

AGAINST NORMAL LOVE (Rough Draft, 01/01/2009)

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Normalcy is the evil side of homosexuality.¹

- Jack Smith

Focusing on iconic New York underground queer filmmaker Jack Smith's early films and performative audio recordings, this essay examines three influential and unlikely collaborators - filmmaker and artist Jack Smith, filmmaker and musician Tony Conrad, and drag queen performer Francis Francine - and positions them within the historical, political, and cultural context of queer, underground, downtown New York in the 1960's. Through an examination of several of Conrad's audio recordings of Jack Smith, Francis Francine, and Mario Montez made between 1962 and 1964², this paper aims to investigate the liberatory possibilities the queer underground community represented for white heterosexual men like Conrad, and, conversely, Smith's conflicted relationship to what he would later describe as the "queer ghetto" community.

¹ This quotation is taken from J. Hoberman and Edward Leffingwell's edited compilation of Jack Smith's writings, *Wait For Me At the Bottom of the Pool: The Writings of Jack Smith* (London: Serpent's Tail Press, 1997), p. 151. Leffingwell notes that the disjointed statements contained in this chapter (titled "Statements, 'Ravings,' and Epigrams") were found in "journals and letters, on file cards, the backs of envelopes, as marginalia in books, and elsewhere."

² Two compact disks, comprising a selection of these audio recordings, were released by Conrad in 1997 on his Audio ArtKive label (an imprint of the Table of the Elements: www.tableoftheelements.com): Jack Smith, *Les Evening Gowns Damnées*, Audio ArtKive 01, Table of the Elements TOE-CD-46 and *Silent Shadows on Cinemaroc Island*, Audio ArtKive, Table of the Elements TOE-CD-47. Conrad has several unreleased recordings of Francis Francine from 1969-1970, which include ambient recordings made with Walter De Maria and Beverly Grant, an interview with Francis Francine in 1970, and recordings of Francine that were made for Grant and Conrad's 1970 film, *Coming Attractions*.

Conrad and Smith met in the summer of 1962, when Conrad moved into the loft that Marian Zazeela had formerly shared with Smith. By this time Smith had established himself as a photographer, filmmaker, and performer, and more importantly, as a wildly unpredictable, infectious, and inspirational artistic presence. Conrad described Smith as, at the time, being a:

self-constructed artwork, and so powerful that he exerted the kind of influence that you ordinarily have when you enter a different culture . . . Jack Smith was *his own country*: he spoke differently; he looked at different things; he liked different things. And everything he did was part of a self-constructed universe built around key features that were largely drawn from his own personal nostalgia.³

In 1958 and 1959, prior to meeting Conrad, Jack Smith was featured as the primary figure in Ken Jacob's epic film, *Star Spangled to Death* (1956-60) and its in-camera edited spin-off, *Little Stabs at Happiness* (1959-62). Smith was an artistic muse of sorts, and certainly a major aesthetic influence on Jacobs, and Jacob's film *Blonde Cobra* (1959-63) is a portrait of, and homage to, Smith.

During the filming of Jacob's *Star Spangled to Death*, Jack Smith shot *Scotch Tape* (1959-62), which would be his first publicly screened 16mm film. Smith had made numerous 8mm and Super-8mm films before shooting *Scotch Tape* in 1959, but most of his experience with filmmaking prior to this point was as a performer rather than as a camera operator. Smith borrowed Jacob's Bell and Howell 16mm camera and one 100' roll of Kodachrome and shot Jerry Sims, Ken Jacobs, and Reese Haire dancing and playing around in one of Jacob's locations

³ Scott MacDonald, "Tony Conrad: On the Sixties," in *A Critical Cinema 5: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), p.59.

for *Star Spangled to Death* - the rubble strewn site of what would eventually become the Lincoln Center. The film cuts abruptly between extreme close-ups and full-frame shots of the performers, and creates a portrait of the site in which Smith's characters appear to be gleefully embedded within the rubble.

These scenes in *Scotch Tape* recall a passage from Jack Smith's 1978 interview with Sylvère Lotringer, published in *Semiotext(e)*, in which Lotringer asks Smith, "Have you ever thought of another type of society?" and Jack's response is:

I can think of billions of ways for the world to be completely different. I can think of other types of societies . . . Like in the middle of the city should be a repository of objects that people don't want anymore, which they would take to this giant junkyard. That would form an organization, a way that the city would be organized . . . I think that this center of unused objects and unwanted objects would become a center of intellectual activity. Things would grow up around it.⁴

Smith created a repository of junk and unused objects similar to that described above at the 56 Ludlow Street loft that Smith shared with Conrad from 1962 - 1964. This space became a safe arena for creative expression and was defined by transformation⁵ – upon entering the loft, misfit humans were transformed into exotic and sensual creatures, trash was transformed into glitter, and through and uncompromising parody and celebration of Hollywood B-movie culture, a place for misfit queer subjects was established. Rather than functioning as a center of activity for

⁴ Jack Smith and Sylvère Lotringer, "Uncle Fishhook and the Sacred Baby Poo Poo of Art," *Semiotext(e)* 1 no. 2 (1978), reprinted in J. Hoberman and Edward Leffingwell's collection, *On Jack Smith's Flaming Creatures and Other Secret-Flix of Cinemaroc* (New York: Granary Books and Hips Road, 2001), p. 115.

