

# THE HERETICAL JACOBIN



Developed in the 1960s in the context of the London Film-Makers' Co-operative, the film practice of English artist JOHN SMITH is aimed at deconstructing narration by means of sincere engagement and sophisticated humor.

*Frozen War (Hotel Diaries 1),*  
video still, 2001  
Courtesy: the artist

words by SIMONE MENEGOI

## COLUMNS: PIONEERS

Scene: a crowded street. Still frame. They are shooting a film. A voice-over gives instructions to the passers-by, like an old man crossing the street, a couple of girls moving by the camera and a Jamaican family turning the corner. The trailer of a truck pauses in the left corner of the frame, then at the command of the voice-over, it is pushed outside. Yet the instructions given by the invisible director gradually become unlikely or even absurd. The voice dictates the moment when a couple of pigeons have to enter flying through the frame, and the pigeons fulfill the order with a timing too perfect to be true. Even a public clock is “directed”: the minute hand, as the voice says, must make a complete rotation in one hour, while the hour hand must make its rotation in twelve hours. The viewer grasps the trick: the voice’s directives don’t affect the image, but vice versa. The scene was shot first and has an independent development; the voice-over was added afterwards, adapting to what happens in the frame. Since the voice is in slight advance of the events, it seems that it induces them. The “film” we are watching is simply a fragment of urban life.

For more than one reason, *The Girl Chewing Gum*, a 16mm film realized in 1976, can be considered the manifesto of its author, the London film-and-video-maker John Smith. It contains all the elements of his work: an indie filmmaker’s craft approach, all ideas and no budget; humor; the strong bond with London’s East End, where Smith lives (the film was shot in Hackney); and, above all, the critical approach to the audiovisual language. “Something that is fundamental to me in any film I make,” Smith told Cate Elwes in 2001, “is that the information it presents should be made suspect and its construction should be made evident. [...] I’m interested in work that invites us to question what we are told. It’s to do with engagement rather than consumption”<sup>1</sup>. Throughout almost forty years of work, Smith has remained loyal to this principle, which took shape in the London underground film scene between the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s. In that period, Smith was closely involved with the London Film-Makers’ Co-operative, an association founded in 1967, which aimed to provide production structures and distribution to underground filmmakers. Those were the years of “structural cinema,” a form of filmmaking focused on



Above:  
Om, film still, 1986

Below:  
Associations, film still, 1975

All images courtesy: the artist

### ARTIST’S BIO

JOHN SMITH was born in London in 1952 and studied film at the Royal College of Art. Recent solo exhibitions include Royal College of Art, Ikon Gallery, Birmingham in 2006, Kunstmuseum Magdeburg in 2005 and Open Eye Gallery, Liverpool in 2003. Smith lives and works in London, where he is also a Professor of Fine Art at the University of East London. He is represented by Tanya Leighton Gallery, Berlin.



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its own language, rather than the representation of the world through that language. London Co-op artists elaborated a more radical version, influenced by Marxism, of this general trend, called “structural/materialist film.” In 1976 (the same year as *The Girl...*), Peter Gidal, one of Co-op theoreticians, wrote an essay-manifesto defining the group’s positions. Among those there were the refusal of narration; the refusal of the aesthetic and psychological mechanism on which narration is based (that is, the viewer’s identification with what is happening on the screen, considered the terminal product of capitalist alienation); the support of a radically anti-illusionist cinema, which “does not represent, or document, anything.”<sup>2</sup>

Smith’s 1970s works are clearly influenced by this artistic background. *Associations* (1975), for instance, explores the bonds between image, phonic signifier and signified. It is composed of a voice-over reading a scientific text on the linguistic and psychological mechanisms of verbal associations, and rapid sequences of still images taken from newspapers and magazines, which are self-reflexively connected to the words of the text by phonic assonance. *Leading Light* (1975) and *Blue Bathroom* (1978–79) are studies of places and objects in altering conditions of lightning, with extreme editing effects (in some parts of *Blue Bathroom*, the very rapid alternation of identical frames, but with reversed compositions of light and shadow, causes a stroboscopic effect). Beyond the influence of the aesthetic atmosphere of the London underground, *Leading Light* and *Blue Bathroom* are influenced by two great American experimental filmmakers: Hollis Frampton, whose *Zorns Lemma* (1970), structured according to mathematical criteria, is mostly made of frames of alphabetical letters taken from Manhattan’s signs, and Michael Snow, whose *Wavelength* (1967) is an endless odyssey of a forward zoom through a room, continuously changing from daytime to nighttime, from light to shadow.

If the Co-op was Smith’s natural context, his work nevertheless remained heterodox, even heretical, compared to a certain sectarian spirit characterizing the association.

(To get an idea of the aesthetic Jacobinism of those years, it suffices to say that Gidal, in his 1976 manifesto, contemptuously wrote off “Antonioni and the much less talented Bertolucci, Pasolini, Losey,” saying that they were conservatives disguised as progressives, worse than the professed reactionaries). Instead of refusing narration altogether, Smith preferred clear-headed play with its seductive power, as in *The Girl...*— in other words, using narration to deconstruct narration. Although he kept a strictly anti-illusionistic approach to film language, he increasingly dedicated himself to *description*, and even to the despicable *documentation*, of places. Above all, he introduced an unexpected ingredient into the austere universe of British experimental film: humor.

Of course, the word must be considered cautiously. Smith’s approach to humor, like

## COLUMNS: PIONEERS

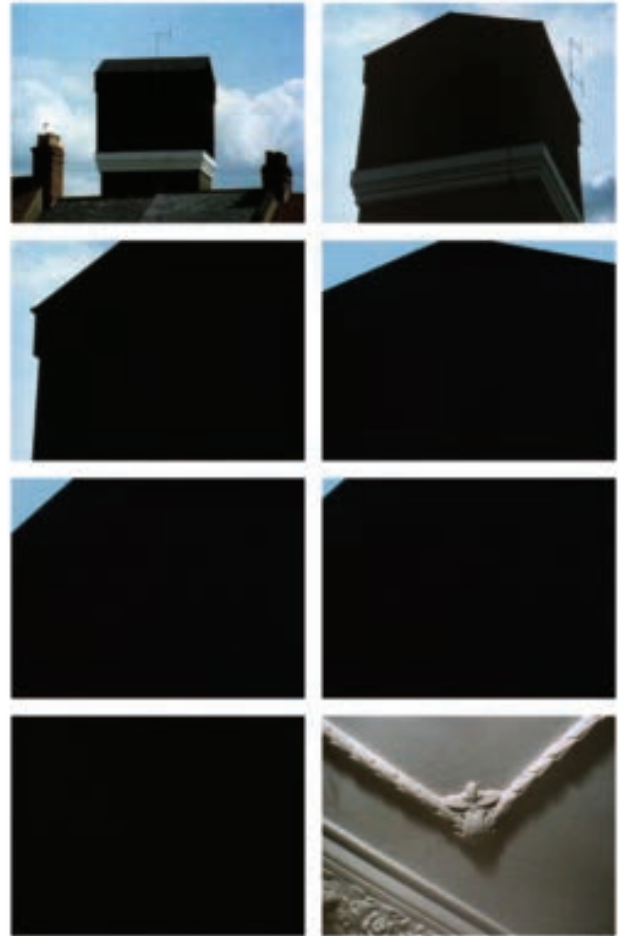
the spirit of his work taken generally, is intellectually sophisticated. In a 2003 interview, he explains to Brian Frye that what he is interested in is the joke's structure, the creation—sometimes sadistically slow and very detailed—of expectations which are then, suddenly, belied or overturned: a structure common to both jokes and avant-garde work. Yet the intellectual approach does not exclude pleasure. Smith's films are often actually *funny*, with few equals in experimental cinema. The author is fully aware of that, asserting that humor is an element of openness in his work, allowing him to get closer to a different—and wider—audience than the one of contemporary art.

There is a democratic spirit to this openness, which suits his left-wing political beliefs. This spirit comes through the constant attention of the director to the surrounding context, that is, London's East End, with its populist social and urban fabric in the process of continuous transformation. Despite his refusal of the documentary clichés, many of his films from the 1980s and videos from the 1990s are *also* precious documents of a daily, proletarian, anti-heroic London of which the director considered himself a part.

*The Black Tower* (16mm, 1985–87), widely considered to be Smith's masterpiece, uses all the intuitions and techniques that the filmmakers had been developing at that moment. It takes its cue from the director's discovery of a newly-built construction in the vicinity of his house: the waterworks of a hospital, which were painted an unusual matte black. Observing it from different points of view, the filmmaker realized that he could create the illusion that the construction rose in different contexts. From one point of view, the waterworks seemed clearly connected to the hospital, but from another, it seemed close to a meadow, while from a third, it seemed to tower over a cemetery, and so forth. Considering this condition, which was not unusual for a building in an urban context, Smith invented a story, dark and ominous, about a man obsessed with a black tower, a sort of architectural *unheimlich* that appears before the man's eyes in many places until it drives him mad. In the film, the story is told by the usual voice-over, while the protagonist's hallucinations are simply different views of the construction, alternated with abstract shots. A perfect, elegant game of linguistic construction, Raymond Roussel-style—but the gothic fascination of the story, as it happens in Roussel, shifts the attention from the form to the content, leaving the audience uncertain about the nature of what they are watching. Since it is Smith who voices the voice-over, some have gone so far as to say that it was an autobiographical story. "The scales tip a bit further in the narrative direction than I expected," ironically commented the director.

In the aforementioned interview with Cate Elwes, Smith explained his artistic devotion to the places where he lives: "I am very wary of making films on themes that are outside of my experience. That is a big reason for rooting things at home. [...] But there is also a very practical consideration involved here. I nearly always work on my own. I don't like filming on my own in a place that is unfamiliar."

But the "unfamiliar" places are nevertheless present in Smith's life: they are the places he "meets" during his travels, particularly trips throughout the world to present his films. Between those places, there are some sites that are unfamiliar *par excellence*: hotels, supposedly anonymous and interchangeable, supposedly the same from a city to another. Challenging his own habits, Smith took these places, the most neutral places one can imagine, as a point of departure, directing a series of works freed from his usual geographical and existential coordinates. The result was the seven videos of the "Hotel Diaries" series (2001–07, his most recent works to date). The formula is simple and direct, far from the sophisticated editing exercises of the previous films. With a camera in his hand, Smith "explores" his hotel room, commenting out loud and in real time on what he sees. He looks for particular marks, something that distin-



*The Black Tower*, film still, 1985-1987  
Courtesy: the artist

### CURRENT & FORTHCOMING

John Smith is among the participating artists in the 6th Berlin Biennial for Contemporary Art.

### FOOTNOTES

1. "Trespassing beyond the frame" in Josephine Lanyon (ed.), *John Smith. Film and Video Works 1972-2002* (Picture This Moving Image/Watershed Media Centre 2002).

2. "Theory and Definition of Structural/Materialist Film" in Peter Gidal (ed.), *Structural Film Anthology* (London, British Film Institute, 1976).

COLUMNS: PIONEERS



Above:  
*Blight*, film still, 1996

Below:  
*The Girl Chewing Gum*,  
film still, 1976

All images courtesy: the artist

COLUMNS: PIONEERS



*Shepherd's Delight*, film still, 1980-1984  
Courtesy: the artist



## COLUMNS: PIONEERS



*Gargantuan*, film still, 1992  
Courtesy: the artist

### AUTHOR

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guishes that specific room or hotel from the others he has visited, taking his cue from what he sees to wander through personal associations. The recurring topic in his monologue is the international political situation. The series, started in October 2001, a few weeks after the fatal attacks on the Twin Towers, reports, through Smith's commentaries, on the developments of the Middle East conflict, the punitive wars took up by Bush's America, and Islamic terrorism. In 2007, Smith finally arrived in a country widely evoked in the videos: Palestine. We don't see the razor wire of check-points and images of war; instead, Smith once again limits his shots to an anonymous room in a hotel in East Jerusalem. But the damaged roof of the room—a souvenir of the recent occupation of the hotel by the Israeli army—is enough to materialize history and its tragedies. Although different from his formally sophisticated works, the "Hotel Diaries" maintain a recurring characteristic of his work, the voice-over, and confirm his idea of a "committed" however non-pedantic cinema, through which he manages to handle important issues while remaining grounded in particular and daily matters. In the last months, the world of contemporary art has taken a particular interest in Smith's work. Royal College, where the artist was a student in the 1970s, dedicated a retrospective to him; his films have been included in collective exhibitions at the Kunsthalle Basel and the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, and he has been invited to the 6. Berlin Biennial. It is a due reward, and hardly an unexpected one. Looking at Smith's work, the most astonishing thing is its abundance. Abundance, not only in a quantitative sense—although he has always worked alone, Smith has accumulated about fifty works, comprised of both short and full-length films—but also an abundance of ideas, approaches, levels of readings and *enjoyment*. Starting from an analytical approach to the film medium and, particularly, to the relationship between image and word, Smith has not refused the challenge of narration. Formalist by nature and study, he managed to use the language of his early works to evoke the surrounding urban and social reality. Inclined to a typically English intellectual humor (Lewis Carroll would probably have loved *Associations's* puns), he has nevertheless proved capable of feeling a subtle form of *pietas* for what is consumed by time: urban landscapes, houses and ourselves. In brief, his art is one we need these days—an art of complexity.



*Slow Glass*,  
film still, 1988-1991  
Courtesy: the artist

**ROD STONEMAN**  
National University of Ireland

## ***The Girl Chewing Gum:*** **The time that cinema forgot**

### **ABSTRACT**

*John Smith's Girl Chewing Gum was made in Hackney, East London and shown at the London Film-Makers' Co-op in 1976. Through its wit and imagination this film extended the forms of British avant-garde experimentation that were pervasive at that moment and mobilized a critique of narrative cinema.*

It would have been 10 March in the spring of 1976, and I would have been wearing a badly fitting navy blue duffel coat when I went to the regular London Co-op Wednesday evening screening at Prince of Wales Crescent, Camden. I was a film student at the Slade School of Art and went to the Co-op quite often as it was a dynamic centre of experimental film. The programme included the first showing of a new film by John Smith, *The Girl Chewing Gum*. His short film stood out in the screening, it immediately struck me as remarkable – a witty play with the parameters of cinema achieved with an elegant and notable simplicity of concept and means.

It is interesting to determine the point in the film at which first time viewers realize that the directorial voice is not in control of the image; after a few minutes they work out that this illusion is achieved by a shift between the image and the sound tracks that allows description to become anticipation. Maybe by 'I want the clock to move jerkily towards me ... stop. Now I want the long hand to move at the rate of one revolution every hour, and the short hand to move at the rate of one revolution every twelve hours' certainly by

### **KEYWORDS**

experimental film  
structural materialism  
London Film-Makers'  
Co-op  
'Control is an illusion' –  
apocryphal feminist  
maxim

'Now two pigeons fly across' (Figure 6b). The role of chance is brought into the foreground of the film by the voice's assertion of control over relatively autonomous elements. As Boethius, writing *The Consolation of Philosophy* in 524 ad, made clear – chance events may be unforeseen, but that does not mean that they are completely random or outside causality.

Exaggerated auteurial control is manifested through the attempted orchestration of the aleatoric or chance elements involved in filming in a city street or other location shooting. These unforeseen factors are also revealed through a director controlling the pro-filmic event in the opening street scene (filmed in the Studios de la Victorine in Nice) in Francois Truffaut's *Day For Night/La Nuit Américaine* (1973); made a few years earlier and apparently a starting point for John Smith.

This renegotiation of verisimilitude and the spectator's relation with the space of the film involves several disorienting reversals – the comment 'two pigeons fly past from right to left, and two boys run past from left to right' (Figure 10) refers to the viewer's perspective and not, as one might expect, that of the boys; the phrase 'everything else ... goes away a bit' (Figure 11) pre-emptively describes a zoom out literally from the spectator's point of view. The implicit codes of the filmic process are destabilized as representation is treated as reality. The idea of the commanding author is further undercut as the voice on the soundtrack becomes increasingly less plausible in terms of veracity or credibility in an inventive 'fictional' construction that soon breaks diegetic space by addressing the viewer directly: 'I am shouting into a microphone on the edge of a field near Letchmore Heath, about fifteen miles from the building you are looking at' (Figure 18a).

There is play with on-screen sound – an alarm bell rings in the background but there is a silence on the sound track when we are told 'The burglar alarm is still ringing' (Figure 19c) and it returns for the 360° pan of the countryside. After the eponymous heroine of the film appears there are further shifts with sound/image track disjunction when the voice-over adds extraneous detail not available to the viewer; speaking from the unseen landscape the voice moves into a non-credible realm invoking the unfeasible scale of 'a large blackbird with a wingspan of about nine feet' (Figure 18b), and then suggesting (libellously) that the young man crossing the road '... has just robbed the local post office and is attempting to appear inconspicuous ... he grips the butt of the revolver in his raincoat pocket even harder' (Figures 19a and 19b).

The London Film-Makers' Co-op at this time was more than an access workshop with a vague milieu – it defined a critical context where, for a brief period, a group of film-makers worked in convergence and shared preoccupations and debates. It was a constellation that drew focus towards individual artists' work while placing it in the context of a small-scale movement, a cluster of activity generating its own discourses locally and connecting with experimental film internationally; John Smith encountered these arguments in courses by Peter Gidal and Jorge Dana at the Royal College of Art. 'Structural materialist' film, as it was called, proposed that films should decipher both their own material construction and operation. It was also referred to as 'structural minimalism', as questioning cinematic process sometimes extended to inhibiting and repressing the representational image itself; an approach to signification described as purist and reductive in Peter Wollen's 'The two avant-gardes'. It should be understood that, in the wider frame of film culture, this was the 'moment of *Screen*' when French structural theory – semiotics, Marxism and psychoanalysis – was having a direct impact on anglophone film culture.

These specific politicized debates about signifying practice placed even formal film in a radical framework. In their differences from the industrialized modes of representation, experimental films were seen to question naturalized codes: their attention to structure and signification threw the codes of normative film-making into focus. In its unique way *The Girl Chewing Gum* both challenged the set formulae of structural film and pointed towards the presence of mainstream cinema exemplified by *The Land that Time Forgot* (Connor 1975) at the Dalston Odeon.

Experimental film in Britain was carried to direct interaction with audiences as film-makers became used to presenting and discussing their films with audiences at screenings; John Smith took his films around Britain with support from the Arts Council's 'Film-makers on Tour' scheme. This ethos of discussion was a relevant starting point for an encounter with a wider audience through television. There was an early screening of 'Associations' on BBC2's *First Picture Show* in 1976, and after the launch of Channel 4 in 1983 there was a more consistent engagement with experiment by British television, *Black Tower* was transmitted in 1988 and *Slow Glass* in 1993 (Stoneman 1996). *The Girl Chewing Gum* was eventually shown by the Franco-German arts channel Arte in 1999 and 3sat in 2001.

In relation to contemporary short film-making *The Girl Chewing Gum* is exemplary in that it is an artisanal film made with ideas and imagination rather than budget. I remembered that it had a tiny budget from discussion at the time of its screening and John Smith recently confirmed:

The budget was miniscule – the cost of one 400 ft roll and one 100ft. roll of 16mm B/W neg, dev and rush print and mag. striped show print. It was conceptually important (and economically vital) that the film was shot in one take, that whatever happened when I switched on the camera became the action within the film. I shot it and my fellow student (now Director of Photography) Patrick Duval recorded the sync sound for the Dalston shot. After writing the text for the voice-over I drove my motor bike to a field in Herdfordshire and shouted my directions (edited later on the Steenbeck of course) into a crappy microphone.

(E-mail to author 10 October 2011)

The budget was provided by Smith's ex-tutor Ken Campbell (book artist and poet) at north-east London Poly and his wife Ruth who generously gave him £500 to make new work while he was at the RCA. He made both *The Girl Chewing Gum* and *Leading Light* with this money 'so the total budget was probably about £250', which covered the cost of making the film (shot at a ratio of 1: 1) editing and working with the separate magnetic sound track.

Although digital shooting and editing is now cheaply and easily available it tends to be accompanied by a pervasive aspiration to use ever more sophisticated and elaborate equipment and software – a kind of techno-fetishism. John Smith's film stands as exemplary in an epoch where somehow budget is an index of production value, which then equates with cultural worth. As the German experimentalist Klaus Wyborny suggested in *Pictures of the Lost Word* (1970–1974): 'There is often an inverse relationship between budget and quality'.

As the queue of people at the Dalston Odeon suggests, the film moves beyond the introversions of experimental modernism and faces the wider domain of industrial cinema. Alexander Kluge talked of the 'homeopathic

effect' of the avant garde – the smaller the dose the greater the effect and this short film can be understood to be a part of a critique of conventional narrative cinema that is not an academic question. The forms of film that emanate from the bottom left hand corner of the United States constitute a global monoculture, which in 2011, as in 1976, continues to pervade our screens; as Robert Olson noted in *Hollywood Planet*, it is a world where the global audience is 100 times more likely to view a Hollywood product than a European film. An epoch or two after it was made, the subversive wit of *The Girl Chewing Gum*, its attention to the calibration of meaning making and play with spectator's understandings, are even more necessary as we face the forces of industrial culture.

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The gaze through glass exemplifies the question concerning the relationship between reality and its semblance. Be it eyeglasses, a window, or a goldfish bowl: the lens is always part of reality while also affecting, by virtue of its material properties or its curvature, what is seen through it – the German term “Objektiv” for a photographer’s lens seems hardly apposite.

In John Smith’s work, glass becomes a media-reflective metaphor for film as such. The documentary picture showing a cramped hotel room or the growth of a lily reveals its structuralist qualities when the cracks in the filmic reality show how our image of it is composed. In another twist on the relationship between reality and its semblance, film here not only lays out how it operates but is also the instrument of this reflection.

We are looking into a forest glade dappled with sunlight. Then it begins to rain, splattering what we take to be the camera’s lens into a streaming blur. Moments later, a wiper sweeps across the view and the semi-transparent surface proves to be that of a car windshield. Meanwhile, the narrator on the soundtrack is telling us that this is not merely a generic patch of countryside, but a forest in Essex, in southeastern England, from which great amounts of wood were culled during the reign of King James I of England (1566–1625), to supply glass manufacturers of the period. Although everything in this passage of film is geared to qualify what we are seeing with what we are seeing it through, what we are seeing – this particular forest – proves to be equally significant in the equation.

I have been describing a sequence from John Smith’s longest 16mm film “Slow Glass” (1991) – the centerpiece of his show at Tanya Leighton Gallery in Berlin this spring. Smith makes us aware that structuralist and documentary modes of filmmaking – which we might have thought antithetical (the former self-reflexive; the latter

outward-looking) are united in their empiricism. He elicits structuralist metaphors from social observation: the subject, located in primary experience, always appears to come first, and the medium to follow. His films can appear raw and local when they appear – as they increasingly do – within a contemporary art context dedicated to the navel-gazing of cultural referencing; that is, among art that is primarily about other art. The conjunction of structuralist and documentary modes is also a reminder of Smith’s roots in early British Conceptual Art of the late 1960s and early seventies, a movement including such figures as Bruce McLean, Susan Hiller, and Art and Language, which impelled both self-critique and self-erasure, wiping the artistic slate clean of the remnants of late Modernist mannerism and beginning again from first principles. This was a historical juncture at which empiricism (taking art out of the picture frame, and even the frame of the gallery, and back into the unmediated environment through performance, happenings, and an extensive use of found objects) and self-reflexivity (asking artistic media to focus on their own materiality, even to an extent that would render them dysfunctional) collided.

“Slow Glass” is essentially a 40-minute meditation on glass, and the British industry of glassmaking. One of the first pieces of information the narrator imparts to us is that, contrary to appearances, glass is a very slow-moving liquid that hardens as it cools, but never crystallizes into a solid. An apparently stable phenomenon proves to be imperceptibly changing. Appearances are elusive; they may even be illusions. Smith collages footage, gathered over many years, of Leyton in East London, where he was living at the time, to reveal the changing cityscape. He makes it clear



John Smith, "The Kiss", 1999, film still

that observing the city in the present tense cannot be distinguished from perceiving it on a temporal axis. To see is to remember, and to see an object in the present is also to see it become transparent to its own past. Smith manages to make the overt artifice of his editing, with its radical temporal juxtapositions, function as an empirical tool.

The only film shared between the Berlin show and Smith's concurrently running mini-survey show at the Kestnergesellschaft in Hannover (both exhibitions are joined by a further retrospective selection at the Neue Museum Weserberg in Bremen, also concurrent) is the "The Kiss" (1999). We watch a lily, which appears to be blooming in fast-motion, until it fractures a pane of glass through which we had unknowingly been watching its growth. In fact, what appears to be time-lapse photography is five minutes of real-time film and the accelerated growth is an

illusion. Smith held the lily between two panes of glass which he gradually brought together in a vice until the increasing pressure shattered one of the panes and pressed the flower. The illusion of growth is caused by the spread of the petals under the compression of the encroaching panes. Shown on a monitor in Berlin and as a beamer projection in Hannover, the film proves to be remarkably presentation-specific. The broken shards "become" the television screen in the Berlin installation in a way which gives the film's structuralist metaphor an extra dimension. The lily is set up, within the film's extremely restricted viewpoint, as "test-case" reality – the thing being observed by the camera – and its exoticism extends the conceit like a set of inverted commas designating the flower as the "real", but in the alternative form of its artificial image, an artificiality that is enhanced by the illusion of



John Smith, "Bildstörung", Kestnergesellschaft, Hannover, 2012, exhibition view

its unnaturally accelerated growth. Smith's basic methodology – exposing the inherent strangeness of the mundane – is rhetorically inverted here. The exotic form of the spreading lily stands for the otherness of the real as it is manifested in the image that film makes of it. The broken glass is a violent emblem of the fracturing of that image's illusion, a moral culmination in which reality overpowers fiction.

The seven-part sequence "Hotel Diaries" (2001–2007), presented on adjacent monitors in Hannover, also associates the exotic with self-reflexivity, as though what is familiar is already so extraordinary that a foreign environment can only be a false lead – a blind – and literally so, in that Smith restricts his view, in each of the parts, to the four walls of a hotel room somewhere around the world. He blinds himself to what lies beyond those boundaries in order to concentrate on himself and his own act of filming. This is filmic self-reflexivity figured in theatrical terms. Only in the sixth part, "Dirty Pictures" (2007), set in Palestine, does Smith wander briefly onto the balcony and allow his camera to rove over the separation wall and take in the dun-colored panorama. The sense of having breached the limits of a cell is significantly qualified when we see

Smith in a different hotel room, inspecting the footage of the cityscape we have just been shown. He claims to be dissatisfied because specks of dust on the camera lens have disrupted the view. We might wonder why he didn't go back and refilm, but that dust – like the rain over Essex, and the windscreen wiper that cleared it – functions as a reminder that we are looking not through our own eyes but through someone else's or at least their camera, their surrogate eyes. And not at the present but at the past, even as our relief at being released from the confinement of the hotel room might allow us to forget it.

**MARK PRINCE**

John Smith, "Slow Glass", Tanya Leighton Gallery, Berlin, February 11–March 3, 2012.

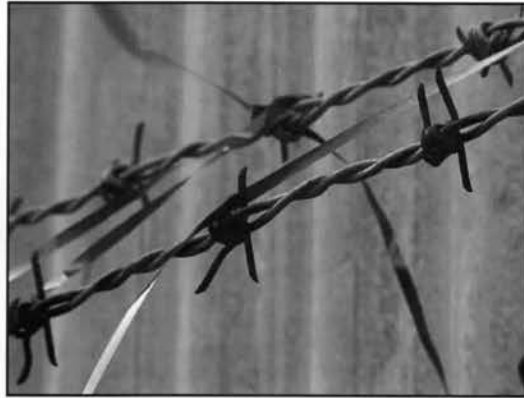
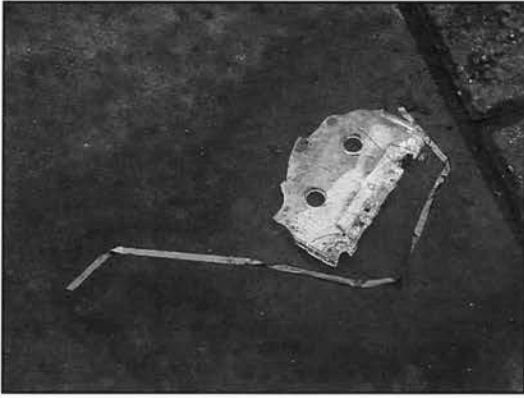
John Smith, "Bildstörung", Kestnergesellschaft, Hannover, February 24–April 29, 2012.

## FLASHBACKS



# Trespassing beyond the frame

John Smith talking film with Cate Elwes



*Lost Sound*  
(Collaboration with  
Graeme Miller 1998-  
2001) 28 mins. Video.  
*Lost Sound* documents  
fragments of discarded  
audio tape found by  
the artists within a  
small area of East  
London, combining the  
sound retrieved from  
each piece of tape with  
images of the place  
where it was found.  
The work explores the  
potential of chance,  
creating portraits of  
particular places by  
building formal, narra-  
tive and musical con-  
nections between  
images and sounds  
linked by the random  
discovery of the tape  
samples.  
Opposite: *Worst case  
Scenario* (work in  
progress)

**Catherine Elwes:** I wanted to ask you about *Lost Sound* (1998-2001) in relation to documentary. In what way is a film like *Lost Sound* different from documentary, particularly documentary as we currently experience it on television.

**John Smith:** If I'm forced to put a label on my films, I'm happy to call many of them documentaries, especially if you go back to Grierson's definition of documentary as "the creative treatment of reality". A number of my films are entirely documentary in their source material but they always construct stories from these sources. Something that is fundamental to me in any film I make is that the information it presents should be made suspect and its construction should be made evident. Television documentary in its worst form compels us to believe everything it is telling us. I'm interested in work that invites us to question what we are told. It's to do with engagement rather than consumption. Hopefully *Lost Sound*, made in collaboration with Graeme Miller, asks us questions, about itself as well as the world. What starts out as scientific documentation evolves into formal manipulation, questioning its documentary authenticity and stressing its construction. All film is fiction in that it is literally 'made up' – from controlled representations of chosen phenomena which are ordered selectively to construct meanings. All film is factual in that, as well as existing physically, it presents ideas born out of experience – a fictional narrative can sometimes say more about the 'real' world than a documentary. So I feel that the

accepted genre distinction between documentary and fiction is given too much importance. I'm interested in work that bridges this divide, that asks questions about real events without claiming to accurately represent them.

**CE:** In spite of the fact that you are often very specific in your use of humour, verbal humour, puns and visual jokes, you have written that you deliberately keep your images 'open', leaving us space to breathe, to exercise our imaginations. You refer to the research into radio and television that was done when children's television first started in which children were reported as saying that radio has the best pictures. Presumably, they said this because radio allows them the space to create the visual images suggested by the audio elements. In your films, there are many moments in which the screen goes blank or becomes highly abstract to the extent that you aren't too sure what you are looking at. Either the voice takes over, or it creates a space for the text to resonate. Perhaps you have discovered a much more effective way of telling a story, a very clever and an even more devious way of manipulating the audience. You have discovered, as radio has always known, that less is more.

**JS:** I think you're right. The films do control the framework within which the imagination can operate. As you say, they are extremely devious and lead you up the garden path all the time. But in order to do that effectively, you have to create a space for the viewers, so that the viewers start to take their own directions.

*The Girl Chewing Gum* (1976)  
12 mins. 16mm film.

"In *The Girl Chewing Gum* a commanding voice over appears to direct the action in a busy London street. As the instructions become more absurd and fantasised, we realise that the supposed director (not the shot) is fictional; he only describes - not prescribes - the events that take place before him. Smith embraced the 'spectre of narrative' (suppressed by structural film), to play word against picture and chance against order. Sharp and direct, the film anticipates the more elaborate scenarios to come; witty, many-layered, punning, but also seriously and poetically haunted by drama's ineradicable ghost."

A.L. Rees "A Directory of British Film & Video Artists"  
Arts Council of England, 1995



*The Black Tower* (1985-7) 24 mins. 16mm film.

