

rethinking
art's histories

Flesh Cinema

The corporeal turn in
American avant-garde film

Ara Osterweil



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Flesh Cinema

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rethinking art's histories

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This book is dedicated to my mother Enid Weisman Osterweil (1944–2009),
whose rebellious, indomitable spirit keeps me aloft even in her absence.
(Ma, you were right: your love is enough to last a lifetime.)

Acknowledgments

This is a book about the profound and often conflicting demands that love, friendship, and art make upon us. How lucky I feel to have had the support of so many fellow travelers during the long process of this book's creation.

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Introduction

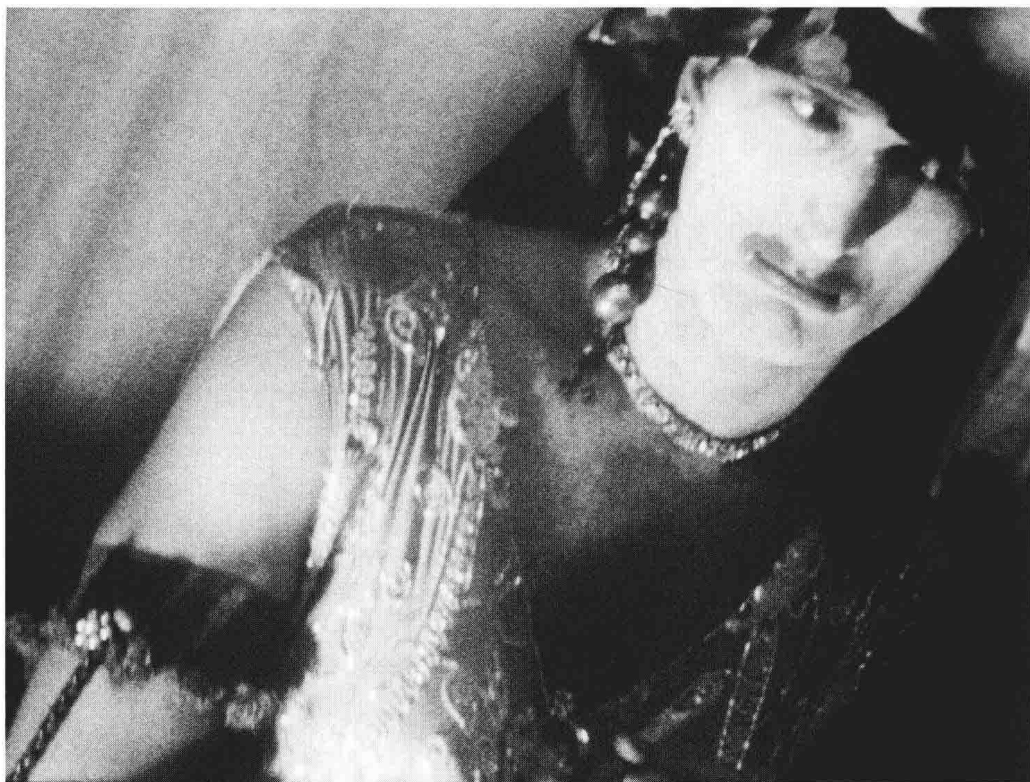
'Give me a body then': this is the formula of philosophical reversal. The body is no longer the obstacle that separates thought from itself, that which it has to overcome to reach thinking. It is on the contrary that which it plunges into or must plunge into, in order to reach the unthought, that is life. Not that the body thinks, but, obstinate and stubborn, it forces us to think, and forces us to think what is concealed from thought, life... The categories of life are precisely the attitudes of the body, its postures.

(Gilles Deleuze, *The Time Image*)

Like all turgid dreams, this one begins with bodies pressed against each other in a dark room.

It was a cold night during the relentless Montreal winter when I screened Ken Jacobs's 1963 film *Blonde Cobra* for my seminar on avant-garde cinema. The film, which stars Jack Smith, is composed of the surviving footage of two 'catastrophic remakes'¹ of popular movies from the 1930s and 40s shot in the late 1950s by Jacobs's friend Bob Fleischner. Described affectionately by critic David James as 'the worst film ever made',² *Blonde Cobra* looks like outtakes from a knockoff Dietrich picture made by a bunch of Martians. Punctuating the decrepit remains of Fleischner's two abandoned parodies – one of Josef von Sternberg's *Blonde Venus* (1932), the other of Robert Siodmak's *Cobra Woman* (1944) – with periodic intrusions from a live radio, Jacobs distilled the relics of these queer home movies into a euphoric elegy for things that fall apart – films, dreams, friendships, and any stable notion of who we are or might like to be.