⁵ Jerry Tartaglia, "The Perfect Queer Appositiveness of Jack Smith" in *Experimental Cinema: The Film Reader*, ed. Winston Wheeler Dixon and Gwendolyn Audrey Foster (London: Routledge, 2002).

unused and unwanted objects, the Ludlow Street space became a site of performance and refuge for artists and performers who would have had a difficult time fitting in elsewhere. Smith would frequently invite his friends, the “transvestite creatures,” over to the Ludlow Street loft for evening dress-up parties, readings, and performances. Conrad, in conversation with Scott MacDonald in 2004, said that Jack, from time to time, would:

invite some of the transvestite creatures over for evening dress-up sessions and would mediate fantasy moments that he called “Tangiers fantasies.” Of course, these sessions had nothing to do with the real Tangiers: each time, *Montezland* was brought to life in some strange version, according to Jack’s predisposition at the moment. I would help by running the phonograph and tape recorder.⁶

Conrad describes Smith as having carefully attending to the design and decor of their loft prior to these evening dress-up sessions.

He would frequently arrange pieces of cloth and arabesque hangings so that they hung “just so.” He would set up his metal Moroccan lamp and make adjustments in lighting so that the atmosphere established a particular kind of mood and ambience.⁷

It was at the 56 Ludlow Street loft that Conrad, who was initially dismissive of Smith’s aesthetic sensibility, ended up finding a sense of artistic and sexual freedom that was completely at odds

⁶ MacDonald, p.64

⁷ Tony Conrad, interview with the author 11/17/2008.

with the highly controlled aesthetics he was concurrently exploring with the Theater of Eternal Music⁸.

Conrad wasn't initially interested in what he describes as Smith's "romantic nostalgia" and his desire to "make things pretty," and:

had the idea right away that Jack was not a serious artist. I just had no respect for him at all. I had no interest in what he was doing. You know, it was just like I was laughing up my sleeve every time I saw this pathetic creature. And, so . . . it did astonish me that I had an epiphany in a sense [when I began to appreciate Jack's work].⁹

Conrad's epiphany came after he saw Smith's *Scotch Tape* projected at the Charles Theater. Conrad had helped Smith transfer a record to magnetic 1/4" tape for the soundtrack of the film in order to extend its playing time and was completely dismayed by his choice of music. Conrad, again in conversation with Scott MacDonald, describes Smith's choice of musical accompaniment as:

nothing very sophisticated at all: Eddy Duchin, the piano player, playing a rumba or a samba. I recorded the disk and cut the tape together and then, when it came time to go to the theater, lugged the tape recorder, actually Marian Zazeela's old tape recorder, which weighed fifty pounds, over to the theater. The tape recorder was placed at the front of the theater under the screen, and when the movie began, I turned on the tape – *and the experience was stunning! It was incredible!* And I realized that I needed to understand

⁸ At the time, Conrad was performing with LaMonte Young, Marian Zazeela, Angus MacLise, and John Cale in what would be termed in 1965 the "Theater of Eternal Music". In its earliest incarnations (1962-?), the group included Billy Linich (later to be know as Billy Name) on guitar.

⁹ Brandon Joseph, *Beyond the Dream Syndicate: Tony Conrad and the Arts After Cage (A "Minor" History)*, (New York: Zone Books, 2008), p.239.

what had happened to convert such pedestrian sound into something completely magical in the context of the image, *and* what was going on with the *picture* that in the context of the sound it should have become so lambent and affecting.¹⁰

Smith's ability to adapt to the circumstances of his environment and the unpredictability of the film medium are vividly evident in *Scotch Tape*, which famously derives its title from the piece of scotch tape that accidentally became stuck in the gate of Jacob's Bolex during Smith's shooting. The sense of improvisation and chance that *Scotch Tape* represented are crucial to understanding both Smith's aesthetic and larger artistic movements in music, dance, performance, and studio art practice at the time.

Scotch Tape didn't aspire to be avant-garde or transcendent, it embraced a certain flexibility of style and became a celebratory homage to the inevitable and unpredictable. The nostalgia that initially repelled Conrad is most obvious in Smith's choice of musical accompaniment for the film, which functions as a popular remnant of the recent past. In combining the urban detritus and rubble visible in *Scotch Tape* with a song from an era just recently gone by, Smith embraced the discarded materials of his cultural past and attempted to transform them into a celebration of the discarded and the failed. The transformative power that this music had on Smith's film would deeply influence Conrad's developing interest in the relationship between sounds and images.