"In *The Black Tower* we enter the world of a man haunted by a tower which, he believes, is following him around London. While the character of the central protagonist is indicated only by a narrative voice-over which takes us from unease to breakdown to mysterious death, the images, meticulously controlled and articulated, deliver a series of colour coded puzzles, jokes and puns which pull the viewer into a mind-teasing engagement. In *The Black Tower* we have an example of a film which plays with the emotions as well as the language of film."

Nik Houghton, *Independent Media* magazine 1987.

"Something that is fundamental to me in any film I make is that the information it presents should be made suspect and its construction should be made evident. Television documentary in its worst form compels us to believe everything it is telling us. I'm interested in work that invites us to question what we are told. It's to do with engagement rather than consumption"

“There are many ways in which my films don’t give you things. The point about the fixed frame is that you wonder what is going on outside of it. A travelling camera takes you there, and it’s usually an anti-climax”

**CE:** Straight into your trap, John.

**JS:** Yes, it’s very cat and mouse. The wicked thing is to let on that you knew what it was that they were going to think anyway.

**CE:** In your writings you describe time as a fixed system and film as a flexible system. I understood this to mean that you can use film to take control of a march of time over which, in reality, you have no control. In *The Girl Chewing Gum* (1976), you reveal the ways in which a film director manipulates actors and events to create a reality that has no bearing on what we experience in our daily lives. It is a terrific joke, but to me, the real joke, and a very poignant joke is that the voice-over ‘director’ actually has no power whatsoever to direct the chain of events unfolding in front of the camera. And that is what you know we know.

**JS:** In *The Girl Chewing Gum* I wasn’t really thinking about the director, I was thinking about the audience. The director is an impotent character and in some ways incidental. I made the film after seeing Truffaut’s *Day for Night*. There is a winter scene in the film within the film in which the main protagonists meet against a background of extras doing things on the street. Believe it or not, I was really surprised to discover that the people in the background were being directed in their actions. Even the dog was instructed to piss up a lamp-post. Until then, I had assumed that extras in street scenes were real passers-by going about their business. I was already a filmmaker and thought to myself how naïve I had been about the ‘realism’ of fiction films. *The Girl Chewing Gum* came out of the shock I felt at the power of the illusion of cinema. I made it for myself – just to make sure I understood that all these things were being controlled.

**CE:** I think your word impotence is right. In *The Girl Chewing Gum*, the voice over ‘director’ made me think about King Canute facing the waves and telling wave number three that he could come in now.

**JS:** What I was really trying to express is how everything in a film, documentary as well as fiction, is always directed. It is chosen. The maker of the film can always take it out. So, if a person crosses the street in a film, that action has in effect been directed, because the filmmaker has chosen to include it.

**CE:** I suppose what I respond to is the extra dimension that emerges in retrospect, the poignancy of the fact that your voice-over could do nothing to direct those people’s actions. This brings me onto *The Black Tower* (1985-7). When I first saw it, I thought that it was a study of madness, a descent into chaos, madness and death. I thought it was a very dark film. Maybe that was just the aspect that I responded to.

**JS:** I said earlier that I manipulate my audience and anticipate their reactions, but I was quite shocked when I started showing *The Black Tower*. People asked me if I’d ever had a nervous breakdown or whether I had any experience of working with mental patients. Stories must come from somewhere, but the story I consciously tell in the film was constructed purely around the places where I could see the tower. I decided to write a narrative that was basically a pastiche of a familiar form of storytelling like a ghost story or a short story of the type I used to love reading as a child. But I never expected people to take the story in *The Black Tower* so seriously. The tower was actually in the grounds of a hospital, and you could see it across a cemetery. So, I thought, I’ve got the hospital, I’ve got the cemetery and, as we know, sickness and death are very common themes in narrative. I’ve got an ending for my pastiche! I was responding to chance, cued by the places where I could see the tower. From one position I could see it behind a high wall, so I thought of a prison. Seeing it behind a couple of trees meant that the protagonist could go to the countryside. I collected a series of images and then wrote a story around them. My intention was that the story should have a certain atmosphere. I wanted the film to play with the edge between immersion in a psychological narrative and seeing the film for what it is – a material construction, an assemblage of assorted parts. So there are gradual movements between totally abstract manipulations of images and very straightforward narrative. I wanted the film to be poised on that edge, but people fall into the narrative abyss more than I expected they would.

**CE:** But you have written about the power of the voice-over, and its ability to override images, to fix their meaning. Is this a good example of that?

**JS:** Very much so, but in *The Black Tower* I was playing with that power, controlling and releasing. It’s a question of balance. The scales tip a bit further in the narrative direction than I expected.

**CE:** I felt that your use of the static frame in *The Black Tower* increased the feeling of claustrophobia. Although you use static frames throughout your work, in this case it considerably enhanced the drama and its dark humour.

**JS:** There are many ways in which my films don’t give you things. The point about the fixed frame is that you wonder what is going on outside of it. A travelling camera takes you there, and it’s usually an anti-climax. The movement tells you that you’re going somewhere important. Static framings have equal importance, you have to make your own value judgements. I use a lot of close-ups. A close-up denies you the full picture. You rarely see people in my films, the action is usually described or suggested rather than depicted. So you are forced to imagine. The monster in the horror film is always less frightening when you see it.

*Slow Glass* (1988-91)  
40 mins. 16mm film.

“The film begins with a shout in the street and a smashed pane, and ends with a bricked-up window. Between these literal images of opening and closing, *Slow Glass* spins immaculately shot puns and paradoxes that play on reflection and speculation – words that refer both to acts of seeing and of mind. Glass is the key, as a narrator’s running commentary sketches the glassmaker’s art, splicing a history lesson with a quasi-autobiography. The authority of word, voice and picture is questioned through the film’s gradual revelation of its own (highly pleasurable) artifice.”

A.L. Rees, London Film-Makers’ Co-op distribution catalogue 1993.



**CE:** In *Slow Glass* (1988-91) you do show people, but they are strangely disembodied. You see a hand and a glass, and the act of lifting the glass. Then you use jump cuts so that at times, the hand disappears. You pan across people who look familiar, but then their behaviour seems odd. How do you do that?

**JS:** I think you are referring to the scene at the end of *Slow Glass* where the camera pans across a lot of people who are standing in a bar. It is to do with the sound. It starts with synch-sound and then cuts out to silence. You continue to observe them in silence and a distance is created. The high frequency tone created by running a finger around the edge of a wine glass is then faded in, producing an even greater separation between sound and image. The camera finally comes to rest on a close-up of the wine glass and moving finger and the synchronisation is restored. I wanted to express an alienated perception of the world, of the protagonist being in a crowded place but observing it as an outsider. *Slow Glass* is the only film that I have made in which I have concentrated on creating a specific character. The glazier is one of those people you might meet in a pub who comes out with a lot of interesting information, but who you very soon can't wait get away from. It emerges that his real agenda is quite different from what he is talking about. He appears to be discussing the history of glassmaking, but what really underlies his monologue is his own alienation from the present-day.

**CE:** His narrative is very powerful in the film. You would have to severely tamper with the language to make it function in other ways. You would almost need to re-invent poetry or introduce gibberish.

**JS:** The language does break down in places. I do introduce gibberish, which I find quite poetic. There are lots of obscure words associated with glass making, for example marver, cullet, lehr, pontil and punty-wad. These occur at several points in the film without explanation. Towards the end of the film Ian Bourn (the unseen protagonist) improvises around these words, creating nonsense which is nevertheless full of meaning.

**CE:** I feel that the humour in your films has a much darker side that takes me off into other realms of thought and emotion. And I often come away feeling sad. In *Lost Sound* you used the device that the soundtrack is made up of fragments of tape you found caught in the gutter, in the cracks and crevices of the street and which make up the images you show us on screen. These fragments of ‘lost’ musical entertainment also represented people’s lives and I got a sense of migration, of people in transition through the area. Then they drift away. I found it very poignant, not just lost sounds, but lost peoples, ghosts.

**JS:** *Lost Sound* is certainly concerned with loss in a broader sense - we deliberately called it *Lost Sound* rather than *Found Sound*, although for us the soundtrack was indeed found. The pathos of the title is intentional, suggesting unknown histories about which we can only speculate. It shouldn't have been a revelation, but it was surprising that we found so little western music, less than a quarter of the total. We shot the film in Hackney and the contents of the tapes reflect the diversity of the population. It was pertinent to be editing the film when asylum seekers were very much in the news. You constantly heard the simplistic myth on the radio that people come here for our wonderful way of life. When we filmed, of course, we didn't know what sound was on the tape we were shooting. It was only afterwards when we rescued the sound that we found its association with a particular image. For me, one of the most poignant images is of a clump of tape on the kerb in Kingsland Road. It is a miserable wet, grey afternoon and the sound on the tape is of really joyous West African music. The sunniest music you could wish for against a horrible bleak, polluted, grey road. So the film does express a sense of loss, of displacement, of attempts to survive in alien environments. It develops quite slowly at first as it needs time to create particular atmospheres, to develop a sense of place – of marginal places, microcosmic places.

**CE:** I recently showed Patrick Keiller's film *London* to a group of Canadian students and they didn't react as favourably as a similar group did at Camberwell. But

when you showed *Lost Sound* at the Lux in London, I could hear all the locals grunting in recognition of their own streets. It had a real significance for them. I wonder how easily our sense of place can be transposed to another country. Do you think the films have an ideal audience?

**JS:** For a film like *Lost Sound*, the experience is bound to be different for someone who is familiar with the place where it was shot. There were editing decisions that were made based on privileged knowledge of the area. Often these were poignant, for instance in the case of racial tensions that exist here. When we were filming at the end of Brick Lane we couldn't help remembering that a couple of years ago, members of the British National Party were handing out their leaflets on the same corner. At one point in the film there is a close-up of a bit of tape that starts moving in time to a piece of Indian music. The music is suddenly cut off by the barking of a vicious dog. It starts again and is stopped by the same bark, the censorious bark of the British Bulldog.

**CE:** I see the films as locating your identity in the subtle changes you observe in these streets over a period of time. People always ask, where do you come from? For you it is easy, you just show them your films, and say, this is where I come from. And you can also say, this is who I am. You have become an observer of an environment that defines you. I rather envy that feeling of belonging. These days, our lives are increasingly transient and nomadic but you have succeeded in creating a sense of belonging to a specific place through the films that you have made here in the last twenty years.

**JS:** Concerning the documentary aspect of the work, I am very wary of making films on themes that are outside of my experience. That is a big reason for rooting things at home. But there is also a very practical consideration

involved here. I nearly always work on my own. I don't like filming on my own in a place that is unfamiliar. Many of my films were shot inside, or out of the windows of, the house where I was living at the time. Sometimes I might go down the road a bit. But on the whole, I have always worked in environments that I know well. I don't have to worry if I am looking through a camera and can hear someone standing behind me. I usually know them. But having said that, I have just shot my new film, *Worst Case Scenario*, in Vienna.

**CE:** That must have been traumatic.

**JS:** Well, actually I shot it from my hotel window! The films I have made in London have often come out of the experience of looking at places over long periods of time and seeing different things in them at different times – like seeing successive pictures in the patterns of your bedroom wallpaper. I came up with the idea for the film that I shot in Vienna when I was showing my films in the evenings and had several days free to contemplate a particular place. So the sense of sustained observation is the same in both places. Like *The Girl Chewing Gum*, *Worst Case Scenario* is a view of a street corner from a fixed vantage point, which will transform real events into imaginary ones. I'll find out what happened there when I start editing!

#### Catherine Elwes

*John Smith's films are distributed by the Lux Centre, 2-4 Hoxton Square, London N1 6NU. Worst Case Scenario will be completed in spring 2002 to coincide with the launch of a major tour of John Smith's work supported by the Arts Council of England's National Touring Programme.*



*Worst Case Scenario (work in progress)*

# Camera Austria

# 120

2012

INTERNATIONAL

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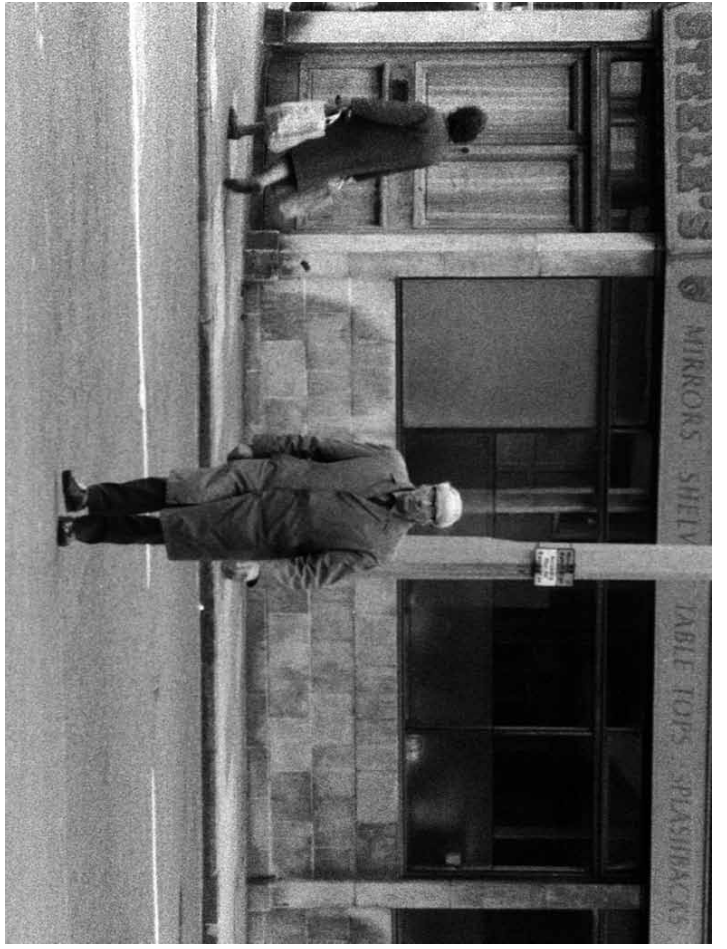
1. — Der englische Film- und Videokünstler John Smith studierte Filmkunst bereits in den 1970er Jahren in London, zunächst an der North East London Polytechnic, dann bis 1977 am Royal College of Art. Schnell galt er als wichtiger Vertreter der zweiten Generation des britischen strukturalistischen Films. Und diese Generation »saw the movement with a more distant and critical eye«<sup>1</sup>, wie es A. L. Rees treffend beschrieb. Diese kritische Distanz drückte sich in John Smiths Gebrauch des Mediums vor allem durch seinen »use of humour to evoke but also to question film narrative«<sup>2</sup> aus. Dieses Unterlaufen der strengen formalistischen Grundhaltung des strukturalistischen Films durch Narration und Humor bestimmt gerade in John Smiths Frühwerk das ästhetische Geschehen. Die Strategie, dank Humor stil- und ideologiekritisch arbeiten zu können, um sich so von vorgegebenen Mustern zu distanzieren, beschrieb übrigens der russische Sprachwissenschaftler Michail Bachtin in seinen Büchern bereits in den 1940er und 1950er Jahren überaus detailliert.<sup>3</sup> Aber auch ein ausgeprägtes Interesse am alltäglichen Leben und dessen visueller Erforschung findet sich schnell in den Filmen des Briten. Es ist also kein Zufall, dass der urbane Lebensraum eine gewichtige inhaltliche Konstante der Filme von John Smith darstellt. In diesem Sinne schreibt Ingo Clauß von Smiths »Neugier, die ihn zu den für seine Arbeiten typischen Erkundungen seiner Umgebung treibt«<sup>4</sup>. Und diese Neugier ist nicht zuletzt durch sein »Bewusstsein für den Wandel städtischer Umgebung«<sup>5</sup> motiviert. Urbane Entwicklung inklusive neoliberaler Gentrifikation spielen daher auch in den frühen Filmen und Videos des Künstlers immer wieder eine wichtige Rolle.

2. — In seinem Film »New York Eye and Ear Control« (1964) zeigt Michael Snow, US-amerikanischer strukturalistischer Filmkünstler der ersten Generation, in bewegten Bildern Aufnahmen einer silhouettenhaft-flächigen Frauenskulptur. Es handelt sich um eine »Walking Woman« des Künstlers, die – neben vielen anderen – für den Film im Stadtraum New Yorks aufgestellt wurde. Zu hören ist derweil aber nicht der jeweilige Sound des Ortes, etwa Straßenlärm, sondern expressive Jazzmusik. Bild- und Tonspur gehen in »New York Eye and Ear Control« auseinander und verhindern dadurch in dieser Arbeit einen simplen, durch die Sinne kontrollierbaren Realismus. Zwölf Jahre später geht John Smith in seinem frühen Film »The Girl Chewing Gum« (1976) scheinbar zunächst den umgekehrten Weg, der trotzdem die Bedingungen der Wahrnehmung cineastischer Bilder genauso kritisch-reflexiv hinterfragt. Der zwölf Minuten lange, in Schwarzweiß auf 16mm gedrehte Film besteht aus nur zwei Einstellungen, die eine, knapp elf Minuten lang, zeigt das alltägliche Geschehen auf einer East Londoner Straße unweit von John Smiths damaligem Wohnort. Autos fahren vorbei, FußgängerInnen überqueren die Straße, rechts liegt ein Kino, vor dem Menschen warten, eine Straßenuhr auf dem Dach eines Hauses kommt ins Bild, Tauben fliegen durch die Luft, wieder kommen FußgängerInnen ... Die zweite Einstellung fokussiert auf eine Landschaft am Rande Londons, Hecken und Felder, im Hintergrund Strommasten. Auf der Tonspur des Films ist, neben einem permanenten Alarmläuten, eine männliche Stimme zu hören. Es handelt sich um die Stimme von John Smith, der das zu sehende Geschehen wie ein Regisseur einer cineastischen Großaufnahme minutiös

Translated by Dawn Michelle d'Atri

1. — The English film and video artist John Smith was already studying film in London in the 1970s. He initially attended North East London Polytechnic and later the Royal College of Art, graduating in 1977. Smith soon became known as an important representative of the second generation of British structuralist film. And this was the generation that "saw the movement with a more distant and critical eye",<sup>1</sup> as A. L. Rees has aptly noted. This critical distance was expressed through Smith's use of the medium, particularly his "use of humour to evoke but also to question film narrative".<sup>2</sup> Such undermining of the strict formalist stance taken by structuralist film through narration and humour are determinative of John Smith's aesthetic pursuits, especially in his early work. The strategy of using humour to facilitate working in a style- and ideology-critical way as a means of distancing oneself from prescribed patterns was in fact addressed in depth by the Russian linguist Mikhail Bakhtin in his books of the 1940s and 1950s.<sup>3</sup> Yet a pronounced interest in everyday life and the visual exploration thereof are easily ascertained in the British artist's films. Indeed, it is no coincidence that urban environment represents a substantial constant in John Smith's films when it comes to content. Touching on this aspect, Ingo Clauß writes of Smith's "curiosity that impels him to explore his environment in a way that is typical for his works".<sup>4</sup> This curiosity is motivated not least by his "awareness of the vicissitude of metropolitan environments".<sup>5</sup> Urban development, including neoliberal gentrification, thus frequently played an important role in the artist's early films and videos as well.

2. — Michael Snow, an American structuralist film artist of the first generation, invokes moving images to present pictures of a planar, silhouette-like female sculpture in his film "New York Eye and Ear Control" (1964). This is a "walking woman", one of many situated throughout urban space in New York City by the artist for his film. Yet the actual sounds engendered at the sculpture site (street noise) are not audible here, but rather expressive jazz music. The sound and video tracks diverge in "New York Eye and Ear Control" and, as such, hamper in this work a simple realism controllable by the senses. Twelve years later, John Smith seems (at least initially) to have taken the reverse path in his early film "The Girl Chewing Gum" (1976), one that nonetheless equally challenges the conditions involved in the perception of cinematic images in a critically reflective way. The twelve-minute-long, black-and-white 16mm film contains but two shots. The first is close to eleven minutes in duration and shows everyday events along an East London street not far from the flat Smith was living in at the time. Vehicles are driving past, pedestrians are crossing the street, a cinema with people queuing is visible to the right, a street clock is noticeable on a rooftop, pigeons are flying about, and some women are approaching on foot, and so forth. The second shot is focused on a landscape on the outskirts of London, with hedges and fields foregrounding electrical pylons to the rear. Besides a perpetually recurring alarm bell, the sound track of the film conveys a male voice. It is the voice of John Smith, who is fastidiously supervising what is visible on screen as would a cinematic director a close-up scene. At the beginning of the film, the artist gives the command to "slowly move the trailer to the left", which is promptly followed by a trailer exit-





- ← p. 22: John Smith, stills from: *The Girl Chewing Gum*, 1976, 16mm, B/W, sound, 12', and: *The Man Plooting Mum*, 2011, HD video, colour, sound, 12'.
- ← p. 23: John Smith, stills from: *The Man Plooting Mum*, 2011, HD video, colour, sound, 12', and: *The Girl Chewing Gum*, 1976, 16mm, B/W, sound, 12'.
- John Smith, stills from: *The Black Tower*, 1985–87, 16mm, colour, sound, 24'.



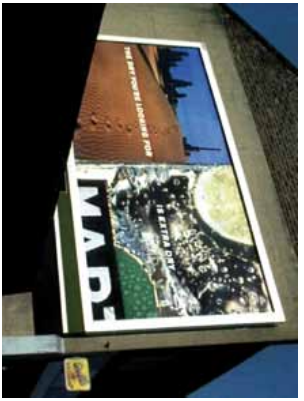
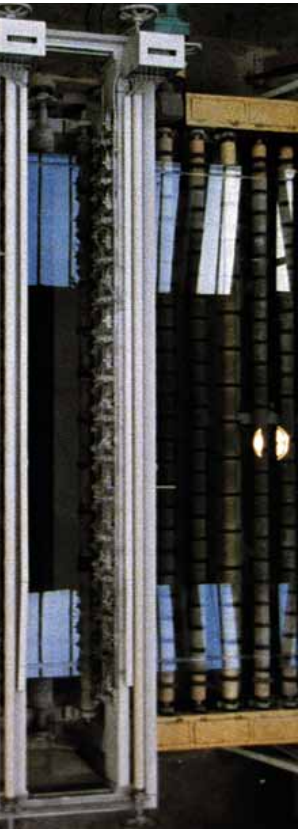
dirigiert: »Slowly move the trailer to the left«, fordert er gleich zu

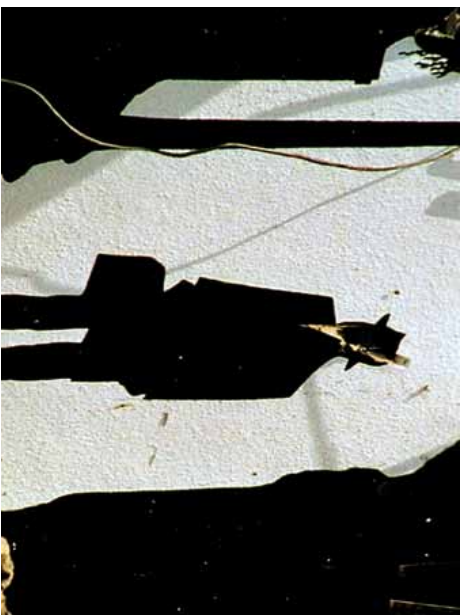
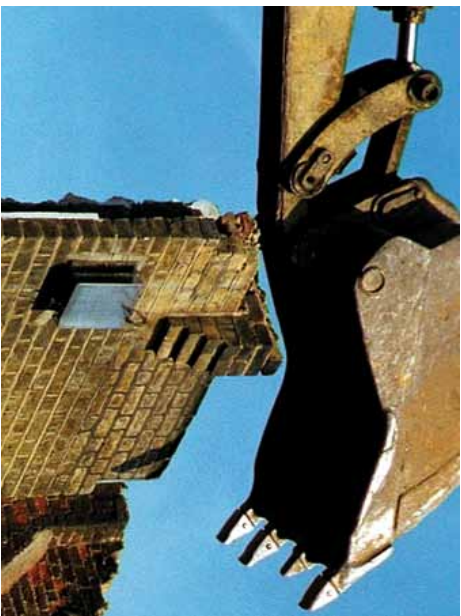
Beginn des Films und prompt bewegt sich ein Anhänger nach links heraus aus dem Bild. Kurz darauf die Anweisung: »And I want two girls, coming from the right, talking to each other« – und prompt kommen zwei junge, sich unterhaltende Frauen vorbei. Und später: »I want the old man with white hair and glasses to cross the road«. Prompt ...

Bild- und Tonspur gehen bei dieser »Augen- und Ohnkontrolle« also nicht auseinander wie bei Michael Snows »New York Eye and Ear Control«, sondern verlaufen verblüffend parallel. Ein wenig erinnert dieses Parallelgeschehen aufgrund seiner benennenden Dimensionen an zeichentheoretische Abbildungen à la Ferdinand de Saussure. Doch langsam wird das Geschehen zunehmend absurd, der Sprecher scheint seiner Machtgüste nicht mehr Herr zu sein, möchte zum Beispiel der Strakenhür die Geschwindigkeit ihres Tickens vorschreiben und fordert diese außerdem auf, ihm näher zu kommen – was dank der filmischen Technik des Zooms dann auch tatsächlich geschieht. Immer mehr driften zudem im Laufe des Films Ton und Bild auseinander, etwa wenn der Sprecher ange-

ing the screen to the left. The directive "and I want two girls, coming from the right, talking to each other" is soon to follow – and, promptly, two young, conversing girls stroll by. And later: "I want the old man with white hair and glasses to cross the road." Which is promptly followed by ...

In this "eye and ear control", the sound and video tracks run parallel to an astounding degree, in contrast to the divergence experienced in Michael Snow's "New York Eye and Ear Control". Due to its appellative dimension, this dualism is somewhat reminiscent of Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic figures. Though now the events slowly become increasingly absurd: the speaker appears to lose control over his desire for power and, for instance, wants to stipulate how fast the street clock may tick, even going so far as to tell the clock to step closer – which, thanks to the filmic technique of zooming, actually comes to pass. What is more, image and sound drift further and further apart over the course of the film, for example when the speaker describes the said landscape shot while the view is trained on the exterior wall of a building instead. The landscape does not appear until considerably later, and





← p. 26-27: John Smith, stills from:  
Slow Glass, 1988-91. 16 mm, colour,  
sound, 40'.  
John Smith, stills from: Blight, 1994-96.  
16 mm transferred to SD video, colour,  
sound, 14'.

when it does, the speaker unwaveringly continues to describe the scenario found on the East London street. In "The Girl Chewing Gum" the "unreliable narrator" expertly succeeds in adeptly interweaving filmic fiction and documentary fact; ultimately, the image material is nothing more than lapidary everyday prosaic pictures of London in mid-1970s. Although "The Girl Chewing Gum" reports on everyday urban life in the Thames metropolis with this photographic material, this is nevertheless not the primary theme of John Smith's early work. The artist was evidently still processing the conceptual-formal stringency of structuralist film through his humorous narrative approach—and offering reflection on our perception of cinematic material in the ambivalent realm of artistically staged illusion and "realistic" portrayal.

In the film "The Man Phoning Mum" (2011), a remake of "The Girl Chewing Gum", however, the change in urban situation decidedly comes to the fore. Here John Smith shot the long take from "The Girl Chewing Gum" once again thirty-five years later. In "The Man Phoning Mum" this shot is superimposed over the original one. This makes visible significant changes in the cityscape: the aforementioned street clock has been removed, the cinema had been replaced by new buildings, the passers-by are talking on their mobile phones, and so on.

3 — The story of the twenty-three-minute-long film "The Black Tower" (1985–87) is quickly told: a man in London feels he is being pursued by a black tower, so for months he is loath to leave his flat, and eventually he is taken to hospital, recovers, convalesces in a forested landscape, but suddenly the omnipresent, ominous tower returns, which the man enters and then dies, but even then the black tower is hovering behind his gravestone in the film's final shot. Here John Smith takes recourse to a classical bourgeois narrative, where a psychosis is related. The critic Michael Stoeker sees several archetypes, for example, the horror stories of Edgar Allan Poe. It is fascinating how the story in "The Black Tower" is told by Smith, this time with elaborate image/text cutting. While the sound track conveys the mounting paranoia through calm, clear words, the images stutter along, cut in irritating staccato and repeatedly interrupted by monochrome inserts (usually black) for seconds at a time. Occasionally, these seemingly abstract surfaces actually do harbour concrete motifs, serving to enhance confusion on the part of the viewer: for example, a red surface suddenly turns out to be a close-up of a bedspread thanks to a gradual camera pan. Moreover, the images in this film have an air of technical alienation: a street view, for instance, is revealed upon closer examination to be two street views combined. The protagonist in "The Black Tower" cannot trust his perception, and the same holds equally true for the viewers of the film.

Certain aspects of "The Black Tower" overlap with "The Girl Chewing Gum": while the city with its architectures and lifestyles is consistently present, it does not really have substance. And although Ingo Claub notes how, in "The Black Tower", the "detailed filmic observation of buildings and streets [shows] Smith's exploration of the modification and transience of urban space",<sup>8</sup> this exploration nonetheless does not become the thematic focus of his work until the film "Slow Glass" (1988–91).

4 — At first glance, the forty-minute film "Slow Glass" deals with the changes that the artisan trade of glass-making faces. At the same time, this narrative thread is employed by John Smith to report on autobiographical issues and architectural developments impacting London's cityscape, as well as on the encroachment of a neo-liberal economy upon the housing market. The film shows the artist at the height of his form-related "expert skills", which he uses not only to reflect on the mediate conditions of the cinematic, but also to thematically explore the aforementioned subject areas in an almost documentary way. In "Slow Glass", form and content seem to studiously balance one another out; they are reciprocally dependent. Decisive here is how facts—for example, the advancing industrialisation of the glass-making trade and the gentrifica-

sichts einer Häuserwand besagte Landschaftsaufnahme beschreibt, die aber erst deutlich später im Bild erscheint. Ist diese Landschaft letztlich doch zu sehen, beschreibt der Sprecher allerdings unweitr weiter das Szenario auf der East Londoner Straße. Dem »unzuverlässigen Erzähler« gelingt es in »The Girl Chewing Gum« filmische Fiktion und dokumentarischen Fakt geschickt ineinander zu verweben, letztlich handelt es sich bei dem Bildmaterial um nichts anderes, als um lapidar-alltägliche Aufnahmen aus dem London der mittleren 1970er Jahre. Dank dieser Aufnahmen berichtet »The Girl Chewing Gum« zwar auch über den urbanen Alltag in der Themsestadt, primäres Thema aber ist dieser in der frühen Arbeit jedoch sicher nicht. Noch ging es John Smith offensichtlich um besagtes humorvoll-narratives Abarbeiten am der konzeptuell-formalen Stringenz des strukturalistischen Films. Und um das Reflektieren unserer Wahrnehmung von cineastischem Material im Spannungsfeld von künstlerisch inszenierter Illusion und »realistischem« Abbild.

In dem Film »The Man Phoning Mum« (2011), einem Remake von »The Girl Chewing Gum«, tritt jedoch die Veränderung der urbanen Situation dezidiert in den Vordergrund. John Smith hat hier die lange Einstellung aus »The Girl Chewing Gum« 35 Jahre später noch einmal gedreht. Diese Aufnahme überlagert dann in »The Man Phoning Mum« die ursprüngliche Einstellung. So werden signifikante Veränderungen im Stadtbild sichtbar: Besagte Uhr wurde entfernt, das Kino ist ersetzt durch Neubauten, die PassantInnen telefonieren mit Handys...

