

## Jack Smith

Legendary Filmmaker, Theatrical Genius, and Exotic Art Consultant  
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Jack Smith's favorite pastime while growing up was going to the movies, and he spent most of his Saturdays at the matinee where he often sat through the film several times. He particularly savored the lush exotic Technicolor productions that starred the likes of Maria Montez and Yvonne De Carlo, produced by Universal. The images of these exotic stars remained with him throughout his career and reappeared as themes in many of his works.

After briefly studying dance at the Denishawn Institute in Los Angeles and shooting a short film there Smith came to New York in the late 1950's and began collaborating with a number of young underground filmmakers. His second film entitled *Scotch Tape* was shot on the set of Ken Jacobs' *Star Spangled to Death*. P. Adams Sitney wrote: »*Scotch Tape* is only three minutes long, in color, and appears to have been constructed in the camera without much subsequent editing, if any... He [Jacobs] had shot several rolls of film before he realized that the tape had gotten caught in the camera. Rather than let this accident ruin his film, Smith capitalized upon it in his title. Fortunately its fixed position offers a formal counterbalance to the play of scales upon which the shot changes are based.«

By 1962 the underground film movement had gained some notoriety. Jonas Mekas was writing about the new films regularly in his weekly column in the *Village Voice*; as well as having screenings at the Charles Theatre on Avenue B and East 12th Street and publishing *Film Culture*, a journal devoted to film as an art

form. Smith began shooting his third film, which was to establish his reputation as an underground genius.

Smith convinced a young Hispanic Post Office worker he met late one night on the subway to act in the film in the guise of Maria Montez, the Hollywood star of the early 1940's films Smith so admired. The young man became a central image in the film and eventually adopted the name Mario Montez. Dressed in a black lace flamenco gown, he appears as an innocent soon to be devoured by a miasma of nude orgiastic bodies, the *flaming creatures* led by a Joan Crawford look-alike played by Francis Francine, a transvestite performer from the ongoing Coney Island circuit.

Although there is no story per se, the film is united structurally through a series of episodes involving the film's creatures. These are treated thematically and deal severally with flirtation, an orgy, a rape, death, vampirism, and a rebirth through a new sexual excitement.

In filming *Flaming Creatures*, Smith used out-of-date black-and-white stock. This created an effect that varied the intensity of the lushly composed tableaux from silvery torrents of light, in which at times the bodies of the orgiastic bacchantes are washed out and become a single rhythmic mass of celluloid, to bold blacks and shadows in the film noir tradition.

Smith's production process was described in *Film Culture* by Gregory Markopoulos, another well-respected underground film maker, who wrote: »Before laboratory expenses, the motion picture cost a mere hundred dollars. Like many another film maker, Jack Smith has proved that cost means very little when it comes to the

breath that it *art*. *Flaming Creatures* was photographed on the roof of the Windsor Theatre in Manhattan... The project took eight weekends; again proof of what the amateur motion picture is able to accomplish which the commercial motion picture has forgotten, frowns upon, disavows.«

In the same article, Markopoulos added that in this film Smith discovered that the performers were more important than the characters they portrayed. Actors who take on a characterization are an *outmoded* idea. Smith, he explains, brought forth the notion that: »Anyone may step into the costume. The costume becomes the character and the character the costume.«

Although characterization was not important to Smith, detail was. Markopoulos went on to say that in composing shots, Smith »may have spent hours, a whole night, arranging, shifting, replacing, placing objects, people, cheese cloth, fabrics...« He did this purposely in order to achieve the specific effects he had in mind.

Smith did not himself perform in the film. His dazzling camera work included a Busby Berkeley-style revolve from a top view over the mass of nude bodies, simulating an earthquake. The camera moved quickly, never lingering on the gyrating breasts and penises in the background, while in the foreground an Arabian-style lantern shook. The camera in this sense became a performer, much more critically important than any of the actors, who could easily be replaced by others wearing the same costumes.