Conrad was profoundly impacted by what he described as Smith's "commitment and investment" to his work, as well as the scene in which he produced it. Conrad was fascinated by

¹⁰ MacDonald, p.61

“the *social* aspects of this work” and the “fact that Jack and the people who surrounded him were, from my perspective, from some other *planet*.”¹¹

Conrad, again quoted at length in conversation with Scott MacDonald, described his developing attraction to Jack Smith’s work as the result of several elements.

One was the sexual explicitness of the group that he was involved with and their fascination with cross-dressing and with sexuality in general. This was fascinating to me, just because I didn’t know anything about it. I was completely naïve at the time. I, who had somehow eluded the societal tar pit of getting the job, getting the girl, getting married, getting the baby, getting the promotion, getting the car, getting the house, getting the next baby, and so forth – basically by having gone away to college and studying instead of fucking – was fascinated to find that there were people who had found alternative life patterns *not* through having gone to college, *not* through intellectually hypothesizing their own experiential framework, but through self-definition driven by sexual longings of an unorthodox type. These longings had led them into an alternative space that I *loved*; I *loved* these people, even though I shared very little of their experience.¹²

The part of the experience that Conrad didn’t share with Smith’s artistic contemporaries and collaborators was his sexuality. While he described Smith’s scene as “specifically gay,” and as possessing, at times, a “kind of awkwardness”¹³ for heterosexual men like himself, Conrad clearly found the world populated by Smith’s outrageous cross-dressing creatures to be both liberating and inspiring. During the filming of *Flaming Creatures*, which took place in the late

¹¹ MacDonald, pp. 58-59

¹² MacDonald, p. 60

summer / early fall of 1962, Smith assigned Conrad a dress to wear, which he “ripped down the back to expose my ass and turned my back to the camera.”¹⁴

Smith’s aesthetic vision has been described by Jerry Tartaglia as one of:

Queer alienation: the campy sensibility which turns straight images on their head, revising the paradigm, re-ordering not only the constructions of heterocentric dominance, but of the gay so-called subculture and its tradition of Diva worship. Smith’s was an aesthetic quest to identify the gay image, and to relocate it in a Queer landscape.¹⁵

This landscape was not simply one that was created with queer sexuality in mind – it was one in which a “naïve” and relatively inexperienced heterosexual young man like Conrad could, all of a sudden, find himself wearing a dress that exposed his ass.

As Juan A. Suárez, in his study of Kenneth Anger, Jack Smith, and Andy Warhol, *Bike Boys, Drag Queens, and Superstars: Avant-Garde, Mass Culture and Gay Identities in the 1960’s Underground*, writes, Smith’s cinema was one in which old and degraded visions of Hollywood glamour formed the backdrop for Smith’s polymorphous depictions of sensual pleasure and sexuality. In *Flaming Creatures*, the sex act itself is projected as a parody and all body parts are indiscriminately glamorized and eroticized. Sexuality isn’t genital, nor is it based in the fulfillment of desire, but is rather transformed into something polymorphous, textured, and

¹³ Tony Conrad, interview with the author, 11/17/2008. Conrad described Smith’s scene as being one of “cross correspondence,” in which self-identified “straight” men like Angus MacLise, Piero Heliczer, and Conrad felt accepted and comfortable.

¹⁴ From J. Hoberman’s unpublished interview with Conrad in 1996, noted in J. Hoberman, *On Jack Smith’s Flaming Creatures and Other Secret-Flix of Cinemaroc* (New York: Granary Books and Hips Road, 2001).

¹⁵ Tartaglia, p. 165

fragmented.¹⁶ There is a complete collapse of sexual distinctions (male, female, heterosexual, homosexual, etc.) in Smith's films from this period; his flaming creatures, including a relatively minor on-screen presence like Conrad, seem to blissfully abandon traditional gender roles and distinctions. The sexuality that is exposed in *Flaming Creatures* is a gender-blurring sensuality which is playful, polymorphous, and continually surprising, and which opposes a stable definition of homo or heterosexuality.

Conrad started recording Smith's performances, readings, and improvisations in the fall of 1962, around the same time that Smith was filming *Flaming Creatures*. While Smith and Conrad were living on what Conrad refers to as the absolute "bottom of the economic scale" at the time, Conrad had access to a 1/4" tape recorder (was this formerly Marian Zazeela's?) which he considered a "pretty precious thing at the time."¹⁷ Conrad bought as much cheap 1/4" tape as he could, and would turn on the machine and record goings-on in the Ludlow Street space whenever the opportunity arose or something "captivating" started to happen. Smith would frequently read recently completed manuscripts and texts, improvise performances, or stage elaborate audio plays for Conrad's recorder. Conrad says that these happenings were unique and never rehearsed, and were a mix of improvisations and performances that stemmed from Smith's pre-written texts.

