



Figure 1: Film still from *Flaming Creatures*, Jack Smith, 1962-1963.  
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## **OPEN HALL 1**

Thursday, 13 August 2020, 8–9:30 a.m. NZST

Minutes by LP

SH: I've heard this time described in a few different contexts now as one not of revolution but one of revelation. That really struck a chord, this idea that the global pandemic was so disruptive to the daily fabric of life that it revealed or exposed a number of operative vectors of power, forces of aggression, oppression, inequality, the heterogeneity of experience, and the precarity of life. And I guess while I had previously engaged with these ideas abstractly, on the level of theory, or in cloistered groups with close friends, or intuitively (just this sense that the planet was careening toward some sort of catastrophe), here we are in this heightened state of virus time, adrenalized by the very real threat of danger, and I'm wondering what we can do in the art world—or if you don't like that term, as a community with a shared interest in art—to debunk some myths and perhaps find some equitable ways of working. Against this backdrop, today's Hot Question is:

The art world is a burning building on the verge of collapse. What parts (activities, processes, systems, structures) would you save and what would you throw on the fire? And why?

LD: What I value most in my interaction with visual art is sitting in a shared space, often with the artist, perhaps not, and engaging the artwork together and in discussion with others. As together with others you may notice details that you wouldn't see if you were alone or in a virtual encounter—that elongated time and space. Shared space and shared conversation are what the artwork is for.

CH: What would happen if we became more collaborative, collegial, more unified in the sense of addressing some of the problems of scarce resources. Keep that and build on it, chuck out the competitiveness and differences of opinion in terms of what's valuable and think more collectively as a group and as a sector about what kind of power we could have to advocate with if we started to pull together a little more.

SH: For those who don't know, I'm still recovering from ten years as a dealer in the commercial space. I'm trying to boost my immune system against a competitive market mentality (I'm saying that instead of "dismantle" as it's more positive). And what I hope is that we might be able to better metabolize it, use it rather than be used by it. It's one thing to want better, more equal, less violent systems or institutions, to want improvement within those spaces, but practical actions otherwise may only have a logic inside that system. So could we imagine the whole thing burn? Is it even possible to imagine a complete reproduction of the

system? Can we imagine the art world without the profit and wage system? I don't know.

NS: A lot of artists would have the intention of partaking in radical social and political change, but because of the structure we live in it is unsustainable, we don't have the time and resources.

GP: I want to repeat something that was said to me about a month ago that keeps coming around in my head, it was from an elderly man, who said that what he valued in art is someone who mainly "gardens." He said that what he values most above all else in any sphere is a transformative aspect rather than a transactional.

SS: It's really hard for me to think about the art world as a burning body, a burning building, it's a body, as I think there is so much of the art world that I love. For me it's about nurturing, or ways of nurturing the things we do love about it, like focusing on the relationships we have with other artists. I make art because I love artists, I love the way I can talk about things I'm interested in with artists. Looking from the inside—instead of watching a burning building—it's more of an idea of what you focus on to nurture and grow to take over that building, like a vine.

JB: Do we actually think that the building is burning?

HB: Yeah, what are the specifics of that? What specifically is burning? If this is a metaphor, then what is the literal situation?

CALM: I haven't been able to get the image of Grenfell out of my mind.

LD: From the perspective of Los Angeles, the entire world is burning. We can't separate out the art world burning from the collapse of other structures and social compacts or contracts. The idea of the collective has been undone and rebuilt and undone and rebuilt, simultaneously, over the last few months in this country.

RB: I would save the transformative elements of the art world and I would get rid of the transactional elements of the art world, which is obviously a big problem. And because of how I work and how I think, a lot of the space where I think things could be different is through language, what language we use, how we use it. Ocean Vuong, in an interview with Kirsta Tippett, talked about how change is always thought to be at the tip of your fingers but change is in your mouth; I found that a really useful way to think about the border between language and the body, and how powerful that ability to penetrate or permeate between being a body, between being a social body, between being a social body that speaks in relation to other social bodies, which for me is what the transformative is and not what the

transactional is. So I guess the transactional might be in the hands and the transformative might be in the goopy muscle of the tongue.

STA: What has been revealed in the current moment is that everything is amplified, i.e., forms of impoverishment, distance, proximity. In New Zealand, we came out of our longest period of lockdown in late May, early June and it coincided in a profound way for me with Matariki, which is Māori New Year here. I used that coincidence as a kind of prompt to accept a different mode of rejuvenation and as a moment to really soak that in and connect with the celestial signals and systems ... the burning house metaphor feels like an analogy of connecting with other ways of understanding our position—the ceiling blowing off and you're looking up at the stars at dawn. What I'm excited about personally is a rejuvenated investment in some of those less visible ways of locating ourselves, and for me what that starts to offer is thinking on different kinds of temporal lines, systems that we are connected to that last for millennia and beyond, and thinking outside of tightly Westernized flows. To me, I'm still clinging on to that kernel of optimism, which we are stirring around, which is that some things may change for the better out of all of this. Today, I'm feeling pretty good, I've had just enough coffee and I'm energized rather than frantic. Yesterday, to be honest, I called a sickie and stayed in bed with my head under the covers.