3 — Die Story des 23 Minuten langen Films »The Black Tower« (1985 – 1987) ist schnell erzählt. Ein Mann in London fühlt sich von einem schwarzen Turm verfolgt, er traut sich deshalb monatelang nicht aus seiner Wohnung, wird ins Krankenhaus eingeliefert, geneset, erholt sich in einer waldigen Landschaft, doch plötzlich ist der ominös-omnipräsente Turm wieder da, der Mann tritt ein in diesen, stirbt, noch hinter seinem Grabstein lauert in einer letzten Einstellung der schwarze Turm. John Smith greift hier auf ein klassisches bürgerliches Narrativ zurück: das der Erzählung einer Psychose. Der Kritiker Michael Stoeker benennt einige Vorbilder: z. B. die Horrorgeschichten von Edgar Allan Poe,<sup>8</sup> Spemann ist, wie diese Geschichte in »The Black Tower« von John Smith erzählt wird, nämlich diesmal mit einer ausgeklügelten Bild-Text-Schere. Während die Tonspur in ruhigen, klaren Worten von dem zunehmenden Verfolgungswahn erzählt, stotern die Bilder, sind in irritierendem Stakkato geschnitten und werden immer wieder sekundentlang durch monochrome, meist schwarze Inserts unterbrochen. Diese scheinbar abstrakten Flächen weisen sich, die Verwirrung der Betrachtenden steigend, einige Male dann doch als gegenständliche Motive, so entpuppt sich eine rote Fläche durch einen langsamen Kameraschwenk plötzlich als Close-up einer Bettdecke. Zudem sind die Bilder in diesem Film technisch verformt, das Bild einer Straße etwa zeigt sich bei genauem Hinsehen als aus zwei Straßensichten zusammengesetzt. So wie der Protagonist in »The Black Tower« seiner Wahrnehmung nicht traut, so wenig kann es auch der Betrachter/die des Films.

Für »The Black Tower« gilt, was schon für »The Girl Chewing Gum« galt: Die Stadt, ihre Architekturen und Lebensformen, sind zwar konstant präsent, wackeliger Gehalt aber sind sie nicht. Auch wenn Ingo Claub davon schreibt, dass in »The Black Tower« die »detailliertere filmische Betrachtung von Gebäuden und Straßenzügen... Smiths Auseinandersetzung mit Veränderung und Vergänglichkeit von unserem Raum«<sup>8</sup> zeigt, so wird diese Auseinandersetzung dennoch erst in seinem Film »Slow Glass« (1988 – 1991) explizit zum Thema der Arbeit.

4 — Der 40 Minuten lange Film »Slow Glass« ist vordergründig gesehen ein Film über die Veränderung im Handwerk der Glasherstellung, Gleichzeitig wird diese narrative Folie von John Smith genutzt, um über Autobiografisches ebenso zu berichten wie über architektonische Entwicklungen im Stadtbild Londons sowie über das Vordringen einer neoliberalen Ökonomie auf dem Wohnungsmarkt. Der Film zeigt den Künstler auf der Höhe seiner formalen

»Komerscharf«, die er nicht nur nutzt, um die medialen Bedingungen des Cineastischen zu reflektieren, sondern auch, um fast schon dokummentarisch besagte Themenfelder zu behandeln. Formales und Inhaltliches hält sich in »Slow Glass« wohlkultiviert die Waage, beides bedingt sich wechselseitig. Entscheidend dabei ist, dass Fakten, wie etwa die voranschiebende Industrialisierung des Glas-handwerkes und die Gentrifizierung von Londons Innenstadt, als filmisch erzählte Fakten ihre zwaangsläufige fiktionale Qualität offenbaren, ohne so ihren mehrpropharen »Realitätsgehalt« zu verlieren.

Der Film beginnt mit der Aufnahme eines Blicks durch ein Zimmerfenster. Vor dem Fenster fliegt ein Fußball, der sich schließlich auf die Scheibe zubewegt – das Bersten des Glases ist dann jedoch nicht mehr zu sehen. Nur die Tonspur macht dieses wahrnehmbar, während im Bild bereits eine nahezu monochrome-abstrakte schwarze Fläche zu sehen ist. Langsam öffnet sich der Fokus und die Fläche erweist sich als Close-up eines gefüllten Guinnessglases; Jetzt ist die Stimme eines Mannes zu hören, der beginnt, in einem Pub die Geschichte der Glasproduktion kenntnisreich zu erzählen – nicht ohne dabei persönliche, aber auch fast schon philosophische Anekdoten einzustreuen. Schmitz, und das Schneiden einer Glasplatte erscheint im Bild, eine Einstellung, die im Laufe des Films, ihren Blickwinkel verändernd, immer wieder auftrahnt. Das Schneiden des Glases sieht so metonymisch für den Schnitt im Film. Einige Einstellungen später und die Fertigungstraße einer modernen Glasfabrik kommt ins bewegte Bild, erkennbar erst als nach einigen Minuten die Kamerafahrt das Umfeld der zunächst rätselhaften Struktur erkennbar werden lässt. Schmitz, die Kamera-perspektive wechselt und führt den Blick des Betrachters durch die Windschutzscheibe eines durch einen Wald fahrenden Autos. Die männliche Stimme erzählt davor, dass die Körner das Glas handwerklich nach England brachten, wo es zunächst in Wäldern ange-stiebt war, da die Handwerker eine Menge Holz zur Glasproduktion benötigten. Der historische Rückblick bringt den Mann prompt dazu, über das Verhältnis von Wahrnehmung und Erinnerung laut nachzudenken. Das Auto bewegt sich inzwischen wieder im Stadtbild Londons. Baustellen kommen ins Bild, verlassene Ladenlokale mit dem Hinweis »look-up-shop to let«, aber auch eine chine neue Weinbar, ein Immobilienbüro, »open on sundays«. Im Fenster werden vermeintlich lukrativer Angebote um neue BesitzerInnen, plötzlich taucht ein Kind im Fenster auf und blickt uns an...

Ton- und Bildspur verhalten sich im gesamten Film in unterschiedlicher Weise zueinander. Mal deckeln sich Ton und Bild, etwa wenn das fahrende Auto zu hören und zu sehen ist. Immer wieder aber setzt John Smith gezielt die Ton-Bild-Schere ein, um den il-lusionären Charakter des filmischen Geschehens aufzudecken. Ein prägnantes Beispiel: Da ist nach einer guten Verlistung das Dach eines Wohnhauses mit Schornstein zu sehen, ein Vogel fliegt vorbei, (sein) Zwitschern ist deutlich zu hören. Plötzlich das gleiche Bild, farblich vertrenndet, quasi »eingeschwärzt«, und nun erklingt dramatische, typische Filmmusik. Nicht von ungefähr erinnert diese Sequenz an ähnliche Einstellungen aus »The Black Tower«. So spielt der Künstler in »Slow Glass« immer wieder mit Konventionen und formalen Tricks des Films, springt von einem Genre ins andere, etwa vom Dokumentar-zum Horrortilm, und behauptet trotz aller eingestreuten Irritationen – oder gerade deswegen? – doch stets souverän den narrativ-informativen Charakter seines Werkes. Bis zuletzt ist daher auch immer wieder die männliche Stimme und deren Erzählung von der Geschichte der Glasfertigung zu hören.

Der Film endet mit einer Aufnahme des Fensters, das anfangs von einem Fußball getroffen in Scherben aufging – dank dieses Zi-zugriffes auch wie viele von Smiths Werken ein Beispiel für dessen explizit kritisch-reflexiven Einsatz des Mediums. Dennoch blieb »Slow Glass« alles andere als ein ausschließlich in sich geschlossenes, selbstreferenzielles Werk, sondern eines, das beständig auf Fakten nichtfilmischer Art Bezug nimmt – und hier Stellung bezieht. Genau dieser hier fast schon modellhaft vorgefällige Dualismus von Selbstreferenzialität und kognitiver Öffnung, von »operationaler

tion of London's city centre – reveal, as filmically narrated facts, their inevitably fictional character without forfeiting their verifiable "reflection of reality".

The film starts off with the view through a pane of glass from a room window. A football is suspended in front of the window, ultimately moving towards the pane – yet the shattering of the window remains to be seen. Only the sound track makes the impact perceptible, with the image now evincing an almost monochrome-abstrakt plane of black. Slowly the focus is intensified, and the plane turns out to be a brimming Guinness glass close up. Now the voice of a man becomes audible, who is sitting in a pub and knowledgeable beginning to convey the history of glass production, all the while interspersing his story with personal, almost philosophical anecdotes. Cut – and the cutting of a glass pane appears in the image, a shot that recurs over the course of the film, each time from a varied angle. The cutting of the glass metonymically stands for the act of cutting film. A few shots later the assembly line at a modern glass factory enters the moving image. At first nothing more than a puzzling texture, the assembly line is not recognizable until several minutes later, the camera pan takes in its surroundings. Cut – the camera perspective shifts and leads the gaze of the viewer out through the windshield of an automobile driving in the forest. A male voice tells of how the Romans brought the art of glass-making to England, where it was initially centred in forested regions since the artisans required a great deal of wood to produce glass. The retrospective historical view promptly persuades the man to ponder about the relationship between perception and memory. Meanwhile, the vehicle is back amidst the cityscape of London, with roadworks entering the picture, deserted shops with notices reading "look-up shop to let", but also a chic new winebar, a real-estate business, "open on Sunday's", advertised in the window are supposedly lucrative offers luring new owners, when suddenly a child appears in the window to stare at us...

Throughout the entire film, the sound and image tracks interact in different ways. Sometimes sound and image are congruent, such as when the driving car is both audible and visible. Yet John Smith as repeatedly wields the sound/image cutting in order to expose the illusory character of the filmic occurrences. A trenchant example: about a quarter of an hour into the film, the roof of a residential chimney-stack building enters the picture; a bird flies past, (its) chirping clearly audible. Suddenly we see the same image, but the colouring has shifted to a quasi "blackening", and the dramatic music typically associated with cinema resounds. It is not by chance that this sequence is reminiscent of similar takes in "The Black Tower". The artist in "Slow Glass" for instance keeps toying with filmic conventions and form-based tricks and jumps from one genre to the next, such as from documentary to horror film. Despite – or precisely because? – of the many interspersed irritations, the film masterfully asserts the narrative-informative character of its craft. The male voice and its historical narrative of the glass-making trade are threaded through to the very end.

The film concludes with a view of the window that in the beginning was shattered by the impact of a football – and thanks to this reference, the circle is closed. With its formal points of access, "Slow Glass" like many of Smith's works, is an example of the artist's explicitly critical-reflective execution of the medium. Nonetheless, the film remains anything but an exclusively self-contained, self-referential work. It rather repeatedly makes reference to facts of a non-filmic nature – and, in the process, takes a stance. Precisely this almost exemplarily staged dualism of self-referentiality and cognitive opening – "operational closeness" and "informational openness" – is known to be a basic principle in the systems theory of Niklas Luhmann.<sup>9</sup>

5 — Urban life and municipal development are now finally posited at the centre of aesthetic activity in the fourteen-minute-long film "Bright" (1994–96). The work "documents" the demolition of a housing settlement in East London. The complex was forced to yield to the construction of a new motorway link road, despite

years of passionate protesting on the part of residents. Invoking acutely sensitive imagery, underscored by a suggestive score and everyday sounds, like chirping birds, a mother calling out to her son, and traffic noise, John Smith shows not only how architecture is dismantled piece by piece, but how the once vital community is destroyed by the demolition crew: bricks tumble down, building walls are razed one by one to reveal what were once private living spaces, a deflated children's football has been abandoned, excavators move across the screen, and bare-chested workers carry out their tasks. Smith also shows stumps of felled trees, as well as an old shoe lying on the ground and the frayed wallpaper of what used to be the nursery ...

The pictures seen in "Blight" suggest danger, yet this impression is counteracted by the accompanying sentimental music in particular—and also by the nature of the kitsch that distinguishes many of the images, as well as the frequently audible refrain "Don't really remember". But John Smith does not stop at this duality of meaning, for the soberly spoken text fragments that have been additionally integrated, telling of the multifaceted memories of the fight to save the housing settlement, serve to additionally charge the sound track with narrative objectiveness. The film ends with shots of the new road net construction and the later traffic along the new route. Brief shots intermingle to show graffiti that reads "No", "Homes", or "Not here". The failure of the protest movement is ultimately documented with a graphic depiction of London's road network, with "Kill the spiders for me" simultaneously heard from offscreen. Image and text now, for the last time, enter into the exciting affinity of ambiguity so typical for John Smith's aesthetic pursuits: this collage of visual and auditive material is basically harmonious and dissonant at once. The harmonious character arises because the road net and the net-spinning spiders indeed reveal semantic overlapping, while dissonance emerges with the picture of the (environmentally unsound) road network frankly deviating in meaning from the spider web originating in the realm of nature. So who is now actually meant to be "killed", the net-producing urban planners or spiders? Precisely this question ends up remaining pugnaciously open in this constellation.

1 A. L. Rees, *A History of Experimental Film and Video* (London: British Film Institute, 1999), p. 117.

2 Ibid.

3 See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Probleme der Poetik Dostoevskijs* (Frankfurt/Main: Ullstein Materialien, 1985).

4 John Smith, *Worst Case Scenario: Filme von 1975 bis 2003*, ed. Ingo Clauß (Bremen: Weserburg Museum für moderne Kunst, 2012), p. 46.

5 Ibid.

6 John Smith, *Solo Show*, ed. Gemma Lloyd and Gareth Bell-Jones (London: Royal College of Art Galleries, 2010), p. 3.

7 Michael Stoeber, "John Smith", in *Artist* (Bremen), 91 (2012), p. 42.

8 Smith, *Worst Case Scenario*, p. 46.

9 See Niklas Luhmann, *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1997).

Geschlossenheit« und »informationeller Offenheit« ist bekanntlich ein Grundgedanke der Systemtheorie von Niklas Luhmann.<sup>9</sup>

5. — Urbanes Leben und Stadtentwicklung stehen in dem 14 Minuten langen Film »Blight« (1994 – 1996) dann endgültig im Zentrum des ästhetischen Geschehens. Die Arbeit »dokumentiert« den Abriss einer Wohnsiedlung in East London. Die Siedlung musste, trotz eines über Jahre anhaltenden engagierten Protestes der BewohnerInnen, dem Bau einer Autobahnverbindung weichen. In überaus sensiblen Bildern, unterlegt mit suggestiver Filmmusik und Alltagsgeräuschen wie Vogelgezwitscher, dem Rufen einer Mutter nach ihrem Sohn und Verkehrslärm, zeigt John Smith, wie Stück für Stück nicht nur Architektur, sondern vor allem, wie ein einstmals vitaler Lebensraum von der Abrisskolonne vernichtet wird: Ziegelsteine fallen herab, Häuserwände werden reihenweise niedergerissen, so den Blick auf einst private Wohnräume freilegend, ein kaputter Kinderfußball liegt herum, Bagger fahren durch das Bild, Arbeiter mit nackten Oberkörpern verrichten eifertig ihre Arbeit. Auch Stümpfe abgeholzter Bäume werden von Smith gezeigt, ebenso ein auf dem Boden liegender alter Schuh und die zerfetzte Tapete eines einstigen Kinderzimmers ...

Bedrohung suggerieren die Bilder von »Blight«, doch dieser Eindruck wird vor allem durch die sentimentale Musik konterkariert. Und auch durch den Charakter des Kitsches, den nicht nur viele der Bilder, sondern auch der oftmals zu hörende Refrain »Don't really remember« charakterisieren. Aber mit dieser Zweideutigkeit lässt es John Smith nicht bewenden, denn die zudem eingefügten, sachlich gesprochenen Textfragmente, die von den vielfältigen Erinnerungen um den Kampf um die Wohnsiedlung erzählen, laden die Tonspur außerdem auch mit einer narrativen Sachlichkeit auf. Der Film endet mit Aufnahmen des Baus der neuen Straßennetze und des späteren Verkehrs auf ihnen. Dazwischen geschnitten sind kurze Einstellungen, die Graffiti mit den Schriftzügen »No«, »Homes«, »Not here« zeigen. Das Scheitern des Protestes wird schließlich dokumentiert mit einer grafischen Darstellung des Verkehrsstraßennetzes Londons, aus dem Off ertönt im selben Moment: »Kill the spiders for me«. Bild und Text begeben sich ein letztes Mal in ein spannungsvolles Verhältnis der Ambiguität, das typisch ist für John Smiths ästhetische Arbeit: Diese Collage von Visuellem und Audielllem ist eine quasi harmonische und dissonante zugleich: Harmonischen Charakters ist sie, weil Straßennetz und die Netz knüpfende Spinne nun mal eine semantische Schnittmenge ausweisen, als dissonant erweist sie sich, weil das Bild des (umweltschädlichen) Straßennetzes eben etwas anderes meint als das Wort des aus der Welt der Natur stammenden Spinnennetzes. Und wer da nun tatsächlich »gekillt« werden soll, die Netze produzierenden Städteplaner oder die Spinnen, genau das bleibt in dieser Zusammenstellung letztlich kämpferisch offen.

1 A. L. Rees, *A History of Experimental Film and Video*, London: British Film Institute 1999, S. 117.

2 Ebd.

3 Vgl. Michail Bachtin, *Probleme der Poetik Dostoevskijs*. Frankfurt/Main: Ullstein Materialien 1985.

4 John Smith, *Worst Case Scenario. Filme von 1975 bis 2003*. Hrsg. von Ingo Clauß, Bremen: Weserburg Museum für moderne Kunst 2012, S. 46.

5 Ebd.

6 John Smith, *Solo Show*, Hrsg. von Gemma Lloyd und Gareth Bell-Jones, London: Royal College of Art Galleries 2010, S. 3.

7 Michael Stoeber, »John Smith«, in: *Artist* (Bremen), Nr. 91, 2012, S. 42.

8 John Smith, *Worst Case Scenario*, a.a.O., S. 46.

9 Vgl. Niklas Luhmann, *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft*, Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp 1997.

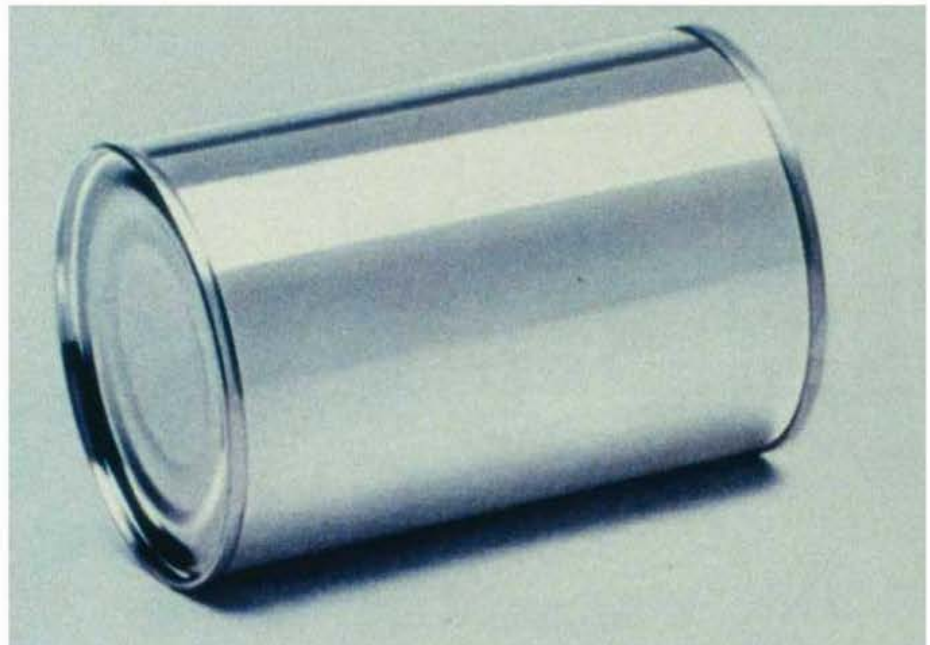
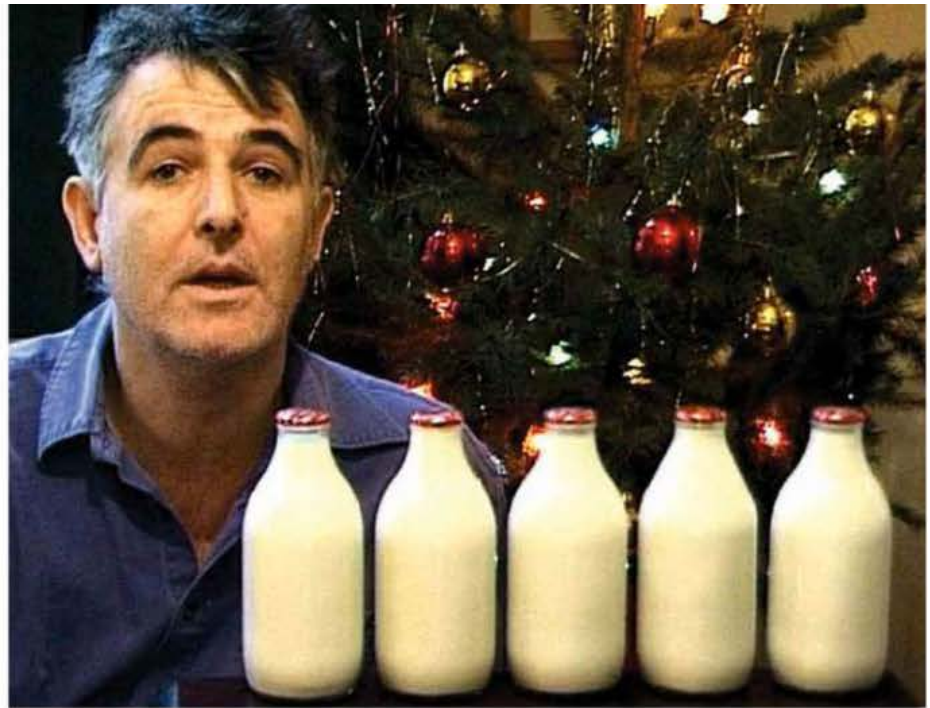
*"The artist's object is to appear strange and even surprising to the audience. He achieves this by looking strangely at himself and his work. As a result everything put forward by him has a touch of the amazing."*

—Bertolt Brecht, "Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting"

**A** member of the "second wave" of British structuralist filmmakers, who benefited from the influence of radical mentors such as Peter Gidal and Guy Sherwin without swallowing their prescriptions wholesale, John Smith followed in his mentors' footsteps by relentlessly revealing the artifice upon which cinematic representation depends. To paraphrase Michael O'Pray, Smith manipulates in order to expose manipulation: he leads us into seemingly familiar territory before blatantly confounding our expectations and forcing us to think twice about how image and sound can be molded to match their maker's aims.

Smith's baring of this device is all the more impressive for the frequent paucity of devices at his disposal. At his most efficient and economical, he requires little more than time-lapsed sunlight lapping the furniture of a modest West London apartment to incite reflection on the geometric construction of filmic space (*Leading Light*, 1975). In *The Girl Chewing Gum* (1976), Smith channels Truffaut's "Director Ferrand" from *Day for Night* (1973) as he hollers instructions at his "cast" of extras on a bustling Hackney street corner, gradually revealing that these commands are actually an *ex post facto* imposition, a reaction to the autonomous movements of random passers-by. In *The Black Tower* (1987), a jet-black water shed atop a brick tower is photographed from multiple perspectives, the resulting images providing the basis for a mysterious and disorientating narrative relating a man's maddening experience of encountering the obsidian edifice around every London street corner, and even in the sylvan sanctuary of the English countryside. And in *Blight* (1996), which depicts the demolition of the filmmaker's neighbourhood to make room for the incoming M11 motorway, the film's very subject matter puns on the construction (and, in Smith's case, the deconstruction) of the images, sounds, language, and ideologies upon which cinema is based.

While Smith's use of humour is often singled out as the most distinctive trait of his work, even



## **VOICES OFF**

The Films and Videos of John Smith

BY SAMUEL LA FRANCE

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Top: *Regression*

Bottom : *Associations*

more crucial is his employment of his own voice as both interrogator and embodiment of the codes and conventions his practice aims to subvert. In *Associations* (1975), made during his student days at the Royal College of Art, Smith employs an excerpt from Herbert H. Clarke's *Word Associations and Linguistic Theory* as a vehicle for shameless visual punning: as Smith's dry reading of the text progresses, increasingly hilarious word-image associations are drawn from selected keywords (or "stimuli"), such as *categories* (a Persian cat), *idiosyncratic* (a bathroom vanity, a rodent, and a clock), or *Chomsky* (an alpine skier). The purpose of *Associations* is to render a text unintelligible through its gross (in this case deliberate) misinterpretation, abating both the supremacy of the word as a communicative tool and the artist's own competence as a sound-and-image-maker.

In the works that followed, Smith developed this theme of directorial unreliability within larger explorations of filmic language, time, and on- and off-screen space. In *The Girl Chewing Gum*, he inverts the temporal structure of the film's production, leading us first to believe that the overheard director occupies an off-screen but nevertheless diegetic space, then revealing that this monologue has been recorded in a field at Letchmore Heath, some 15 miles away from where the street footage was filmed. In the film's final moments, Smith cuts to this same field and executes a slow lateral pan that takes in horses, electrical towers, and the surrounding pastoral landscape, but the artist's voice has now gone silent and the body from which it issues is conspicuously absent. Following on the revelation of his inability to "direct" the urban action previously glimpsed, the filmmaker (an ironic designation in this context) is now literally effaced from the work.

In these early films, Smith demonstrates how an image's adherence to the directing "voice"—literal in Smith's case, figurative by extension—is interrupted as a result of that voice's unintelligibility, disengagement, or impotence, exposing the fickleness of cinematic interpretation in an effort to confuse, bemuse, and (no less important) amuse the spectator. Smith made direct use of his body and voice in a number of key works throughout the '80s, culminating in the brilliant, one-minute *Gargantuan* (1992). The film begins with an extreme close-up of a newt, imperiously commanding the screen in all its majestically magnified newty-ness as Smith's voice intones an ode to its apparent enormity. As the camera slowly zooms out, the newt becomes "medium," "average" in the opinion of its unseen balladeer; and as the previously off-screen space invades the frame, revealing Smith's pyjama-clad body and a bedside clock ticking in the foreground, the amphibian is adjudged "little," "scanty," and "diminutive." As Smith finishes his serenade with the refrain "My newt, I love my newt," the word "minute" (minute) appears on screen and the alarm rings to mark the song's end. The (self-)deprecation here is double. Not only does Smith make himself look foolish through his absurd act of amphibian

adoration (and his deliberately dreadful pun), he also arrogates perspectival authority to the camera rather than the artist: lying on his side, Smith describes the newt's changing stature in relation to how the camera, and not he himself, sees it. Yielding his authority to both the tyranny of time and the expanding field of the camera eye, Smith subsumes his positions as seer, speaker, maker, and subject within the inexorability of the film's process, reducing the role of the artist to a lethargic body, a deceived eye, and a saccharine voice.

By the late '90s, when film's economic and material impracticality began to outweigh its aesthetic and conceptual benefits, Smith started using digital as an intermediary before embarking on his first full-fledged video experiment, *Regression* (1998-99). A remake of a 16mm film made two decades earlier, *7P* (1977-78), the video begins with a direct-to-camera address wherein Smith justifies his conversion to digital, first describing the technical issues that plagued his earlier attempt, then suggesting that the new medium will lend a certain contemporaneity to the piece, and finally engaging in comically hyperbolic speculation that, with some rudimentary movie magic, viewers might mistake him for a spritely Young British Artist. As Chris Kennedy has astutely pointed out, Smith's facetiously Fitzgeraldian aspiration is achieved through a rigid adherence to a familiar song's cumulative structure: filming himself singing one line from "The Twelve Days of Christmas" every morning after Christmas day, the artist literally grows younger with the repetition of each of the previous days' verses. The self-derisive tone of Smith's introduction—as well as the earnestness with which his multiple selves fail to hold the carol's tune—helps avoid the potential pitfalls of the aging artist's conversion to what Rosalind Krauss suggested was an inherently narcissistic medium. Where Smith had previously employed his own seeming inadequacy as artist in order to emphasize the primacy of process, his focus in *Regression* on the sagginess of his chin and his desire to appear younger signal a new movement in his work, his interrogations of cinema's illusions and representational limits relocated from the process of filmmaking to a self fit to be fetishized within a newly digital economy.

This revised self-engagement with the voice and body stands in counterpoint to the supposedly transparent lack of process in Smith's approach to videomaking. Not unlike his work on 16mm, Smith's videos are characterized by a restrained practicality laced with hints of misdirection, self-deprecation, or outright boredom. In his seven-part *Hotel Diaries* (2001-2007), Smith imposes a set of more or less rigid formal and practical constraints to which all of the videos comply. Each is comprised of a single shot (with the exception of *Dirty Pictures* [2007], which contains two scenes filmed on each side of the West Bank barrier) recorded with a mini-DV camcorder; each is limited to the space of the respective hotel's rooms and hallways and the view outside; and each contains diegetic narration by Smith assessing the decor, relaying banal observations about the artist's life and work, and offering commentary on key developments in international events, often engendered by the images captured in the camera's purview: an empty bed calls to mind the death of Yasser Arafat; a pyramid brings to mind troubles in the Middle East and the recent election of Hamas in Gaza; a visit



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*Gargantuan*

to the Jewish Museum and Peter Eisenman's Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe in the Berlin-shot *Museum Piece* (2004) yields a hallway-wandering monologue about Smith's discomfort in entering the museum due to his objection to Israeli state policy.

Although these videos seem improvisational and disengaged from specific aesthetic goals, they are in fact carefully constructed and rehearsed performances whose heavy subject matter is offset by Smith's meandering narration on the quotidian details of each room and his handheld, seemingly haphazard videography, which frequently gravitates towards mirrors, windows, picture frames, and other reflective surfaces. With the apparatus' view now practically indistinguishable from the artist's own eye, these videos suggest that the switch to a less process-based form of filmmaking has empowered Smith to look for (and at) himself. His identity and presence as a filmmaker—manifested in an eye, a body, and a voice that now collude in order to create—is now the primary engine and signifying system of the work's creation, and as such must be broken down in its turn. By de-emphasizing the process of image-making through the deceptive casualness of his visual strategies, Smith now gleefully deconstructs himself. He films a tooth that has fallen out of his mouth; admits to "losing it a bit" as he exhaustedly rambles on; pokes fun at a biographical description of him in the Rotterdam film festival program guide as "one of the most famous experimental filmmakers in the world"; and, at the conclusion of *Museum Piece*, he undercuts his political pontifications about Israel and the Holocaust by paying off a seemingly random comment from the beginning of the video—that he is sometimes told he has a lisp, one that he himself cannot hear—with a pan up to the manufacturer's label on an elevator and a patently awful Smithian pun: "I was in *Schindler's Lift*."

The admission (or performance) of revelatory self-criticism and the functions (and malfunctions) of Smith's own mouth and body become central illusions of his practice that carry the potential to reveal introverted bouts of self-doubt. *Soft Work* (2012), a sort of "making-of" documentation of Smith's creation of the installation *Horizon—Five Pounds a Belgian* (2012), is filled with such moments. As Smith films the horizon of a shoreline in the south of England, he offers a loquacious rumination on his work, his willingness to be bored and to subject his audiences to boredom, and the occasional second-guessing that he experiences as an established filmmaker: "The only thing I'm a bit worried about is that people might find it a bit egotistic, or narcissistic. Do people really want to hear me waffling on about things that are important to me but pretty dull to everybody else?" Another project documented on video that evolved into a gallery show, *unusual Red cardigan* (2011), begins with Smith defining himself as "one of those people" who indulges in egosurfing (a.k.a. self-Googleing) to keep up to date with his online presence. This confession leads him to eBay, where a seller is auctioning a VHS compilation of Smith's films for the "rather steep" sum of £100. As Smith relates his sleuthing by retracing his web browsing, he reveals that he has ordered at other times from the seller's very limited stock—mostly comprising women's clothing and accessories—in hopes of learning more about the seller's identity. Though he admits that his methods are rather "creepy," the artist acknowledges that the transparency of his investigation may have brought him to the vendor's attention. His curiosity is ultimately revealed to be self-serving, driven by his desire, if not for genuine connection, then at least for attention ("I bet she wondered about me, as I've been wondering about her").