They were largely spontaneous events, even when there was a reading. Jack had written a number of short stories and texts, for example, "Pfeffernuss Flavored Aspirin" and "The First Memoirs of Maria Montez," and sometimes people would be coming by.

¹⁶ Juan Suarez, *Bike Boys, Drag Queens, and Superstars: Avant-Garde, Mass Culture and Gay Identities in the 1960's Underground Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996).

¹⁷ Conrad, interview with the author 11/17/2008.

When they did, there would sometimes be music performances or something like that, and when there was, I would turn on the recorder.

At around the same time, I was also recording my musical performances (in another location) with LaMonte Young, John Cale, Marian Zazeela, and Angus MacLise. These were musical performances that, at the time, clearly seemed to us to represent a new kind of music that was very important and that we felt was the best thing in the world. It seemed to all be extremely important, and that was why we were recording it – both as a document and because we thought that it was the best music that anyone could possibly be doing at the time.

There was a little bit of the same spirit inhabiting the recordings that I made of Jack Smith. These were recordings that were completely surprising and different and that I felt were extremely vivid and significant. They represented a kind of unheralded sensibility and quality of performance that I hadn't been aware of earlier, and that I thought was amazing. In part, there was the sense that the tapes would be important documentation, although they were also just good things that we would want to listen to later. There was also the sense that these things were just very significant and of historical value. I thought that they were so good that people should hear them, and definitely thought that they were better than anything on the radio or that we could hear on records at the time.¹⁸

Conrad's reasoning for documenting his performances with the Theater of Eternal Music stems from both his perception that the performances the group was engaged in were truly groundbreaking, as well as his desire to document his own involvement with the group. The division between Young and Conrad that resulted in Young's refusal to allow Conrad access to these tapes is based, to a certain extent in questions of authorship, but also seems to stem from a

¹⁸ Tony Conrad, interview with the author 11/17/2008.

more fundamental disagreement regarding whether or not the recordings should be allowed to function as more than just documentation of the group's performances.

In a few of Conrad's recordings of Smith, Conrad can be heard playing guitar or mandola while Smith reads and very occasionally takes part in one of the performances.¹⁹ He tends to remain very much in the background, and at times seems almost embarrassed to be heard giggling or responding to Smith's inquiries about the status of the recorder.²⁰ Angus MacLise, John Cale, Kate and Piero Heliczer, Jerry Joffen, Joel Markman, and Arnold Rockwood, among others, participated in Conrad's recordings, but the most outstanding figures in Smith's performances were Mario Montez and Francis (Frances / Frankie) Francine.²¹ Montez and Francine appeared in Smith's films from this period (*Flaming Creatures*, *Normal Love*) and were featured in Smith's book of photographs, *The Beautiful Book*, which was printed in a limited run of 200 copies in late 1962. Francine was cast as the sheriff in Andy Warhol's *Lonesome Cowboys* (1967-68) and both Montez and Francine would go on to be remembered as primarily "Warhol's" superstars.²²

Conrad describes Francine as, undoubtedly, Smith's primary inspiration and closest friend at the time that the Ludlow Street audio recordings were made.

¹⁹ Conrad performs in *Love is Strange* (recorded in November 1962, track 2 on *Les Evening Gowns Damnées*) and in *The First Memoirs of Maria Montez* (recorded on February 24, 1963, track 2 on *Silent Shadows on Cinemaroc Island*)

²⁰ At the beginning of *Jack Smith Tells Tales of Francine*, Smith is heard asking Conrad whether or not he is recording. Mario Montez tells Smith to "start from the beginning," which Conrad repeats to Smith.

²¹ Piero Heliczer notes that Francis Francine's given name was Frank di Giovanni.

²² Montez appeared in Warhol's *Mario Banana* (1964), *Batman Dracula* (1964), *Harlot* (1964), *Screen Test #2* (1965), *Hedy* (1965), *Chelsea Girls* (1966), among others.

Frankie was Jack’s “number one” interest at the time *Flaming Creatures* was made, and Jack definitely intended Frankie as the star. Mario [Montez] was much freer in a sense, and much younger, and much more sensual. Frankie had a quality that was more fascinating for Jack – I think because of his background and the way that she sustained a kind of weird quality that was so different from the norm.

Francine was Smith’s professed best friend²³ and, according to Conrad, Smith was the only person that Francine discussed her “background” with. In “Les Evening Gowns Damnées,” Smith describes Francine as a “hermaphrodite ex-carnival star,” and told Conrad and others that Francine had supported herself by traveling with a side show prior to moving to New York City. Although Conrad never talked to Francine directly about her purported side show past or hermaphroditism, and maintains that this was because Smith was the only person who Francine felt comfortable confiding in, he believes that Francine did travel with a sideshow and possessed, as he describes, a “special capacity which allowed her to display the genitals of both sexes.”²⁴

Smith repeatedly refers to Francine as a “hermaphrodite” or “transvestite” ex-carnival star in Conrad’s recordings.²⁵ Whether or not Francine was actually a hermaphrodite remains, I believe, a valid question, since Smith’s fascination with hermaphrodites and polymorphous sexuality seems to have developed into a propensity to exaggerate reality and create fantastical narratives related to the sexuality and erotic inclinations of his creatures. J. Hoberman, in his 2001 study of *Flaming Creatures, On Jack Smith’s Flaming Creatures and Other Secret-Flix of Cinemaroc*, describes the “gender confusion” of *Flaming Creatures* as partially resulting from Smith telling

²³ In Conrad’s recording of Smith’s reading of “Les Evening Gowns Damnées,” Smith sentimentally refers to Francine as his best friend.