AG: Maybe it's about thinking about different kinds of economies, the market economy already exists inside the community economy. Taking the metaphor of the burning house and the question of what you would save, I start thinking about actual objects. The tuwaiwai is an object that is so important for how it sits in its community and for all the social relationships that it makes. How it forms social hierarchies, how it is given, and how it is received. ... This could be a good metaphor for an object that relates back to the community economy and how we can exchange socially.

JAK: I see the system as part of whoever lets it live, like a virus, it is difficult to see forward except through historical examples of structural change. Do we go back to a sense of nature, out of the studio, the "product," while still keeping the poetics?

SR: If you were to get away from the competitive, market-driven, transactional issues it would be to take some time in thinking about what friendship is. I think radical friendship doesn't need to situate itself with nepotism, it can be outside of that. It is a supportive structure, where you share affinities and really value interpersonal relationships. This is what I have been thinking about needing to commit to more.

JB: I find it really interesting that we are talking a lot about friendships and relationships, but not what we do,

whether it be writing or making art; it's almost like it's secondary, like an outcome that will look after itself, if we have the communication between us.

NH: When I hear about a burning house or a burning world I think about which world or whose world or whose house or which house, because a lot of people's worlds and houses have been burning for a long time. And there's a tension perhaps that occurs when people from outside of the mainstream or an institution are finally getting a platform or getting a place and then everyone goes, oh no, this shit is burning down, we don't want to do it anymore. And those people go, wait, wait, we just got here and now you're saying that it's not legit. ... In the meantime, people on the outside have been surviving in burning worlds, they have been pulling things out of the house, so to speak. And now people want to get amongst that. So how do you keep the kind of remnants of your disaster to yourself, your project of rebuilding that then everyone else wants to get amongst when you're not quite ready to let other people in?

CALM: I can't quite leave the metaphor and pin it to just the art world. In terms of talking about saving the relationships, it's also about saving the people, those who are in the building or house. I can't escape the idea of saving the people.



TC: During Covid we had a huge chance to radically transform our sense of political urgency in midst the precarity of political structures, but we did nothing ... we're all victims of ourselves. If we want to establish this anti-capitalist life through the production of art, it's actually more about us, changing our personal role, than social or political emancipation.

GP: I've been sitting here, half of me concentrating, the other half spinning off into thinking about why houses catch fire and I've gone back to the 1980s and I've been thinking about someone passing out smoking. I think the reason why I'm having that image is that Bernard Stiegler died this week, just yesterday. ... What I take from Stiegler's writing—he's was a thinker I really value, and I miss him already, I liked thinking that he was alive when reading his work—he talks a lot about the importance of the ability to pay attention. That ability to pay attention is also the ability to care and also to register significance ... I've also noticed this year, since the pandemic has wound itself up, is that people are finding it very hard to concentrate. So my question to myself has been how to do anything out of this space when it is so difficult to concentrate collectively. I've been trying to have some compassion for that, but also acknowledge that it requires effort: we need to concentrate, we need to pay attention and recognize the difficulty of paying attention in the developed world, and that our ability to do so is becoming more and more fragile.

CG: I've been struggling with time, I want to get rid of time in the art world, then some really good things could happen. ... I think I may be a bit of apocalypticist, where I really like the burning of everything. I'm just waiting on the super apocalypse to happen, because then we can start over with fertile ground and learn from our mistakes. ... Maybe this is because I'm trapped in this zone of being an arts worker at the institution; some people would say that's a position of power, but I feel like I'm not in a position of power most of the time when it comes to doing what I really want to do or when it comes to having the conversations I really want to have. Burn time. I say that from the position of privilege that I have.

LP: I keep thinking about the fire itself. If we took on the fire ourselves, we could make some good work—what is the work we want to make? To put focus there and from there the structures to exhibit and share may come.

GP: Flaming Creatures!

LM: I was thinking about this concept of control burn too. Even though we are talking about the art world, I keep thinking about the ecological situation. The right amount of burning, the natural cycle of a bush fire is putting carbon back into the earth and providing nutrients for things to grow again. I like this idea that could feel agency to burn the bits we want to burn and

grow the things we want to regrow. The thing I would save is the space to work. Making is a space of privacy and the house doesn't feel private anymore.

HC: It feels to me that there has been a slow burn in the world since the GFC. The macro financial response of governments around the world have greatly contributed to cheap money and have greatly contributed to inequality. We live in the consequences of that. You can trace Trump, Brexit to this, and you can see the consequences of those politics in the completely failed responses to Covid on a human level. I'm also extremely pessimistic about the future recovery and the capacity for Covid to change anything and all the more so. How this relates to the art world is low to no interest rates, massive inflation of asset values, and there is a direct link to the financialization of the art market. And thinking more locally, real estate values in Auckland, space is hard to come by, it is harder and harder for people to pay rent, more time is spent having to work day jobs to support a practice, more and more people paying off mortgages, less disposable income ... it's been a slow burn for quite a while.

