

**SCOTCH TAPE URBANISM**  
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Where shall we go from here? Towards what form? The theatrical site, containing the stage and the auditorium?

The site. I told an Italian who wanted to build a theater whose elements would be movable and whose architecture flexible, depending on what play was being performed—even before he had finished his sentence I said that the architecture of the theater still remains to be discovered but that it must be stationary, immobilised, so that it can be held responsible: it shall be judged by its shape. It's too easy to put one's trust in the moveable.

— Jean Genet, "The Strange Word Urb..." (1966)<sup>1</sup>

A viral image is circulating. It is composed of juxtaposed photographs: one shows the Trumps (Donald, Donald Jr., Eric, and Ivanka) as they break ground at a development site, the other features an aerial perspective of a mass grave on Hart Island being filled with white coffins holding corpses currently accumulating from COVID-19. Its caption reads, "First Family photograph." As a meme, the image indexes the callously criminal behavior of the so-called "First Family," whose management of the pandemic has consistently placed profits over people, allowing market forces to trump care for human lives. While this horrifying reality will be all too familiar to the reader, reading further into this meme reveals yet another layer. The image of the Trumps is cribbed from their real estate business, a staged photo op of them breaking ground at the Trump International Hotel in Washington D.C., in 2014. The photo's juxtaposition with the image of the grave below suggests the synchronicity of developers and gravediggers, builders-cum-buriers. In his long history of administering "beautiful" building projects, hasn't Trump always been in the business of prognosticating and designing what should count as a liveable future, deciding almost unilaterally what to raise and what to raze, comfortable with material destruction as long as it measures up in a calculus of dollars and cents?

The essay that follows was written two years ago, building on my research on the queer artist and filmmaker Jack Smith and particularly his work *Scotch Tape* (1961). At the time, I was thinking about claims being made on the future in a different light. I wanted to use Smith's film to address what I sensed was a sweeping commercialization of the notion of a "queer utopian horizon" by prominent cultural institutions. I had been thinking about the way certain notions of dance were being instrumentalized to make claims that the body and the built environment could have a perfectly symbiotic relationship. It wasn't this hope for more meaningful design that troubled me, but that its terms often lent themselves to a rather specific vision for what this utopian future would look like (endlessly fluid, adaptable organisms, coursing with advanced technological capacities). The rush to ameliorate the way any architecture poses a limit to dance seemed both to obscure what might come of the misalignment between these fields and to recall an old legacy of modernist theater design, particularly by architects that envisioned the theater as what Manfredo Tafuri calls a utopian "counter-city."<sup>2</sup> The theater is, in other words, an ideological, as much as material, site. Indeed, it has often been posited as a world apart from the daily experience of the city. What seems like a new utopianism in the design of more perfectly aligned performing bodies and performance spaces, has, in fact, long been part of the practice of urbanism.

Consider the role of performance in planning for the future of the city given by two of the most well-known actors in urban development. In *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Jane Jacobs describes city life as "an intricate ballet in which the individual dancers and ensembles all have distinctive parts which miraculously reinforce each other and compose an orderly whole."<sup>3</sup> Jacobs' advocacy to preserve city life for its (middle-class family) inhabitants is what drives this vision of a ballet that is perplexingly both improvised and organized into wholeness. Such a populist vision of the city has often been framed against the technocratic visions of Jacobs' nemesis, New York City Planning Commissioner Robert Moses. Yet if Jacobs and Moses disagree over who retained the rights to the city, so to speak, strangely they agreed that the health of the city might be tested by its capacity to make a future for performance. Jacobs' vision of a ballet is joined to Moses' literal project of Lincoln Center, a proposal first made in the mid-1950s to create a central home for the performing arts in New York City. Lincoln Center's commitment to the arts was partially cover for a broader redevelopment of the west side, which would erect luxury apartment buildings and, in the process, destroy Lincoln Square (also known as San Juan Hill), a historically Black neighborhood that by 1957 was home to more than 30,000 working-class African-American and Puerto Rican residents living in more than 6,000 homes. As Moses explained at one public hearing, the forced displacement of the area's residents was a "relatively cheap cost" considering that without Lincoln Center the performing arts "will be out on the street without a home."<sup>4</sup>