Markopoulos also proclaimed the film to have broken new ground in regard to Smith's use of sound, which created a

counterpoint to the image rather than augmenting it. »During the earthquake sequence the sound of the tolling bells was prepared electronically through the magnification of a dinner bell. The sound track was measured to the image and printed without any synchronization whatsoever. Again the amateur motion picture through experimentation points the way to the wonders that are to be perceived in the future of motion pictures.«

Perhaps even more important than the film's innovation in terms of sound and unorthodox technique was its influence on the phenomenon of transvestite performance. Although men dressing as women is an old theatrical custom, Smith's use of it in ›Flaming Creatures‹ presented an altogether different approach to drag. Ronald Tavel wrote in ›Film Culture‹: »As late as '64, some important reviewers of ›Creatures‹ [sic] still could not figure out if the dancers were male or female. One critic claimed the point of the film centered about this question.«

In awarding Smith its fifth independent film award, ›Film Culture‹ declared: »He has attained for the first time in motion pictures a high level of art which is absolutely lacking in decorum; and a treatment of sex which makes us aware of the restraint of all previous film-makers... He has struck us with not the mere pity of the perverse, but the glory, the pageantry of Transylvestia [sic] and the magic of Fairyland. He has lit up a part of life, although it is a part which most men scorn. No higher single praise can be given an artist than this, he has expressed a fresh vision of life.«

Through the film and his influence on Mario Montez, who

spawned numerous imitators such as Candy Darling and Holly Woodlawn, Smith brought forth a chic new style of drag performance where the artifice, costume, and fantasy became glamorized. Smith allowed performers to play characters of either sex. Gender was not as important as the ability to portray the desired womanly manifestations. Though tame by today's standard in the early 1960's it was considered revolutionary.

The film was declared a masterpiece by Mekas, and Smith became an immediate star of the budding underground movie scene. Later, Mekas took a print of ›Flaming Creatures‹ to Brussels to the Knokke-Le Zoute film festival. There the film was banned because of Belgian law. Mekas, determined to show the film, presented private screenings in his hotel room. The episode created an enormous scandal, and the film received a ›Film-Maudit‹ prize from the festival committee. The notoriety made Smith an even bigger success but was later to create some serious difficulties.

During this period, Smith also wrote several pieces for ›Film Culture‹, published by Mekas. In two particularly influential essays, Smith propounded his theories regarding the importance of the glorious visual elements that were created by the stylistic extremism of two such diverse figures as Josef von Sternberg and Maria Montez. Both were at that time highly out of vogue. Smith elaborated on their importance, claiming that both strove for a quality in their work that defied filmic realism in favor of Romantic exaggeration. He explained that Maria Montez achieved this quality as a performer whose persons was far greater than the characters she portrayed; von

Sternberg was the master of visual cinema whose creation, Marlene Dietrich, was his own »visual projection – a brilliant transvestite in a world of delirious unreal adventures.«

The relationship Smith attributes to von Sternberg and Dietrich was much like Smith's own relationship with Mario Montez. Mario, who had never acted before, eventually became the first of the Warhol superstars. Describing this, Ronald Tavel wrote in his article ›The Banana Diary‹: »Stars of this nature can be created. They are created by directors who wish to statue a vehicle for the expression of themselves. Mario Montez is a creation of Jack Smith. He formulated him at his Cinemaroc Studio, first as Dolores Flores; and, later, when his development became undeniable, as Mario. Smith fed Mario his vision, his psychology, his dream. Mario cleansed his dream, and Smith refilled it. Mario took on Smith's vocabulary, his costumes, and his fantasy.«

Tavel goes on to add that the process was gradual and that Mario's status as a ›star‹ did not come until two years later. But with Montez's star-status firm, Warhol seized the idea and promoted an official list of ten underground superstars. Though the list was often revised, Smith was named in the earliest.

In his essays, Smith went on to denounce contemporary Hollywood films with their excessive concerns for realism and simple narratives together with an abandonment of an interest in the cinema as a visual medium. He glorified the exotic films then considered bad, claiming these were the higher art form. He stated: »Trash is the material of creators. It exists whether one approves or not.«



In one of the essays, entitled »The Perfect Filmic Appositeness of Maria Montez,« he presented his philosophy regarding the art of film and performance. »Good film technique is a classical attribute... perfect film technique, form, length, etc., a classical work – Montez flix are none of these. They are romantic expressions. They came about because (as in the case of von Sternberg) an inflexible person committed to an obsession was given his way thru some fortuitous circumstance. Results of this sort transcend film technique. Not barely – but resoundingly, meaningfully, with magnificence, with the vigor that one exposed human being always has – and with failure. We cause their downfall [after we have enjoyed them] because they embarrass us grown up as we are and post adolescent / post war / post graduate / post-toasties, etc. Then movies that were secret (I felt I had to sneak away to see M. M. flix) remain secret somehow, and a nation forgets its pleasure, trash.«

