

# Jess Segall's Performance-Based Practice is Helping to Pose Important Questions About Commodity, Consumption, and Queer Ecology

The recent Guggenheim Fellow currently has a show on view at Brooklyn's famed Smack Mellon and challenges what is on the verge...



ANNI IRISH

NOV 3, 2023



Share



[Jess Segall](#) has been blurring the boundaries between cinema and performance-based installations for over a decade. I first encountered Segall's work in 2021, while she was a resident at the well known [Triangle Arts Association](#) in DUMBO Brooklyn. The documentation I saw from previous projects Segall had created, specifically *Reverse Alchemy* (2021), and *(un)common intimacy* (2018), occupied a space somewhere between Marina Abramovic and Cindy Sherman in my mind. Hardcore, challenging, and unapologetically dealing with issues of the body and a queer feminist history, Segall's work pushed the bounds of performance to another level and continues to do so. The Columbia MFA and Bard graduate was recently awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship which is a testament to Segall's work and also her commitment to creating pathbreaking art that confronts the viewer head on.



*Installation view, Smack Mellon, Brooklyn, NY 2023, photo by Etienne Frossard. Photo courtesy of Jess Segall.*

In *(un)common intimacy*, Segall investigates the complicated landscape of private wildlife reserves in the US which sent her on a tour of six states where she “trained” and filmed with various animals, including a tiger and alligator. The result is a beautifully shot film with accompanying stills that vacillates between danger and calm. Segall can be seen swimming in a 1950s inspired red and white polka bikini almost like an iconic pinup girl alongside a tiger. It is absurd, scary, and eerie. For *Reverse Alchemy*, science plays a role again, but Segall has an extra step in which she creates a gold farm. In this performance, Segall dissolved gold she obtained from the US mint, and through a reverse engineering process she extracted key chemicals to feed plants to “explore the potential for gold mining through cultivation rather than extraction.”



*Installation view, "Other Worldly" at the Fries Museum 2018. Image courtesy of Jess Segall.*



*"Other Worldly" at the Fries Museum 2018. Image courtesy of Jess Segall.*

Segall's latest body of work, *Human Energy* (which borrows its name from Chevron) has been over two years in the making. Concerned with many of the growing issues related to climate change, Segall specifically looked at the oil industry in an effort to look at greed and preservation from multiple perspectives. Juxtaposing the crude oil fields of California with shots of oil baths in Azerbaijan and even gay cruising spot that was once an active oil field itself, Segall has created a complex look at desire, commodity, identity, and the things that drive us. The result is a stunning 4-channel video installation that considers each of elements, and features Segall at one point atop an oil rig clad in a black bra, garters and fishnets. Another shot captures Segall as the sunsets on an oil field, with long shadows being cast. Segall can be seen with her back to the camera in a black leather jacket, heels, fishnets, walking towards the rig.





*Installation view, Smack Mellon, Brooklyn, NY 2023, photo by Etienne Frossard. Image courtesy of Jess Segall.*

In September [Human Energy opened at Smack Mellon in Brooklyn](#). Since then Segall has been traipsing the globe giving a talk at LA's Artcenter and ping ponging between New York City and Berlin, where she also maintains a studio and is currently working on a project with [FLAD](#) and [Air351](#) in Lisbon, Portugal. I recently had the chance to catch up with Segall about her current work, what it was like to win the Guggenheim, and what's next for her.



*Installation view, Smack Mellon, Brooklyn, NY 2023, photo by Etienne Frossard. Image courtesy of Jess Segall.*

**Anni Irish:** This latest exhibit at Smack Mellon is one of your most ambitious to date and is also dealing with larger subject matter you have taken on over the last few years such as ecofeminism, queer ecology, and oil as a commodity, sexuality, performance, and the body. Can you talk a little about how this project came together?

**Jess Segall:** This is the first in a series of films I am making about climate and desire. It also comes from a video and performance practice over the last years of working with plants, animals, vulnerable ecological sites and extreme climates.