²⁴ Conrad, in interview with the author 11/17/2008.

²⁵ Francine’s hermaphroditism and cross-dressing is mentioned in “Jack Smith Reads from the Great Moldy Triumph,” “Jack Smith Tells Tales of Francine,” and “Jack Smith Reads ‘Les Evening Gowns Damnées,’” all of which appear on the *Les Evening Gowns Damnées* Audio ArtKive 01 compilation.

Ken Kelman that Shelia Bick, the film's female lead, was actually a hermaphrodite. As a result, Kelman erroneously described Bick as a hermaphrodite in his review of the film in *Film Culture* and this myth has reportedly been repeated in other sources.²⁶

It is likely that Francis Francine's persona was based on the sideshow "half and half," Francis-Francine Hodgkiss, whose life was chronicled by Daniel Mannix in a 1948 issue of *True* magazine²⁷. Francis-Francine Hodgkiss was born with an "enlarged clitoris that looked like a penis" and ended up becoming one of the most successful sideshow performers of the 1940's.²⁸ While Francine's character and the mythology and mystery surrounding her background could have easily been based on the life of Hodgkiss, Conrad believes that Francine did have a background in carnival sideshow "theatricals."

Francine's voice isn't strongly represented in the recordings, although she is heard on "Jack Smith Reads from 'The Great Moldy Triumph'" (1963) and "Love is Strange" (1962). Conrad said that, although Francine was completely comfortable when she was being filmed, she would get "self-conscious and nervous" when he was recording audio and thought that the recordings "put her on the spot in a way that was somewhat uncomfortable."²⁹ Although she is heard in only a few of the tapes that Conrad has released to date, Francine is well represented throughout the recordings as a central figure in Jack's stories.

²⁶ Hoberman, p.15. Kelman's review appears in *Film Culture* no 29 (1963) and is titled "Smith Myth."

²⁷ "Strange People" in *True*, September 1948 (*need to find this complete reference)

²⁸ Marc Hartzman, author of *American Sideshow: An Encyclopedia of History's Most Wondrous and Curiously Strange Performers* (Tarcher, 2005), wrote about Hodgkiss in his blog on 1/14/2007 (<http://americansideshow.blogspot.com/2007/01/francis-francine-hodgkiss.html>)

²⁹ Tony Conrad, interview with the author 11/17/2008

Conrad's recording, "Jack Smith Reads 'Les Evening Gowns Damnées'" (date unknown), begins with a musical overture of Angus MacLise playing bowed mandola and Conrad strumming a lute guitar (which Smith refers to as "tweaking a mandolin in the normal way"). Smith describes the evening as an "overstimulated night on the eve of the world's destruction" and commences to read from his short story, "Les Evening Gowns Damnées," while Conrad and MacLise continue to play in the background. Smith tells the story of Francine being picked up on the street by a millionaire on Halloween who "probably saw how ludicrous it would be if she were covered with jewelry and he offered to pay her expenses for two weeks of being a cunt at an expensive hotel in Miami Beach." The millionaire let Smith accompany Francine to Miami, and the two friends go out on the town to shop for evening gowns. Smith says that he wanted to have some "homos brought up" to their apartment and be fitted, but, since Francine didn't want to wait, they ended up at a local department store.

At the store, Smith was:

dressed as inconspicuously as possible. Frankie looked, ah, low-brow, but she had a mad pseudo hauteur that was her idea of how rich people act, and it stunned sales people or sort of paralyzed them temporarily.³⁰

After Francine shocked an "elegant white-haired saleslady" by asking for evening gowns in her size, she proceeded to explain to the saleslady that she was in "theatricals" and wasn't interested in the least in buying an evening gown, but was rather "thrown into the position of having to." Smith says that the two friends "fought against their fate" in evening gown department, and were

³⁰ Smith, "Les Evening Gowns Damnées"

“hyper aware that we couldn’t stay there forever and we didn’t want to become conspicuous by staying there for too long because we were secretly afraid that the whole store would find out.”

After the evening gowns were delivered to their apartment, Smith describes Francine as being “badly shaken” by the department store delivery boys. When Francine recovers, the two friends commence to try on all of the evening gowns in a wild “E.G. orgy,” scream “madly out of overstimulation,” and eventually get ready to go out for the evening. Smith describes Frankie as loving a gown that was a:

bouffant powder blue job, all covered with ruffles and net and cabbage roses and ribbons and everything. ‘It looks like a Puerto Rican graduation dress,’ I said. If she were to wear that thing, the game would be up, because no normal woman of her age would wear a thing like that.