He added that atrocious acting was the most glorious kind of performing. By this he meant acting that was not limited by realistic conventions, preferring acting where the performer loomed larger than the character portrayed. »I'd rather have atrocious acting,« he wrote. »The more rules broken the more enriched becomes the activity as it has to expand to include what a human view of the activity won't allow it not to include.«

The notion of breaking as many rules as possible was clearly present in Smith's own »Flaming Creatures«. The film presented all the forbidden images that Hollywood could not or would not show. These were presented, however, within a visual style rich in

detail and very much reminiscent of Hollywood's own treatment of exoticism in the 1930's and 1940's. Nevertheless, the exotic props, costumes, and scenery were shot with camera work that clearly lacked polish, slickness, or technique – a prevalent trait in the emerging underground film movement. It was these qualities that led Jonas Mekas to proclaim the film one of the »four works that make up the real revolution in cinema today.«

Smith's influence was such that Fellini, whose films were till then part of the new Italian Realist school, sought out and attended an early screening of »Flaming Creatures« at Ron Rice's downtown loft. »Two minutes after I met Federico Fellini in Rome, he asked me whether I had seen Jack Smith's »Flaming Creatures,« wrote Stanley Kaufman in »A World On Film«.

The film with its use of frontal nudity, along with transvestism and androgyny, was at that time a cultural milestone. Susan Sonntag discussed it in a 1964 essay. She wrote: »In »Flaming Creatures« amateurishness of technique is not frustrating, as it is in so many other recent »underground« films.« She saw the film as an early example of a style that was to become known as Pop.

»»Flaming Creatures« is that rare modern work of art: it is about joy and innocence. To be sure, this joyousness is composed out of themes which are – by ordinary standards – perverse, decadent, at the least highly theatrical and artificial. But this, I think, is precisely how the film comes by its beauty and its modernity. »Flaming Creatures« is a lovely specimen of what currently, in one genre, goes by the flippant name of »pop art.« ... Pop art lets in wonderful and new mixtures of

attitude, which would before have seemed contradictions.«

Included among the many Pop icons utilized by Smith in the film is a segment devoted to a »new smear-proof heart-shape lipstick.« While the performers, both men and women, apply the lipstick, a slick commercial voice proclaims the product's virtues. Suddenly it is interrupted by another voice asking, »How does a man get lipstick off his penis?« The first voice, which had sounded so real that it could easily have been part of an actual television commercial, replies, very coolly, »A man is not supposed to have lipstick on his penis!« Then, it continues the sales pitch.

Perhaps it is specifically this Pop quality that attracted Andy Warhol, who was already becoming well-known for his Campbell's Soup can and other Pop paintings, to Smith. In an interview by David Ehrenstein, Warhol stated that Smith is the American film maker he most admired. »You really like Jack Smith?« Ehrenstein asked. Warhol replied: »When I was little, I always thought he was my best director. I mean, just the only person I would ever try to copy, and just so terrific, and now since I'm grown up, I just think he makes the best movies.«

The time span Warhol referred to was less than three years. By 1963, when Smith started shooting »Normal Love«, his second major film, originally titled »The Great Pasty Triumph«, Warhol was already a regular at the Charles Theatre and then the Gramercy Arts, theatres where Mekas organized midnight screenings and Smith often showed rushes of scenes from the elaborately extravagant »commercial« sequel to »Flaming Creatures«.

Jim Hoberman described Smith's shooting process for

›Normal Love‹ in ›Midnight Movies‹: »Somehow he filled car loads of fanciful horror archetypes (the Werewolf, the Yellow Hag, the Black Spider, the White Bat, the Mermaid), driving through the New Jersey countryside and out to Fire Island, looking for the perfect field of Goldenrod in which to shoot the ›Yellow Sequence‹ or the exact location for the ›Roman Bath‹ scene. Smith was a perfectionist; the search for the swamp where the emerald-green mummy would wade after and languidly rape-murder the Cobra Woman went on for weeks. In the meantime, a deserted West Side pier was covered with comatose creatures in pink gowns, and interiors were shot at the Moon Pool, a gauzy, candle-lit, incense-shrouded, mirror-strewn altar to Maria Montez that Smith laboriously built in the middle of someone's East Village living room.«