*Human Energy* came from a nexus of thought on climate, queer futures, capitalism and pleasure. 1: That climate change is a non-consensual global endurance performance. 2: The oil industry and our oil consumption lifts up authoritarian systems of governance, ones that oppress freedoms including the rights of LGBTQ+ people, forcing intimacy into submerged coexistence alongside extractive industry. 3: The cinematic trope of queerness as death and infertility in films about dystopian futures. An early example is *Mad Max*, where resource scarcity pits the “good guys” “ i.e. the heteronormative family

unit against the subversive queers “the bad guys” in a fight for survival over gasoline. 4: We know oil intimately - it may be the first material placed on our body (vaseline / petroleum jelly) or used as sexual lubrication - especially queer sex.

Practically, I spent some time location-scouting for the work: this is usually the longest part of my process - securing the location, the rest falls into place afterwards I find and know a place. A residency at Triangle helped support the ideation phase, and Artists Alliance worked as a fiscal sponsor. I had support from a wide range of orgs to make this happen, including CEC Artslink, who were able to connect me with Salaam Cinema in Baku, who hosted me in Azerbaijan and performed in the video work, and Also a reliable crew of friends who you call when making something crazy. This includes Zefrey Throwell who filmed all of the drone and erotic scenes in California and Kim Darling, who appears in the video. It was a small crew for most of this project, considering all the logistics. For the music, I wanted the sonic orchestra of the oil field pump jacks to move from field recordings into a dance track - echoing the celebration of queer nightlife in post-industrial spaces, including the amount of nightclubs in old power stations.

While in Berlin, I found the right sound design with Steffi, a producer and Berghain resident DJ, to weave in and out of these soundscapes. Smack Mellon was a great place to premiere this work, given the scale of the gallery and its history as a power plant. I thank Rachel for trusting the project and for working with me on bringing this 4 channel video work into a towering architectural environment.

**AI: The installation that is currently on view is also shot in two different locations -- California and Azerbaijan where people are able to take actual oil baths. There is also an incredible scene within the California oil installation, where you are actually riding an oil rig and are in heels, a garter, and essentially lingerie. I love that juxtaposition and the kind of absurdity and comedy it creates while also being very sexual, can you say more about this tension?**

**JS:** Ha ha, thank you! In continuing the thread from the last question - First, I was thinking about the sexuality of an oil field - what that would look like in terms of gender, power dynamics and rhythm. It should be brutal - and I wondered in what way I could “tame” the pumpjacks. I found out that one of the locations where we filmed in



California used to be a gay cruising site - the work is a bit of a re-enactment. But riding a pumpjack is also a stupid thing to do, so I'm glad the humor came through.



*Installation view, Smack Mellon, Brooklyn, NY 2023, photo by Etienne Frossard. Image courtesy of Jess Segall.*

**AI:** Your work has always used a great deal of performance, and video and is a larger trajectory of feminist based body work in my mind. I would love to hear your thoughts on the current state of performance art today.

**JS:** Performance is changing in the way that how we see bodies in space is changing - with gender and an awareness of intersectional bodies and how they take up space. I also think the next generation is getting more conservative. For example, I've had students upset at Andrea Fraser's performance "Little Frank and his Carp," where she humps the wall of the Guggenheim, because there are children in the museum. It comes for a place of awareness and considering public consent, which is a big departure from the legacy of the nude free-wheeling performance art of the 1960-s to 90-s. The number one question I get asked about Human Energy is if I got permission

to film in the oil field, I think transgression is no longer a common tool used in performance at the moment.

Also, everyone is performing all the time in front of their cameras for social media. I love working with young people that are comfortable in front of a camera.

