cinema or his dazzling writing and still photography. Johnson very capably synthesizes what has come before while redressing the gaps in the scholarship. The most important publication until now on Smith was the Hoberman- and Edward Leffingwell-edited anthology *Wait for Me at the Bottom of the Pool* (2008), in large part because it included Smith's writings alongside insightful critical texts. Johnson's most original achievement in *Glorious Catastrophe* is in his comprehensive mapping of the written word in Smith's oeuvre (specifically in chapter 6) and his venturing an analysis of its relationship to performance.

I should note a key event that contributed greatly to the critical discourse on Smith: *Live Film! Jack Smith! Five Flaming Days in a Rented World*, organized by Marc Siegel, Susanne Sachsse, and Stephanie Schulte Strathaus in 2009. Johnson was one of dozens of participants from around the world who gathered to consume Smith's work and discuss his legacy before returning to their hometowns to produce new films, studies, performances, and more, inspired by his oeuvre, which were premiered six months later in Berlin. The result was a fascinating, polyvocal collective autopsy of Smith; its raging yet

critical fandom managed to keep the artist's infamous "difficulty" alive by (largely) resisting soft-focus romanticism.

As Johnson's title suggests, Smith's potent engagement with catastrophe and failure is the central tenet of the study. Johnson argues that, for Smith, the very "possibility for meaning is predicated upon accumulated catastrophes, represented in the logics of fragmentation, vulgarity, excess and waste" (1). Johnson expertly analyzes the major themes of Smith's persona and work and how they operated within the prevailing cultural and political discourses of his time, and in the here and now, which finds his work circulating as a touchstone for contemporary queer artists. Johnson charts the entire Smith cosmology: from his vendettas to his obscenity trials, each piece of the puzzle works to contextualize his films, performances, and images, which are considered in depth. As Johnson describes, "I explore many facets of Smith's glittering logic, which extends from his political and social grievances, to his idiosyncratic perspectives on aesthetics, and the problems entailed in a life lived towards art" (2). Smith's work is always buttressed by his fervent beliefs and philosophies, "his own politicised responses to what he understood as a perpetual state of exploitation, misrepresentation and abuse" (8).

Johnson begins by productively framing Smith as a "lost cause"

who represented a road not taken for the development of a radical, utopian art (4). Rather than being consciously excluded from the historical record, Johnson suggests that Smith “necessarily failed to register” (17). For Johnson, Smith was too messy and idiosyncratic a figure to fit into prevailing narratives of the development of visual and performance cultures, and Johnson resists imprisoning Smith as a product of the 1960s by considering the “collision between glamour, disaster and sexual excess” (8) that his work staged into the 1970s and 1980s, as well. Johnson does not seek to recuperate Smith into any canons, but instead identifies him with a “minor” history poised in between and to some degree outside performance and visual culture (14). Uninterested in heroizing Smith, Johnson is attuned to the problems of historiography surrounding his subject and of art and culture more broadly, and he is conscientious about how these narratives and canons were and are built. Johnson neatly summarizes the ambitions of this copiously illustrated tome: “Seduced by Smith’s aggressive attacks on public morality, *Glorious Catastrophe* reads Smith’s practice as a fruitfully ambivalent investment in crisis, exploring representations of sexuality, failure and death across art, performance, film, and writing” (26–27).

The first two chapters of *Glorious Catastrophe* advance a

“counterhistory of cultural experimentation in the 1960s” by tracing Smith’s complex position “between narratives of art, theatre and film” (29). Chapter 1, “Little triumphs of disaster: failure, boredom and excess” introduces the notion of failure as a way of understanding the threat that Smith’s marginal expressionism presents to the writing of art history’s dominant narratives, specifically the cool, conceptual art of the 1960s. “At once moronic and tragic, triumphant and vulnerable, bored and hysterical, Smith’s work poses peculiar challenges to criticism,” Johnson explains, but it embodies the value of seeking out the “itinerant, volatile and elusive” as a way of fully understanding the complexity inherent in every historical moment (36, 38). Johnson explores the intricate nuances of Smith’s relentless drive towards failure—from frenzy to atrophy and everything in between—and the vital role of failure in performance more broadly. The cultivated boredom in Smith’s work becomes an infinitely complex art form and metaphor for his—and Johnson’s—emphasis on the meager and minor, one that refuses to give audiences easy satisfaction.

Chapter 2, “‘Beyond self-disappearance’: Jack Smith and art’s histories,” analyzes how Smith’s art and life intertwined through his persona and his polemics, which consistently and vociferously denounced the artist’s subjection to

disciplinary processes of art historical institutionalization as “repressive, punitive, and delimiting of artistic labour” (58). According to Johnson, what makes Smith difficult, specifically, is “his unapologetic queerness; his vociferous critiques of art and art history; his rejection of finite and commodifiable forms of production . . . and his generally inappropriate politics” (61). Johnson productively contrasts Smith to Andy Warhol—specifically Warhol’s enthusiastic embrace of careerism and financial success as antithetical to Smith’s stubborn, all-consuming “hatred of capitalism” (111). He concludes the chapter by proposing that Smith’s aesthetic ideas were virtually inseparable from his moral judgments of the (art) world and his place within it (82–83).