Much of the shooting for ›Normal Love‹ took place at the estate of Eleanor Ward in Old Lyme, Conn. Warhol was a frequent observer at these shootings, and in his autobiography, ›Popism‹, he acknowledged his own debt as a film maker to Smith. »Jack Smith was filming a lot out there, and I picked something up from him for my own movies – the way he used anyone who happened to be around that day, and also how he just kept shooting until the actors got bored. People would ask him what the movie was about, and he would say things that sounded like a takeoff on the ›mad artist‹ – ›The appeal of an underground movie is not to the understanding!‹«

Warhol, in fact, shot his own 16mm film as a ›newsreel‹ of Smith's cast, which included the still unknown Tiny Tim and his ukulele, cavorting through the lush Old Lyme meadow. In



Jack Smith

addition, Warhol's later films involved thrusting a group of performers into a prescribed situation and filming their reactions to the situation and to each other without creating any necessarily understandable plot, as for example in ›Chelsea Girls‹.

In 1964, the Gramercy Arts was shut down by the New York Police Department in their ›cleanup‹ preceding the 1964 World's Fair. »Mekas moved his ›Film-Maker's Showcase‹ downtown to the New Bowery Theatre on St. Marks Place in the East Village.« In was here that on March 3, 1964, the New York police seized the print of ›Flaming Creatures‹, along with some rushes for ›Normal Love‹ and Warhol's ›Normal Love‹ ›newsreel.« In addition, they arrested Mekas and projectionist Ken Jacobs. Ten days later, Mekas was again arrested for showing Genet's ›Un Chant d'Amour‹ as a benefit for the ›Flaming Creatures‹ defense fund. Although ›Un Chant d'Amour‹ eventually was ruled acceptable for the public morals, ›Flaming

Creatures‹ was deemed obscene. The case was eventually appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court, but the court refused to hear it. The film is still legally banned to this day.

Smith claims that he was not allowed at the trials because Mekas considered his behavior irrational by this time. In fact, Mekas does refer to Jack as ›nuts‹ in an otherwise greatly laudatory review of ›The Great Pasty Triumph‹, what ›Normal Love‹ was called at that time. Part of the problem was that by then Smith had developed his philosophy of re-editing his films for each new screening. New material could be added and old scenes deleted or reshuffled. Mekas, who believed staunchly in the sacrosanct quality of the finished film product, feared that Smith would dismantle films that Mekas viewed as masterpieces. Although Smith continued showing the rushes from ›Normal Love‹ through 1965, he never completed it in the traditional sense and continued to dismantle and



rearrange the footage for new screenings.

In November 1965, Smith presented his first theatrical performance in New York as part of the New Cinema Festival organized by Mekas at the Film-Makers Cinematheque. The show was entitled ›Rehearsal for the Destruction of Atlantis‹ and was one of the ›expanded cinema‹ performances – a hybrid form just emerging that combined live performers with projected imagery. Mekas described it as »an orgy of costumes, suppressed and open violence, and color. The center of the piece was a huge red lobster, a masterpiece creation of costume and character.«

The play presented a clear anti-war, pro-marijuana statement within a completely absurd context. It was set in Atlantis – Smith's metaphor for Vietnam, in what Smith described as »a child's vegetable garden of foreign policy cadavers.« The script, which was published in the Winter 65-66 issue of ›Film Culture‹, indicates the show was an early instigator of forced audience participation.

Smith utilized numerous interesting and innovative structural elements such as physical transformations of the set and direct addresses to the audience that prefigure the theatre of Robert Wilson and Richard Foreman who acknowledge his influence.

Performed for only two nights, ›Rehearsal for the Destruction of Atlantis‹ was also a seminal influence in the emergence of the style of theatre later associated with Ludlam's Ridiculous Theatrical Company. Ludlam expressed his own debt to Smith by stating in 1971 that: »Jack is the daddy of us all.«

Along with acting with the ridiculous in such productions as

Ludlam's ›When Queens Collide‹, Smith at this time was working on and began showing his third major film, which included footage shot during 1965-67. Jim Hoberman described the various names Smith used to refer to the footage. »Midnights throughout late 1967 and early 1968, Jack Smith was screening a program called ›Horror and Fantasy at Midnight‹ – ›Reefers of Technicolor Island! Scrubwoman of Atlantis! Ratdroppings of Uranus! Marshgas of Flatulandia!‹«