After all, you have to consider that Francine is pushing 40, and some of her front teeth are missing. Her figure has become somewhat square and muscular and she has a pronounced hard feature, I mean, pronounced hard features. She would be surrealistic in that get-up, and attract as much attention, even if she were a woman, that we would of course be seen through – *not* being cunts – with all that amount of attention, like who would throw a glaring spotlight on something you wanted to cover up?³¹

Even though Smith considered his outfit for the evening to be “quite convincing,” he describes himself as carrying a large ostrich feather fan which he used to cover his face when he “spotted any plainclothesmen or fuzz” or developed an unexpected erection. While Smith mentions encountering a few “low creatures” who “let off some disgusting remarks,” he makes a point of noting that:

quite a few stunning men looked at me with normal desire. It only made me feel sad and ludicrous, because I was not what they thought. True, I was not what they thought, and I seem to be . . . honest . . . something about my honesty made me feel such a way . . . Oh well, I thought, I just have to dig it for its interesting qualities, if not for its pragmatic attributes.³²

Although Smith describes his and Francine’s evening gown orgy as a giddy and completely overstimulated affair, the evening seems to rest under an undeniable cloud of fear and tension. Mentioned almost in passing, Smith makes a point of describing how shaken Francine was by the delivery boys, yet he doesn’t explain their encounter. Smith is admittedly concerned about Francine’s gown selection, and seems to find her conspicuous physical presence potentially threatening. Jack’s story, while unmistakably fiction, does reveal some of the terrors of the public transvestite and cross-dresser in the era before Stonewall.

In “Jack Smith Tells Tales of Francine to Mario Montez and Tony Conrad” (recorded on November 11, 1964), Smith is prodded by Montez to relay some of Francine’s famous “Francine-sayings,” which Montez describes as phrases such as “Mary, get off the pot,” “I couldn’t be less annoyed,” and “you name it, I’ll shoot it.” Conrad has said that Francine was known for her witty phrases and unexpected interjections, and could be:

pedestrian and dull in a certain way but then would spout incredibly sharp, tart, and brilliant remarks. He had a way of mouthing comebacks and participating in conversations in the most oblique and interesting way.³³

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Tony Conrad, in interview with the author 11/17/2008

Smith, although repeatedly prompted by Montez to relay some of Francine’s comebacks, decides instead to tell tales of poor Francine’s desire for a “normal love.” Mario laughs wildly and continuously in the background as Jack describes Francine’s escape from the carnival with a man who owned a nightclub in Kentucky. Smith says that this man took pity on Francine’s degraded situation in the sideshow and:

was sorry that there was nothing that science could do to help her, but admired her spirit and her courage and her beauty and wanted to marry her and give her a home and security and his grandmother’s jewels.³⁴

After going home with the man, Francine realized that the man didn’t understand that she “wasn’t what she seemed.” When Smith completes this line of the story, Montez interrupts and asks, “What did he tell him he was . . . she was?” Jack responds, “I mean, the man though that Frankie was a woman.” At this point in the recording, Montez laughs hysterically and, barely able to catch his breath, says “that’s too much . . .” and continues laughing uncontrollably. Jack resumes the story and says that:

then, after the meal, when Francine’s head was giddy and she felt bubbly, he took her into another room and opened the safe and brought out his grandmother’s jewels. Francine admired them and I think that’s where her heart broke. I think that’s when Frankie’s heart broke, I think that’s when he went mad and he declined the offer of marriage and said ‘No, I am not, I am not what I seem to be,’ and left.

³⁴ “Jack Smith Tells Tales of Francine” to Mario Montez and Tony Conrad, recorded on November 11, 1964 and released as track 5 on the *Les Evening Gowns Damnées* compilation.

Francine, Jack's professed best-friend, is the butt of wild jokes and laughter on behalf of Montez, Conrad, and Smith. Perhaps Francine was easy to pick on because of her penchant for outrageous and inappropriate outfits, or maybe she was just too hardened and old to be taken seriously. Francine's mythologized sideshow past, while an apparent source of fascination for Smith, is completely incomprehensible to Montez.³⁵ It seems that, for Smith and Montez, there was a tenuous balance between safe expressions and embarrassing displays, between believability and excess, and between true friendship and catty cruelty. Smith presents Francine as a tragic figure whose desire for a "normal love" with a wealthy man could only ever be profoundly heartbreaking. Implicit in these tales of Francine is a criticism of her longing for this "normal love," her palpable sadness at passing as a "real" woman and subsequently being forced to reveal herself to her suitors, and her longing to be an accepted queen in a "normal" (straight) relationship with a wealthy man.