In a way, *Dad's Stick* (2012) closes a loop started nearly 40 years earlier with *Associations*. The video is a brief remembrance of Smith's late father, describing his precision as a hobbyist painter, his benevolence, and work ethic, as well as three objects that his father used throughout his lifetime, each with a function lost or reshaped over time: a standard-issue ruler repurposed as a truncheon; a stick for stirring wall-paints transformed into a record of the family's domestic history; and a teacup used to catch drops of touch-up paint, now hardly suitable for sipping Earl Grey. Forgoing handheld videography for precise, static documentation of the objects and opting to use captions instead of voiceover narration, Smith here uses his voice only sparingly, imitating his father's habit of humming and singing pop songs with mixed-up or invented lyrics. It's no doubt telling that Smith, after years of placing his demeaned self at or near the centre of his work, here largely absents himself when dealing with such intensely personal material. Yet this work about the distortion of mnemonic associations is revealing in a way wholly unlike Smith's self-mocking self-interrogations: it locates his career-long fascination with the malleability of language and the scrambling of significations in both his familial roots and the habits of everyday life. After years of tricks and deliberate befuddlement, there is here no deception at work: though his body is absent and his voice never rises above a gentle hum, the artist is more sincerely present than ever before.

# Art

MONTHLY

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**John Smith**

Interviewed by Mark Prince

**On Drawing**

Christopher Townsend

**On Painting**

David Ryan

**Whitney Biennial**

Kathy Battista

John Smith interviewed by Mark Prince

# Waitinggame

John Smith  
'Hotel Diaries'  
Pyramids/Skunk  
2006-07  
video



**Mark Prince:** *One of the things that makes your films currently so distinctive is that you return to primary experience for your material. You walk the streets or look out the window and film what you see. You are not looking through a filter of received references that backs you up. I associate this return to first principles with the spirit of early British conceptual art. Would you say that was your original context?*

**John Smith:** It was. Conceptual Art was formative but also, when I began making work, it was within the world of structuralist, materialist filmmaking, and also the world of semiology, looking at the construction of meaning. But I'm glad you mentioned that there aren't many references in the films.

*Which is unusual now, at least in films made within an art context.*  
Absolutely. Most of my friends at the time weren't at art school. I wanted to make work that you didn't need to have a background in art or experimental filmmaking to appreciate. That has remained important to me. I'd be as interested in showing my

work at a library film society to a group of old-age pensioners as I would to an informed art audience.

*Although many of your methods seem structuralist, you tend to work in the opposite direction: to begin by seeing film as hampered by its literalness and then to go on to create a space for fantasy within it. A new potential for illusion is opened up from a position of disillusionment.*

I am trying to work backwards and forwards between an involvement in the illusion and making you aware that what you are looking at is a construction. Unlike many of my contemporaries in the 1970s, I have a love/hate relationship with illusionism rather than just a hatred of it. I am wary of the power that mainstream cinema has but I'm also fascinated by storytelling and the psychological involvement it asks of you. I like work in which you have that experience of identification while being regularly reminded of its artifice.



'Hotel Diaries' Dirty Pictures 2007 video

'Hotel Diaries' Dirty Pictures 2007 video

Blight 1994-96 video

*Entertainment is a great resource.*

It seems such a shame to throw that away.

*Now that the digital modification of films can be done on an iPhone, we are generally more aware of how artificial images can be. Do you think that invalidates Structuralism or makes its project more urgent?*

I think it is still very relevant. Despite the fact that we know images can be constructed we still look at them as if they were evidence. We can't help it. In the same way, when we're given verbal information that we know to be nonsense, we still half believe it. That is really what *The Girl Chewing Gum* of 1976, and *The Black Tower* from 1985-87 are about. You are given these obviously false narratives but the power of the word is such that it is all too easy to imagine them. You are told there is a man in a long raincoat with a gun in his pocket who has just robbed the local post office. If that is funny, it's because it so so easy to imagine that it is actually the case, although you know it isn't.

*We need to imagine a film is happening before our eyes for it to remain engaging. In The Girl Chewing Gum, your voiceover makes it difficult to maintain that illusion. Your films seem to express frustration with the limitations of the medium by manipulating our sense of time in this way or by extreme cutting – radical juxtapositions between documentary and fictional modes, and between still and moving images. Do you find the limitations of film frustrating?*

Not at all. Sometimes I think there are too many possibilities. I often deliberately set up limitations. For example, a film has to be a single shot, or it is going to be exactly one minute long, or the camera is not going to move. I like limitations and I am interested in suggesting what might be going on outside the imposed structure that I'm putting around the work.

*But do you see the solipsistic narratives of The Girl Chewing Gum and The Black Tower as metaphors for the insularity of a film's world?*

I find it interesting when people see *The Black Tower* and ask if I have suffered from mental illness. Well, not as far as I know. For me, it is a playful engagement with constructing these worlds.

*How did The Black Tower come about?*

Like most of my work, it was made over quite a long period, over two and half years. It could have been four different films. The sequence in which monochrome colour fields turn into representational images was originally an idea in itself. The part in which the seasons change on the street and the cars appear and disappear from behind a tree was also planned as a single film. I am interested in making hybrid work which goes off in unexpected directions. To me, one of the exciting things about filmmaking – and particularly about editing – is how you can bring disparate elements together and create a seamless flow from one kind of engagement to another. But essentially *The Black Tower* came about because I moved into a house in Leytonstone in East London in the early 1980s. From the bedroom window was the view that you see at the end of the film of the black tower from across the graveyard.

*There was actually a black tower?*

Yes. You are looking at completely undoctored images of the same building from different angles. It was a water tower in the grounds of the hospital.

*I assumed it was a little model you had made in the studio and somehow superimposed onto the 16mm film.*

Someone else said that to me recently. That's the last thing I would have expected people to think when I made the film, especially because things like that were so much harder to achieve convincingly then. I guess it relates to your point about our contemporary awareness of the constructedness of photographic images. Coming back to *The Girl Chewing Gum* and how the voice can determine how we see images, it was a formal proposition for me to make a film in which you are told that this building is in different places and then to make that convincing simply through careful framing. The narrative came out of the places the water tower was visible from: across the graveyard, so I knew it was going to have death in it; the grounds of a hospital, so there was going to be sickness in it; behind high walls, so there would be a prison; over some trees, so I could place it in the countryside. I wrote down what the locations suggested. The film was about the power of language. I was quite shocked when people started saying they found the story scary. I simply wanted to write a pastiche of a mystery horror story, the sort of thing I used to enjoy reading as a teenager.

*Many of your films are based around East London, where you live, and determined, like *The Black Tower*, by the features of the area. Perhaps there is a connection to London-based painters, such as Frank Auerbach and Leon Kossoff, who have worked in the city over the past half century and treated it as a field for empirical artistic research, even though their work can be almost abstract. Would you agree with Auerbach that the greater the familiarity with the subject, the greater the freedom to invent from it?*

Absolutely. You can draw whatever meaning you want out of something if you dwell on it for long enough. You become aware of detail. With *The Black Tower*, I became fascinated, in an aesthetic sense, with what the tower looked like in various lighting conditions. On a sunny day, it was like a hole cut out of the sky, an absence of image on a plinth. The film is about encompassing polarities – there is illusionism, narrative, conventional cinema and, at the other extreme, something completely abstract. The black frame could be no image at all, or could be the wall of the black tower, or a night sky.

*When your films stray from London, they do so rhetorically, as though to point out the absurdity of the exotic when the familiar is so strange. There is the exile to the field in Hertfordshire at the end of *The Girl Chewing Gum*, or the last imageless frames of *Lost Sound* which tell us we are in Palermo, when the rest of the film has taken place in a few square miles around Shoreditch. In the 'Hotel Diaries', 2001-07, you are in a series of foreign cities but always confined to the four walls of the hotel room. Vienna, in *Worst Case Scenario* of 2001-03 – mostly shot in black-and-white stills from another hotel room – seems an alien territory. Does being elsewhere dictate a different method?*

It is important for me that the work is rooted in the mundane. So even in the section of the 'Hotel Diaries' set in Palestine, when I look out of the window and over the Separation Wall, I deliberately don't show the dramatic events I am talking about. Although I shot a lot of video footage when I was there which could be seen as reportage, I am more interested in showing ordinary things and investing them with something which makes them extraordinary. So much of cinema is about spectacle that you become immune to it. I find it hard to look at a sunset in reality because it makes me think of shampoo adverts. Our pleasure in the natural world can become a cliché because of our overexposure to it through media.

*Your longest 16mm film, *Slow Glass* of 1988-91, taps into an archive of footage of the same London sites filmed over several years. It gives us the impression of watching the city altering before our eyes, which produces a sense of nostalgia and loss. A shopfront switches its sign several times within seconds. Does deconstruction, which is usually thought of as a dispassionate process, have an emotional meaning for you?*

I think it's both. I'm a bit of a sucker for the optical effect – for example, switching between an image of something by day and night. I find that very seductive. Sometimes I get a bit annoyed with myself if it begins to feel gratuitous. I first got involved with making films through doing light shows for rock bands so I was really interested in the optical effects of imagery.

*In your 2011 show at PEER in London you began looking back to previous work. You were qualifying not just the representation of the Dalston site in *The Girl Chewing Gum*, but the film itself as an established cultural artefact. Was there a sense of trepidation in tampering with a film which has become a classic of British experimental filmmaking? Or did you feel it was yours to tamper with?*

I felt I had every right to do it. But a few people were a bit shocked. I thought I would treat the film with the irreverence it deserves. I show these older works all the time. They are so familiar to me that I don't have the distance of someone seeing them for the first time. But it did really shock me when I superimposed the new onto the old images.

*What seemed staged in *The Girl Chewing Gum* takes on a documentary status. The new colour images push you and the 1970s passers-by back into a black-and-white world which is definitively past. It has become an emotive autobiographical document.*

I think that is something that runs through a lot of my recent work. Maybe because I am still showing those early films. It is a constant reminder of how long ago things were and how much things have changed. Not least because I am actually in a lot of the work. I am seeing images of myself or hearing my voice and, of course, I am getting older.

*In the series 'Hotel Diaries', it is a looped process of watching yourself filming yourself watching yourself filming etc. The political theme seems to arise serendipitously in the first film, *Frozen War*. Did you then seek it out in the subsequent parts?*

*Frozen War* was made in 2001. The second film, *Museum Piece*, was set in Berlin in 2004 and ends with me talking about 'Schindler's Lift'. The film had a serious political motivation but I was a bit concerned that people would think it was all a cheap trick, leading up to that pun. So I wanted to make another one just to qualify that. The third part, *Throwing Stones*, I made only a month after *Museum Piece*.

*That is the one in which you mention the possibility of a trilogy.*

Yes, but the reason for making that one was that Yassar Arafat had died the previous day. That is how it has been with the remaining parts. They have always been triggered by events relating to the conflicts in the Middle East and Afghanistan that have occurred while I have been travelling.

*How much foresight do you have? Are they scripted at all?*

They are not scripted, but I know what I am going to talk about and in what order. It is important what the camera is looking at while I am saying something. I have to get myself into a certain frame of mind because it is quite difficult to film and talk at the same time,



The Man Phoning Mum 2011 video

and I don't allow myself to edit. Occasionally I have done two or three retakes until I get it right.

*When you look out over the city in Palestine, there are specks of dirt on the camera lens. At the beginning of the next film you comment on how you found this regrettable. But you didn't go back and reshoot it, you chose instead to incorporate the mistake into the narrative of the next film. And that also enabled me to give the film the title Dirty Pictures.*

*What are you working on at the moment?*

A commission that is going to be filmed in Margate. I am simply going to film the sea.

*There are those lines from The Wasteland: 'On Margate Sands. / I can connect / Nothing with nothing.' In your film The Waste Land, TS Eliot reads part of the poem, but I think not those lines.*

That's funny, because the film is going to be very much about nothingness. I am interested in looking out at the vista from the window, and all you see is sea and sky. It should look like a completely naturalistic image but I'll use the same device as in *Worst Case Scenario* where it gradually becomes apparent that you're looking at the same place at different times of day within a single image.

*How long would you give yourself to make such a film?*

In this case it is dependent on the limited periods I am able to use the office from which I am planning to film. Usually it is flexible. There is a lot of sitting around waiting.

*Like waiting for the ceiling tiles in the hotel room in Palestine to start flapping around again?*

Or waiting for the unexpected. The waiting around usually pays off in the end. Making *Lost Sound*, for example, Graeme Miller and I would find a strip of tape to film and I would set up an interesting shot, but then be left waiting for things to happen in the background.

*It seems amazing that coherent sound could be retrieved from those bits of chewed-up tape found on the street.*

You are hearing the content of the tape that you're looking at. It might have had almost all the magnetic coating washed off, but we are so familiar with music that when you play it, your mind fills in the gaps.

The type of music is very quickly identifiable. But we also wanted to draw attention to the musical qualities of natural sound – sometimes you are not sure whether what you're hearing is on the tape or ambient sound. So the stop/start of the eroded material creates its own rhythm, or the ambient sound fills in the gaps.

*It is a speculative process.*

And a solitary one. Waiting for sound as much as for pictures. The clock nearby is going to chime on the hour, or there are some workers on a building site putting up scaffolding, they stop, and you are waiting for them to start up again.

*Blight was filmed at a building site along the route of the M11 Link Road in East London. As in Lost Sound, there is a musical component. The voices on the soundtrack seem to derive from found recordings but they are looped and set to music, so they seem like incantations. How did those different elements come together?*

It was a collaboration with the composer Jocelyn Pook, who also lived in that part of Leytonstone. Both our houses were being demolished – the house you see being knocked down was next door to my house. I recorded interviews with people who lived in the area, exploring memory and loss – recurring themes in my work. I asked them, for example, what they remembered about the houses they had lived in. Fragments of the interviews were chopped up quite ruthlessly, given that those people had often been baring their souls to me. Jocelyn noticed the musical qualities of some voices, which played a big part in what we selected. You are looking at discarded objects in a wasteland, an old vacuum cleaner or record player, as you hear the words 'Blue' or 'Grey with a little pink'. Or you see the rings of a tree trunk while hearing numbers, which could be someone's age, the number of the house they lived in or how many brothers and sisters they have. The question is what a number or colour can convey without being given a specific context in which its meaning declares itself.

*There are various lateral associations between word and image, or image and image, such as between the map of the motorway network and the spider's web tattoo on the arm of a builder.*

I came home one night and the house next door had been partly demolished. A wall was exposed revealing a poster for *The Exorcist*. So I decided to construct the beginning of the film in such a way that you wouldn't see the people involved in the demolition, so it looked as though there was a poltergeist in the house. Some unseen force. And then I started filming the workers, and one of them had the spider's web tattoo on his elbow, which looked like the motorway network around London. Then in one of the first interviews, I asked a woman what she remembered about the house she had lived in as a child. They had an outside toilet which she hated because it contained lots of spiders, and she would have her father go in first and kill them. So the theme of the spider emerged from these separate sources, completely by chance, and became a motif in both the image and the soundtrack. All of a sudden something like that happens which you realise you can build on. That is also why I tend to work over long periods. I'm afraid that things will not come through unless you give them time. You have to wait to find out what you need. Things radiate outwards from that serendipity. ■

**John Smith** is at Kestnergesellschaft, Hanover to 29 April and Turner Contemporary, Margate from 1 to 17 June.

**MARK PRINCE** is an artist based in Berlin.

# FILM

## John Smith: White Hole

We begin in the dark, and we end there too. John Smith's six-minute film *White Hole*, 2014, starts with a visual and interpretative void, as a black screen is accompanied by backwards speech. The visual aspect clarifies first: a white dot appears at the centre, gradually growing until we see a roughly hemispherical form and fit the sight to a mental template – a train tunnel, the film is leading us towards the brightness at its end. As we slide closer, though – and as the garbled speech stumbles along, like a deeply foreign language – it becomes apparent that this isn't quite a 'film'; or rather, it is and it isn't. The camera is filming, but slowly zooming in on a black-and-white photograph of the end of a tunnel. As we reach the mouth, the screen fills with whiteness: daylight, at last. The 'foreign language' reverses into comprehensible English – relief! – but the camera keeps moving forward and a black dot appears on the horizon. We're heading into another tunnel, or rather another photograph of a tunnel, not an exit but an entrance. And, as so often in the films Smith has made over the past 40 years, illusions are being pointedly punctured.

As we progress into the black hole – and as we watch the film, surely not coincidentally, in the recent aftermath of the celebrations of the fall of the Berlin Wall – Smith starts talking about the only time he ever visited a communist country: Poland in 1980, just after Margaret Thatcher's government took power back home. He liked it. He couldn't speak the language at all and was delightedly bemused by the shops, which offered a double barrier: not only couldn't he read their signs, but what was displayed in the window didn't correspond to what was inside. Which wasn't much, and Smith loved the fact that, as opposed to capitalist Britain, there were 'no decadent luxuries, and there was very little choice'.



John Smith  
*White Hole* 2014  
video

The Poles he spoke to, though, 'did not agree ... they seemed to be obsessed by western democracy' and, the Solidarity movement aside, sang the praises of Thatcher. They wanted the light at the other end of the tunnel, on the other side of the Iron Curtain. It seemed far away. Smith now starts talking about visiting Leipzig in 1997, just after Tony Blair's government had taken power – a moment, of course, of temporary optimism for the left. The East German city, eight years after communism began toppling, was, he said, beginning to look like the West. Yet unemployment was rising, the divide between rich and poor expanding, and a new East German aphorism was going around: people were saying they could see 'a tunnel at the end of the light'. The light is snuffed, the film starts again, and this time we know what's coming.

The work of Smith's that *White Hole* recalls most, for me, is *Om*, 1986, a similarly compressed, self-unveiling reflection on the violent nationalism beneath Thatcherism's bucolic, heritage-clad facade, in which what appears to be a Buddhist monk sitting amid rising fumes of incense turns out to be a thuggish, cigarette-smoking skinhead in a barbershop, getting a haircut. The distance from barbers to Poles is not a great one, and the link is a wilful, hopeful misreading. The Britain that elected Thatcher, *Om* suggests, couldn't see neoliberalism's retracted claws. Eastern Europe unsurprisingly wanted what it saw, distantly, in

the West, while leftists like Smith wanted the less that they had. Each side, we now know, was looking into a faulty mirror of its hopes. The train in *White Hole* has crashed through the looking glass.

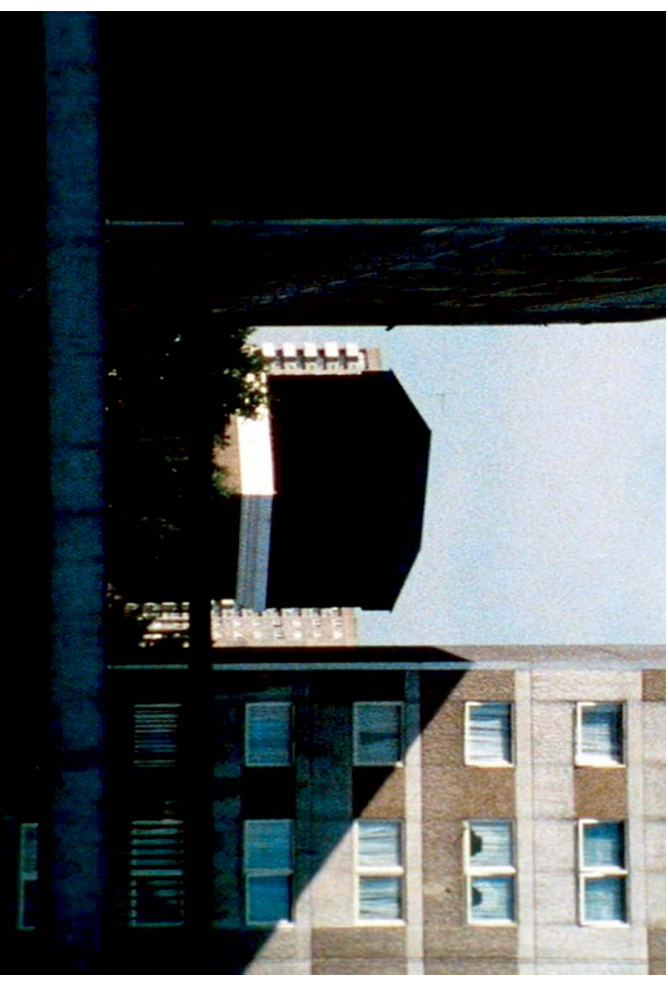
And then there is the loop, which might suggest an even more pessimistic message: that as a species we are easily seduced, doomed to misinterpret and to rush towards an illusory light, to grip hold of what seems better than what we have, though we barely understand it. The 'light at the end' might read as the light seen, legendarily, by the dying. Under these auspices, the job of art, Smith's cogent work suggests, is cognitive enlightenment so that we don't get fooled again. But his light turns dark, and his film goes round in circles; it is nearly two decades since *Om* and here is Smith, making a closely related point. What might console, in a limited way, is the deep formal and inferential gratification of *White Hole*, a film of such impeccable economy – a few minutes, a mirroring structure, two photographs, a bit of chat, decades of geopolitical change mordantly trapped between – that you can't believe it didn't already exist; that it wasn't always out there, waiting to arrive. ■

John Smith's *White Hole* is installed at Tyneside Cinema, Newcastle to 11 January.

MARTIN HERBERT is a writer based in Tunbridge Wells and Berlin.



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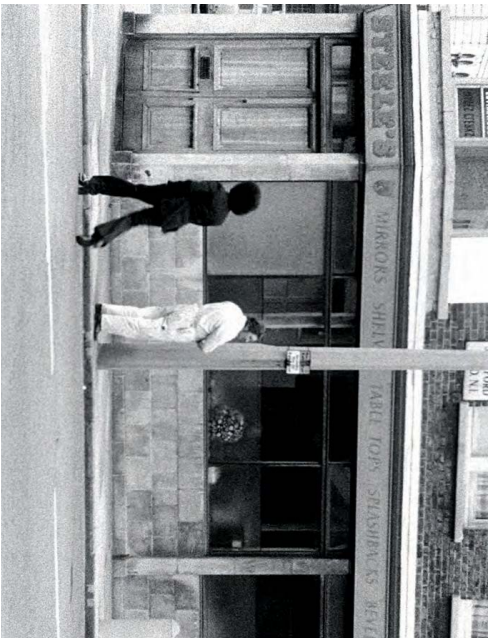


Opposite page: John Smith, *Worst Case Scenario*, 2003–2003, stills from a black-and-white and color film in 35 mm transferred to video, 18 minutes.  
Above: John Smith, *The Black Tower*, 1988–87, still from a color film in 16 mm, 24 minutes.

## Funny Games

START CONVERSATIONS WITH JOHN SMITH

John Smith's films and videos, made over the past four decades, are puzzles that won't be solved. Just when the logic of their structural precision begins to seem familiar to those acquainted with British and North American experimental filmmaking, Smith's dark wit diverts the viewer into unexpected and unruly networks of meaning and absurdity. Smith studied at the Royal College of Art (RCA) in London and is indebted to the Brechtian outlook of the London Film-Makers' Co-op, of which he was a member; his explorations of perception and narration open up cinematic possibilities that remain strikingly prescient and relevant in the digital age. While his work has recently migrated from its roots in London's East End to the artist's travels through the border zones of the Middle East and Cyprus, it has likewise found new, far-flung exhibition venues, from the recent Berlin Biennale to moma PS1 in New York and the RCA, where a retrospective was held; a DVD compilation of his work will be released by LUX this month. Committed to defamiliarizing what we see and hear but never offering easy experiences of resolution, Smith has produced an important body of work that reorients our critical bearings as the outpouring of images becomes ever more promiscuous. Tate Modern curator Stuart Comer talks to the filmmaker about his deft use of strategic ambiguity and disorderly humor.



**STUART COMER:** Documentary films are allegedly about evidence; in your films, the evidence itself often functions as the “crime.” For instance, in one of your best-known works, *The Girl Chewing Gum* [1976], the voice-over narration, the linguistic clues, are completely misleading with respect to the image.

**JOHN SMITH:** When I made *The Girl Chewing Gum*, I became aware of just how powerful the word can be in determining how we understand an image. The film is composed of only two shots, and what you see for the first eleven minutes is just a documentary shot of people on the street in East London in the 1970s. But what you hear is a voice “directing” all of the action that happens, as if it were a fictional movie being filmed.

**SC:** It’s now recognized as a crucial precedent for so much work today that is concerned with scrambling the line between fact and fiction. How did you arrive at such an early conception of both narrative and formal subterfuge?

**JS:** Well, I’m not sure, but when I put the voice-over onto *The Girl Chewing Gum*, it was a revelation. I became fascinated by just how ambiguous and malleable documentary images can be, and by how powerfully a voice-over can affect the way we see those images, even when we know that the voice-over is fictitious. After I finished school at the RCA in 1977, I was asked to make a thirty-minute documentary for Thames Television, part of a series of six documentaries held together only by the fact that none of the people who made them had made a film for television before.

And I thought, “OK, I’ve been offered the opportunity to make a film that will be screened on mainstream TV, I’m going to make an antidocumentary. I’m going to make a film that actually undermines documentary while at the same time is one.” I wanted to work with a subject that would be familiar to viewers, where there would be an expectation about how that subject might be addressed, so I decided to make a film that revolved around living in high-rise housing. At that time in Britain, the utopian vision of social housing in apartment blocks was falling apart, and everyone knew about the issues involved.

**SC:** That was the ostensible subject.

**JS:** Yes, but in fact my main aim was to pull apart ideas about documentary, to expose how documentary “evidence” could be shaped to fit the filmmaker’s agenda. I recorded people talking about the paces where they lived, and like all of us, they had both positive and negative things to say. I edited the film so that you didn’t really have any idea whether it was a good place or a bad place, where people were making what could appear to be contradictory statements about the place, although of course they’re not contradictory at all. They’re only contradictory in the

**Open to page 208, Smith, 7 minutes, plus a color still from a black-and-white film in 16 mm, 12 minutes.**

**The page John Smith, from a color film in 16 mm, 7 minutes, plus for “Associations.”**

**“Much of my work makes propositions about images that we objectively know are untrue.”**  
—John Smith

simplistic terms that a second-rate conventional television documentary would deal in.

**SC:** Why did you feel the need to go beyond the structuralist approaches to film and art that held sway at the time?

**JS:** From the beginning, although I was very interested in the ideas around, for want of a better word, structural film or materialist film, I was also always interested in narrative. There was always an element of humor and play in my work. And there was a lot more of that in the American work—Michael Snow, Hollis Frampton, Owen Land—than there was in the British work.

**SC:** For example, when I first saw Snow’s *Wavelength* [1967], that was an incredibly formative moment, to see the narrative elements in that film—something I’d been trying to do myself already, not knowing that other people were working in that way, trying to integrate what were essentially narrative episodes inside a formal structure and to create a tension between these moments of illusion and the constant reference to the fact that we’re looking at something that is constructed.

**SC:** This element of play in your work allows you to undermine the same rules that you use to structure your films.

**JS:** Oh, absolutely. In every new piece you’re creating a new language, and in order to create a language, you have to create rules. So I’m very interested in making work where you set up a framework within which things operate, where the viewer gradually gets to learn the language, gets to anticipate what’s going to happen next—and then expectation is thwarted. The rules change. Unpredictable things happen. A new language develops.

**SC:** Were you looking at Surrealist film?

**JS:** One of my most magical cinema memories, actu-

ally, is of the first time I ever saw a Surrealist film. I went to an all-night screening at the Electric Cinema in Notting Hill Gate when I was about seventeen, and it was wonderful, because I’d never seen a British film before. I went to sleep in *Examining Anger* and then woke up in Franju’s *Judex*. I think, and then went back to sleep and woke up in Boonczyk’s *Coro, The d’Amour*. There was this fantastic merging of different things.

I only found out later about the story of Breton and the Surrealists going to the cinema at any time during the program, and once they actually started to work out what the narrative was, that was time to leave and move on to the next cinema.

**SC:** It’s a great story, because like those kinds of ludic experiences, your work is also undeniably funny.

**JS:** The humor comes out of my interest in how different things have different meanings depending on the context in which they’re presented. An enormous amount of my work, usually through words, makes propositions about images that we objectively know are untrue. But because of the power of language, it’s easy for us to imagine the scenario that’s being described. So humor comes out of that. I think, where you’re looking at something that’s ambiguous and being given an alternative reading for it. It’s not a premeditated strategy at all.

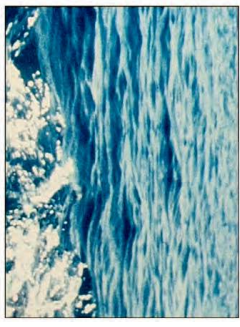
That being said, I’m really pleased that the work does have humor, not least because it’s important to me to get a reaction to the work. If you make a film that is funny, you get an audible reaction from the audience—you know that people have tuned in.

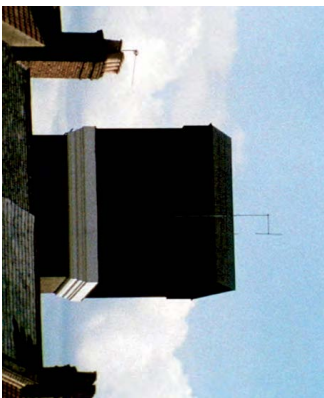
**SC:** It’s interesting to go back to another early film like *Associations* [1975], which is basically a cinematic rubeus using magazine images to create visual puns. Although it uses representational advertising images in a pop manner, they are chained to this linguistic game.

**JS:** All I can say is that I have always had a penchant for a bad pun, which I can’t quite resist. Wordplay is just one way of playing with meaning. I was reassured to find that I was not alone, when I got to see Owen Land’s work. I discovered that both of us explore puns to the extreme and squeeze out every last drop of possible meaning from our material.

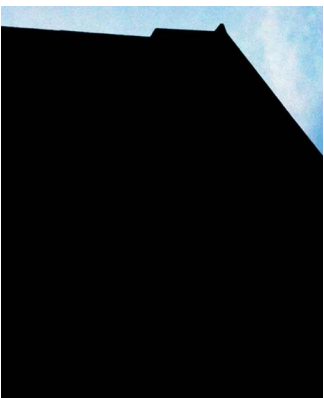
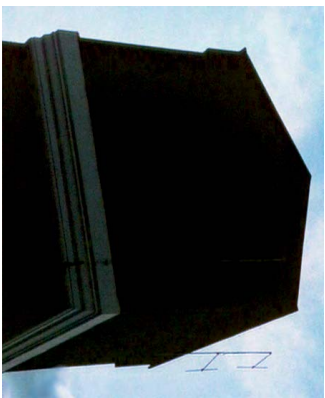
**SC:** How did that approach relate to something like *The Black Tower* [1985–87]?

**JS:** Well, almost all my work comes out of personal experience, things that I might encounter in everyday life and imagine in a different context. *The Black Tower* came about because that was a building I could see from the bedroom of the house I moved into in Leptonstone in East London in the early 1980s. At the end of the film, there is a shot across a railway track and a graveyard. You can see the tower in the distance, and that was actually the

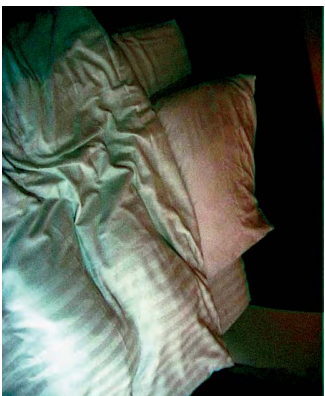




Left: John Smith, *The Black Tower*, 1993, color, 16-mm film, 15.6 min., 24 minutes.



Right: from top, John Smith, *5x6*, 1995, color, 16-mm film, 8 minutes; later *Hotel Diaries*, 8, 2007, still from a color video, 9 minutes; John Smith, *Knowing*, 2007, still from a color video, 1.5 minutes; John Smith, *Frozen War/Hotel Diaries 2*, 2011, still from a color video, 1.5 minutes.



**“In *The Black Tower*, I wanted to shift between representation and abstraction so that the black we see on the screen could just be an absence of image. But it could just as easily be a perfectly represented night sky. They would look exactly the same.” —John Smith**

view from my bedroom window when I moved into this place.