The film later became known as ›No President‹. Jonas Mekas described it in his ›Village Voice‹ review of November 16, 1967: »A very important event took place last Thursday at the New Cinema Playhouse. Jack Smith presented two hours of his new work. The audience, their eyes glued to the screen, watched two hours of the rarest imagination... We saw three films, forty-five minutes each. They didn't have titles, but the first one starred a most beautiful marijuana plant, a gorgeous blooming white queen with her crown reaching toward the sky. In the second part we saw a gallery of creatures, and there is no other name for them than to call them Jack Smith's creatures. Although they are enacted by other talented and beautiful people, it's Jack's imagination that crowns them with those fantastic gowns and hats and plumes and colors. The third part is like a continuation of the second, but in black and white, or more truly, in gray and white. The most suprising thing about this black and white part is that it comes after all the lush and glorious color, and you think what could surpass it, and you are sort of afraid, for a moment, when you see black and white. But not even three minutes pass, and you realize that this

black and white is as glorious and maybe even more so than all the rest; that these grays and whites surpass all the other colors, and triumph, despite all the competition.«

Like ›Normal Love, No President‹ was never cut in a final form; rather, Smith reedited the footage for various new screenings. Describing this process, P. Adams Sitney wrote: »The cinematic object for Smith loses its absolute integrity and becomes a privileged part of the dialectical work which is the performance. This may account for his refusal definitely to complete a film since ›Flaming Creatures‹ (he has even attempted to change, and very possibly destroy, that film in recent years).«

Stated more plainly, this means Smith refused to believe in the sacrosanct quality of any individual movie. Instead, he felt that episodes, scenes, even individual shots could be moved around, deleted, or added each time the film was shown in order to create a ›new movie‹ for each show.

This idea was not only unique in terms of film, but when applied by Smith to his performance pieces, it was theatrically innovative as well. Although the idea was accepted in underground theatre circles, it was viewed as heretical within the underground film movement which, even more than the Hollywood community, believed in the sacred quality of the finished film. Smith's belief that film need not ever be stuck in a static form was partially responsible for his parting with Jonas Mekas who, although he still admired Smith's work, felt this concept was a threat to Smith's art.

In addition, Smith blamed Mekas for much of the controversy over ›Flaming Creatures‹,

claiming that the film he had made as a comedy had been turned into »a sex issue of the Cocktail World.« This artistic difference is significant because much of Smith's subsequent work revolves around his conflict with Mekas and his claims that Mekas was responsible for the confiscation of the film. (See the accompanying interview excerpted from »Semiotext.«)

It is worthwhile to examine Smith's philosophy of reassembling the films for new showings in conjunction with the persecution he felt he suffered because of »Flaming Creatures«. By not producing a single finished product – »the film« – of which prints can be made and distributed independently of the film maker, while at the same time holding on to the materials and re-editing these for new showings and additionally, by selecting the musical accompaniment and as such constructing the sound track while the film was being screened, Smith turned each showing into a unique performance dependent on the presence of the film maker – himself.

In this manner, his film shows were transformed into performances as opposed to being traditional screenings. Furthermore, this process did away with the existence of a specific film object that could be seized, confiscated, banned, or duplicated.

Smith continued showing various permutations of »No President« and other material. However, in essence, »No President« remained his last 16mm film.

In 1970, Smith moved into a two-story loft in SoHo, at 36 Greene Street off Grand Street. He called it the »Plaster Foundation«, and he began presenting a series of performances there every Saturday at midnight by the Reptilian Theatrical Company.

Smith was the only permanent member. A few performers reappeared for weeks at a time, and the rest were drafted from the audience.

By incorporating whatever hazards may have occurred into the performance, Smith created a unique show each time, although the underlying script may have been the same.

Generally, Smith incorporated subtle changes in the script from week to week. While he de-emphasized the narrative in these performances, Smith shifted the focus to the self-referential process of how the performance was being presented. This quality of self-reference has become an important element in performance art, one of the qualities that set it apart from traditional theatre.

Smith's emphasis was on the performer – himself – as he attempts to tell a story. What was foremost for Smith was how the performance came about. The story itself was secondary, as it was also in the work of Bertold Brecht. Smith's interest lay directly with the performer and his own immediate circumstances, the most immediate being the performance currently in progress; whereas with Brecht the emphasis may be on the moral overtones invoked by the story, through the performers' comments on the narrative.