Even after Conrad had a falling out with Smith in the mid-1960's³⁶, he and his wife, Beverly Grant, maintained a close relationship to Francine. Francine frequently visited Conrad and Grant at their loft on 42nd Street into the early 1970's, and Conrad continued to make audio recordings of Francine during this period. Conrad describes Francine as extremely private about her living circumstances, and although he knew Francine had an apartment on a cul-de-sac on 5th Street, it was "rare that anyone got a chance to visit him there." Conrad fell out of touch with Francine

³⁵ Interestingly, this audio recording predates Montez's appearance in Andy Warhol's *Screen Test #2*, which was shot on February 7, 1965. Ronald Tavel's cruel treatment of Montez is wonderfully analyzed in Douglas Crimp's groundbreaking essay on queer shame, "Marion Montez, For Shame," in *Regarding Sedgwick: Essays on Queer Culture and Critical Theory*, eds. Stephen M. Barber and David L. Clark (New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 57-70.

³⁶ Conrad explains this falling out as resulting from, most likely, Conrad's involvement with Beverly Grant, who he met on the set of Smith's *Normal Love*. In interview with Scott MacDonald, Conrad says that Smith found it extraordinarily difficult to be friendly with the men who were involved with the women he loved. Conrad described Smith as "hating LaMonte Young" (Marian Zazeela's partner).

around the time he moved to Ohio in 1973, and fears that she may have fallen prey to “the [AIDS] epidemic in the 80’s.”³⁷

Grant and Conrad’s nearly forgotten film, *Coming Attractions* (1970), is a feature-length portrait of Francine, and recounts the “past loves and experiences of an aging transsexual.”³⁸ *Coming Attractions* aims to both do justice to its star, Francine, and to pay homage to the scene (Smith’s), which Conrad had loved so dearly. When Grant and Conrad were estranged from Smith in the mid 1960’s, Conrad describes them as feeling completely “cut off . . . with unfulfilled ambitions.”³⁹ *Coming Attractions* is a hodgepodge conglomeration of Conrad and Grant’s various interests at the time, and attempts to combine allegorical and symbolic narrative elements with the formal device of flicker. Loosely structured as a series of “Coming Attraction” teasers for yet-to-be-made films, *Coming Attractions* uses what Conrad describes as “allegorical settings and simple iconic devices,” to drive its narrative. The film’s confused and degraded narrative is interrupted and superimposed with formal visual structures (mattes and flicker sequences) that seem to be an extension of aesthetic concerns the couple was exploring in non-narrative films like *Straight and Narrow* (1970) and *The Flicker* (1966) at the time. As an attempt to combine formally structured investigations of perception with elements of narrative cinema, *Coming Attractions* represents an ambitious effort to create a portrait of an influential and inspiring individual, Francis Francine, as well as a non-normative means of representing the queer world.

³⁷ Tony Conrad, interview with the author 11/17/2008

³⁸ Description taken from Conrad’s press release notes for the film, found in the Filmmakers Coop catalog description of *Coming Attractions* online at www.film-makerscoop.com. *Coming Attractions* is currently not available for rent from the Coop and Conrad has pulled all prints from distribution in anticipation of undertaking a preservation project in conjunction with Anthology Film Archives.

³⁹ MacDonald, p.76

By the time that *Coming Attractions* was completed, Smith was almost completely isolated from the scene populated by roving transvestite creatures that Conrad had loved so much. Smith was at odds with Mekas, didn't consider himself to be a part of the underground and experimental film community, and was completely estranged from what he describes as the "queer-ghetto." In his 1978 interview with Smith, Sylvère Lotringer asks him what he thinks of the gay movement, and Smith replies:

They've become a ghetto, already: they just want to talk about gay things. They're trying to cut it off from being in any context . . . I took my program to a gay theater, and he couldn't understand how it was gay, because he was unable to see it in a context. If it wasn't discussing exactly how many inches was my first lollipop, well then it wouldn't be anything they'd be interested in.⁴⁰

It is evident from accounts of those closest to him that Jack Smith's answer to the struggles of surviving as a queer artist in the era before Stonewall involved the embrace of a completely alternate mode of existence and a decidedly underground lifestyle (underground in that it was based on his sexual orientation, his central position in the New York underground art and film scene of the 1960's, and his open embrace of drug culture). According to his contemporaries, Smith seemed to live in a sort of alternate universe, writing in elaborate and impenetrable poetics⁴¹, embracing all that was rubble and trash, and perpetually attempting to transform the forgotten and the maligned into glamorous creatures that were brimming with possibility.

⁴⁰ Jack Smith and Sylvère Lotringer, "Uncle Fishhook and the Sacred Baby Poo Poo of Art," *Semiotext(e)* 1 no. 2 (1978), reprinted in J. Hoberman and Edward Leffingwell's collection, *On Jack Smith's Flaming Creatures and Other Secret-Flix of Cinemaroc* (New York: Granary Books and Hips Road, 2001), p. 112.