Johnson’s chapter 3, “*Flaming Creatures* and the burden of disgust,” examines Smith’s defining work, *Flaming Creatures*, the banning of which Johnson argues was “the defining event of [Smith’s] career” (110). He analyzes it through the lens of the disgust brought to bear on it by the US courts and government in their suppression of the film through the 1960s; as a serious target of morality crusades, it becomes a case study in the state subjugation of queer subjects at that time. Johnson articulates an aesthetics of disgust, particularly around the film’s central rape scene—which suggests that

sexuality and especially heterosexuality always veer towards the catastrophic—and the specter of male homosexuality. He also critiques Susan Sontag’s famed defense of the film at the height of its notoriety for desexualizing both it and Smith (102). Johnson concludes by positing that, for Smith, the performances undertaken for *Flaming Creatures*—the queer world they imagined into being—had a kind of life of their own that exceeded their recording.

Chapter 4, “Innocent monsters and *Normal Love*,” analyzes Smith’s gorgeous color follow-up film to *Flaming Creatures*—and the controversy it, too, engendered—which acts “as a satire on heterosexuality that imagines it as a mundane submission to social and economic pressures” (117). Smith saw all sexual desire as deformed by the demands of capitalism to the point that the masses are “shocked” by the real, unvarnished bodies that lack the market’s artificial plastic sheen (119). In sharp contrast, Smith’s view of sexuality is as a force always veering towards collapse and death, a “diffuse and opportune register of the perverse” (138) that poses difference proudly against perfection and prudishness. Johnson interprets *Normal Love* (1963) as a struggle to “crystallise emergent political and theoretical knowledge about sexual dissidence” (120). This contributed to building a nascent pre-Stonewall gay subculture around the figure

of the freak, which became a kind of prefiguration of “queer” (128). *Normal Love* advances an ethical code around freakishness akin to that developed in the similarly nihilistic film *Freaks* (1931) by Tod Browning, with its deviants’ rallying cry of “One of us! One of us!” (124).

Glorious Catastrophe’s final three chapters develop Johnson’s thesis on the centrality of failure and catastrophe in Smith’s work to fruition. Chapter 5, “The Deaths of Maria Montez,” explores Smith’s profound investment in the titular 1940s Hollywood actress—a mystical beauty with no acting skills. Johnson also unpacks the metaphor of the wound—its “proximity to death, disease, disgrace and other bodily disasters” (144)—as a site for camp meanings. Johnson here is interested in Smith’s queer appropriation of Montez’s trashy performances and films, arguing that this “subcultural ethics of wounded recognition” can be a model for examining how Smith’s own legacy continues to influence and be taken on by others today (144). Montez’s mode of being and exotic glamour and *mise-en-scènes* opened up the possibility of a “better time and place” for Smith; writer Ronald Tavel even suggested that, for Smith, “every pertinent phenomenon was screened through her” (151). Johnson reads Smith’s work as distinctly autobiographical—his passionate comments on

Montez are “decoys for self-analysis” (153)—at a time when this was out of fashion in both theater and performance. He identifies the crux of Smith’s practice as the lesson from Montez that, in ineptly failing to perform a fiction, something far more genuine and truthful reveals itself (154). Smith’s zealous investment in Montez—and the wound of her failure—ultimately lays a foundation for a queer politics.

Smith’s prolific writing, which includes everything from scribbled notes, plentiful lists, performance scores, and doodles, to journal entries, erotic fantasias, and screeds, is the subject of chapter 6, “Glamorize your messes’: scenes of writing,” interpreted by Johnson as a “labour of wayward performances and ugly feelings” (167–68). Johnson pored over every fragment of written ephemera in the Smith archive over six weeks in 2005, a task that had not been undertaken to such an exhaustive degree before. The emotional impact on Johnson of finding the more private and personal scraps of Smith’s detritus is palpable, and in that sense the chapter is perhaps the most invocatory of a (mythic?) “real” Smith who existed without an imagined reader or audience that needed to be communicated to. Johnson posits that Smith’s artistic practices “inhabit a curious space between artistic endeavour, therapeutic pursuit, and domestic hobbyhorse” (179). While distinct from his

spoken words, many of the written words acted to spur on his improvisations in the performances (some performances were more tightly scripted, however), whereas other texts become poetic undertakings to Johnson's eye. Writing here is a highly performative act—though one oriented towards preservation rather than disappearance—with Johnson paying particular attention to the “hinge between the body that lives and the text that it writes” (182).