LWT: I too have been thinking about the difference between slow violence and fast violence. The image of burning that came to mind when we started this conversation is, of course, the third precinct police building in Minneapolis that was a blaze, which is a building I have been to. The second building on fire is

not one building but many, the recent images coming out of Lebanon and the blast. The relationship between corruption and slow violence was interestingly highlighted by that explosion, because it occurred in an instant. In light of burning things, something that has been very much on my mind is the capaciousness of abolition. As a concept that moves in the circles that I'm and in the media more generally, I've been noticing that abolition has not been travelling with the same traction as it was originally popularized as abolition plus reparation. And so when I think about the question of the burning art world, I'm worried and concerned that we are fetishizing the burning so much that it becomes a kind of diction when it is more about power. ... The most important text for me recently has been Saidiya Hartman's *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals*, the way she puts breath back into the archive that is incomplete and thought-loss.

FC: I've had an unusual experience of having three months in New Zealand and now coming up to two months in Los Angeles, so I've seen two different ways of dealing with this virus. And I'm hearing from the different voices that for people in LA right now with so many cases and so much sickness around it's a different scenario—the metaphor of the house burning is a bit stressful if you are in fire season in LA. In thinking about the way I work, in thinking about contexts,

spaces, relationships as part of my work, it is hard to separate the art world from the rest of the world. I see the art world as relating to what's really going on in the world. I'm constantly thinking about the mechanism as part of the content of the work. I want to advocate for that as the position of an artist who doesn't need to take a clear position or name things that they want to save, but who tries to be in a position to listen, see, and connect.

BRC: If the house is burning down and we are in different states of grief, which may explain the lack of action, for me it's about space, finding space, because the house is the place to grieve and that's a collective process. And maybe these conversations are part of that space?

NF: What you need to make your work is constancy. And you need space. You can't operate in chaos and fire, you can imagine it and it gives you thoughts about metaphors, but you do need privacy. And you can't be fighting for your food, fighting for the lives of your children as people are doing in other parts of the world and then be making art. What everyone needs to do is to create a safe space for artists to make work, otherwise it won't happen. We can imagine endings and imagine burning and so forth and its productive conceptually, but practically it's not. Practically what we need is constancy.

EA: I'd like to return to focusing on the image of the tuwaiwai. I don't know if everyone here knows what a tuwaiwai is, but it's a craft form that comes from the Moana region. It is usually used as a cover, as a blanket, but also for walls. I was thinking a lot about that image in connection to the idea of transformation—I just have to get my little notebook—the idea of transformational practices as opposed to transactional. The tuwaiwai is not only about relationships but about knowledge, about the care for knowledge, and the ways that knowledge can be exchanged, forwarded, but is always in excess of a particular object.

STA: We're on our way to closing up ... I'm going to say something, I wasn't going to, but I guess someone told me that in instances like this when you are unsure whether to say it or not and you're on the fence, just say it. So I'm going to say this and I feel like it's probably going to be a tough one to follow. But I'm just going to say it anyway. My Dad actually died in a burning house fire. ... It's okay, it's okay, I'm okay with it. But just thinking about this analogy and thinking about how this is not an analogy, this is really happening and this has really happened, I feel that that's the part of the conversation that I think we are all trying to grapple with, really. The analogy you are describing was for me one of the most impactful, transformational turning points in my life. I still feel the ripples and effects of that daily, I'm still tethered to that, and I embrace that in a lot of ways too. So today's conversation today has

been around the responsibility that we have to embrace what is happening now, not as an analogy but as something real, that we are embedded in, and in fact have some agency in. I feel compelled to turn that analogy into something real for all of us. That's something that's been ringing in my mind, ringing in my life! What that event revealed to me is actually how conflated our experience is. If we could summarize today's conversation, I would use this kind of phenomenon of absolute conflation without architecture as another interesting analogy and a profound reality at the moment.

**Featuring:**

AG: Ayesha Green, Auckland

BRC: Bridget Riggir-Cuddy, Auckland

CALM: Cameron Ah Loo-Matamua, Auckland

CG: Chloe Geoghegan, Auckland

CH: Charlotte Huddleston, Auckland

EA: Elle Loui August, Auckland

FC: Fiona Connor, Los Angeles

GP: Gwynneth Porter, Christchurch

HB: Heidi Brickell, Auckland

HC: Harry Cundy, Auckland

JAK: J. A. Kennedy, Auckland

JB: Jan Bryant, Melbourne

LD: Leslie Dick, Los Angeles

LM: Louise Menzies, Christchurch

LP: Laura Preston, Berlin

LWT: Luke Willis Thompson, London

NF: Nicola Farquhar, Auckland

NH: Ngahuia Harrison, Auckland

NS: Nick Smith, Los Angeles

RB: Ruth Buchanan, Berlin

SH: Sarah Hopkinson, Auckland

SR: Sarah Rose, Glasgow

SS: Sriwhana Spong, London

STA: Shannon Te Ao, Wellington

TC: Tyson Campbell, Auckland