In this respect, Smith performed as the director at the moment of performance. His constant manipulation of the secondary actors, including instructing them to read their lines over and over again until done to his satisfaction – as well as his selection of various music to be played for the show while the performance was in progress and his characteristic rearrangement of the set, which often took place at the

beginning of his shows – served to accentuate his role. As the playwright, director, and central performer he was enacting a performance specifically about his role at the present moment – the moment of being. Each moment for Smith, however, was not independent, but viewed as part of his overall personal history. It is this personal history that effected the moment of being, creating a complex dialectic.

Although this quality of self-reference was exhibited in the happenings of the 1960's, Smith was unique in utilizing it within a storytelling/theatrical context, the story often being a thinly veiled, yet highly exotic, metaphor for his own life. Unlike tradition theatre, however, Smith's »narratives« do not include a linear progression or any logically causal circumstances. Nor do various sections relate in coming together to present a single narrative superstructure. Actions or scenes are not frozen and can be moved around freely. Finally, the meaning always reflects back to the actual moment of experience. The story remains a small part of the overall visceral experience.

To Smith, words themselves did not convey precise meanings. For this reason, he would insist on the performers repeating their lines until they were said with just the right intonation. His instruction to the performers, his search for the right record or slide, and the initial setup period were all as much a part of the performance as the narrative.

By the winter of 1970-71, Smith was presenting a new ritual cum performance variously entitled »Claptailism of Palmola Christmas Spectacle« or »Gas Stations of the Cross Religious Spectacle.« Smith began utilizing slides in this series of performances,



and he managed to transform even this into an act of hesitancy revealing its own dialectic. Describing this section, Stefan Brecht wrote: »He tries various approaches – in front of you. ... He is figuring out how to do it while doing it. Changing one slide for another, he stops pulling the first one while a corner of the image is still (dimly) on the screen, then pulls it out. ... Any performance of his contains many such episodes of change of approach to a simple practical task.«

No doubt this emphasis on the transformation of ordinary tasks is, at least in part, related to the use of mind-altering drugs prevalent within the counter-culture to which Smith and his shows belong.

By the spring of 1971, Smith was evicted from the Plaster Foundation for his inability to pay the \$150 monthly rent. He moved into a basement space at 18 Mercer Street and began transforming the space into a studio for what was to be his fourth major film – his own version of »Hamlet«. The film was to be shot as an Arabian-Nights-style epic set in the Midwest. Stefan Brecht who was to play Plodius, a combination of Polonius and Claudius, wrote, »The whole family will be landlords – modern royalty.« He explained that to Smith »Landlordism ... is the origin of all current crimes and trouble.«

Although the scenario was written and cast and the set and costumes almost completed, the film was never shot. For a while, Smith attempted to present it in play form, but this did not come about, either. Some film footage was shot in the space, but shortly Smith was again forced to relocate, and he moved back into a small apartment in the East Village.

Though he had already utilized slides in his shows at the Plaster Foundation, it was after the demise of »Hamlet« that Smith began devoting his photographic endeavors to 35mm slides. This was due in part to not having a performance space, or money for the expensive 16mm film stock and processing.

Smith presented several shows featuring Yolanda La Penguin (a toy penguin) and himself as her trainer. These included »The Horror of the Rented World«, presented on Halloween 1975, and »How Can Uncle Fishhook Have A Free Bicentennial Zombie Underground«, at Artist's Space on July 4, 1976. The narrative involved the penguin as a film actress, kept upright in a cardboard box by her trainer, who lets her out only to appear in films. Meanwhile, the trainer, played by Smith, lurks behind corners, counting, coveting, and otherwise enjoying money. The story served as a metaphor for what Smith believed had been his own relationship with Jonas Mekas.

Like his theatre work, Smith's slide shows were highly innovative. The slides were shot against lush and exotic locals in various European cities as well as the Lower East Side. In addition, through the use of acute angles, his painstaking attention to light and shadow, and his intuitive understanding of color, he transformed even everyday phenomena into their mythical counterparts. In addition, rather than using a slide tray in the traditional manner, Smith would select the images to be projected at the moment of performance. He would insert a slide, take it out, then reinsert it, always drawing attention to his own performing process.

Smith's next play, presented from November 31, 1976 to

January 2, 1977 was entitled »Orchid Rot of Rented Lagoon or The Secret of Rented Island«. It was an adaptation of Ibsen's »Ghosts« transposed to Atlantis – here a metaphor for New York City.