What is strange about the urbanisms of Moses and Jacobs is that despite their divergence they share this notion that performance is the barometer for the city's future life. Given the way performance is merely instrumental in their arguments, a means to an end, one could only speculate about how they themselves might have described the relation between dance and architecture. Perhaps they believed too much in the idea that performance always entails live bodies gathered by design. It's this belief—"trust in the moveable," in liveness—that Jean Genet finds strange about the word "urb," as my epigraph suggests. Genet instead proposes that, "[i]n today's cities, the only place—unfortunately still on the outskirts—where a theater could be built is in the cemetery...[where the] architect of the theater will be unable to bear the inane constructions wherein families bury their dead."<sup>5</sup> Genet's reflections evoke the actual cemetery, but they also use the graveyard as a symbol for a space and set of practices created when "the City or State should desire to rid itself as it were in one fell sweep of some other community...evoking some very possible future architecturally outside of time, of the past as well as the future."<sup>6</sup> If urbanism is committed to studying the life of the city, isn't it also a practice more often administered through the death and destruction of buildings, bodies, and ways of being? Genet continues:

We shall ask future city planners to provide for a cemetery within the confines of the city, where the dead will continue to be buried, or to plan for a disturbing columbarium...Do you see what I am driving at? The theatre will be built as close as possible to, actually in the guardian shadow of, the place where the dead are buried, or the solitary monument which digests them.<sup>7</sup>

What Genet is driving at is a theater constrained and yet made possible by its situatedness within the reality and imagining of death. Under the same shadow of a similar kind of fruitful constraint, I turn now to *Scotch Tape* and to what I would call the dance (macabre?) of Jack Smith, an artist well known for his critique of the capitalist logic of the city, but not often considered in relation to the choreographic dimension of his performances.

With more space, I would want to begin by elaborating on the displacement of the Western graveyards from the center of town, alongside the church. The most often cited theorist of this shift is Michel Foucault, whose lecture "Of Other Spaces" (1967)<sup>8</sup> describes this move in relation to modern notions of health, hygiene, and a fear of death-as-disease (a belief echoed when Moses described spaces like San Juan Hill as in need of "bold and septic surgery").<sup>9</sup> If the graveyard is the limit of urban life, it is also, Foucault argues, a mirror of the individualism pervasive in modern society: parceled units assigned to each body create a "quasi-eternal" echo in which the singular self is left to rest and rot in isolation.<sup>10</sup> Genet arrives at a similar conclusion, though for him the graveyard is less a question of spatial than performance politics, constituted through pseudo-ritualistic acts. For instance, Genet cites the groundskeepers who tend to the landscape and the visitors who skirt the graves in deference (and who will, he implies, become self-selecting audiences "themselves capable of taking a nocturnal stroll through a cemetery").<sup>11</sup> His most evocative description, however, is of the funeral mime (descending from the Roman ritual of a performer tasked with impersonating the dead as part of their burial). The mime's task is not to perform anything new, but only to repeat a life that has already been lived. His performance is constrained by death, and even further by the only thing the living can know of the dead—their life, as death itself remains so real and yet unthinkable.

Writing of the theater of Jack Smith in the 1970s, Jonas Mekas describes Smith as "the keeper of the graveyard at the end of civilization."<sup>12</sup> It was during this period that Smith, working in his live-work loft in SoHo, would stage performances in which (among other actions) he would spend hours hopelessly arranging cascading piles of debris collected from city streets—a wreckage of building materials from the city's deindustrialization as well as empty plastic and cardboard packaging from the growing landscape of consumer products. Like Genet's funeral mime, Smith's performance comes from sifting through dead and discarded materials, mining through past life. Yet this miming has even older roots in Smith's practice, occurring as well, for instance, in a site I've already touched on: Lincoln Center. In 1959, filmmaker Ken Jacobs brought Smith (along with Jerry Sims, Reese Haire, and several others) to trespass on what was, at the time, the construction site for the future hub of performing arts. Over the course of the afternoon, they improvised their way across a scene of demolition that had not yet been cleared for building. They shot film and took photographs, dressing in various costumes and covered with fabrics, setting themselves against broken slabs of concrete and bent rebar. It was here that Smith, borrowing Jacobs' camera, filmed his short work *Scotch Tape*. Just over three minutes, the film shows Smith's friends weaving their way through the chaos of construction materials. In one extended moment, Haire uses the elasticity of an arched piece of metal to bounce himself up and down. The film's title derives from a piece of tape trapped in the camera and that appears superimposed over the final print. The tape suggests both the happenstance and the tenuousness of these bodies as they came into contact with and danced their way through this site. Whether framed in a tightly cropped aerial perspective that shows their bodies playing with the materials they find on site or capture in long shots as flickers against this vast landscape, it is clear that their dance derives its shape, movement and rhythm from the limits and possibility of a demolition zone. Every move they make is contingent on the unstable grounds in which they perform.