The “narrative” of *The Black Tower* is about somebody who notices a building. The building follows him around, he keeps seeing it in different places, and it eventually leads to his mental breakdown. But it comes out of that very real and ordinary experience most of us have when we travel in an area where there is a distinctive tall building that pops up in unpredictable places, wherever you might be.

I filmed the tower from as many different positions as I could, and I framed it so that it appeared as though it were in a different place in each of the shots. So, for example, it’s actually in the city, but at one time I see it over some trees, and I frame it so the only other thing you can see around it is trees—suggesting that the tower has gone to the country. I constructed a narrative around the places that these images suggested. One image showed the tower next to a hospital, so I knew my protagonist would get sick. Another showed it behind a high wall, so I decided he would visit a prison. Another showed it looming over a graveyard, so I knew that he had to die. The narrative is a deliberate pastiche of a supernatural short story; the specific details were not important to me. I was more interested in the power of stories generally, how stories can determine the reading of images and how they can transport us to imaginary places.

**SC:** *The Black Tower*, then, seems like a bridge between earlier films, like *The Gift Opening Game*, and later projects like “Hotel Diaries” (2001–2007). One becomes highly aware of the frame as a border between inside and outside, between us and them—there’s a sense of paranoia, even surveillance, that really builds throughout the film.

**JS:** Yes, *The Black Tower* is probably the first film

where I’m dealing largely with what you don’t see and what’s actually excluded from one’s vision. The film restricts visual information in two different ways. One is through framing. I film in very tight close-up at times, so although you’re looking at a representational image, you’re not on a plane of what it represents, because you’re just looking at a flat color field. So, for example, you might be looking at a clear blue sky, but there’s just a sky-blue surface. Or you might see something that looks exactly like that same surface, and then a rearpaper gets placed on it, and you realize it’s a kitchen work top of the same color.

The other kind of not-revealing has to do with darkness. For nearly half of *The Black Tower*, there’s no image on the screen. The image is completely black. I wanted to shift between representation and abstraction so that the black we see on the screen could just be an absence of image. It could just be a black film leader. But it could just as easily be a photographic image of a perfectly represented night sky, or the surface of the wall of a black building in the middle of the day in bright sunlight. All of those images would look exactly the same.

**SC:** I love the persistent idea of the monochrome in the film.

**JS:** In some ways it’s my most extreme film. At one end it’s completely naturalistic, illusionistic mainstream cinema, and at the other it’s total abstraction. I was trying to make a piece that moves backward and forward between those two things. We get psychologically involved in a story but are then constantly reminded that in fact we’re looking at something that’s complete artifice. So there’s this contrasting and releasing going on in the film.

**SC:** That oscillation seems related to the kind of urbanism that your films propose, of engaging with the fact of a city or location—and then with its depiction and representation. It’s an investigation of the politics of spaces and pictures. And I think it bears mentioning that in your newer work, you have increasingly been addressing specific political situations and global concerns that are quite far removed from the everyday in the East End.

**JS:** Yes. In “Hotel Diaries,” I use my hotel rooms as found film sets and find ways of manipulating the meanings of the objects, pictures, and furnishings that I find there to make metaphorical connections with events occurring in the world outside. So although “Hotel Diaries” addresses issues that are outside my own experience, it’s also centered on my familiarity with the mundane minutiae of these different hotel rooms. These works come out of the fact that because of the pervasive horrors of the world, all the ways that are happening in the world at the moment, everything inevitably reminds you of them.

**SC:** Where was the first “Hotel Diaries” shot?

**JS:** In Ireland in October 2001. So it was only a few weeks after 9/11. It came out of a very immediate, traumatic experience, and I happened to have my video camera with me, and I decided I was going to start filming and talking. It was a completely spontaneous piece of work.

**SC:** That actually raises a question about shifts in technology. During the Film-Makers’ Co-op years, you were working primarily with 16-mm film. Now, like many artists, you’ve made a shift to video, which is a more portable medium and allows you to work in a very different way. Was that a natural transition for you?

**JS:** Sort of. I never made any video work at all until 1993, when I made a series of three video pieces that ended up as one longer piece called *Home State* [1993–94], which is similar in form to “Hotel Diaries.” It’s three long shots, each about half an hour long, where the shot is framed mainly in close-up, traveling around the interior of a house that I lived in at the time.

But I think the reason I started working with video had indeed very much to do with technology. I’ve always worked on my own; I don’t usually like working with other people. So I rarely worked with sound, and I rarely always filmed and recorded my sound at separate times. When portable, affordable video came along, where you could get really good images and record sound simultaneously, I was excited. It enabled me to be spontaneous and work very quickly, which was a refreshing change from the long-winded process of 16-mm production.

I’ve been working entirely on video for some years now, but in two quite different ways. There are some pieces that retain that spontaneity of video, but in others I’m using it in as close a way to film as I can, especially now that HD has become affordable.

**SC:** For many filmmakers associated with the Co-op or with structuralism, it is a real problem to show their films transferred to video. Is that something that bothers you?

**JS:** For most of my work, it isn’t an issue at all. Although it’s about construction, most of my work is not concerned with the physicality of the material. That being said, there are a number of films I cannot bear to show on video—those that are edited in camera, like *Leading Light* [1975] and my first *Hacked-up Marshes* film [1977], which is shot on a Bolex camera; when you start a Bolex, the first frame of the film is slightly overexposed. So whenever the camera starts and stops, you get this slight flash on every cut. In these films, the materiality of the medium is important—I just can’t bear to see those flash frames transferred onto video; they make no sense that way.

**SC:** Much of your work in the past few years has



John Smith, *Flag Mountain*, 2010. Still from a color HD video, 8 minutes.

“Hotel Diaries’ comes out of the fact that because of the pervasive horrors of the world, all the wars that are happening in the world at the moment, everything and every detail inevitably reminds you of them.”  
—John Smith

been seen as often in exhibitions and galleries as it has in the cinema, notably in the recent Berlin Biennale and in your survey at the KCA in 2010.

**JS:** For me, the big issue in relation to gallery exhibition is that the majority of my work is linear, durational work, and ideally I want people to come in at the beginning and stay right until the end, and I certainly don’t want them coming in at the middle and leaving in the middle or, even worse, coming in at the middle and leaving a minute and a half later. So the fact that my films are shown a lot in galleries now has certainly influenced my recent work. For example, I much prefer *Flag Mountain* [2010] as a gallery installation than as a linear film—it was conceived with a looped exhibition format in mind. The sound track of that film, which was shot in Nicosia, Cyprus, starts off with the sound of a Muslim call to prayer, transitions to the Turkish national anthem, and ends with bells from a Greek Orthodox church. So if we look at it as a linear work, it ends with Christianity, that’s the resolution. But that’s certainly not something I’m trying to suggest in the film. What I’m trying to suggest, rather, is a continuous dialogue—or a lack thereof, but a kind of ongoing back-and-forth—between two different communities, whether political, ethnic, or religious. So the continuous looping,

with no titles and no apparent beginning or end, is crucial to the reading of the work.

**SC:** How does this extremely open-ended form square with your fascination with didactics? *Shepherd’s Delight* [1980–84], for instance, takes the form of a lecture. There is an idea of pedagogy, or even something official or authoritarian that you’re taking the piss out of.

**JS:** My films are very anti-authoritarian in general. When the work starts to become authoritarian itself, it has to eat its own tail. It has to destroy itself.

I was thinking recently about Brecht’s ideas about alienation, the lasting impact that they had on me, and the structural filmmaker’s idea that you must always draw attention to construction. For a long time, I wondered whether my obsessive need to reveal artifice and construction might just come from a kind of accidental indoctrination, almost a religion attained because of the time I happened to go to film school. But then I realized it’s much simpler. On a purely visceral level, the film and video work by other people that engages me the most is the work that makes me aware of its construction and draws attention to its artifice. And it’s not necessarily to do with the physical space, it might be virtual, it might just have to do with somebody designing something along on a time line. Forgetting about the politics of it all, which I nevertheless still agree with, it’s ironic that the thing that excites me most about the critical strategy of alienation, or barring the device, is that it engages me in such a physical way.

**SC:** Your interest in the way film is installed, the way it engages bodily experience, harks back to the Co-op years, when there were also a lot of projection-based performances. Is that type of expanded cinema something you ever engaged?

**JS:** Well, only in that before I ever made my own films I used to do light shows for bands. That was how I got interested in filmmaking.

**SC:** Were they psychedelic light shows?

**JS:** Yes, from the age of seventeen, I used to do the light shows at the local college with a couple of friends. When the student union had money, they used to get really big bands in and pay us to do a light show every couple of weeks. My friend’s father ran a photographic shop in Dalston, down the road from where we are sitting now in Hackney. And one of the things that he sold was ex-government, ex-army photographic equipment. It meant that we could get hold of 16-mm film projectors for almost nothing, and also found footage, instructional documentary films with names like *Your Skin or Your Hair and Scalp*, which were quite fun, as well as having live action, they’d also have animation of how hair follicles grow and things like that.

So in addition to all the liquid slides and the graphic or patterned projections, one of the things

we used to do was project 16-mm film loops from multiple projectors, and I was just amazed at how I could select a little bit of film to make a loop from one of these found-footage films, show several loops on several different projectors, and all of a sudden, completely accidentally, all of these relationships would occur between one image and the next. I discovered that you can put any two images together with each other, and it’s going to create a meaning. Coincidences will always occur. By projecting images next to each other or superimposing them, I discovered a process of live editing.

In fact, the first 16-mm film I made was a film called *Triangles* [1972], which was an abstract animation cut to the Velvet Underground song “White Light/White Heat.” I made the film from loops that I had shot for the light show, three little painted black-and-white cardboard triangles that I animated. When I converted it into a single-screen film, I put different loops of film through a printer and superimposed them. But I also used exactly the same sort of process. I was using in the light show, which involved projecting different black-and-white high-contrast film loops through colored gels, spinning wheels of color gels, which changed the colors and alternated colors—superimposing two colors makes a third color and all of that. So it was very simple.

**SC:** Did that ever bring you into contact with people like Gustav Metzger and the Boyle Family, who were artists but also famously produced light environments for the likes of Soft Machine and Jimi Hendrix?

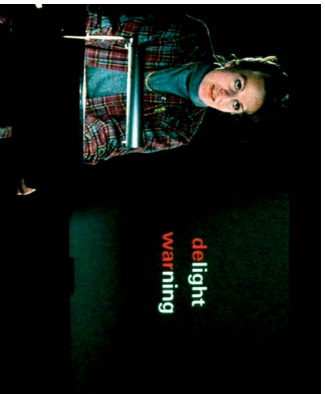
**JS:** No, but I was really interested in Mark Boyle. At the time, I bought this book about him called *Journey to the Surface of the Earth* [1970]. There are fantastic descriptions of many of the things the Boyle Family did, like the “sensual laboratory,” for which they projected blown-up details of the human body as part of a live performance, as well as the light shows with Soft Machine, of course, which were more like what I was doing.

I have always cited Trilium’s *Day for Night* as the inspiration for *The Girl Chasing Guns*. But actually, I was recently looking at the Boyle book again and rediscovered a description of a performance that recounts how he invited people to a backstreet somewhere, and they went into the back entrance of a building and found themselves in this auditorium, like a little cinema, in a gallery, theater-type space with curtains across the screen at the front. And when everybody sat down, the curtains were opened to reveal the view through a shop window onto a street. So the audience watched what was going on in the street: real life as performance. □

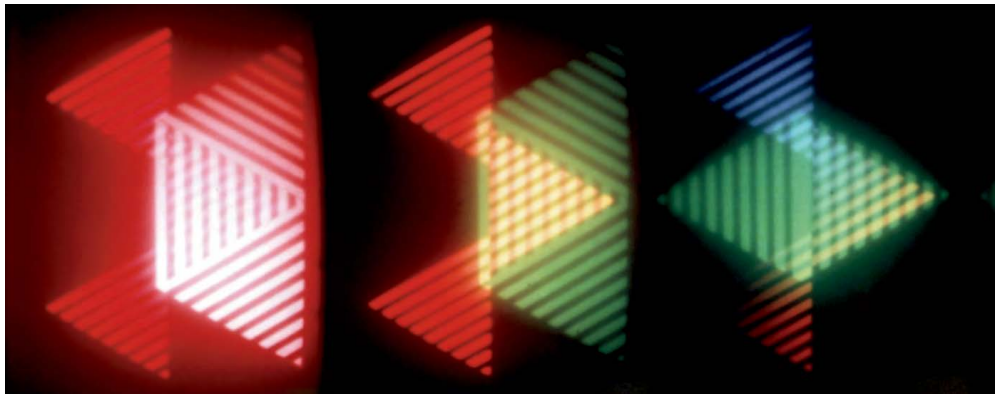
John Smith, *Ylvis* Association, The Girl Chasing Guns, and On can be seen at the Zach Lieber Fund for a new multimedia artwork by Smith will feature in a solo exhibition at TCA in London in October.



John Smith, *Shepherd’s Delight*, 1980–84. Color film, 35 minutes.



John Smith, *Wrennis*, 1972. Still from color film in 16 mm, 57 minutes.



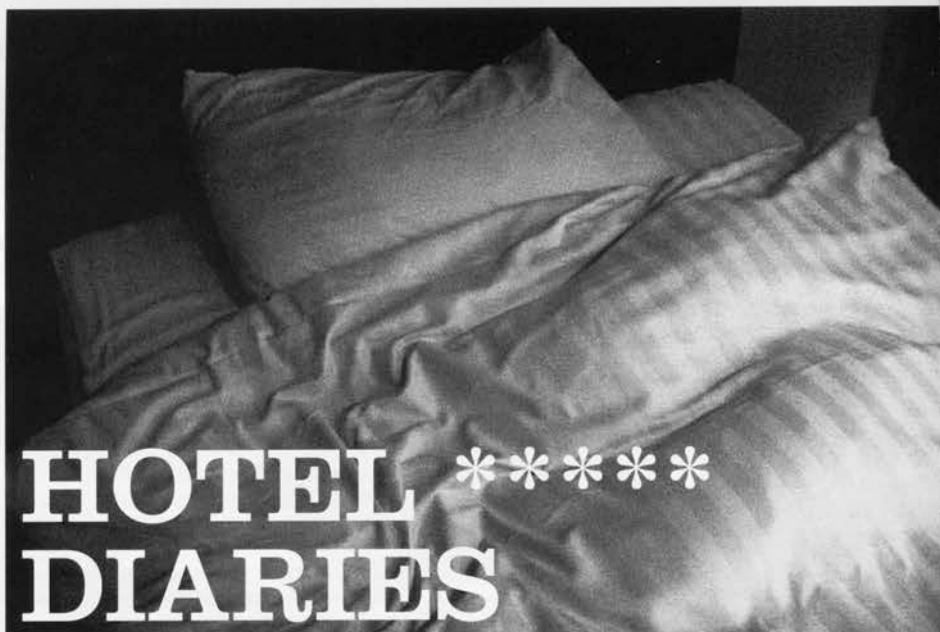
It's tempting to write about *Hotel Diaries* in the way that this series of films seems to have started. Turn on the computer/camera and start writing/filming what immediately strikes you. I'm in a train in upstate New York and have just finished re-viewing John Smith's series of films made in hotel rooms over six years. I was occasionally distracted by the Hudson River running alongside the railway track, thinking about the diary film and why it seems to be such an intrinsically American form. Something to do with Thoreau recording the seasons out at Walden, or Brakhage living rough up in the wilds of Colorado, or Jonas Mekas chronicling the New York art and indie film world. We don't really do diary films in Britain, do we?

Actually, these aren't diaries in any conventional sense: they're more like nocturnes, in which Smith ruminates, apparently talking to himself while filming in a series of hotel rooms that chart his travels, mainly around film festivals. Like almost all of his films they offer a carefully crafted nonchalance, a studied lack of pretension. The décor of hotel rooms is a running theme: he is infuriated by the uselessness of a flimsy folding suitcase stand. A tray with bottle and glass provides an attractive ready-made composition, which he's spoiled by leaving his debris next to it. Why, he wonders, are Irish hotel rooms becoming blander, more interchangeable with rooms in a dozen European cities he has visited?

American pastoral the tone certainly isn't. It's more Pooterish, a deliberate cultivation of the everyday traveller's minor joys and woes. We learn little of what has taken Smith to these rooms in six countries, since the festival screening of his films – presumably? – remains off-screen. But cumulatively the persona Smith is creating develops, as we learn what intrigues and irritates him, and come to share his delight in the epiphanies of the solitary traveller. Why does a late-night television programme suddenly freeze on screen? This sends Smith off on an extended reflection about what might have happened back in London; one that's part-comic as his speculations grow wilder, but also has an undertow of pathos. Might this be how we learn of catastrophe, from a malfunctioning television screen in a hotel room? Maybe this is closer to Edward Hopper's edgy nocturnes.

There's also an extraordinary moment in a German hotel when Smith's nocturnal exploration is interrupted by a startling encounter with himself, as he enters a mirrored lift. It's impossible to know whether this is staged, but its *doppelgänger* effect (yes, it is Berlin) is as eerie as Hollis Frampton's confrontation with the image of his younger self in *nostalgia*.

I'm putting off the inevitable – the reason I first responded so strongly to *Hotel Diaries* when I saw it in a cinema screening as a feature-shaped 'real film'. For this is a series of films that trace Smith's growing concern about political events in the wider world. That frozen image occurred in October 2001 during a report on American and British air strikes in Afghanistan. All the horrors of the Iraq invasion take place off-screen during subsequent segments of his travels, but remain very much on Smith's mind. The fate of the Palestinian people amid the 'war on terror' haunts him, as he reflects on the comfort of his surroundings. *Hotel Diaries* may be our very own one-man version of the French and German collective films *Loi de Vietnam*



### John Smith makes room for reflection

By Ian Christie



and *Germany in Autumn*, chronicling our sense of distance from urgent events far away in which we're implicated but which we seem powerless to effect. Smith's 'ordinary man' can't ignore the headlines that reach him on hotel television, even though he is moved not to visit the Jewish Museum in Berlin out of a sense of revulsion at the news of the 2004 assault on Fallujah. Eventually, it seems inevitable that we find ourselves with him in a hotel room in Palestine, determined to see for himself.

The surreal epiphanies haven't stopped: in fact, one of the strangest takes place in that Bethlehem Inn hotel room. But the film has taken on a cool anger as Smith recounts what he has seen on the border between Israel and the Palestinian enclave. And the grim view from his hotel window does indeed speak, or show, for itself without any need of commentary. The mundane surroundings of hotel rooms have now come to seem like comfortably padded cells that cocoon us from too much reality, like the pods that E. M. Forster imagined future beings inhabiting in 'The Machine Stops'.

I've been watching some of Straub-Huillet's later films and am reminded of Jean-Marie Straub insisting that their early rigorously formal films about long-dead art and artists were a protest against the Vietnam War, and the incredulity this provoked in some quarters. Smith, I'm sure, would have no qualms about his film being regarded as propaganda on behalf of the Palestinians. But it's also propaganda on behalf of film as a vital way of connecting with the world. A dirty lens matters to a filmmaker, as it should, while a wall of 'separation' built to encircle a captive people should matter to the world.

Visit [www.johnsmithfilms.com](http://www.johnsmithfilms.com)

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Images courtesy of the artist, LUX London.

# John Smith: The Man Girl Phoning Chewing Mum Gum

John Smith interviewed by Pia Bolognesi

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Last year marked an important anniversary for *The Girl Chewing Gum* (1976), a film that made history in the structural/materialist movement, but John Smith's films, videos, and installations are hard to classify. The British artist studied in the 1970s at the Royal College of Art, after which he became involved in the activities of the London Filmmakers Co-op. Inspired in his formative years by Conceptual art and structural film, but also fascinated by the immersive power of narrative and the spoken word, he has developed an extensive body of work that subverts the perceived boundaries between documentary and fiction, representation and abstraction. Often rooted in everyday life, Smith's meticulously crafted films and videos rework and transform reality, playfully exploring and exposing the language of cinema.

**PIA BOLOGNESI:** *The Girl Chewing Gum* has turned forty—forty-one to be precise. Has anything changed in the way you perceive this work today?

**JOHN SMITH:** When I made the film as a twenty-three-year-old art student, it never occurred to me that people might still be watching it forty years later. At the time it was important to me that the film should impose its ideas upon a scene of everyday London life, so I deliberately chose a very ordinary location for the shoot. The only prerequisite was that the location should contain a street clock (so that I could "direct" the hands of the clock to move) and a cinema (because the film was conceived as a critique of mainstream illusionistic film). I essentially wanted the location to appear familiar and mundane. The passage of time has of course added a completely new dimension to the reading of the work. A film that documents the banalities of everyday life in 1976 now looks like an exotic record of a strange and long-lost era, where ordinary people in the street have been transformed by the passage of time into costumed character actors. *The Girl Chewing Gum* is regularly shown in schools and colleges, and in recent years I have been amused to discover several online blogs written by students. One of these stated that the film was made before color film was invented, while another asserted that it was made before filmmakers learned how to edit properly, explaining why it consists of only two shots. Reading these interpretations made me realize how long ago 1976 must seem to a fifteen-year-old—almost as long ago as 1895, when the Lumière brothers first presented their films. Regularly being present at screenings of *The Girl Chewing Gum* and my other older works makes me very aware of the passage of time in relation to my own life, especially as my own presence features in many of the works. I was recently slightly horrified to realize that I am now more than half as old as cinema itself!

**PB:** In 2011 you shot *The Man Phoning Mum*, a sort of remake of *The Girl Chewing Gum*,

thirty-five years later. You came back to the same location, a street corner in Dalston, and filmed again, superimposing this new footage upon the original from 1976. This process is interesting for so many reasons: the changes in the landscape as it relates to the gentrification of London's East End; the coexistence of these two different moments that comes alive in the body of the image; the discrepancy in media formats, just to mention a few aspects. And here again, as in most of your films and videos, there's a pragmatic structural precision that expresses itself through the images. This time the superimposition is perfect in its discordance between 16mm and HD.

**JS:** The overlaying of the two distinct media (black-and-white 16mm film and color HD video) is an important aspect of *The Man Phoning Mum*, as it operates on several levels: formal, aesthetic, literal, lyrical. For me it is as if the materiality of film is attempting to break through the smooth surface of the digital video. I really like the way in which the grainy gray people from 1976 accidentally cross paths with their crisp and colourful HD counterparts from 2011, each treading on the paving stones that have remained the same for thirty-five years while the architecture has changed around them. I have a fantasy that maybe there is one person who happened to walk in front of my camera who appears in both the 1976 and 2011 recordings, oblivious in *The Man Phoning Mum* to their chance on-screen meeting with their younger self.

**PB:** I've often thought about *The Girl Chewing Gum* as dialectically connected with *Projection Instructions* by Morgan Fisher, from the same year. Do you think they're somehow related?

**JS:** Certainly, a primary function of both films is to draw direct attention to the cinematic apparatus, albeit by very different means. Although they expand in various directions, they are both based on developments of a single, simple concept. I certainly feel empathy with Fisher's film, perhaps because both works in different ways combine cold formal ideas with a warmer inclusion of a human presence. In general I feel rather more affinity with the American experimental filmmakers of the 1960s and 1970s than with the British of the same period, as the Americans' works contain elements of fragmented narrative and humor that were largely missing from the artists' films produced on this side of the Atlantic.

**PB:** The tension between documentary and fiction is clear in your works. You also deal with how the formal structure exceeds pure structuralism to open itself to the narrative element, to the perceptive graft, which is sometimes ironic and playful, and at other times leans toward temporal and spatial abstraction, creating a sense of linguistic disorientation. You compound the visual level with the addition of words. How do you create this multiplicity of levels despite the fact that you adhere to such a precise and conclusive form?

**JS:** It is very important to me that the films contain the range of elements that you have mentioned. The kind of film work that engages me the most contains a degree of disorientation, where the viewer is not always

sure what it is that he or she is watching. So I aim to make work that is hard to classify within a particular genre, combining diverse and unexpected approaches and visual and auditory languages within a single film. It is often the combination of images and sounds used for both representational and abstract purposes within a single work that gives that work its dynamic. Shifting the emphasis of a film between narrative/representational and formal/abstract concerns encourages the viewer to actively engage rather than passively consume. But my films aren't generally conceived with this degree of complexity. They usually start out as quite simple ideas that expand and develop organically over time, particularly during editing, where ideas are frequently triggered by chance events and accidents that occurred during filming. The street scene in *The Girl Chewing Gum* was of course largely shaped by chance, as I had no idea what would happen in front of my camera when I started filming the single ten-minute shot. It was during the making of this film that I truly came to appreciate the potential of chance, and how accidents that might at first seem annoying can stimulate new directions for a work. For example, the boy who we are told has robbed the post office only exists because there was an alarm bell ringing in the street for the whole duration of the filming and I needed to justify its presence on the soundtrack. When I got the film back from the laboratory and got ready to plan the spoken directions that would later be added, I was very irritated to discover that I had zoomed in on the clock face in a very jerky and unprofessional manner. It was of course something that I would have to live with, but as I am a bit of a technical perfectionist I found it extremely annoying. Eventually I realized that there was an obvious way out of the problem—I was the director of the film and could therefore be in complete control of my material. So before the shot zoomed in on the clock I added the verbal command "I want the clock to move jerkily toward me" to the soundtrack. To my great relief the clock responded to my request obediently and did exactly what I asked.

# JOHN SMITH: EVERYDAY DISRUPTIONS

BY MARK PRINCE

VIEWED AGAINST THE background of contemporary art, the work of the British experimental filmmaker John Smith reveals how self-oriented the current context has become. This is a curious paradox given that Smith, born in 1952, emerged as an artist in early 1970s England under the influence of Structuralist filmmaking, which aimed to dismantle the illusionism on which film is based. But Smith's films are also rooted in British Conceptual art of the late 1960s and early '70s, which sought to scrap all the prevailing templates of art-making and begin over again from first principles.

Smith's work reminds us that early Conceptualism involved taking art out of the picture frame, and the frame out of the gallery, to engage the unmediated environment through performance, Happenings and a use of the found object. His recourse to primary experience for his material exposes the reliance of today's artists—both younger and of his own generation—on webs of quotation to reinforce their authority. In contrast, Smith seems liberated from the circular bind of art about art, despite his concern with investigating how film manipulates us.

Considered together, the three recent solo exhibitions of Smith's films in Germany—at the Kestnergesellschaft in Hannover, the Neue Museum Weserburg in Bremen and Tanya Leighton Gallery in Berlin—provided a 40-year overview of a career in which a painstaking accumulation of footage, complex editing and long periods of creative gestation have produced an average of four or five films per decade. The three exhibitions constituted a salutary argument against the art market's demands for production.

Smith typically begins with the observation of his immediate sur-

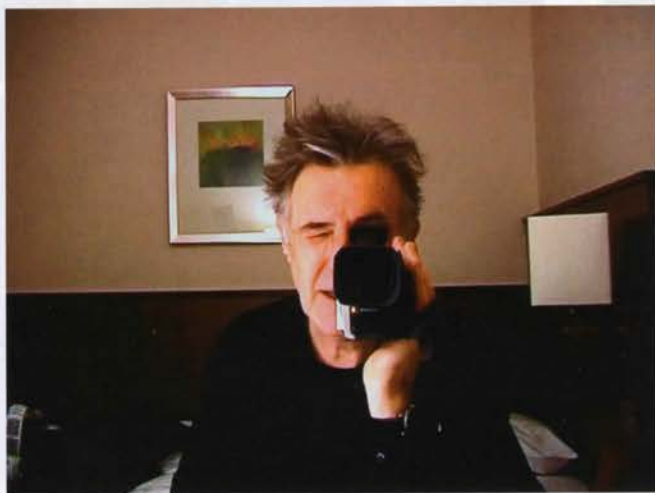
roundings: he walks the streets, or looks out of the window, and films what he sees. Artifice—in the form of radical editing, manipulations of temporal perception and switches between documentary and fictional modes—is then applied in the cutting room. His most celebrated work, *The Girl Chewing Gum* (1976, 12 minutes), shows the comings and goings on an unexceptional street corner in Dalston, East London. This scene is transformed by Smith's voiceover, which makes it appear that he is directing the passersby, a conceit as comic as it is temporally disorienting. Our habitual suspension of disbelief depends on accepting the film's artifice for the purposes of emotional engagement.

This illusion can only be sustained if we insist on seeing the urban traffic as submissive to Smith's commands. The absurd correlation between voice and action is finally rendered spatial, as the camera's view is exiled to an empty field in the Hertfordshire countryside, from which Smith claims to have been narrating what has preceded.

We are left to choose between interpreting Smith's voiceover as evidence of the narrator's ability to cause events or as the disillusioned words of someone who has already seen the film. It is also, however, a metaphor for artistic solipsism, which makes the film itself a fable about an artist's ability to create a microcosmic world in which all the rules are his.



John Smith: *The Girl Chewing Gum*, 1976, film, 12 minutes. Images this article courtesy Tanya Leighton Gallery, Berlin.



Above, three stills from the seven-part film series "Hotel Diaries," 2001-07. Top to bottom, *Dirty Pictures*, 2007, 14 minutes; *Pyramids/Skunk*, 2006-07, 16 minutes; and *Throwing Stones*, 2004, 11 minutes.

Opposite, five stills from *The Black Tower*, 1985-87, film, 24 minutes.

SMITH'S ARTISTIC PROJECT IS TO REVEAL THE MUNDANE AS EXTRAORDINARY, AND WHEN HE STRAYS FROM HIS IMMEDIATE ENVIRONMENT HE DOES SO RHETORICALLY, AS IF TO INTIMATE THE ABSURDITY OF EXOTICISM WHEN THE FAMILIAR IS ALREADY SO STRANGE.

STRUCTURALIST FILMMAKING is self-reflexive: the medium coerced into revealing its own materiality. Smith takes this literally, reading self (film) as self (artist). From *The Girl Chewing Gum* onward, his films often feature his own voice as their narrative catalyst and connector. This allows for expediency (his voice being the nearest at hand) as well as transparency (the film brought to reveal its maker).

The seven-part film sequence "Hotel Diaries" (2001-07)—installed in Hannover on seven adjacent monitors—is Smith's most extended meditation on the insularity of filmmaking: his viewpoint is hemmed in by the four walls of various hotel rooms around the world. Only in the sixth section does Smith wander briefly onto his Palestinian balcony and let the camera rove over the dun-colored cityscape.

These seven miniature chamber pieces, each approximately 10 minutes long, are unedited experiments in the free-form improvisation of narrative. Smith places himself in the role of the storyteller/entertainer, weaving a stream of consciousness out of the most frugal materials—the basic act of filming, his own solitary witness of that act and what he happens to discover in the unfamiliar territory of his hotel room. Ironically, he chooses to look for narrative-building material in spaces known for being generic and homogenized. He might focus on the mysteriously frozen image of a politician on a TV screen (*Frozen War*, 2001); cheap Styrofoam ceiling tiles flapping with each gust of wind, as though a poltergeist were playing havoc above (*Dirty Pictures*, 2007); or inscrutable heraldic symbols on the walls of an English bed and breakfast accommodation (*B & B*, 2005). References to the Middle East conflict serve as a global foil, offsetting the principal register of self-containment. Smith explores the dimensions of his mostly silent microcosm, while the big world threatens to boom from the headlines of a newspaper lying folded on the dressing table.

"Hotel Diaries" is one of the few films Smith has made outside the suburban East London area where he lives. His artistic project is to reveal the mundane as extraordinary, and when he strays from his immediate environment he does so rhetorically, as if to intimate the absurdity of exoticism when the familiar is already so strange. He always seems to be asking us what we might be missing through an excess of familiarity with our surroundings. The project of linguistic structuralism was to reveal the construction of meaning in everyday language; to make us aware that signifiers manipulate our perceptions and that naming things—and



the act of picturing is another form of naming—is tendentious. *The Girl Chewing Gum* and “Hotel Diaries” are ironic performances of the act of naming aspects of quotidian reality.