Jim Hoberman claimed the performance was »a cross between rehearsal and a private ritual.« He went on to quote Dan Isaac, the »Village Voice« critic who »reported that, at the performance he attended, Smith actively solicited the audience's aid in staging the piece, asking »Am I under the blue spot now. Do I look blue?« and that later, »Somewhere after midnight, the other members of the company ... tried to get him to wind it up so they could all go home. But he only glared at them and yelled into the wings: If you have nothing to do – do it on stage!«

In addition to the live sequences, the text was recorded and played on tape, with Smith reading all the parts, using different voices. The tape, however, was not always audible because of sound effects and exotic music, which were played simultaneously. Hoberman wrote: »Most performances began with the burning of an enormous quantity of incense and ended, sometimes five intermissionless hours later after Smith had struggled through the entire script, with the playing of Doris Day's record of (Once I had A) »Secret Love« and the parting of Mrs. Alving's veil to reveal a hideously grotesque mask of diseased decay.«

Smith's next New York production took place in the spring of 1978. Unlike previous productions, it was not a visual performance. Entitled »I Was a Mekas Collaborator, The Horror of Uncle Fishhook's Safe, a Jungle Jack Radio Adventure«, it was a spoof of the 1940's radio dramas Smith

grew up on and was predominately a sound play.

Describing this production a the »Drama Review« article, Hoberman wrote: »In some respects it was the most self-referential piece he had ever staged. Dealing with the failure of art, with years of accumulated frustrations and grievances, it all but presupposed a familiarity with his biography: Uncle Fishhook (Jonas Mekas), the mausoleum (Anthology Film Archives), the Pawnshop (Filmmaker's Cooperative) and the horror of rented island (Smith's continuing vicissitudes with landlords) figured prominently.«

Though Smith willfully projected a sense of disorganization, the show was carefully structured and consisted of four essentially demarcated parts, which were sometimes regrouped. The sense of disorganization was intentional in order to demonstrate the »thinking is interesting on stage.« What Smith meant by this phrase, which was one of his major philosophical premises, is that he was dissatisfied with theatre that is merely repetitious and does not allow spontaneity at each performance. Because Smith's theatre took place in the »gap between art and life,« Smith preferred his plays to involve an element of spontaneity.

There is no doubt that a familiarity with Smith's previous work greatly assisted in the understanding of the plot, which shifted back and forth through several levels of time and meaning.

At one point, utilizing the »Ghosts« script, Smith presented a complex overlapping of characters, featuring himself as Jungle Jack playing Sinbad Glick playing Oswald Alving. Reading as Manders, he tells Sinbad, »I have often seen mention of you in the papers, and extremely favorable

mention, too. Wasn't it Uncle Fishhook's Column, Uncle Fishhook's »Movie Journal?«

Later, after Mrs. Glick (Alving), also read by Smith, asks who is Uncle Fishhook, Sinbad explains that he has spent fifteen years locked up in Uncle Fishhook's safe. What Smith is referring to is his contention that Mekas (Uncle Fishhook) was in possession of »Flaming Creatures«, while he himself did not have a copy of the film. Mekas, Smith claimed, used the film to aggrandize his own career, while he, the filmmaker, was victimized by the aftermath of the extended court case involving »Flaming Creatures«. This contention has reappeared in various permutations in Smith's subsequent work.

What was particularly unique about »I Was a Mekas Collaborator« was Smith's movement across the continuum »between art and life.« At times, Smith performed as himself, instructing his assistants. At other times, he was Jungle Jack, masquerading as Sinbad Glick, who in turn moved in and out of the character of Oswald Alving as enacted by Smith in his previous production. Alving, too, as enacted by Smith, was but another thinly veiled reincarnation of Jack Smith.

Audience members familiar with Smith's work were continually pulled in and out of dissimilar, yet overlapping, theatrical matrices within the play, which nevertheless united allegorically in relationship to Smith's use of his own life as the basis of his art.

Smith continued shooting slides, both on trips out of New York and throughout lower Manhattan. In the next two years, he presented several slide shows at Club 57. One especially vitriolic performance was entitled »Penguin Rustling Out by the Old



Jack Smith

Archives«, and subtitled »A Boiled Lobster-Color Slide Show« with Sinbad Glick and Yolanda La Penguina. He insisted that an apt title can color and influence the meaning of any performance.

Smith's next performance »What's Underground About Marshmallows« utilized some of the material from his 1978 radio play, but was acted out live in front of the audience. At its conclusion, Smith also incorporated into the piece selections from his films »Normal Love« and »No President«. The piece was subsequently reenacted by Ron Vawter in his performance »Roy Cohn / Jack Smith«.