There are several choreographies one might observe in this work—from the largely improvised movements of the performers, to that of the camera, to the largely unremarked dance history of Jack Smith himself. One rarely thinks of Smith as a dancer, despite the fact that Smith made a name for himself performing unusual choreographies in a range of underground cinema. Most notably in the early work of Ken Jacobs, one can find Smith throwing his body up against shuttered storefronts, spinning inside of the airshaft of an apartment complex, or leaping through the open air of a sidewalk. In a film segment titled "Little Cobra Dance" (dir. Ken Jacobs, 1957), the camera follows Smith, wrapped in fabric, as he indecorously descends a rickety fire escape, throwing his weight from side to side, freezing in mid-descent, breaking the railing on his way down. The stairs end on a rooftop, depositing Smith onto a makeshift stage sandwiched between several taller buildings, nested inside a crowded block of New York City. Dancing a short jig Smith moves towards and away from the camera in a fixed line before breaking this perpendicular motion to carry himself side-to-side, traversing the lateral plane of the roof. It is as though his dance is designed to illustrate the dimensions of the architectural and cinematic that frames the world around him. It's like a terrible rendition of Nijinsky's faun, without the clarity of narrative. In fact, Smith claimed to have studied with Ruth St. Denis, a paragon of Modernism and Orientalism, whose reference routes Smith's repetitive expressive gestures through a politics of repetition that transcends the dimension of form. St. Denis is a strong reminder that copying is never a neutral act. Only in Smith's case, what he copies is not some fantasmatic notion of the "East" but rather the alienating conditions of the built environment—the walls, windows and doors that exclude and protect, and the cracks and crevices of their infrastructure after they've fallen to the ground. St. Denis achieved great acclaim for creating a fantasy of another place and time (another problematic way utopia has often been framed by and for the "West"), but the space Smith reveals as other is the very city he lives in—not alien figures, alienated ground. Back in the courtyard his big, campy gestures lead nowhere. Walled out of space he is also held inside—the dance's grand gestures come to a dead end.

Returning to Lincoln Center, two more photographs clarify the different deployments of dance I've been attempting to map in relation to certain questions of architecture. One is Jack Smith's, a photograph that blends figures with their ground. Reese Haire curves his body to the shape of a curved steel bar, Jerry Sims is shrouded under a floral fabric that transforms his body into globular shapes like the pile of concrete rubble that surrounds him, and Ken Jacobs, laying upside down, reaches up his hand to barely gesture towards a plastic water lily that has been temporarily attached to twisted metal that courses over his head [Figure 1]. Partially buried in the demolition zone of the future Lincoln Center, the photograph holds together this ephemeral fusion of bodies and matter. The other image, far more widely circulated, is titled "Explosion on the West Side" and was featured in *Life* magazine as an advertisement for the film version *West Side Story* (1961) [Figure 2]. It shows actor Russ Tamblyn, who played Riff, jumping with arms and legs spread wide, seemingly bursting forth from an explosion emanating from the site. In the background and through the blue of the explosion's heat, one can see the first of Lincoln Center's new apartment complexes—its height stretching beyond the picture frame. For all the suppleness of Smith's photograph, Tamblyn's image signifies only danger and the transcendence of the dancer over this zone of destruction. Fear and danger are key elements of the *West Side Story*, of course, a fictional account of two lovers in their plight to transcend their social circumstance—or more accurately the racialized, working-class communities of San Juan Hill, on which the fictional story was based. Alas, as the Jets famously chide to Officer Krupke, "No one likes a fella with a social disease." Tamblyn's flight is more than virtuosic. It reveals the very ideology of the musical as it tells the story of individual players who *miraculously* transcend the world that surrounds them. The right dance, command of the body's architectonics can seemingly carry you into the future. Other performances, as Smith's choreography suggests to the viewer, bury you deeper in the present, even cementing the body to its site. Could this be one way of pushing back against the rhythms of the city's corpus, itself a series of articulations that seem to interminably point to hopes for a renewed and expanded future?