Smith has remarked that *The Black Tower* (1985-87)—the culmination of his Hannover show—is “about the power of language.” The narrator of the 23-minute film—Smith himself—describes observing a mysterious black tower repeatedly appearing over trees and rooftops. The film’s story was suggested by the angles from which a local water tower, peaked by an ominously black house structure, could be seen. A view across hospital grounds evokes illness; a graveyard suggests death; a bank of trees an interlude of rural convalescence. From these beginnings, the film spirals into a surrealist tale of mental illness, as the narrator becomes reluctant to leave his home for fear the tower’s inexplicable reappearance will further threaten his sanity.

Smith’s script builds upon the reflex significations of contingent images, rather as a therapist might probe a patient’s psyche by asking him to engage in free association. We are left ultimately unsure whether it is the city itself, the culture—in the guise of the images it trafficks—or the artist’s fertile imagination that has created the narrative. Structuralist film, which was intended to expose filmic illusion, has had its purpose reversed into projecting a space for fantasy. But if the film’s wayward narrative turns are no more than reflections of what the views of the water tower happen to signify, its themes of agoraphobia and solipsistic hallucination function as metaphors for the sealed-off world of film. Smith’s passive attitude to his material is therefore strategic: he is receptive to not just any results, but the right results. In their openness to fantasy, his films transcend the literalness of their Structuralist roots.

Toward the end of *The Girl Chewing Gum*, the voiceover shifts from description to a more internalized mode, but one that serves to raise our awareness of how little we know about reality through images, and how much we automatically compensate for that lack with our imagination. We are told a furtive-looking man, scurrying across the road, has just robbed a bank and is concealing a pistol in his raincoat. Thriller conventions are appropriated in order to make us conscious that such an outlandish notion is finally no more fantastic than anything else we might assume about the passersby from the safe remove of the film footage. It could, of course, just as likely be true. ○

“John Smith: Picture Interference” was on view at Kestnergesellschaft, Hannover, Feb. 24-Apr. 29. A catalogue will be published in the fall. “Worst Case Scenario: Films from 1975-2003” appeared at the Neue Museum Weserburg, Bremen, Jan. 20-Mar. 24. “Slow Glass” was at Tanya Leighton Gallery, Berlin, Feb. 11-Mar. 3.

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## Experimental Film

## John Smith

Michael O'Pray

*John Smith: Film and Video Works 1972-2002*, eds Mark Cosgrove and Josephine Lanyon, Picture This Moving Image/Watershed Media Centre, Bristol, 2002, 138pp, col & b/w illus, £12.00, 0 953 9872 48.

John Smith has always been an awkward case in British experimental film, not least because he has been that peculiar beast – a humourist. But like his forebearers the Marx Brothers and Buster Keaton, Smith's humour is grounded in a profound understanding and playful subversion of the film medium itself. It is the relationship film has to language and sound that particularly tickles his fancy or stimulates his imagination.

Books or, for that matter, catalogues on individual British avant-garde filmmakers are rare. As such this volume of essays marking 30 years of John Smith's film and video work is very welcome. It includes contributions by fellow artists (and collaborators) Cornelia Parker, Ian Bourn and Nicky Hamlyn, the critic AL Rees, an interview by the artist and critic Catherine Elwes and a handful of Smith's film scripts.

One of the most talented filmmakers of the postwar generation, he has attracted admirers from way beyond the narrow confines of the Avant Garde. His reputation rests on a quite unique sensibility which has successfully married three traits – humour, documentary and formal ingenuity – into an indissoluble whole. His formative years were spent in the conceptualism-cum-structuralism of the 70s in which he recognised something others often overlooked or ignored and that was its wit. Smith developed this trait but always with a strong sense of subject matter, especially that of his native East London.

Rees's essay sets out Smith's relationship to the avant-garde tradition, meticulously laying out its themes and aesthetic strategies. He rightly cites George Landow as an American precursor and counterpart. But he is equally quick to point out elements that echo the more playful visual/word-games of Michael Snow and Hollis Frampton. Nearer home, he lays out some tantalising connections with Peter Greenaway's own punning proclivities, and plugs in the British landscape tradition to Smith's own documentarist tendencies. Rees's creation of a referential field for Smith only serves to highlight Smith's originality, his early forging of a sensibility, against his contemporaries. Smith has an unerring nose for art bullshit.

Rees points out that the films open 'a narrative space in which the viewer can

John Smith  
*Slow Glass* 1988-91  
film still



question the construction of the film as a manipulated spectacle'. This is also the space, he believes, in which Smith's wry and, at times, manic, obsessive 'humour' resides, most memorably in his classic *The Black Tower*, 1987. As Rees implies, Smith's humour is in many ways intellectual – punning, ironic, anagrammatic, and at times heavily reliant on cultural references as in *The Waste Land*, but it can also be more knock-about as in *Shepherd's Delight*. What Smith does not seem to share with his fellow avant-gardists is their modernist belief in the openness of meaning. His films, like all humorous work, are highly controlled and quite precise in their effect (something Hamlyn brings out in his essay). There is no room for wandering off or projecting subjective meanings. Rather, the problem is more one of getting the puns. The irony here being that Smith's subversion of film manipulation requires the very same level of manipulation on his part.

Hamlyn's essay deals mainly with Smith's use of both systems of ideas which are often verbal, and location. Smith is the East London (not East End) artist. His film oeuvre – ranging from *The Girl Chewing Gum*, 1976, to *Lost Sounds*, 2002 – is a developing document of this still deeply unfashionable part of London, mainly Hackney and Leytonstone. Hamlyn gives an interesting account of this documentarist trait which, focusing as it does on his immediate surrounding, mingles inevitably with an autobiographical one. His readings of *The Black Tower* and *The Girl Chewing Gum*, for example, are subtle, backed up by his sensitivity to the influence of the East London locations.

Rees's essay mentions loss in relation to Smith, but it is Ian Bourn's gentle melancholic essay that centres on this mood and hence carries one of the more arresting insights in the book, one which notes something beyond the systems, the ironic humour and documenting. He suggests that 'much of John Smith's work is an exploration of how things change and the feelings of loss we sometimes experience when these things

change'. Not only and most interestingly does Bourn locate this loss in Smith's use of everyday sounds – 'the chimes of a distant ice cream van' – but also in his often meticulous photographing of objects, isolated from their surroundings. Bourn comments on three films *Leading Light*, *Blight* and *Home Suite*. Interestingly he doesn't include *Slow Glass*, perhaps because he is the voice-over in that film, and one feels that his own artistic sensibility diffuses the film.

Smith's early film *Leading Light* (a film of a room the filmmaker lived in at the time) is exemplary of this mood of loss for Bourn. But at times in *Slow Glass*, the loss is ontological, things slipping into the past so that only memory seems reliable – and glass is a metaphor for this continual flux. But Smith's oeuvre documents a larger loss, a unique moment in British history in which Smith is inextricably implicated – the collapse of the industrially-based working-class communities, here of East London, given its *coup de grâce* under Thatcher. In this way, Smith's *Slow Glass* is a blunt rejoinder to Robert Flaherty's Romantic *Industrial Britain* (as *Blight*, made with the composer Jocelyn Pook, is to Edgar Anstey's *Housing Problems*), and perhaps stands as an extension of Humphrey Jennings's elegiac *Spare Time*, in which with hindsight we can detect the beginnings of the collapse of a working class – the Welsh miners helping the woman pianist off with her coat as they gently begin their rendition of Handel's *Largo*. Only in the enormously popular *Blight* does Smith perhaps give in to an uneasy aestheticisation (it is one of the most beautiful films) of his surroundings. This is an excellent introductory book on Smith even if it perhaps serves his remarkable formal imagination better than it does his equally unique humour. ■

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## John Smith

### *Solo Show*

What's the usual mark of the seriousness of an artist's reputation? A big solo show at a major institution, perhaps? Although isn't it slightly gauche to then go and call your solo show *Solo Show*? Surely you can't be serious.

Seriousness and flippancy, rigour and self-deprecation, turn at the heart of British filmmaker John Smith's work, and the staging of this, the largest-ever retrospective of his work in the UK, is rich with institutional irony and critical self-consciousness. For this *Solo Show* is also the graduation show of the 14 students of the Royal College's masters programme in curating, and their choice to commit all their resources to the celebration of a much underseen and undervalued artist (one who was once a student at the same college) deftly exposes the process of validation that a major show deploys. And in response, Smith's precise, modest and wryly comic excursions into the structural and narrative artifices of filmmaking never disappoint.

What distinguishes Smith's early films, from the 1970s (when he was still at the RCA), is their clear engagement with the structuralist approaches to filmic form that had emerged in the independent film movement of the late 1960s and early 70s while redirecting them towards a less austere, more humanised and playful encounter with everyday reality. Unlike the often grindingly sober, emotionless and self-referential early structuralist experiments in film and video (the kind of works where a video camera might point at a video monitor of its own feedback, or in which the optical soundtrack of film would be transferred to the visual frame, matching the technology of the image with that of its sound), Smith's films always appear rooted in the homely banality of everyday suburban experience, which makes his impish short-circuiting of narrative and documentary modes all the more effective. In *The Girl Chewing Gum* (1976) a camera films a street in Hackney; off-screen, a voice appears to direct the actions of the various pedestrians and vehicles as they come into view, until it becomes ludicrously apparent that this voice is only narrating the actions that it pretends to direct (Smith's geekishly nasal London accent demanding that birds fly across the shot, or instructing the hour hand of a clock to make one revolution every 12 hours, and so on).

Another classic is the 1975 *Associations*, in which a voiceover reads Herbert H. Clark's staggeringly boring essay 'Word Associations and Linguistic Theory', while a series of odd images flash up in rapid sequence, tracking the repetitive key phrases of the essay. It's only after a while that the repeated sequence of a donkey, a sewing machine, the sea and a group of Indian people triggers the realisation that the images correspond to homophones in the spoken text ('associations': *ass-sew-sea-Asians*, get it?). This gets particularly funny when the text hits the word 'responses' – an image of a group of Ron Burgundy-like moustachioed 1970s hipsters corresponding to the diverted homophone 'ponces'.

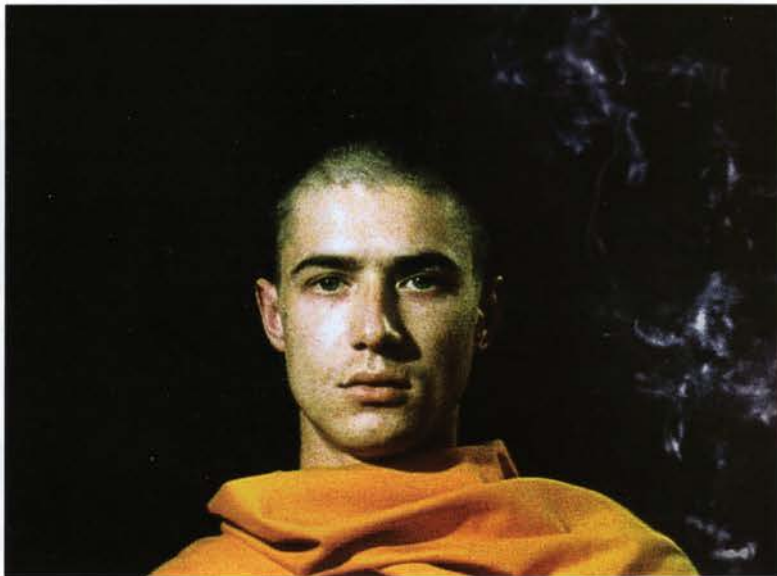
It's this mixture of conceptual interest, cultural informality and subversive scepticism towards narrative orthodoxy and authorial subjectivity that allows Smith's work to endure past the period trends from which it emerged. Smith's works from the 1980s further problematise the division between documentary and fiction, especially in *The Black Tower* (1985–7), where an increasingly unbelievable narrator explains a growing obsession with a building that can be seen in the distance but never found, while in *Slow Glass* (1988–91), Smith fashions an ode to memory, transience and passing, moving from dramatic recreations of his own childhood memories to the apparently documentary mode of oral history, in which a narrator describes the disappearance of glass-blowing craftsmanship, over deft time-lapsed scenes of 1980s urban decay and the emerging landscape of postindustrial London.

Smith's work in the last two decades marks the general shift to digital video, and while this means that the more technical-formal materiality of cine film no longer commands the theoretical urgency it once did, Smith takes up video with relish. If Handycam amateurist authenticity would seem to be the antithesis of cine-editing artifice, Smith develops forms of self-narration – talking off-camera while filming live – that complicate the naive assumption that greater technical transparency equates greater realism. In *Home Suite* (1993–4), the biographical commentary accompanying a tour of a house he inhabits verges on the improbable, while in *Hotel Diaries* (2001–7) Smith's political and cultural musings fuse weirdly with his bored roaming of the various hotel interiors the travelling artist finds himself in. Ordinary life, Smith continuously points out, only looks banal and indifferent because the forms by which it is represented are often banal and indifferent; by attending to the artifice of image and narrative, Smith suggests that ordinary life is always as extraordinary as the representations by which we give shape to our understanding of it. *J.J. Charlesworth*



*The Girl Chewing Gum*, 1976 (film still), 16mm film, 12 min (B/W, sound).  
Courtesy the artist, LUX, London, and Tanya Leighton Gallery, Berlin

# John Smith



John Smith  
*Om*  
1986  
Video still

Royal College of Art, London, UK

John Smith's films and videos have been criminally under-shown in his home city. Seven years after his last London solo at the long-gone Pearl Gallery, it took the unanimous enthusiasm of graduating students on the Royal College of Art's MA in curating - where, for the first time since the course was founded in 1992, its final show was dedicated to a single artist, the 14 curators splitting admin duties while brainstorming the show *en masse* with Smith - to occasion this 17-film display, his biggest exhibition to date. Wit-injected and profoundly serious, theory-driven and anecdotal, Smith's filmmaking has never seemed wholly at home anywhere. So it made sense to return to the maker's Alma Mater, where it was born.

His best-known film, *The Girl Chewing Gum* (1976), made while Smith was a student at the RCA, is on one level a classically Structuralist/Materialist disclosure of formal duplicities. Over a 16mm time capsule of mid-70s street life in Dalston, East London, Smith layers a blokeish *ex post facto* voice-over that recasts the chance events he had filmed as continuous theatre. ('Let's have the man in the white boiler suit coming in from the right,' etc.) Yet the film modulates unexpectedly into a coherent discussion of the run-down area's sociology, before flipping again when the narrator claims to be 'shouting into a microphone on the edge of a field near Letchmore Heath'. The demystifying impulse,

*The Girl...* argues, need not preclude - indeed, might be sweetened by - comedy. It might also enfold social commentary, allying reflexive manoeuvres with a punctilious attentiveness to the everyday's warp and weft.

There's no contradiction here, politics being inherent in the distinction between how things are presented and how they actually are. Smith's prodigious warm-up films suggest as much in embryo: *The Hut* (1973), for example, is an ostentatious piece of directive editing, framed by a scrap of narrative - a voice speaking ominously of a hut discovered in the woods - which leads into forensic shots of the edifice's scorched exterior, spliced together in an accelerating martial rhythm. It's a hut; it's a horror show. In



John Smith  
*The Girl Chewing Gum*  
1976  
Video still

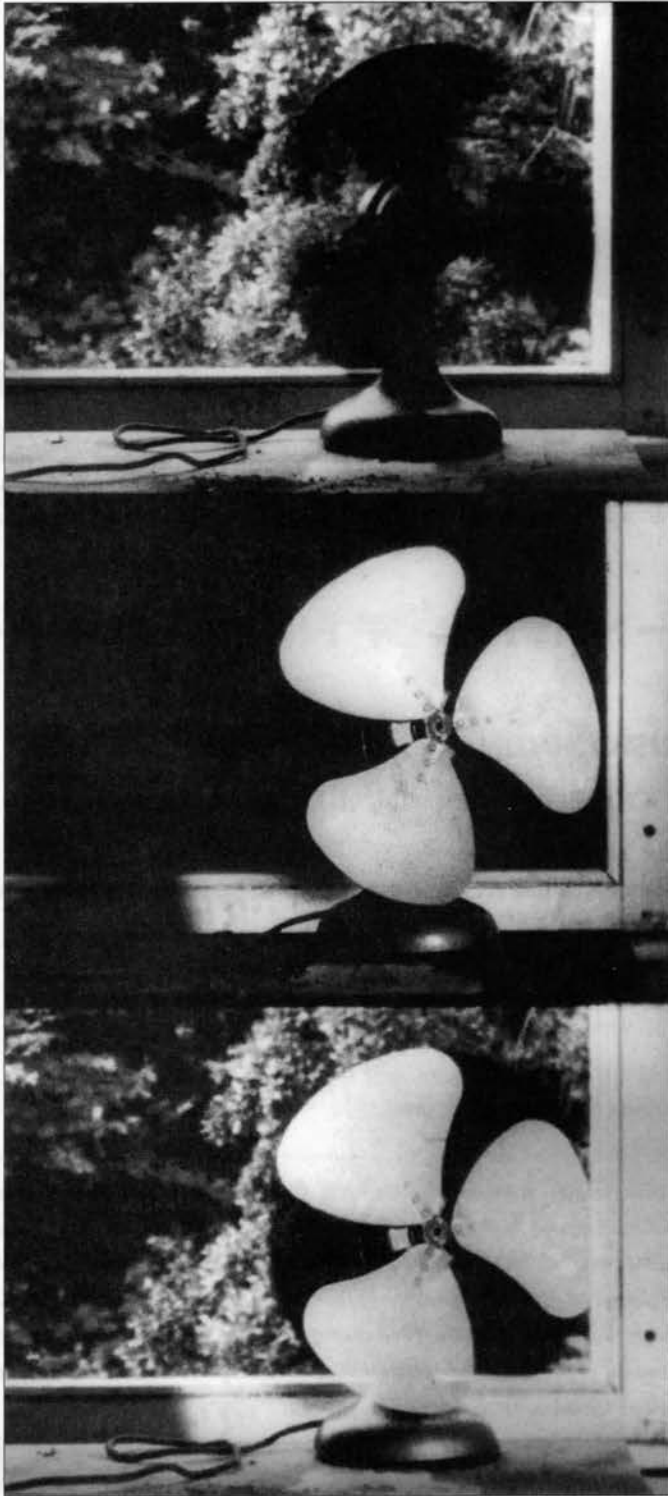
the implausibly concise four-minute switchback ride that is *Om* (1986), meanwhile, what appears to be a serene Buddhist monk sitting draped in an orange robe, incense smoke trailing into view, morphs into a smoking skinhead getting a haircut. It is hardly coincidental that this was made deep in the Thatcher years, when ugly nationalism was increasingly conspicuous in England.

What kinds of truth can be cradled within a larger structure of disabusing is a recurrent question in Smith's art. Repeatedly, he has the camera bear witness, showing the mundane intersecting with larger choices, ambient pressures, ideology. In the first part of his feature-length video trilogy *Home Suite* (1993-4), Smith surveys his house's decaying, mouldy, bug-infested toilet, noting its timeworn surfaces and the associations they stir up. It seems that the house (is it really his?) is due for demolition, like those squatted neighbourhood residences brought down in the second part of the work, filmed on the street amid the newly evicted. We are suspended, here, just prior to the introduction of the Criminal Justice Bill of 1994: a hinge moment, an ending.

If Smith remains a potentially unreliable narrator in these works, a sense of the camera as a memorializing tool remains strong. In *Third Attempt* (2010), a film projection, *7P* (1977-8) - wherein footage of a Christmas tree unravels in caffeinated editing and is soundtracked by a screwy audio recitation of 'The 12 Days of Christmas' - plays simultaneously with *Regression* (1998-9), a later video 'remake' of it. In this second film, Smith appears before another (or maybe the same) Christmas tree, discussing his reasons for 'regressing': the advantages of video and his sense that the work is more contemporary now than it was at the time. (While too old to be a yBa, he says, he has carefully positioned the camera to take a few years off him.) If materialism still provides this work's framework - its armature is its own making and remaking - it is animated with life imperfectly lived, and the revisions made by time's onrush.

This, indeed, is both the surprise and sublimity of Smith's work. In 'Hotel Diaries' (2001-7), he shuffles around hotel rooms in six countries, circling back to thoughts of evolving conflicts in the distant Middle East. Here, what can't be accurately known - symbolized by the first segment, in which BBC footage on a hotel television set is inexplicably frozen - is counterweighted by what can, via the camcorder's eye and Smith's loquacious monologues: anecdotes, descriptions and analyses of where he is, interwoven with geopolitical anxiety. That dimension aside, it's a surprisingly short leap to here from the 16mm *Leading Light* (1975), in which soft natural light strafes, in time-lapse, a room's contents on an amber afternoon: striped carpet, books, a turntable. Representation, Smith's work implies, is at once a haven of quiet decelits and our surest stopgap against an infinite forgetting.

Martin Herbert



John Smith, *Blue Bathroom* (1978-9)

# JOHN SMITH

**R**est assured, it's not just a pseudonym. John Smith is one of England's finest avant-garde filmmakers, and one of its more prolific. In thirty years he's finished about as many films and videos, and shown them in museums, galleries and festivals around the world. Smart, funny, and often astonishingly beautiful, until recently Smith's films were unfortunately rarely shown in the United States. With luck, recent screenings in New York and Chicago and a gallery show in Williamsburg, Brooklyn are but the beginning.

Smith started making films in 1972, at the zenith of English Materialist Filmmaking. The theory-first formalism of standard-bearers like Malcolm LeGrice and Peter Gidal is evident in the rigidly precise structure of Smith's films. And yet, the arid film-by-numbers quality that afflicted the films of so many of Smith's contemporaries is tempered by his mordant wit and weakness for narrative.

Girl Chewing Gum, probably Smith's best known film, is one of the few avant-garde films that still never fails to elicit a good, hearty belly-laugh from audiences. Purporting to be the rushes for an establishing shot from an unspecified feature film, it consists of an off-screen voice "directing" people as they go about their business on a busy London street corner. Everyone from a young mother to an inexperienced stickup man to a flock of pigeons gets their cue.

## BRIAN FRYE

His other films are similar, setting up a series of expectations, only to turn them on their head. There's a kind of soft didacticism to Smith's films, which contrasts the brittle hardness that can make the films of his avowedly Materialist peers so hard to watch, and often so unrewarding. Nothing is quite what it seems in a John Smith film, but he always lets you in on the joke. And in the process slyly slips in some tough questions about the business and nature of filmmaking.

**Frye:** How did you come to start making films?

**Smith:** Before I even went to art school, when I was about 16, I started doing light-shows for bands. A friend of mine's father had a photographic shop that sold ex-government equipment, and one of the things that he had was a cellar full of American 16mm Ampro projectors. We could get these projectors for almost nothing. The shop also sold old

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scientific films, informational films, industrial films, documentaries, that sort of thing.

**Frye:** This would be the period when those kinds of films were sold for scrap?

**Smith:** Yes, exactly. It was about 1968. And so our light-show, in addition to including the more psychedelic things—inks and all that—also incorporated film projection. At that time I had no education in film whatsoever. I got interested in film mainly through discovering that you could make a film without making a splice, by projecting loops of different material either superimposed on or next to each other. And I was immediately struck by how meanings came out of nowhere, and how many coincidences you get when you just put two pieces of film together.

**Frye:** This was a realization you came to spontaneously, then? On your own?

**Smith:** Yeah, well, it was at the time when light-shows were emerging with music in Britain and the United States. But it was a fairly new phenomenon at that time. Film wasn't really used very much. It was a fortuitous thing really, of being able to get a hold of all this equipment, like Specto projectors, which run at two frames per second. So that was an interest from the start, but I didn't go off and make films straightaway after that. I was still in school at that time. It was like the end of school, and I wanted to go to art school. I was interested primarily in painting at that time. My parents didn't want me to do a fine art course and, because I was young and I couldn't have got a grant, my parents had to support me when I first went to college. They said, "Well, we're not going to support you to do a fine art course. We'll support you to do a commercial art course." Basically a graphic design course. So I went and did a general art foundation course, and then went and did this graphic design course, which wasn't what I wanted to do, but it was the closest I could get to it. That was a three year course, but when I got to the end of one year I thought, "I'm not really interested in spending my life designing typefaces." Although there were elements of graphic design which interested me, and which I think do inform my later work. Ideas about economy and signification, which are very considered in my work. Anyway, after one year I decided I'd had enough of this. There was a new course opening at another college in another part of London, which was called a com-



John Smith, *Girl Chewing Gum* (1976)

munication design course. It was based in design but it also involved film, photography, video, audio, and writing. It was a kind of media course that is actually quite common now, but at that time it was a very new thing. The emphasis wasn't on commercial design. It wasn't based on commercial ambitions. So I went and did that course, and the person who was teaching film in that course was Guy Sherwin, who was only about three years older than me. As we all know, when you go to college, most of the staff seem very very old, and if there's someone only a couple of years older than you, who hasn't been out of school that long, you generally gravitate towards them. Guy himself hadn't been making films for very long. He was just starting to get involved with the Filmmakers' Co-op in London. A number of us in the course ended up gravitating towards film. It wasn't the kind of hierarchical situation I'd always had a problem with in education. We seemed much more equal. As you know, Guy's not an authoritarian figure, to say the least. But even before that, I had become interested in photography as well, during the graphic design course that I'd done, and continued photographing in the communication design course. My first films came out of still photographs. They were all to do with the animation principle, basically. I made a film which was composed of a lot of still images of people's faces, cutting between similarly framed faces and creating that sense of metamorphosis and animation of facial gestures and things like that.

**Frye:** Was that a response to Kurt Kren's films?

**Smith:** No, I hadn't seen those at that time, and I didn't see very much experimental film for quite a long while.

**Frye:** Would you say that the first experimental films you saw were those coming out of the London Filmmakers' Co-op?

**Smith:** It was a mixture. I mean, I did see some American stuff. During that time Grahame Weinbren came and showed a program of American work. I don't remember exactly what, but they were largely very visual pieces, quite abstract visual films by the Whitneys and Pat O'Neill. Pat O'Neill's work I really liked when I first saw it: at the time I found it really inspiring. Especially coming out of the film work I was talking about earlier, which used ideas about superimposing images. All of his stuff with mirrored images, high-contrast loops printed backward and forward on top of each other, colored filtration and things—spectacle was something that really attracted me to film to begin with.

**Frye:** What sort of films do you think inspired the kind of work you ended up making?

**Smith:** I think that came a little bit later. I'm quite glad that I didn't see too much stuff when I first started, because I didn't know at that time that everything had been done before! After the communication design course I did a post-graduate course in film at the Royal College of Art, and teaching there was Peter Gidal. And Peter ran a weekly seminar that was really influential on me, because we looked at a lot of work, English work and a lot of American work as well. I think I did see some English landscape work at the time I was at the first college, which was a big influence. William Raban's films, for instance. He and Chris Welsby were two English filmmakers who were dealing with landscape and also ideas to do with form, and I was very interested in things which are determined by nature to some extent and the ways in which one can interact with those formally in film. Take a film of mine like *Leading Light*. It's one example of a number of films I made which had to do with taking a natural cycle—in this case the sunlight travelling around a room—which sets a framework in which to work—and then interacting with that. So that worked as an influence. At the RCA I think I started to get a lot more interested in American and Canadian filmmakers. Michael Snow was a really strong influence on me. I think that before even

seeing Snow's films I was making films of my own which had a narrative element and also a formal element, and the tension between those two things is exactly what comes about in *Wavelength*. That's what I was interested in, so that I identified with him a lot. Hollis Frampton's work, some of the things to do with language, like *Zorns Lemma* for instance, in which images come to represent letters of the alphabet was really important as well.

But at that time there was also a big interest in semiology, and that shaped our seminar group at the RCA. So I was also looking at Godard and Straub, and their films were also influences in a different way. One of the good things about the course I did at the RCA was that it had a real mix of people. There were some people who came from a fine art background, but there were also people who were coming from a much more political perspective, who were great fans of Godard, for example. The group of us formed a very interesting hybrid of ideas.

**Frye:** What was your role in or relationship to the London Filmmakers' Co-op? There is a strong narrative undercurrent to your films from fairly early on, which seems idiosyncratic in the context of a group that's known primarily for its anti-narrative rhetoric.

**Smith:** I think I never took that position on. Although there were a lot of things that I drew from it, I always had an interest in narrative. Narrative in a very broad sense. But I have made some much more severe films that I didn't show in New York. Roundabout the late 70s and early 80s I did a



John Smith,  
*Leading Light* (1975)



John Smith, *The Black Tower* (1985-7)

number of films in which there was no way one could ascribe any kind of narrative aspect to them at all. So there have always been those two facets, although I was always interested in narrative.

**Frye:** It seems there is something of a tension between narrative and its dissolution in your films.

**Smith:** Absolutely. I think I said it about the *Black Tower* the other night, and it runs through a lot of the other work as well. I have this fascination with the power of language, but on one level it is also the enemy. So I like playing with it, letting it start to take over and then stopping it. A number of the films I've made have very much to do with taking the viewer to the edge of psychological immersion, but then pulling out again, so one is made aware of the construction of the film. The fact that the films reveal their artifice is important to all of them. Coming back to the Co-op, that's an ideology that does come from there. Although I use narrative, the work is anti-illusionist, without a doubt. It deals with it in a different way, though. I guess a lot of purists would say, "Oh no, you can't do that." But interestingly, Gidal has shown my work in programs along with his own. I think maybe the impression on this side of the

Atlantic, not surprisingly, is of the British avant-garde as being much more severe, linear and single-minded than it actually was. In fact, there was a lot of diversity at that time. There were manifestoes, but as you know, some people write manifestoes and other people keep quiet, and the people who keep quiet don't necessarily agree with what's said in its entirety. At the filmmakers' co-op, at the same time as the people you're talking about there were people like David Larcher. His films are incredibly rich and imagistic. They really want to give pleasure.

**Frye:** What about the role of humor in your films?

**Smith:** I'm glad that the films have humor, but the humor doesn't come first. It's a kind of by-product of the things I'm interested in, because I'm interested in the ambiguity of meaning, how things can mean different things when they are presented in different ways, and how one can use the context of a film to change meaning. Naturally, from that kind of exploration humor arises. When I set out to make a film, I don't intend to make a comedy, but the fact that the humor arises is important. I'm interested in making work that lots of people—including people who are completely uninformed about avant-garde cinema—would be interested in seeing. So to me, the accessibility that humor creates is an important part of the work.

**Frye:** There's a formal element to the joke, as well, that structures many of your films. A long buildup that culminates in a reversal of perception.

**Smith:** I see it as a lot like a game really, like playing a game, and setting up an expectation. Sometimes it's not even funny, it's just surprising. I love playing with that power; it's kind of megalomaniacal. I like getting people in a dark room, locking the doors, and saying, "Okay, now you're going to follow this journey." And controlling to some extent their journey, hopefully, a journey which leaves some freedom for viewers to create their own space. The films have a lot to do with control and release, and certainly also with anticipating what will be seen and to some extent directing that. It's the kind of thing that I like to do, and I see it a lot in Michael Snow's films, which I often find extremely funny, including *Wavelength*. I think there's a kind of humor there, which is wonderful, isn't it? His film *So Is This* is very much about setting up an expectation through text and then taking an alternative route. There's the question of



John Smith,  
*Shepherd's Delight*  
(1980-4)

time, and how long you stretch time. You take the viewer to the point where they feel like they've had enough, and then let them know that you know they're thinking that, and that's what you wanted them to think. Like in my video piece *Regression*, which is very much to do with getting people to ask, "Who is this guy, why does he keep going on?" It's kind of cruel, I suppose, but most people don't mind the cruelty.

**Frye:** There's often a sadistic element to humor. The filmmakers who came to mind first for me when watching your films were George Landow and Robert Nelson. I saw a strong parallel between the way they approach film form and the way you do.

**Smith:** I don't know Robert Nelson's work at all, actually, but in Landow's work, certainly, there is a very similar quality. Fortunately, I was set on a course before I saw Landow's work, otherwise I think I might have felt, "Oh, I'm not going to bother." I love some of his work so much. I did actually make a film, called *Shepherd's Delight*, which was based on an analysis of humor, and it's quite similar in several ways to Landow's *On the Marriage Broker Joke...*, including using Freud as a reference.