Smith's next play was entitled »I Was a Male Yvonne de Carlo« for the Lucky Landlord Underground. It was subtitled »Flame Of Cement Lagoon Performance«, and explored further the themes of the earlier plays.

In 1983 and 1984, after returning from a trip to Germany, Smith



presented several performances at the Pyramid Club. One, called, ›Clash of the Brassiere Goddesses‹ was a short play that featured Smith as a prisoner and Ronald Tavel as a Brassiere Maiden Superior.

Smith's last New York performance ›Death of a Penguin‹ took place at the Millennium Film Workshop as part of their first Slide Art Series, on Feb. 9 and 10, 1985. The slides included a new series shot in Hamburg in 1983. These depicted Yolanda La Penguina, who is kidnapped and subsequently dies. Her trainer (Smith), devastated by the loss, turns into a wino. Lounging one day on a park bench, he discovers the decomposing body of the penguin and, after wrapping it, performs a burial ritual. Smith remained on stage for most of the show and kept the stage lights on. This made it difficult to see the slides which, at least in theory, were supposed to be the central element in the performance.

Smith once again managed to discombobulate his audience as well as the Millennium staff, who were expecting a traditional slide show. This element appears to have been willful and part of his insistence on breaking as many rules as possible. He has stated: »Yes, basically I'm an anarchist; that's not to say that I think there will ever be any state of anarchy, but I don't think that you should stamp out anarchy... You need it to flavor other ideas, because anarchy is the giving part of politics. In this country they have stamped it out and made it a dirty word.«

This political subtext was an important element in all of Smith's work. Unlike overtly political art, however, the message was not presented in direct terms. Rather, it was couched in an elaborately extravagant visual

context. It was Smith's performing process itself that presented an alternative to traditional art forms. Smith wrote extensively about this aspect of his work. »Let art continue to be entertaining, escapist, stunning, naturalistic, and glamorous – but let it also be loaded with information worked into the vapid plots of movies, for instance. Each one would be a more or less complete exposition of one subject or another. Thus you would have Tony Curtis and Janet Leigh busily making yogurt; Humphrey Bogart struggling to introduce a basic civil law course into public schools; infants being given to the old in homes for the aged by Ginger Rogers; donut shaped dwellings with sunlight pouring into central patios for all designed by Gary Cooper; soft, clear plastic bubble cars with hooks that attach to monorails built by Charlton Heston that pass over the Free Paradise of abandoned objects in the center of the city near where Maria Montez and Johnny Weismuller would labour to dissolve all national boundaries and release the prisoner of Uranus. But the stairway to socialism is blocked up by the Yvonne de Carlo Tabernacle Choir waving bloody palm branches and waiting to sing the ›Hymn to the Sun‹ by Irving Birlen. This is the rented moment of ›Exotic Landlordism of Prehistoric Capitalism of Tabu.«

Although on the surface these comments by Smith appear to be humorously entertaining, they are nevertheless fraught with a deep social significance. Smith believed art should be entertaining but also didactic. At the same time, he believed it should question the status quo.

Smith continually insists on breaking rules, if for no other reason than that they exist. »All it is

is an idea of gradually working toward doing things without authorities.« He said. »Under an anarchist system you would phase authorities out slowly, as much as could be. That seems a fantasy, just because it's been so stamped out and ridiculed.«

The authority he referred to, however, is not merely political. It is the authority of our socialization, education, and linguistic systems as well, all of which, he believed, limit thinking. »It's *thinking*. If you can think of a thought in a most pathetic language. ... Look what I have to do in order to think of thoughts. I have to forget language. All I can do with no education, nothing, no advice, no common sense in my life, an insane mother I mean, no background, nothing, nothing, and I have to make art, but I know that under these conditions the one thing I had to find out was if I could think of a thought that has never been thought of before, then it could be in a language that was never read before. If you can think of something, the language will fall into place in the most fantastic way, but the thought is what's going to do it. The language is shit, I mean it's only there to support a thought.«

Jack Smith died of AIDS in New York's Beth Israel Hospital on September 18, 1989. He left no will. In a true twist of tragic irony control of his films now rests in the hands of Anthology Film Archives and the Filmmakers Co-op, two institutions he spent much of his life berating.

(This essay is adapted from ›Chapter 2 – Jack Smith‹ of ›Pop Performance, Four Seminal Influences‹ by Uzi Parnes, Ph.D., Copyright 1988).