He also traces Smith's written attacks on figures such as Jonas Mekas and Susan Sontag and the question of whether he was indeed pathologically paranoid—seeing an organized conspiracy in what could be random occurrences—or simply “having all the facts,” as William Burroughs put it (187). Artists' writings for Johnson represent a productive interruption in the narrating of history, particularly as they occupy a place between “creative practice and everyday life” (191). (As a side note, it's interesting to consider whether this chapter would have been possible to undertake before art dealer Barbara Gladstone's acquisition of Smith's estate from the Plaster Foundation, the small group of friends who had salvaged, preserved, and disseminated Smith's work before the vicious legal battle that eventually saw Gladstone's acquisition and rigorous cataloging of every fragment of Smithiana.)

Finally, chapter 7, “Rehearsals for the destruction of Atlantis,” examines Smith's investment in exoticism and the myth of Atlantis as the foundation of his specific brand of “apocalyptic utopianism.” Focusing on the 1980s, with its unholy trinity of Ronald Reagan, AIDS, and the Culture Wars, Johnson positions Smith's queer utopianism as a performative model for imagining the future useful to us now, when queer theory is bound up in questions of temporality and futurity: “Smith's utopia is allegorised through the myth of Atlantis, as a vanquished plenitude that has been and gone . . . his fostering of the future is an ambivalent gesture, nurtured without any concern for its material realization, and problematically modeled upon a fascination with the figure of apocalypse” (197). Johnson also interrogates another strain of exoticism in Smith's work: his notorious deployment of “racial kitsch” (Tavia Nyong'o's term), which is particularly evident in his early still photography. Johnson sees it as a self-consciously artificial and, in the end, critical examination of the normalization of racist clichés and Orientalist signifiers (204–7). Smith consistently “rehearsed” the destruction of Atlantis throughout his career (216), and the island's intoxicating combination of “disaster and possibility” (219) can be seen throughout his oeuvre. Johnson concludes with what could be a summation of his

entire book: “In his recalcitrant threats, [Smith] reminds us that the shaky yet singular space of culture offers an ersatz paradise, prone to fantasy, pleasure and desire, while also, in the same gesture, invoking a presentiment of something catastrophic” (220).

Johnson struck a nerve for me with his precise and deeply affecting account of the importance of tracing queer cultural lineages and legacies. He states in his introduction,

As individuals frequently removed from reproductive futurity, and often alienated from familial legacies, lesbian, gay and transgender people are especially well-placed to reinvent fantastical histories by asserting new lineages with figures who attract our attention. Plotting out a marginal ancestry, we may procure imaginative cultural heredities to prolong the affective reverberations of missed encounters with those who have preceded us. (21)

Johnson’s motives and perspective resonate strongly with our present historical moment, and they commanded my identification, particularly as he describes himself as someone “conditioned by the inescapable subject position of being queer in the time of AIDS”

(27). Johnson also identifies himself with the writer—or artist—as scrounger, rummaging through detritus to cobble together “a life amid the details” (31), a humble practice very much in harmony with Smith’s own work of bricolage.

Though his scholarship is specifically grounded in performance studies, Johnson casts an extremely wide net in *Glorious Catastrophe*, invoking a generous, eclectic range of references that draw on numerous disciplines and cultural fields. One very much gets a sense of Johnson as an intellectual magpie, as he summons everyone from Lenny Bruce and the debates between Norman Mailer and Kate Millett to the plays *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (Edward Albee, 1962) and *The Boys in the Band* (Mart Crowley, 1968). His promiscuous bibliography finds Alain Badiou, Roland Barthes, and Leo Bersani cheek by jowl, not to mention Freud and Fried. Frank O’Hara and Herman Melville make appearances, as do Nan Goldin and Penny Arcade. Johnson spins off in many directions here; while this makes a concise summary of his arguments challenging, it proves to be an unmitigated thrill to read. Johnson is also very conscientious about offering alternative viewpoints, caveats, and self-criticisms. Even when covering his bases, his writing is highly poetic and, dare I say, performative. His evocative descriptions and interpretations of Smith’s films,

performances, and lectures—like the *Midnight at the Plaster Foundation* (1970) video documentation or the 1984 “Art and art history” lecture—are particularly satisfying.

The great irony of all this attention to Smith—Johnson’s and others’—is that the artist would have howled in protest at the discursive vivisection taking place on the body of his work, no doubt disagreeing with every commentator’s assessments and opinions of his motives and accomplishments. Although Smith railed against artists being consigned to the crypts of museum, archive, and academe, I would hope that he would appreciate the depth of

Johnson’s commitment to catastrophe, his adventurous intelligence, and his keen sensitivity to thinking through Smith’s work, because all of these are prominently on display in this landmark book.

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NOTE

1. J. Hoberman, *On Jack Smith’s “Flaming Creatures” (and Other Secret-Flix of Cinemaroc)* (New York: Granary Books/Hips Road, 2001).