**Frye:** What was the provenance of *Girl Chewing Gum*? Was that material you shot yourself, or something you found?

**Smith:** I generally film in familiar places. That was a street at the end of the street I lived on at the time. I wanted to film on a busy street corner. The film came out of seeing Truffaut's *Day for Night*, which has to do with a film within a film. It's been a long time since I saw it and I might describe it wrongly, but there's a snow scene in the film, in the street, which sets up a situation between two characters, and you see the street being prepared for the filming, which includes machines going down the street spraying the fake snow everywhere. But also, the passers-by in the street are directed. I shot the *Girl Chewing Gum* in 1975, and I started making films in 1972, so I'd been making films for 3 years. And still, when I saw Truffaut's film it had never occurred to me that the people in the background in Hollywood films were directed. I'd always just thought, "Oh, they're passers-by. The film crew have gone into the street to make the film and they've got access to do things." In *Day for Night* a dog is directed to piss up a lamppost, or something like that. Anyway, it was a complete revelation to me, and it came at a time when I was surrounded by people who were saying, "Narrative is the power of illusionism, it's evil." The structural materialist kind of approach to film. And I thought, "Goddamn it, they're right! I've been had! How can I be making films for three years and not realize that?" Though not narrative films. I'd never had much of a narrative element in my films up to that point. I think *Girl Chewing Gum* is the first film I made in which you see a person, more or less anyway. But anyway, *Day For Night* was what made me want to make that film. I thought, "Okay, I'm going to film on a streetcorner, and I'll use a 400 foot roll of film, and I'll film what happens on the street, and then I'll direct it later." So that was the plan. I went and set up the camera, and there were a couple of things that were planned, like I deliberately set up in a place with a clock because I wanted to direct the hands of the clock. Also, it was great to film by a cinema, because the cinema appearing in the shot becomes a reference to this imaginary space that the audience is occupying. Just by coincidence—it doesn't really figure in the film as you can't see it clearly—the film that's showing in the cinema is *The Land That Time Forgot*, which is great,



John Smith,  
*Double Hoarding*

really fortuitous. So anyway, I just filmed what was happening, and kind of improvised the camera movement, followed people sometimes, and directed things later. I filmed in a quite obstructive place in the street, and I was hoping that the police would come and stop me filming, so I could direct that, and that would be the end of the film, but of course they didn't. Afterwards, I sat down with the film and worked out the instructions that I was going to give, and with a stopwatch worked out what I could fit in. I did go off to a field in the middle of nowhere, and shouted into a microphone a script I had written directing all those things, then came back, cut it on separate magnetic stock and fitted it in. The street

sound that you hear is the sync sound of the street. There's an alarm bell ringing throughout the film, which I found very annoying at the time, but I just had to shoot it then. I was doing the camera, and I had a friend who'd come with me to do the sound recording, and I thought "I've got to do it now." So I had to make it a burglary, with a boy robbing the post office. So I fit all of those accidental things into the scenario, because I'm fascinated by accidents.

**Frye:** The narration changes as the film goes on. It's plausible at first and becomes less and less so as the film goes on.


**Smith:** Basically, it moves from direction to description, and so at the end I'm talking about the dentist going to the bank, and all those sorts of things. It's got to do with labeling, and how we perceive things, how we're told what things are. There's an awful way in which documentaries can completely subvert the real world. It's very hard when you look at a documentary that's got a voiceover, without turning the sound down, to say, "Well, what is this visual information giving me really? Is this evidence for what's being said?" "No, it could be evidence of lots of different things," one might say. But the power of the text is so strong, that the image appears to be what the voice is telling us it is.



**Frye:** In your films *Slow Glass* and *The Black Tower* you cause the image to shift suddenly between two points in time. How exactly do you accomplish that, and what in particular did you find compelling about it?

**Smith:** It came about originally by accident. I discovered this technique—which I should patent really, because it's pretty good—when I was making *The Black Tower*. There's one scene in *The Black Tower* of the tower block being demolished, which is made in the same way as most of the shots in *Slow Glass*. When I filmed that shot for the *Black Tower*, basically the demolition went wrong. What

John Smith,  
*Thang Long Green and  
Thang Long Pink*



should have happened was that the block of flats should have collapsed completely, rather than stopping and leaning at an angle. In the foreground there's a row of trees. I had thought the building was going to disappear behind the line of trees. I had planned to do this alternation of there and not-there. So I thought all I need to do is film before it happens, when it happens, and then wait until the dust settles, and with the camera still there on the tripod in the same position I can film it and it won't be there any more. The rubble will be hidden behind the trees. But as it happened, it didn't disappear, so I thought "Fuck, what am I going to do?" Nearly all my films are shot on a Bolex, unless they're sync sound. For the Bolex you can get a thing called a gate focuser, a little prism that you put in the gate, and that's how it's done. Basically, I shot the first piece of film, had it processed, then took a little clip from the negative and put it in the gate of the camera, and then viewed the scene through the negative, and just lined them up. It's still difficult because you have to really precisely plot the position of the camera, but as long as you write down the camera height and position it's ok. For *Slow Glass* I put a nail in the street between two pieces of paving stone, so I could come back later and know that's where the camera was. You just have to know the focal length of the zoom lens and have a really good tripod so you don't line it up and lock it on and have it slip, because once you line it up you then have to load the camera, which is kind of fiddly, and there's a high failure rate. But it works amazingly well. Of course now, with a computer, it's no big deal. It's a shame really, because people found *Slow Glass* kind of astounding when they first saw it. "How did you have all these cameras set up all over London," you know? Put there for years, months...

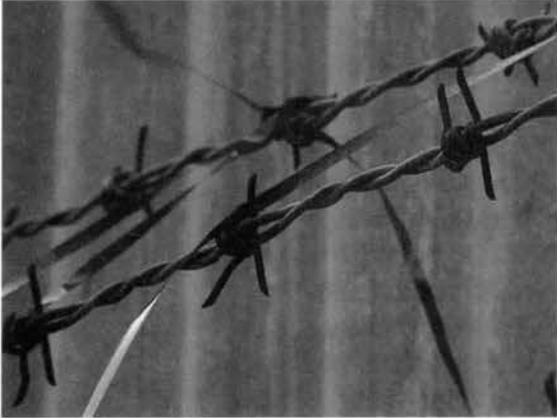
**Frye:** You've worked for television on several occasions. Did you have to adapt your working methods or change the films at all for TV?

**Smith:** Well, I've never looked at it as working for television. I've worked in a situation where the films have been funded partly by television and partly by the arts council, and they've generally been commissions for artists. So nobody's said, "This is a bit obscure, you've got to make it more accessible." Although there were no demands placed whatsoever, I think the only one slightly different in context was *Blight*—the collaboration with the composer—in that

the context for that was a little bit more mainstream. They commissioned six programs in a series, and out of the six directors, only two were artists. Some of them were very straight film directors. The emphasis of those films was very often more on the composer than on the filmmaker. But that being said, there were no demands. I've never, ever had anybody turn around and say, "Do it this way, do it that way." The closest I ever came to that was when I made a promotional film for an English rock band called Echo and the Bunnymen, back in 1980. That was commissioned by Warner Brothers, and they were very unhappy with the result, but I never did anything about it. They didn't like having a film of a band where you don't see the musicians' faces! It was a bit of a problem for them.

**Frye:** What is your experience of working with video after so many years of working with film?

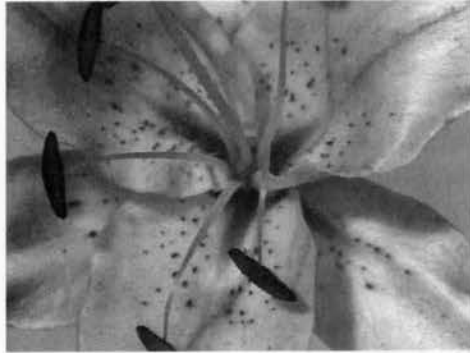
**Smith:** I'm starting to feel a lot more positive about video than I did a couple of years ago. I did make one video piece before I started having problems with film, which capitalized on the advantages of video. It's a 96 minute video tape, composed of 3 half-hour shots shot with a hand-held camera, while I moved around a house. Very close-up shots, travelling shots basically, with me talking while I'm filming. It's something that would have been impossible to do on film. I did it on Hi-8 video and it cost me \$50 to make a feature! I don't think the situation is as bad in America yet, but 16mm is basically dying out in the commercial world in Britain, so there is a real problem with 16mm and the labs now. Almost all 16mm is shot for television, and there's even less and less of that now. Gradually digi-beta is taking over for TV drama. What 16mm the laboratories process is generally just negative to video. I think there are two people left in the country making optical soundtracks. Most of the labs don't make their own, they send them out to these two people, who are getting older, and their machinery is getting older, and you're very lucky if you get a good optical soundtrack. All the good graders—color timers—tend to work with 35mm now and telecine. It's really only artists that are working with 16mm film for projection prints. It's started to get very grim. *Blight*, for example, was shot on film, and I have film prints of it, but I actually prefer to show it on video. It was a bit of a shock for that to happen, but it's got a stereo soundtrack which is very densely layered with sound, and



John Smith, *Lost Sound*  
(2001)

also I was never very happy with the grading of the film. On the telecine I was able to boost the color of the film and correct things which weren't right on the film print. I went through ten prints and still it wasn't right. So I had a couple of years of feeling very negative, like I was working on video only because there's a problem with working on film. More recently I have made some pieces which capitalize on the advantages of video, of which I think there are many. I made a piece called *The Waste Land*, which is shot in a London pub after hours, filming the people who sat in this bar. I could not have got away with taking a film camera in there and doing that, because I would have needed lights, and even if I hadn't needed lights, the film camera would have been too intimidating. So I just used a little mini-DV camera that I put in the corner, and everybody thought I was just a weird guy in the corner. There's a hand-held sync shot where I travel into the toilet of the pub, and I'm talking, reciting this poem while I'm in the toilet. It's something I couldn't have done on film. The recent piece, *Lost Sound*,

which is showing here in Brooklyn, which is images of recording tape in the street, also needed to be shot on video. It has a lot to do with hanging around and waiting for things to happen with the camera running, filming what happens and selecting later. For that we shot 17 hours of tape. Also, conceptually, its tape-to-tape, which justifies its being video for me. At the moment I'm exploring hybrid ways of working. Also, I've always worked on my own at home with my own technology. Films have been edited on a Steenbeck at home. I work incredibly slowly, over long periods of time, and I usually move backwards and forwards between editing and filming. I film something and start to edit it, then ideas come for what I might film next out of what I've edited. One of the big problems for me of working with video was depending on an Avid edit suite. Even if I worked faster, I couldn't afford to hire that sort of facility. I would find it so restrictive, because most of my films I make in the editing. The ideas come about in the editing, so I need that time to just sit in front of the screen. But recently the Apple Corporation brought out the new Final Cut Pro editing software, which is fantastic. If I'm working on DV, I can produce work on my computer at home, and the whole thing cost me a few thousand pounds and that's it. Until the equipment breaks, it costs me almost nothing to make video. But at the same time its film that I love, really, so I'm trying to find different ways of doing things. For the piece I'm working on at the moment I shot 35mm stills on a Nikon with a motor drive. I basically used a still camera as a movie camera. The film is going to end up as stills that occasionally come to life very slightly. So maybe I'll use two frames of the same scene shot a fraction of a second apart. Maybe you'll see a still and somebody will blink, or their bag will swing very slightly. So anyway, I've taken that 35mm still film and I've gone to a telecine suite and I've gone to video. Now that's on my computer, so I can hold those still frames for as long as I want. The plan is to go back eventually to 35mm film, because I don't want to have the nightmare of 16mm film again at the moment. It's depressing, but realistically I'm thinking, "I still want to work on film, 16mm is dying out, is there a way that it's economical to work on 35mm?" But also, is it inhibiting in terms of exhibition spaces, some of which can't show 35mm film? The other option is moving to another country, or forming a relation-



John Smith, *The Kiss* (1999)

ship with a laboratory somewhere where things are a bit more healthy. But I get the feeling that it's only a matter of time, realistically, for 16mm.

**Frye:** What about the gallery show you're doing here in Brooklyn? Have you done this sort of thing before?

**Smith:** Once or twice, yeah. This is a little bit of an experiment with this piece, because it's a durational piece that develops over time. I think it's possible to come in at any time and get something from it, but this screening is a bit of an experiment and I'll be interested to see how it works. It's happening because somebody said, we'd like to show this piece in a gallery show, and I thought, let's try it. That's not the way in which it's intended to be shown, but I think it'll be ok. I don't know about here, but in England opportunities in film and video for artists have shifted toward the gallery in terms of exhibition. I think there are advantages and disadvantages. I think there's one very strong advantage, which makes me want to find a way of being able to show things in that context: things show continuously for a period of time. So there's time for people to hear about work from other people who have seen it, or from reviews, and it's still there, you can still go and see it. The problem with artists' films is that you hear that there was a really good screening the other night, but the person's gone back to wherever it was they came from, and you'll never ever see their work. So I'm trying to find a way around that. There's one piece of mine, *The Kiss*, made in collaboration with Ian Bourn, which involves a lily being crushed between two pieces of glass, that was actually devised as an installation piece. That's the best way to show that piece, because it's a loop cycle. At the end it fades out and a new flower comes on and

goes through the same process. The repetition enables you to look at it in more depth, without just asking, "Hey, how was that done? I thought it was time-lapse." It enables you to look at it as more than a technical trick, I hope, because it has to do with this shift between ideas, something which appears to be organic growth, but is in fact a mechanical process. But I'm trying to work in both ways really. I don't think I would be working in a gallery situation if an opportunity hadn't arisen which makes it seem like it would be mad to avoid it. But there is that problem of audience concentration. For me, the conventional black box of the cinema is still the ideal way to show work.

# Genre Bending and Experimental Comedy: the work of John Smith

ÉMILIE BUJÈS I would like to start with your first films and the framework you were partaking in, on one side of course the London Filmmakers Co-op<sup>1</sup> and your relation to it, on the other hand perhaps there were some other influences as well, from the US in particular?

JOHN SMITH I never saw much work at all until I did my postgraduate course at the Royal College of Art which I started in 1974, where I made *Associations* and *The Girl Chewing Gum*. I was definitely impressed by the American as much as by the British filmmakers. As you probably know, much of the work that was being produced in Britain at that time was very dry and formal, and although I really liked that work, I was also really interested in language, narrative and the power of words. I saw some films from North America, in particular Michael Snow's *Wavelength*, and I really liked its mixing of genres and its shifts between abstraction and representational, narrative interruptions. Later, I saw quite a few other American films that I empathized with, like Robert Nelson's *Bleu Shut* and Hollis Frampton's (*nostalgia*), which a lot of people connect with my work and *The Girl Chewing Gum* in particular.

ÉMILIE BUJÈS So you were consciously willing to go beyond structuralist film, highjacking some of their rules in order to push your interest forward.

JOHN SMITH I certainly needed to; most of my friends at that time weren't artists or filmmakers and I wanted to make work which people who weren't familiar with experimental film would be able to get something from. They might not necessarily read all the layers but I wanted things to be

more accessible. Funnily enough, after making films like *The Girl Chewing Gum* and *Associations*, I made some very dry formal work. But I then had a very strange experience: there was a big international experimental film festival in London in 1979 and because I had a film there I had a free ticket to go and see everything. About half way through the festival I started to get really pissed off. I was thinking: "God, not another fucking structural film which goes on for hours and hours and is based on just one single formal idea". On the last day of the festival my own film *Blue Bathroom* was shown and I was surprised to find that my latest work irritated me as much as all the other films I had been getting annoyed with. It was a revelation that caused a shift in my work—with *Shepherd's Delight*—to making more complex films, with a greater variety of elements, which were still oppositional to mainstream film but at the same time used a lot of mainstream film conventions.

ÉMILIE BUJÈS You often start your films with something that is close to you—quite literally—and could be considered a documentary element, to then bring it somewhere else. Could you explain how the writing process takes place?

JOHN SMITH It is usually a very gradual process. The films that have a big writing component in them, like *The Black Tower*, *Slow Glass* and *Shepherd's Delight*, usually grow very organically and are made over a quite

1. The founding members of the London Filmmakers' Co-operative, formed in 1966, included figures such as Bob Cobbing, Jeff Keen, Simon Hartog and Stephen Dwoskin. It aimed to support the production, distribution and promotion of British experimental film practices, and was based on the Filmmakers' Cooperative founded by Jonas Mekas in New York.

long period of time, often several years. The writing usually starts to evolve after the filming has started. With *The Black Tower* I moved house in the early 1980s and could see the tower across the garden from the house. My initial interest in it was purely aesthetic and visual, because the strangely non-reflective black top of the tower looked like a hole cut out of the sky, and the shape of the hole changed when you saw it from different angles. But then I asked my next door neighbour, who I didn't know before and who ended up being quite an eccentric character, if he knew what that building was. And he said: "Yes. It is the psychiatric ward of the old people's hospital", which of course was a complete lie. But it was quite interesting that he had read it in a sinister way, as I had done myself, and I thought that I would like to write something that explored that sinister feeling.

ÉMILIE BUJÈS So the documentary is fictionalized, sometimes even becoming abstract, through verbal language and filmic language—with such tools as framing which plays here an essential role...

JOHN SMITH Yes, absolutely. I am interested in making hybrid work, which includes lots of different elements that, if edited successfully, brings completely unrelated things together. With *The Black Tower*, I was experimenting with the power of narrative to create some psychological immersion on the part of the viewer, and at the same time exploring a completely abstract and constructed dimension as well, as I do in quite a lot of my films. So the framing is very important, and what I was interested in is the fact is that the close-up images require other images or sounds to contextualize them, for example these flat color fields that are later revealed as objects. But the ultimate abstraction of course is the black screen: it could be the night time sky with no stars or it could be looking at the tower on a sunny day; both those

things would look exactly the same, and in fact in the film sometimes I am filming the tower, sometimes not.

ÉMILIE BUJÈS Until the beginning of the 1990's you have been filming on film stock, to then move on to video; how did this change affect your practice (also in regard to the technical specificities of film that you had been regularly using as narrative devices), and why did you make this decision at that moment?

JOHN SMITH The reason I first started working with film is that there wasn't really a choice in the 1970s if you wanted to make aesthetically pleasing colored images. Video was an absolutely different medium and what was available to artists when I first started making film was basically a heavy camera and separate tape recorder that produced very poor quality black and white images. But by the early 1990's video technology was starting to improve dramatically and it became possible to produce quite good quality images with cheap, lightweight equipment. Also, when I made *Home Suite*, my first video in 1993–94, which is one hour and half long, each part took me a day to make, whereas my films were taking longer and longer to produce... So I was interested in the immediacy, and in the fact that you could record images and spoken sound at the same time and be quite spontaneous, which is impossible to do on your own with film and which I came back to in the *Hotel Diaries*. Also, film was starting to require quite big budgets and I didn't want to be applying for funding all the time. As a teacher, it was important to me as well to make it clear to students that you don't need a fortune to make a film, the most important thing being to have a good idea.

When digital video came along, and especially "Final Cut Pro", I got interested in what that technology offered—a lot of the ideas in my work have been technology driven—and in the fact that I could do everything

myself at home. The first video piece where I exploited the technology was *Lost Sound*, in which I am for example speeding up the action, reversing the action or flipping the image over. They were all things that were difficult to do with film and you would normally have to go to the laboratory.

ÉMILIE BUJÈS Does your new work *White Hole* relate to that new technological empowerment in some way?

JOHN SMITH Yes, it is another example of something that is very easy to do using a computer. It is the first piece I have made where I zoom in on a still image on a computer, a library image that I found on the internet.

ÉMILIE BUJÈS There is an ethnographic aspect in several of your films, strongly accentuated by the fact that your neighbourhood is a recurring setting or subject. Has this interest of yours evolved over time—alongside the metamorphosis of this very neighbourhood—becoming more political and perhaps to some extent leading to recent works like the *Hotel Diaries*?

JOHN SMITH Most of my work is triggered by personal experience. I consider all of my work to be political in a formal sense, but it has certainly become more overtly political in recent years, as political events have impacted more directly on my own life, firstly in relation to the demolition of my house in order to make way for a new motorway, as recorded in *Blight* and *Home Suite*. On a larger scale, the *Hotel Diaries* videos were a direct response to the US/British invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, actions with which I fundamentally disagree. Since 9/11, events in the Middle East and Afghanistan have strongly affected attitudes and events at home too, so international politics are a bigger part of my everyday experience than they ever were in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

ÉMILIE BUJÈS The recurring personal dimension of your work is interestingly tightly related to yet another crucial

element which is humor, to the extent that one might think of fake first-person films or a fictionalized self figure. Humor is also what allows you to undermine the very authoritarian structure you are building...

JOHN SMITH I hope that the films aren't didactic and I guess particularly with the *Hotel Diaries* I don't want to be lecturing anybody because I have nothing special to say. My political opinions become pretty predictable after about three minutes. Somebody said to me a while ago: "Who is the person in your film?" It is me really, but I do try to undermine my authority, often through humour.

In *Shepherd's Delight* for example I am questioning the author's status as well as the authenticity of what one is being told. So I deliberately tell true stories in ways that make them harder to believe. The problem is that sometimes people end up thinking that I made them up, for example with *unusual Red cardigan*, which is actually completely factual.

ÉMILIE BUJÈS In your exhibition at La Galerie—entitled "The Kiss"—objects, which have been represented for many years in your films, are not only playing once again a very essential role but also physically present in the exhibition space...

JOHN SMITH I guess that the objects in the recent works are more intimate, more loaded with a sense of personal history. At La Galerie I thought it would be an interesting experience for the viewer to see some of the objects that feature in the films displayed in a vitrine. If the viewer hasn't already seen the films the immediate reaction will be: "What the hell are these things?" The objects are given importance by the way they are displayed. I am very interested in language: how we put letters together to make words, how we put words together to make sentences, how we put shots together to make "sentences" in film, but also when we put objects together in a row, they become like words in a sentence,

implying some kind of collective meaning. When you arrange things neatly in a kind of scientific way, it somehow implies that there is a connection, a logic.

ÉMILIE BUJÈS *The Girl Chewing Gum* is seminal work of yours and has been abundantly presented; are you getting bored of it or how do you relate to it today, and how did its reception reshape over time?

JOHN SMITH I still think it is of considerable interest, but sometimes I get a bit irritated when I meet somebody who says: “You made the *Girl Chewing Gum*, didn’t you; do you still make films?” because I have made about fifty more films since then. But it’s my own fault that the film is so well-known, because when I first made it nobody was very interested in it. But I thought it was pretty good so I kept on showing it. And if I am doing a lecture screening to introduce people to my work, I still often show it in order to talk about cinematic illusion, and most importantly about how the power of the language can determine how we read images—which of course is something that recurred in probably half of my films since that point. When I made the film, it had nothing to do with time passing. I just wanted to film an ordinary street in the present day and I wasn’t thinking at all about that being any kind of historical record. And of course later on, I realized that maybe this is the longest shot of people walking in the street in East London that was made in the 1970s. Without the sound track it has quite a lot of ethnographic interest, which at the time wasn’t meant at all. I never imagined that this film would still be shown regularly nearly 40 years later.

ÉMILIE BUJÈS With your recent *Dad’s Stick* you are rather remote from your eminent humorous tone and on the contrary using different strategies to express an obviously painful moment; would you like to explain a little how you worked in that case?

JOHN SMITH In *Dad’s Stick*, coming back to the question of language, one of the things that is very important to me is the use of captions rather than my usual voice over. I am really interested in the fact that in the caption you can say something that maybe is quite emotive, but actually doesn’t have any expression to it. There are things in it I would never have done in a voice over, because it would just be too overwhelming emotionally. I was very interested for example in the part saying: “Dad used to beat me with a short piece of plastic washing line that he kept behind the television. It didn’t happen often. He hated having to do it”. To me that line “He hated having to do it” could be either factual or ironic, even humorous—there is no vocal expression to suggest how it should be interpreted. I was interested in playing with the fact that the film is psychologically very loaded but also creates a sort of cool distance through the use of captions. At the same time, it hopefully has an immediacy and an intimacy through the singing on the sound track that humanizes it in a sense. So there is this tension between formal manipulation and the human element, an interaction that is present in a lot of my work.

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Freelance exhibition curator Émilie Bujès is also a programmer for the “Visions du Réel” International Film Festival in Nyon, Switzerland and La Roche-sur-Yon International Film Festival, France. From 2010 to 2014 she was exhibition curator at the Centre for Contemporary Art in Geneva.

# Life in Film: John Smith

In an ongoing series, *frieze* asks artists and filmmakers to list the movies that have influenced their practice



*John Smith is a British film and video artist known for his playful subversion of documentary imagery. Drawing upon the raw material of everyday life his films, in his words, 'rework and transform reality, exploring and exposing the language and manipulative power of cinema'. This year two of his films were included in the 6th Berlin Biennale; he also had solo shows at The Royal College of Art Galleries, London, and Tanya Leighton Gallery, Berlin. Smith's solo exhibition 'Accident' runs at Kunstbunker, Nuremberg, Germany until 31 October. He lives and works in London.*

The earliest event I can remember occurred when I was about six months old. It was a sunny afternoon and I was lying in my pram in the garden. The man who lived in the flat upstairs was relaxing a few feet away in his deckchair. I dropped my teddy bear from the pram and the man reluctantly got up and gave it back to me. After he returned to his seat I deliberately dropped it again

and he, irritated, got up and handed it back to me for a second time. I continued the game, dropping my teddy again and again, which became more and more amusing as the man became increasingly disgruntled.

This is obviously an unreliable or possibly constructed memory but what fascinates me about it is that I remember it shot-by-shot. First, a wide establishing shot: pram and man in garden. Then, a medium close-up: baby drops teddy from pram. A medium shot (baby's point of view) follows: man gets up from deckchair and approaches baby/camera. Unless I was born with an innate knowledge of filmic conventions, my memory, if accurate, has been reconfigured within a filmic structure. Dreams, of course, are often remembered in the same way. It is a testament to the terrifying power of illusionistic cinema that it can reshape memory into a filmic form.

**David Hand**

**Bambi**

1942

*My strongest residual memory is of colour breaking through the darkness – the muted dark pastels of Bambi (1942) and Snow White (1937), the intense Technicolor of the parted Red Sea in The Ten Commandments (1956) and the copious blood on the operating table after the brutal chariot race in Ben Hur (1959).*

My earliest memories of watching an actual film are both hazy and strong. Although this might seem like a contradiction it is precisely the vagueness of the recollection that gives it its potency. I was about five and – as my parents had no television until I was a couple of years older – it may well have been my first significant encounter with the moving image. The venue would have been the Walthamstow Granada or the Regal in Highams Park but what I remember about my first visit to the cinema is not the location but its apparent absence, the dislocation of the projected images from any familiar or even comprehensible space – pictures floating in the darkness. Strangely, the images I remember were not uniformly rectangular in shape but soft-edged vignettes of different sizes located in various places within the slightly frightening void that confronted me, adding to the disorientation of the viewing experience.

I have only a dim recollection of any narrative but I do remember a number of live-action images, in particular one involving a carpet of traditional Middle Eastern design incorporating a stylized tree motif, the kind where the branches stick up at right angles to the horizontal boughs. The film must have used special effects as the carpet gradually came to life, revealing a microcosmic world inhabited by children, animals and birds. A confusion about scale plays a big part in this memory – the tree was depicted on a small area of the carpet, seemingly only a few inches wide, but on the screen it was very big, the size of a real tree. And although the children varied in size from one appearance to the next they were usually enormous, sometimes 20 feet tall. How could a stitch in a carpet be as thick as my arm and how could children be so gigantic? These mixed feelings of utter bewilderment, fascination and horror made a deep impression on me, so much so that the world inside the carpet still pops up in my dreams occasionally. I wish I knew the title of the film.

I'm not sure whether it was due to economic necessity or a lack of interest but my parents rarely took me to the cinema and they never went there on their own. I can't remember asking to see particular films, but every now and



**From top:  
Sergio Leone  
Once Upon a  
Time in the West  
1968**

*In the 1990s I took my dad to see Sergio Leone's Once Upon a Time in the West. It was his first visit to the cinema in over 30 years and his evident enthusiasm for the experience reminded me of my own excitement about the cinema as a child.*

**Terence Young  
From Russia With Love  
1963**

*Watching the film in the presence of my mother was almost unbearable and our mutual silent discomfort became palpable. Things became even more upsetting the next day when my friends joked that my mum looked like Rosa Klebb, the evil and sadistic SMERSH agent played in the film by Lotte Lenya.*

**Cecil B. DeMille  
The Ten Commandments  
1956/57**



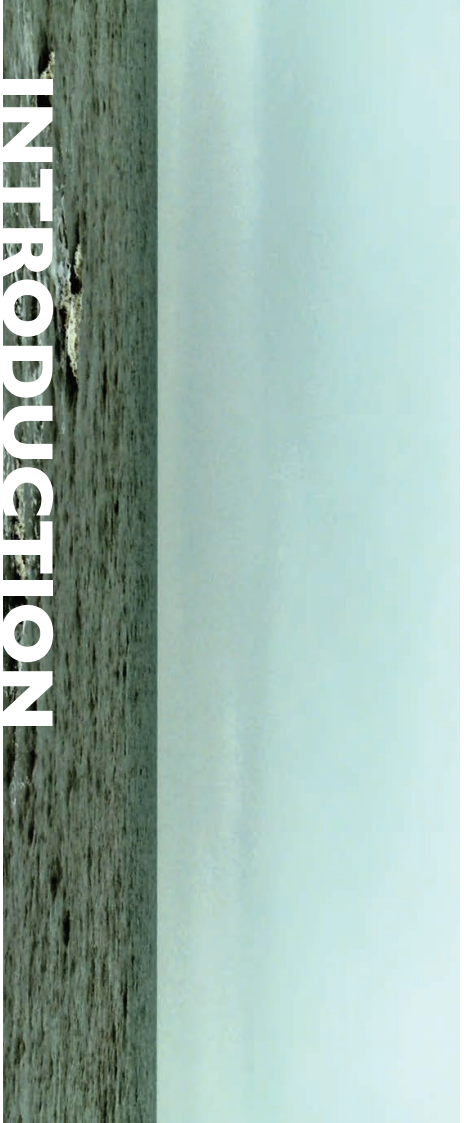
then – not more than once or twice a year – I would find myself in front of one that my parents deemed to be suitable viewing. At first these were mainly Disney cartoons but when I was a bit older I was taken to see biblical Hollywood epics, which always seemed to star Charlton Heston. I don't know if my parents enjoyed these infrequent outings but for me they were always exciting and highly sensual experiences. My strongest residual memory is of colour breaking through the darkness – the muted dark pastels of *Bambi* (1942) and *Snow White* (1937), the intense Technicolor of the parted Red Sea in *The Ten Commandments* (1956) and the copious blood on the operating table after the brutal chariot race in *Ben Hur* (1959).

My last parentally-supervised cinema visit was in 1964 when, after some cajoling, my mother agreed to take me and my 12-year-old friends to see the recently released James Bond film *From Russia With Love* (1963). For reasons that became more than obvious during the screening, the certification required that minors should be accompanied by an adult. I had been expecting violence but, to my surprise and horror, there was also something that I assumed to be sex. Watching the film in the presence of my mother was almost unbearable and our mutual silent discomfort became palpable. Things became even more upsetting

the next day when my friends joked that my mum looked like Rosa Klebb, the evil and sadistic SMERSH agent played in the film by Lotte Lenya. I was reassured many years later to find out about Lenya's creative collaborations with Bertolt Brecht, whose ideas about identification, distanciation and the necessity of revealing artifice were hugely influential on the development of my own filmmaking practice.

After my mother died my relationship with my father gradually changed and I started to take on something of a parental role myself. In the 1990s I took my dad to see Sergio Leone's *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968). It was his first visit to the cinema in over 30 years and his evident enthusiasm for the experience reminded me of my own excitement about the cinema as a child. Before the film started he was like a hyperactive boy who couldn't stop talking, commenting on the enormous size of the auditorium, its architectural details and the number of seats; but when the lights went down he became instantly transfixed. Towards the end of the film, during one of its many extreme close-up shots, he came out of his trance briefly and nudged my arm. With a look of happy amazement on his 70-year-old face he whispered: 'Look at the size of that eye – it must be 25 feet wide!'