Lincoln Center is a theater built as a replacement for—not in the shadow of—the graveyards that continue to be created in the ongoing process of gentrification (sometimes politely referred to as renewal). To think of *Scotch Tape* as both indexing and temporarily obstructing this process might place Smith's film and photographs alongside artworks better known for engaging the city. His play with distance and scale could be read in relation to Joan Jonas' *Song Delay* (1970), and the superimposition of tape on his film echoes Gordon Matta-Clark's more deliberate use of this material in the work *City Slivers* (1972). To the extent that Smith's dancers approximate the formal aspects of the demolition site, his work might even be considered alongside Trisha Brown's *Roof Piece* (1971), a score in which dancers become nodes in a game of choreographic telephone as they send and receive movement across a series of rooftops in SoHo. These are all works that, I would argue, never try to triumph over the city's infrastructure but, in some sense, to become it. Still it's odd to remark on this now, when the pace of construction has (albeit temporarily) slowed and the venerable cultural sites, like Lincoln Center, ones Smith spent so much time railing against, have been shuttered. This includes the most recent revival of *West Side Story* on Broadway, which only premiered in late February 2020. Spaces dedicated to performance have ceased to function in their usual manner, while the institutional logics they embody have moved online. As artists are systematically put out of work, museums and other venues are deploying something like virtual land-grabs for audience attention. It's a choreography of destruction and expansion that eerily echoes the real estate model. I don't mean to castigate—we're all just trying to survive. I do wonder, however, as we continue to build towards the horizon of possibility within the fields of dance and performance, what space have we made for getting hung up on the past, or lost in the shadow of the old? Where we shall go from here? The answer need not always be forward.

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- 1 Jean Genet, "The Strange Word Urb...," trans. Richard Seaver, in *Jean Genet: Reflections on the Theater and Other Writings* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972), 65.
- 2 Manfredo Tafuri, "The Stage as 'Virtual City': From Fuchs to the Totaltheater," in *The Sphere and The Labrynth: Avant-Gardes and Architecture from Piranesi to the 1970s*, translated by Pellegrino d'Acierno and Robert Connolly (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), 112.
- 3 Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, (New York, NY: Random House, 1961), 50.
- 4 Robert Moses, quoted from the record of a public hearing held October 26, 1956, held in the New York City Municipal Archive (archive id: LT7458). Recording and transcript available at [www.wnyc.org/story/wnyc-65th-anniversary-robert-moses-on-lincoln-square-development/](http://www.wnyc.org/story/wnyc-65th-anniversary-robert-moses-on-lincoln-square-development/). accessed November 24, 2019, WNYC Collection, WNYC archives id: 11785.
- 5 Genet, "The Strange Word Urb...," 69.
- 6 Genet, "The Strange Word Urb...," 63. Here Genet is referring specifically the crematorium and to the history of the Holocaust. Evoking the architecture of Dachau, he gestures not only to the genocidal violence of the State, but to city planning that attempts to do away with the monuments to this necropolitical power, for instance (and to follow his example) by reducing the scale of such crematoria to "the size of some family grocery store" (64).
- 7 Genet, "The Strange Word Urb...," 64.
- 8 This is the title of the short essay first published in French in 1984 in the journal *Architecture/Mouvement/Continuité*, and subsequently in English in 1986. 1967, the date I've provided, is the year Foucault first delivered a lecture based on this material. I offer it to highlight the simultaneity of Foucault's and Genet's turn towards the graveyard.
- 9 Robert Moses, WNYC archives id: 11785.
- 10 "[T]he cemetery is indeed a highly heterotropic place, since for the individual, the cemetery begins with this strange heterochrony, the loss of life, and with this quasi-eternity in which her permanent lot is dissolution and disappearance." Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," trans. Jay Miskowicz, *Diacritics*, Vol. 16, 1 (1986), 26.
- 11 Genet, "The Strange Word Urb...," 69.
- 12 Jonas Mekas, "Jack Smith, Or The End of Civilization, July 23, 1970," in *Movie Journal: The Rise of the New American Cinema, 1959–1971* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2016), 397.



Above: "Explosion On The West Side" *Life* magazine, October 21, 1961. Photograph by Gjon Mili.

Left: Jack Smith, *Untitled*, c.1958–1962/201, analog C-print hand printed from original color negative on Fuji Crystal Archive paper, 14 x 11 inches. Copyright Jack Smith Archive. Courtesy of Gladstone Gallery.