⁴¹ A number of these writings pertain to Smith's infamous split from Jonas Mekas and Anthology Film Archives. In Sylvère Lotringer's 1978 interview with Smith, "Uncle Fishhook and the Sacred Baby Poo Poo of Art," Smith refers to Mekas as Uncle Fishhook, and says of *Flaming Creatures*, "Uncle Fishhook was showing it as

Smith created a fantasy space inside the Ludlow Street loft that encouraged the most outrageous forms of expression and seemed to allow for complete artistic and sexual freedom. Perhaps because his films from the 1960's simultaneously problematize and celebrate the relationship of queer countercultures to icons of popular/mass culture, Smith has continued to occupy a marginal position in histories of pre-Stonewall queer cinemas. Homoeroticism, or rather queerness is, in these films, ambiguous, amorous, and fluid; it demands a complete embrace and limitless exploration of pleasure and sensuality. In exposing the artificiality and banality of Hollywood and star culture, and through the appropriation, reinvention, and fantastical salvation of elements of Hollywood glamour, sensuous theatricality, trash, refuse, and social detritus, Smith's unique vision of queerness not only established a non-oppositional relation between commercial cinema and the avant-garde, but embraced a liberated queer sensuality which was not restricted by normative systems of sexual identification.

The recordings that Conrad made of Smith between 1962 and 1964 do not represent the wild and debauched fantasy world of radical and transformative possibility that is typically associated with Smith's films from the time (*Flaming Creatures*, *Normal Love*, *The Yellow Sequence / Normal Love addendum*, and *Respectable Creatures*, aka *Buzzards Over Baghdad*, *Loathsome Kisses of Baghdad*, *Normal Fantasy*). While Smith's audio tales provide small glimpses of the everyday fears associated with being queer in the mid-1960's, they also reveal (most poignantly through Smith and Montez's disapproval of Francine's desire to attain what Smith refers to as a "normal" relationship with a man) Smith's fierce rejection of all things associated with the

his mausoleum . . . and Uncle Fishhook wanted to have something in court at the time, it being so fashionable." Lotringer's interview is reprinted in J. Hoberman and Edward Leffingwell's *Wait For Me at the Bottom of the Pool*:

“normal” heterosexual world. Reality, and the tenuous public life of queer transsexuals in New York in the early 1960’s, seeps into Conrad’s recordings of Smith much more so than it does into Smith’s films. The recordings are fascinating documents of Jack Smith and Tony Conrad’s experiences of queer 1960’s New York and the alternative community that they created in the 56 Ludlow Street loft. While Smith’s films certainly work to create an all-encompassing fantasy space that is removed from the potential danger associated with being a flaming queer in 1960’s New York (in which, as much as neighborhoods like Greenwich Village, the East Village, and the Lower East Side offered an alternative to dominant society, gay men were still regularly being targeted and arrested), they ignore the very real terrors the “flaming creatures” had to face on a day to day basis in pre-Stonewall New York.

Conrad’s audio recordings provide a glimpse into both the queer-political aspects of Smith’s aesthetic and the unique trans / drag / queer performativity represented by Francis Francine. The figure of Francis Francine causes the listener to question how much of what we hear in the recordings is the performance of fantasy, how much of this performance is based in reality and lived experiences, and, ultimately, whether or not the creation of a distinction between fantasy and reality is important.

Because Conrad’s recordings are, in some sense, *just* audio, they cause one to imagine and speculate what the scene looked like, how the creatures appeared, what they were doing, and exactly what was happening when Conrad decided to turn on the recorder. Perhaps it is precisely because they lack a visual component that the recordings become, somehow, more functionally realistic as documents of this particular queer community’s fantasies and fears.

Utilizing what he termed “moldy” materials and the refuse of mainstream culture, Jack Smith forged a wildly critical and queer position against the oppressive forces of alternative film exhibitors and distributors, landlords, capitalism, and mainstream film culture. Conrad’s audio recordings reveal that the fluid sexuality and completely “other” fantasy spaces so often associated with Smith were his ideal, utopian vision of what artistic communities should strive for, rather than actualities. While Smith’s flaming creatures could be as wild and overstimulated as they liked in the 56 Ludlow Street loft, when they ventured outside they had to be wary of police, of errand erections, and of appearing too outrageous.

Conrad knew that “as much as I admired it, Jack’s scene wasn’t an arena I could compete in. I wasn’t gay; I wasn’t a flaming creature.”⁴² His audio recordings of Smith provide a point of entry for questioning exactly what, then, it was about Smith’s world of ambiguous, amorphous, fluid, and fantastical sexuality that was so attractive to Conrad. Perhaps, quite simply, the queer world that floated through the Ludlow Street loft offered a sense of freedom and subversive expressivity to white, heterosexual men like Conrad, at the same time that it offered queer creatures like Smith and Francine a safe space in which they could scream and carry on as loudly and as ferociously as possible.

⁴² MacDonald, p. 64