**AI: Do you think there is a difference in approach from the larger history of American performance body-based works versus Europe and the rest of the world?**

**JS:** Most of my experience showing work in Europe is in Scandinavia or Western Europe, which have quite liberal values, and a more secure relationship with the nude body, so I imagine there could be a difference in reception - whatever the shock or liberating value is for the canon of nudity and sexuality in Western Art. They are also a different audience - I think, more patient and willing to ask direct questions, as there is more accessibility to contemporary art in general due to public funding for the arts. How the public reacts to performance more or less changes with each society - Americans are very vocal and talk to / engage with strangers more than the European public

**AI:** Last month at the Royal Academy the new retrospective of Marina Abramovic. [The Guardian](#) recently described it as “terrifying and vital.” Abramovic is such an important and polarizing person within the artworld today. Will you see the show? And do you have thoughts on her in general?

**JS:** I am interested to see it - it's *the first solo show* of a woman artist at The Royal Academy. Rest Energy still makes my heart stop. Mostly I resonate with her earliest performances but I did love the channel of men having sex with the earth in her 2005 work *Balkan Erotic Epic*.





*Installation view, Smack Mellon, Brooklyn, NY 2023, photo by Etienne Frossard. Image courtesy of Jess Segall.*

**AI:** You also recently were named as a Guggenheim fellow for this year which is an incredible accomplishment! Congratulations. How are you feeling since winning and are you gearing up for new projects?

**JS:** Thank you! It has been a real gift. I am in the research phase of a couple new projects - location scouting for two new video works. One is the follow up to Human Energy, which focuses on the source of oil extraction - I am working towards a companion video piece that traces one end of the petroleum life cycle: plastics. From plastic fetish to microbes that eat plastic, I am looking to start filming in the confluences of waterways where plastic waste moves with the currents into the wider ocean.

**AI:** For people who don't know your artwork, how would you describe it in 5 words?

**JS:** Eco-queer, risky, slow cinema and form.

**AI:** What are you reading currently?

JS: I'm currently re-reading [The Extractive Zone: Social Ecologies and Decolonial Perspectives](#) by Macarena Gómez-Barris in preparation for our talk at eflux (Nov 7th). I just bought and am slowly enjoying Louis Bury's poetic *The Way Things Go*, which came out last month. I am also reading my father's new book ([Seth Zuiho Segall](#)), [The House We Live In: Virtue, Wisdom, and Pluralism](#). He is a Zen priest that writes about historical Western ethics and Buddhism.

AI: When you are in the studio, what is your soundtrack?

JS: It depends on what I am doing! For creative ideation and daydreaming I need silence, for drawing I listen to nerdy podcasts about architecture or wilderness mishaps, and for the moments I am in a flow or need to get a lot done, I've lately been listening to LOT Radio livestreams.

AI: What are some larger ideas or concepts you're engaging with right now?

JS: Queer ecology in general.

AI: Are there any exhibits you recently saw that you keep thinking about?

JS: Yes, this year I saw the [Acropolis Museum](#). I'm always floored by the skill and humanity of sculpture you can recognize over two thousand years later. Then the layers of conquest you can read in the architecture, which gives me no hope for humanity in the future. They have that cheeky from 100 BC, Delos sculpture of Aphrodite fending off the sexual harassment from a Satyr with her sandal, that I particularly hated. The [Carpet Museum in Baku](#) is also amazing. Besides artistry, it gives perspective about how much women's work held society together - from clothing to carrier bags to camel saddles to nomadic housing, the entire survival was woven. It's an amazing entanglement of animals and women's labor.

For shows that are contemporary, I recommend [Matt Lambert's Sissy Smut Screening](#) series at the Volksbühne in Berlin. It's such a relief to see comedy and sexuality play out explicitly, publicly, and in good humor. Also [Carola Eukelyn](#) curated a show about [Worms at Hilbertraum Berlin](#) - [Yana Zschiedrich](#) orchestrated mealworms to trace a drawing of a Greek frieze into pink builder styrofoam, so yeah, I am thinking about this work still as I contemplate our plastic future.

---

© 2023 Anni Irish · [Privacy](#) · [Terms](#) · [Collection notice](#)  
[Substack](#) is the home for great writing