Costumed in the tropes of classical cinema, an unusual-looking group of men sit, smoke, dance, ape, and masquerade in the crumbling tenements of the Lower East Side. Other than Jack Smith, who convulses in the equally unconvincing guises of gangster and goddess, their performances are attenuated to the point of exhaustion. At different intervals throughout the film, we see Smith festooned in sequin dress, silky headscarf, long dangling earrings, and grotesquely applied lipstick, languishing in the debris that constitutes this film's 'set'. With his beaked nose and beady eyes, Smith is one part gypsy, one part flapper, and one part whatsit. How incongruous this mutant Marlene seems in



- 1 Jack Smith is one part flapper, one part gangster, and one part whatsit in Ken Jacobs's *Blonde Cobra* (1963). The film is composed of the outtakes from two failed film projects shot by Bob Fleischner and starring Jack Smith.

the cluttered apartment in which he lolls, indifferent to whatever absurd genre plot is plodding along.

Suddenly, the image blacks out. Disorientation, and – if you are in charge of the screening – panic. Is this blackout supposed to happen, or is it just the latest casualty of our precarious projection system? Though the image quickly returns (this time), it soon becomes clear that this is no mere technical error. Rather, failure is at the very core of this film; it is its *raison d'être*, its aesthetic sensibility, its politics. The entire film is a meditation on what happens when things go wrong, or what Judith Halberstam has described as 'the queer art of failure'.³ Oscillating between the inept antics of its performers and the intermittent interruptions of a dark screen, *Blonde Cobra* appropriates failure as a means of detonating the slick fantasies of cultural capitalism. 'Why shave when I can't even think of a reason for living?' Jack Smith ponders, before stamping this aphorism with its inconsequential origin and authorship: 'Jack Smith, 1958. 6th Street.' In a 'heteronormative, capitalist society' in which success 'equates too easily to specific forms of reproductive maturity combined with wealth

accumulation', Halberstam argues, 'failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world'.⁴ Made in the margins of the culture industry by a band of misfits, *Blonde Cobra* opens up American cinema, and its audiences, to the radical potential of their undoing.

By celebrating perverse forms of instability that explode the most privileged myths of hegemonic culture, I argue that *Blonde Cobra* exposes the failure of America's movie-made aspirations to address the messiness of lived experience. During one of the film's many blackouts, we hear Smith's voice babbling in the background – the background of *what*? What constitutes the *background* when the *foreground* has *disappeared*? – but it takes a while to focus on what he is saying. Even in the dark, all is artificial, tawdry and cheap. Picture the glittery stucco sandcastles plopped upside-down on the ceiling of a Chinese restaurant and you will begin to imagine the grain of Smith's voice. But where is this voice coming from? In the typical theater, the speaker is located behind the screen so it seems as if the voices are emanating from, and grounded in, the bodies depicted on screen. Here, there are no visible bodies, and Smith's voice ricochets around the room with nowhere to land. Schizophrenically unmooring the voice from the body, the fictional world of the film collapses, throwing the audience back upon its own embodied particularities.

In the dark, Jack Smith ravishes us with a debauched tale that begins with a 'twensy, microscopic little boy' who lives with his mother in a two-family house. This lonely little boy eventually befriends another (imaginary?) little boy, whose family lives in the upstairs apartment. As Smith describes the denouement of their nascent and potentially delusive friendship, he accidentally slips into the first person: 'The lonely little boy was less than seven, I know that because we didn't leave Columbus until I was seven, I know it, I was under seven and I took a match and I lit it and I pulled out the other little boy's penis and burnt his penis with a match!' As if to empirically test the reality of his friend – whose existence, much like the film itself, occasions no faith – the boy sears the other's genitals. With this 'obscene' confession – which remains, as the etymology of the word suggests, literally 'off-scene'⁵ – the image snaps back and the Orientalist music resumes. But in a film in which even the characters don't believe in the 'reality' of the diegesis they inhabit, the illusory world of cinema crumbles. This sudden intrusion of biographical perversity ruptures the imaginary signification of the film and compels the audience to consider corporeal relations beyond its frame. By excavating the charged moments when biography seeps into and contaminates the illusion of cinema's hermetically sealed world, I argue that such leakages are essential to experimental film's corporeal mode of address. For in its failure to suture a universal subject into an idealized, self-contained fictional world, experimental cinema implicates the bodies of its spectator, performers, and creator as essential terms of its address.