# INTRODUCTION

We are delighted to be showcasing the work of recent Jarman Award winner John Smith in the Sidney Cooper Gallery. This survey exhibition documents Smith's evolving practice from his early seminal pieces such as *The Girl Chewing Gum* and *Om* through to recent works such as *Dad's Stick* and *Horizon (Five Pounds a Belgian)*.

Noted for his contribution to avant-garde filmmaking both nationally and internationally, this rolling programme of selected films has been put together to showcase the richness of Smith's work.

I am also very grateful to Dr. Andy Birtwistle Reader in Film and Sound in the Department of Media, Art and Design, Canterbury Christ Church University and Ben Rowley, artist in residence, for their contribution to this catalogue and exhibition.

**Hazel Stone**  
Curator, Sidney Cooper Gallery

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## LISTEN

### Voice

*The Black Tower* – *Hotel Diaries* – *The Girl Chewing Gum* – *Soft Work*

The voice has a gentle, relaxed presence. A London accent, but not particularly strong. Maybe a slight lisp, although the speaker tells us he can't hear it himself. The monologue seems to ramble, reflecting on everyday personal experience (the recent loss of a tooth, the exorbitant price of Toblerone purchased from a hotel minibar) or the technical problems of filmmaking (poor focus, dust on the lens, prehardener dirt in the film emulsion). The tone is warm, humorous, self-mocking: "before you start to lose interest in this, I should preface this video by letting you know that I'm actually one of the most famous experimental filmmakers in the world". Anxious about filming "corny", "romantic" sunsets at Margate, the voice explains, "I don't want to get typecast as a sunset filmmaker".

The use of humour, the self-reflexive focus on filmmaking, and the concern with the everyday, the personal and the domestic, identify the work as that of filmmaker John Smith. And it is the voice itself, as much as the thematic and stylistic consistency of his films that identifies Smith as auteur – a sonic presence inscribed across a body of work shot in and around spaces and places the filmmaker has either inhabited or visited. Weaving its way through four decades of creative activity the voice is heard in early

films such as *The Girl Chewing Gum* (1976), later works including the *Black Tower* (1985-7), and the more recent *Hotel Diaries* series (2001-7). If there is something unmistakably documentary-like in Smith's work, then on first hearing his rambling, casual voice-over seems to be the very antithesis of the polished narration delivered by media professionals in most film and television productions. Where voice-over narration in documentary often works to constrain and anchor the meaning of an image, Smith's voice works to multiply, extend and complicate meaning, gently prompting us to interpret an image in surprising, unexpected, and sometimes troubling ways. Over one of the many 'imageless' black screens that populate *The Black Tower* we hear the film's unseen protagonist, voiced by Smith, recalling, "I decided to take another look at the tower near my house when I got back, but by the time I got there it was dark. There was no moon and I couldn't see it over the rooftops. That night I dreamt that I was imprisoned in the tower. My body was paralysed and only my eyes could move. At first I thought that I was in complete darkness, but after a while I noticed a greyish speck which remained in the same place when I moved my eyes. I realised that I was facing a flat black wall. I got the feeling that the room was in fact brightly lit but I couldn't be sure."

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In most filmmaking practices a black screen would be thought of as the absence of an image – an empty frame devoid of meaning. But in response to the suggestions of the voice-over, in *The Black Tower* this same black screen comes to represent a moonless night sky, the darkness of an unlit room, and then the black wall of the tower that haunts the film's protagonist. So persuasive is the voice-over that we may ourselves search the screen for the grey

mark described by the narrator: Heard in the gallery Smith's hypnotic voice transforms the nothingness of the black screen into an image invested with meaning. At the same time, aware of the fact that we are in fact also looking at 'nothing', we may become more aware of the space around us – aware of the mechanics of projection, the materiality of the screen, the space of the gallery. The suggestive power of the voice-over may appear to rest primarily on Smith's linguistic skills, but this would be ignore the role played by the voice itself. In its casual, spontaneous, improvisatory feel, Smith's voice-overs feel wholly unlike the Voice of God narration of the classic documentary tradition. But nevertheless, Smith's voice-over manoeuvres the spectator into position – guiding, nudging and leading us to the point at which a new perspective will suddenly become evident. In distracting us from the manipulatory power of Smith's disembodied voice, the casual tone serves to create a self-reflexive space in which we may become aware of our own imaginative engagement with the films – aware

that we are investing an image with meaning, making connections, finding our own way. Paradoxically this self-awareness is most acute when Smith reveals his hand, letting us know that he knew exactly what we were thinking all along, and thus laying bare the filmmaker's control over the audience, the manipulatory power of cinema, the mediated nature of representation.

This power of the voice is central to the impact made by a number of the videos in the *Hotel Diaries* series. In *Dirty Pictures* (2007) Smith relates a distressing scene witnessed at a crossing point on the Separation Wall in Bethlehem. As Smith describes the technology of the checkpoint, his camera plays across the furniture in his hotel room in East Jerusalem. Conjured by the descriptive power of the improvised voice-over, the familiar mise-en-scene of his immediate surroundings begins to double and recreate the Israeli checkpoint – the door on a dressing table stands in for a turnstile, the shelf holding his suitcase becomes a conveyor belt transporting personal belongings through an x-ray machine, while his drifting handheld camerawork mimics the zigzag passage of travellers through the checkpoint facility itself. There, on the previous day, Smith had witnessed a distraught, disabled Palestinian woman being refused access to the other side of the wall after repeatedly setting off the alarm on a security scanner. Following a number of unsuccessful attempts she is ordered to

remove her orthopaedic shoes and hobbles through the security arch, only to be refused entry yet again. Lying innocently on the floor of his room - in the western tourist's privileged space of comfort and leisure - his own shoes return and transport us to the plight of the Palestinian woman as Smith explains that he had been waved through the checkpoint, his British passport given only the most cursory of inspections by the Israeli security staff. Here the everyday, unremarkable mise-en-scene of travel is made meaningful through the power of spoken narrative, as Smith animates and reframes the mundane surroundings of his hotel room, charging even the prosaic image of a pair of shoes with political significance.

### **Ambient sound**

*Lost Sound*  
Stanway Court NI, Sunday April 12th. Birdsong, traffic passing in the distance. The whipling and crackling of abandoned audiocassette tape animated by the wind. A jet passes overhead, and we catch a short snatch of what might be Arabic music, muffled and indistinct. The sound is accompanied by a shot of cassette tape caught around iron railings, trailing like streamers in the breeze. On first hearing, the soundtrack seems to consist only of ambient sound – recorded on location with the image, laminated to it. This is the unremarkable, everyday background noise of the urban environment: sounds that we hear, but rarely listen to - sounds that,

under normal circumstances, barely inscribe themselves on our consciousness. The location recording helps to give the video a documentary aesthetic, bolstered by the precise details of location and date given onscreen. The very mundanity of the soundtrack suggests a lack of mediation - a guarantee of the indexicality and objectivity of the recording. The music we hear could be ambient sound, issuing from some unseen source in Stanway Court. But in fact it has been harvested from the abandoned audio tape we see in the shot. In this way *Lost Sound* (1998-2001) documents fragments of discarded cassette tape found by Smith and his collaborator Graeme Miller in a small area of East London. The tape is shot in situ, wrapped around clumps of grass, snagged by the peeling bark of a tree, stuck behind a satellite dish, submerged in a kerbside puddle. At one level *Lost Sound* is a video in which little seems to be happening: much of the project features static shots of street furniture, tree trunks, fences, aerials. Similarly, the ambient sounds recorded in these locations present familiar and unremarkable urban soundscapes, varying in density depending on location, time of day, and proximity to roads, factories, shops and the flight paths of aircraft. However, as the video develops Smith and Miller quickly begin building formal, narrative and musical connections between places, events and sounds.

How's Street E2, Monday April 13th. Rap music accompanies a shot of tape caught on barbed

wire - a chance juxtaposition of sound and image suggesting embattlement, ghettoisation, resistance to the problems of urban decay. An old rusting, wrecked car located behind the wire seems to speak of the deprivation of this grim inner city environment. As we contemplate this image, we hear the sound of a car being started somewhere offscreen – a fortuitous combination of sound and image that creates a nice gag about a vehicle that's going nowhere? Or Smith beginning to show his hand, subtly combining, aligning, juxtaposing sounds and images to gently suggest meaning or to create a particular effect. We can't be sure. But while in some sequences there is little visual evidence of artistic intervention beyond framing and composition, the soundtrack increasingly announces itself as a construction. Smith layers and orchestrates sections of ambient sound in such a way that, although remaining laminated to the image, they form a subtle, almost undetectable musique concrète of the environment. At the same time we find ourselves listening to sounds that distinguish themselves from the formless banality of the everyday soundscape. What marks these particular sounds is their ability, when sutured to the image, to create meaning – their ability to signify something other than their own indexical status as witness to the world.

Whitby Street E1. Sunday May 17th. A can rattling down a street. Voices of a man and young child. An empty piece of wall above

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a lock-up unit. In the street below, the man carries the child in his arms, entertaining the infant by striking an empty can with a broom, as if playing polo. The wind blows a piece of cassette tape caught in the wall into the top right hand corner of the frame. As it enters the shot a slightly fuzzy recording of a female soul singer is heard on the soundtrack. The wind subsides, the tape disappears from view, and the music cuts out. Here Smith playfully suggests that the movement of the tape somehow creates the sound we hear, challenging our common understanding of the causal relationship between sound and image, undermining our belief in the veracity and objectivity of what at first appeared to be an almost forensic documentary project. As *Lost Sound* builds, other examples of this type begin to appear: the chevrons on a roundabout << cue Smith to repeatedly rewind the section of video in which they feature; when a weather vane on top of a school roof swings to indicate a change in wind direction, the sound from the harvested cassette plays in reverse; tape lying on the floor at a street market appears to produce sound when sunlight falls upon it, but becomes silent when shadows cast by of passing shoppers throw it into shade. Here, as in other works, the connections that Smith forges between sound and image alert us to the processes of signification, alert us to the fact that meaning is an effect generated by combining sounds and images in particular ways. The very impossibility, yet absolute plausibility, of

the events he creates from his sonic and visual source materials alert us to the mediated nature of representation, as well as our own acts of perception and involvement in meaning making. What presents itself as natural, we come to realise more and more, has been selected, arranged, organised – an orchestration of individual moments sifted from many hours of videotape. By the time we reach the closing sequences of *Lost Sound* the authorial control that was at first hidden has become wholly evident, as Smith repeatedly loops increasingly brief sections of footage to create a rhythmic and progressively more abstract audiovisual musique concrète. With characteristic elegance and wit, Smith's collaboration with Miller opens our eyes and ears to both the world around us and to the mediation of that world through cinematic experience.

### Music

#### *Blight*

The heavy impact made by a sledgehammer is looped to create a rhythmic foundation for other sounds gathered around it: splintering wood, crumbling masonry – the sounds of demolition. Fragments of speech. Different voices located in amongst the soundscape of destruction: "red brick tiles", "plaster roses", "imitation primroses". A man's voice, the word "sorry" repeated several times, takes its place with other shards of speech: "knock the wall down", "splinters everywhere", "gauge

it out." Simple, stark piano chords create an understated elegiac tone, lending the sequence an undertow of sadness, loss. Accompanying this we see images of workmen in hard hats reducing houses to piles of rubble. With an old joist, a pickaxe, or bare hands, walls are pushed over or pulled apart, the sync sound of these shots entering the mix as another element of Smith's elegant and moving musique concrète of demolition. The voices we hear are those of unseen residents, forced to leave their East London homes as a result of the construction of the Mill link road in the mid-1990s.

With the exception of *Lost Sound*, composed or recorded music has never been a dominant feature of Smith's work. It is heard briefly in *Leading Light* (1975), one of Smith's earliest films, in which he tracks the movement of light across a domestic interior. Here music is introduced into the otherwise silent film only when sunlight falls onto a record player sitting on the floor of the room, the volume of the music determined by the amount of light playing across it (an audiovisual figure that will reemerge in *Lost Sound*). Flamenco guitar is heard briefly in *The Black Tower* as the film's protagonist contemplates an ornate plaster moulding in his bedroom, reimagined as "the sleeping Mexican who sat cross-legged on my ceiling". More recently a quick blast of Acker Bilk's *Stranger on the Shore* finds its way into *Soft Work* (2012).

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The result of a collaboration with the composer Jocelyn Pook, *Blight* (1994-6) is perhaps the most musical of all Smith's films, weaving speech, music and location sound into a sophisticated and emotionally powerful continuum, blurring the distinctions between composition, sound design and editing. If Smith has always been an ear-minded filmmaker - attuned to the sounds of the environment and the rhythms of speech - then the collaboration with Pook appears to have intensified the musicality that has always been inherent in his approach to sound. This musicality is evident from the very first moments of the film, as the Doppler swish of passing cars gives way to the creaking of wood, the crunch of falling rubble, and the repeated phrase "Jordan and Kim" - a mother, perhaps, calling her children in from the street. As the sequence gradually builds in complexity, texture and depth, it becomes evident that Smith is a composer, choosing, placing and combining sounds as much for their affective impact as for what they might mean or represent. The musical qualities of the woman's voice seem to be what has motivated the extraction of this particular phrase from what was presumably once a longer recording - a technique that is used elsewhere in the film, generating poignant leitmotifs from fragments of everyday speech. It is precisely this mix and play between materiality, form and meaning that identifies John Smith as an original voice in experimental cinema.

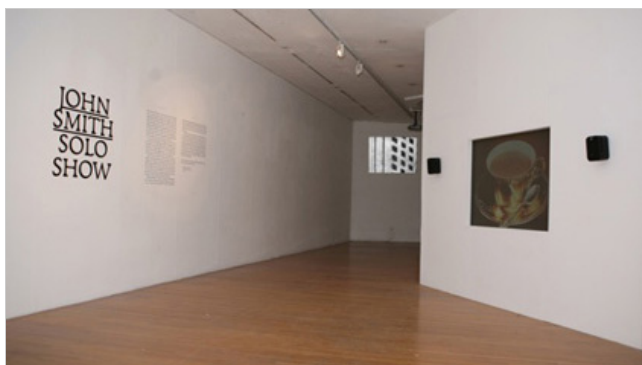
For Smith humour, experimentation, and reflexivity are never goals in themselves, but part and parcel of cinema's potential to engage with the world and our understanding of it. In investigating what is at stake in the creation and transmission of meaning Smith brings us back to the social sphere, reminding us that the practice of art is political, and has political potential. And what distinguishes Smith's work, in this regard, is its lively, entertaining, thoughtful and playful sensitivity to sound - prompting us to take pleasure in listening, prompting us to listen.

Andy Birtwistle



### Artists' movies

## John Smith: Of process and puns



The entrance to John Smith's solo show at the RCA. Photo: Lauren Winsor

**John Smith makes the mundane strange and the avant-garde funny. With three new works on show at his largest ever UK retrospective, he talks to Nick Bradshaw about his special brand of trompe l'oeil Brechtianism**

For anyone labouring under the impression that experimental movies are invariably arid exercises in academic formalism, John Smith's films and videos come as a great spritzer. Lifelong card-carrying **structuralist-materialist** he may be – his works want you to notice their physical or, more often, linguistic construction – but they typically do so by teasing and subverting narrative rather than rejecting it out of hand. They're also delightfully funny, using humour to play up the different meanings of an image, or more and less accustomed ways of seeing. His most famous film, *The Girl Chewing Gum* (1976; distributed on the British **Cinema 16** DVD), presents Dalston street footage as rushes directed by an audible, increasingly megalomaniac director; *The Waste Land* (1999) finds the film-maker himself reciting TS Eliot in the bogs of his local boozery. (Only Smith could see poetry in the reflection of a loo-door sign.)

To put it another way, he's an arch proponent of puns. *Om* (1986) conflates stereotypes of a chanting Eastern mystic and East End bovrer boy. *Associations* (1975) features a dry reading from Herbert H. Clark's *Word Associations and Linguistic Theory* flickeringly illustrated / counterpointed by static images of homonyms for the words being read (the film's title, for instance, is visualised as an ass, a sewing machine, the sea and a group of Asian girls); the comedy of the piece is in trying to keep up with Smith's increasingly rapid-fire, off-the-wall wordplay.

Smith has said that *The Girl Chewing Gum* was inspired by proposed stop-and-search laws which would empower the police's prejudicial worldview, but over the years the politics of his pieces have become franker, much as he has increasingly used himself as a character and subject in his films. *Home Suite* (1993-94) explores the memories conjured by his own East London home as he was being evicted to make way for the M11 Link Road (a devastation further explored in the beautiful protest musical *Blight* (1996)); his *Hotel Diaries* (2001-07) is a series of startlingly unadorned single-shot video monologues, in which the film-maker, camcorder in hand as he sits in hotel rooms around the world, finds consistently remarkable ways to relate the microcosms of his surroundings to the ongoing calamities of the Middle East.

Smith graduated from the Royal College of Art in 1977 and has now come

full circle, presenting his largest ever UK retrospective under the auspices of the college's Curating Contemporary Art MA-degree students. Smith used to prefer to cinema screenings to galleries, but the RCA show runs the gamut, incorporating a mix of free-standing 16mm and video projectors, video monitors and dedicated cinema spaces. It includes his first high-definition video piece – *Flag Mountain* (2010), shot across the divided rooftops of Nicosia in Cyprus – and two new installations which reconfigure older works. *Double Shutter* takes two of the three sections of 1979's *Blue Bathroom*, featuring alternating double exposures (by night and day) of an electric fan and a bathroom ventilator, and screens them on opposite walls, conjuring strange intimations of visual and physical interactions across the room. In *Third Attempt*, two prior attempts to record Smith singing 'The 12 Days of Christmas' across so many days – the 16mm *7P* (1978) and standard-def video *Regression* (1999) – are screened side-by-side, a dialogue across time that encapsulates the exhibition entire.

**NB: How does it feel to be bringing everything back to your almer mater after 35-odd years?**

**JS:** Thirty three, since I left. It's kind of strange. When I was a student the film school was round the back of the Natural History Museum, in a prefab building they used to stuff dead animals in, and I only ever used to go up to the main building to go to the bar, or watch The Clash playing or something. I never knew the gallery space existed until I went along to do this show and found how enormous it was.

I've had some intermittent contact with the place over the years since I left, showing my work, doing a couple of tutorials. I hadn't met this particular group of students on the Curating Contemporary Art course before, but apparently they wanted to do a solo show with somebody, and when they saw *The Girl Chewing Gum*, that was something they could all agree on.



*The Girl Chewing Gum* (1976)

**How do you feel about that film still being your trailer?**

I've mixed feelings. I find it quite funny, because when I first made that film I thought it was quite interesting, but nobody else did. I remember sending it to the Edinburgh Film Festival and it getting rejected, I guess because it's a film that deals with film language and formal ideas but is also comic, which at the time was maybe a little problematic in the world I inhabited. I kept showing it for a couple of years before anybody took an interest. Maybe it's my own fault that it's now become one of my most popular films; I certainly made it pretty familiar. I still tend to show it in any selection of my work, because it's a good introduction to ideas about cinema, where I'm coming from, the power of the voiceover, illusionism and all those things.

**Of the earlier pieces in the show, 'The Hut' and 'Leading Light' seem to embody the two poles of your interests. There's a documentary appreciation of the world in 'Leading Light', and a total mangling of it in 'The Hut'.**

That's true. Most of the work falls between those poles and shifts in and out of naturalism and representation on the one hand and extreme abstractions on the other. Films like *The Black Tower* are very much to do with the way one can move between illusionistic involvement and awareness of construction, abstraction and representation.

**And you're still doing that today with 'Flag Mountain'.**

Well, we only have a few ideas in life, don't we? That's the thing about showing a lot of work together; you realise you're giving away that you have certain motifs through lots of your work. The whole idea of windows by day and by night, that positive and negative aspect which runs from *Leading Light* to the *Double Shutter* piece and *Flag Mountain*, is really recurrent, as is the animation of the real world by matching framings, the pixellation of objects. I have to remind myself that you might see a hundred reworkings by a painter of the same image, because I always want the new work to be something I haven't done before, and obviously that gets harder as time goes on.

**'Leading Light' reminds me of certain contemplative artists who one wouldn't normally associate with you – Nathaniel Dorsky, or other American artists who play directly with light on film. Do you feel a part of that conversation across the Atlantic?**

Yes, and when I was first making work I was really interested in a lot of the American stuff – the obvious, Michael Snow's incorporation of narrative elements within the formal structure, and also the humour of a lot of that work. I thought there was a bit more poetry or humour there than in much of the English stuff. I really like the work of some of my contemporaries, but there was quite a lot of rather mechanistic work made in structural film-making in Britain. By myself included sometimes, I think.

**Was your interest in narrative also seen as deviant in the structuralist world?**

I don't think so. People ask me that question a lot; the work didn't particularly fit in, but I don't think people had problems with my work any more than I had with theirs. I just personally had a fascination with narrative, and wanted to have a narrative element in the work. I've said it before; I have a love/hate relationship with the power of cinema, so I love that immersion in another world, but I also know it's kind of naughty, in Brechtian terms.

**Failing to demystify?**

Yes! It's very ingrained in me that I have to demystify everything. I wouldn't be happy if I made work which didn't draw attention to its construction.



*Double Shutter* (2010) Photo: Lauren Winsor

**Your experiments with process and phasing remind me of Steve Reich's early music. What's happening with 'Double Shutter'? It gives the strange sensation of sitting in a light-and-wind tunnel.**

I made quite a few films which I don't show any more which are very process-based, and simple, formal ideas: for example a ten-minute film with a self-explanatory title, *Subjective Tick-Tocks* (1975), which is just a metronome swinging backwards and forwards for the length of one 400-foot roll of film, with the camera panning backwards and forwards across the metronome in different rhythms. I was interested in how a camera movement might affect your perception of audio rhythms. And when I made *The Hut* I was interested in perceptual psychology and the perception of visual rhythms – how easy it would be to perceive rhythmic cutting.

*Double Shutter* is actually really simple in its construction; there's no editing at all. It's all single shots, and to do with alternating images, masking the day or the night image. So the piece with the electric fan is simply two superimposed images of a fan by day and by night – with the lights off by day, so it's silhouetted, and on by night, when the background's dark. And it's filmed through another fan, masking the day or the night image. So it's two parts come together to form a single image – if you took the alternating device away you'd just be looking at a seemingly naturalistic image of a fan in the daytime with the lights on. I also had both fans on a dimmer switch so I could play with their speeds.

**Which interact with the camera shutter.**

Right, the wagon-wheel effect. So that film's actually triple-shutter, the camera shutter and the two fans. Whereas the other part, with the bathroom ventilator and the cardboard flag going up, is completely manual; although the image becomes quite complex, it's literally somebody bringing a piece of cardboard towards the camera until the image is obscured, then walking away again, initially just by day and then the night images comes in, and you get quite complex patterns between the two.

It's funny, because at the time I made the original film, the audience for artists' film were basically artist film-makers, and lots of us were all dealing with related ideas. Nowadays people are always asking "How did you do that?"



*Third Attempt* (2010), featuring *Regression* (left, 1999) and *7P* (right, 1978)  
Photo: Lauren Winsor

**'Third Attempt', like the whole exhibition, shows some of the things that have been changing in your work over time – one of which is foregrounding yourself in your work. Has that become easier?**

Absolutely. When I made *The Girl Chewing Gum* I used my own voice, but couldn't bear to listen to it – I remember playing around in the RCA dubbing studio trying to disguise it, make myself sound more grown-up. But now it's been tuned by years of cigarettes and whisky...

I still feel slightly uncomfortable with some of the more confessional aspects of the work, but take a sort of masochistic pleasure in making myself squirm. Particularly in the *Hotel Diaries*, which are improvised single takes, I'll say something and think "Fucking hell, that was embarrassing", but I'm stuck with it. But it's quite a deliberate device to have that level of mistake in those pieces. I don't want to be didactic because I've got nothing special to say; I'm sure my armchair-socialist opinions are very irritating for a lot of people. I hope the spontaneity makes them less like a lecture; I'm more interested in sharing concerns and cathartically – for myself – ranting... I really like that the *Hotel Diaries* pieces have given me the opportunity to go around the world and slag off my government's involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan.

**The unedited aspects seems quite radical not only in the context of your earlier works, but also given how heavily processed TV has become.**

They're wilfully simple. I've got myself into trouble at film festivals when I've won prizes for those films, particularly in Cork when I won the main prize for *Museum Piece*. I had to make a speech, and I said that it gave me particular pleasure to get a prize for this film because I'm a great believer in economy, and this film cost €7, or the price of one DV tape. And afterwards I had so many really angry young film-makers coming up to me, saying "I borrowed £10,000 to make my film, and yours is a load of shit!"

What does sometimes upset me if people don't tune into those pieces is when they ask, "Did you plan what you were going to say, or did you just switch on the camera and wave it around?" Actually, apart from *Frozen War*, the first piece, which is spontaneous, they're all planned: I know what I'm going to be looking at when I'm talking about a particular thing, and there are lots of connections between image and sound. But maybe people just don't get the metaphorical significance of talking about Yasser Arafat having just died while the camera's looking at an empty bed, those sorts of things.



*Dirty Pictures* (2007), from *Hotel Diaries*

**Again in 'Third Attempt', you've got 16mm and video playing across each other, and you talk about finding video in some ways more useful and convenient. Is that your final judgement?**

No, not at all. The reason it's called *Third Attempt* is that whereas the film I made in 1978 has those physical qualities of film that I talk about in the video – it's really raw, the splices move and there's a lot of grain – after I'd made the video piece I felt it was a bit sanitised, and I missed the kicks on the splices, the dirt and the raucous singing. I wanted to inject that anarchic element into the piece again, so I was really excited by the idea of

showing the two pieces together.

Also, there's a lot of shit talked about the differences between film and video, so I was really interested to put two comparable film and video images next to each other – a similar thing in exactly the same circumstances, exactly the same size, two projectors of fairly equal luminosity – and see what they look like. Hopefully there's a dialogue between the two technologies as well as a literal one within the piece.



*Flag Mountain* (2010)

**Is 'Flag Mountain' the first piece you've shot on HD?**

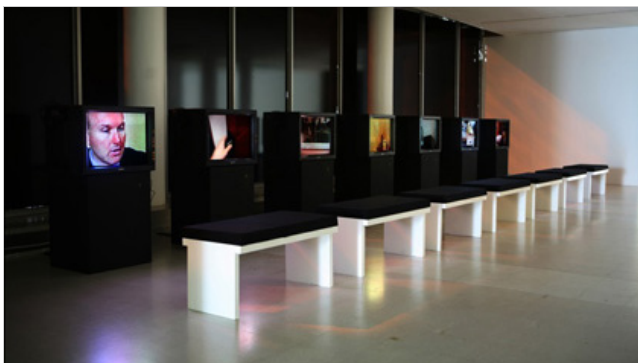
Yes. Specifically just for the subject, really, because it is such a wide shot of a landscape – it looks like shit on standard definition. When I first shot it I was slightly disappointed with the quality of the image, before I realised that even what you might call a close up at the end is an extremely wide shot, in which a person is only so high. Unfortunately I've always been obsessed with focus in images, and it's kind of censored the way I've framed things. There are very few wide shots in any of my films, and it's not because I don't like wide shots, it's just that they don't look that sharp in 16mm, or standard-definition video. So it's quite interesting how the technology affects how one frames things. That said, I do use the close-up very much as a device to mystify, so you're wondering what's going on outside the frame.

I was really pleased with the footage after I shot it. In terms of showing it, I don't want to show it on standard definition, which is all most festivals have, so I've got to get a film print made if I want to show it. I didn't realise you have to get a Dolby track made for 35mm prints now – something to do with Dolby having something sewn up, but I think the print is going to cost me about £5,000.

**At the RCA you're showing the film in a continuous loop with an invisible join. That presumably won't be possible when you take it to festivals?**

No, and I think I really like it much better as a loop. The linear film starts with the little Greek flag blowing in the breeze, then you hear the Muezzin call to prayer, the camera hones in on the mosque, you get all the psychedelic stuff and when the camera pulls out again you hear all the church bells. It's kind of problematic for me that one is a resolution – is Christianity what we're left with? I know it's not really a resolution, but it is an order: Muezzin, Turkish national anthem, church bells. I like the circularity of just moving in and out, across a landscape and between different cultures, without any sense of a resolution.

There are quite a few pieces in the show where I've deliberately taken the titles off; even if there's black between them, they are a repeating cycle. So for example I'm much happier with *The Kiss*, the piece with a lily, as a continuous, rotating loop. When people see it just once they think, "How is that done? What have I been looking at?" Hopefully if you're interested in watching it again you can get beyond that.



*Hotel Diaries* (2001-07) Photo: Lauren Winsor

**Were you surprised to find yourself so happy with a gallery installation of all this work? Did you used to fight against that world more?**

I've been showing quite a lot in galleries for about 15 years now –

generally in group shows, but I've done six or seven one-person shows. Originally I saw it as a compromise – how do I get things as close as possible to a cinema? Whereas nowadays I feel as though a lot of the work really benefits from being shown in this way. I guess what's most important is to acknowledge the needs of individual works. So at the RCA, *Slow Glass* and *The Black Tower* are showing in a cinema environment, with advertised screening times, and a countdown between pieces so that between screenings you don't think it's broken down. And did you notice that the *Hotel Diaries* pieces can be restarted by the viewer? Nobody notices! That's the one thing I'm disappointed by – the button is very discreet.

**In 'Regression' you make some barbed points about commodified art and limited-edition movies. What do you feel now about file trading and digital exchange?**

I feel really fine about it; disseminate as much as possible, basically. But my attitude to that has completely changed over the years. I remember when the ICA approached the London Film-makers' Co-op to put lots of our work into its old videotheque library, offering 10p or something every time somebody watches a film, and we unanimously said "No way, our work has to be shown on film, and you've got to pay a rental fee if anyone wants to see the film." Then in, I guess, the mid-1990s I did some VHS tapes with the old London Electronic Arts: two anthology tapes for £20, and it was 20 years of my work, so a quid a year! At the time I thought, I'm probably going to lose some rentals, which no doubt I did, but so many more people got to know my work, and even if I'd been giving those tapes away they would have had rewards in terms of other opportunities and screenings. And people now only really hire film work if it's going to be installed in a gallery; I think educational institutions have all got bootleg VHSs and DVDs. And I show other artists' work the same way myself.

**And in terms of the "shit that gets talked about the differences between film and video", what work were you not happy to put on VHS?**

Well, the pieces that you see on film at the RCA. Quite a lot of my early work was to do with the materiality of film, so *Leading Light*, *Hackney Marshes* – they're both edited in camera, both have flash frames when the camera starts up... somehow I can't bear to look at a flash frame on video. Whereas the majority of my work has got nothing to do with that; it's to do with the language of film, but not the materials. So *The Girl Chewing Gun*, *The Black Tower*, *Slow Glass* – I'm now happier to show lots of those films on video, because you can get very decent video projectors now, prints don't wear out, and you can send tapes all over the world for only a few quid and not worry about risking your print with an unsure festival.

The one compromise at this show is that *Double Shutter* is in a way a film idea, to do with the strobing of the shutter, but I also wanted to show it big, and you wouldn't get a 16mm projector that was bright enough to show it on that scale. Anyway, the RCA couldn't afford to get prints made of that piece as well, so the decision was made for us. But otherwise there's an integrity about what's showing on film and what on video.



*Lost Sound* (2001)

**'Lost Sound' brings us to audiotape, and back to your documentary side. It also reminds me of Agnès Varda and her gleaners.**

*The Gleaners & I*? Yeah, I like that very much, it's a fantastic piece. But finding subject-matter close to home has always been very important to me. Actually Graeme Miller and I – we collaborated on *Lost Sound* – are redoing an installation version, which involves finding a piece of tape in the street and projecting it onto two sides of a screen, so the A-side and the B-side of the tape. The rule is basically to take a walk from the gallery where the work's going to be shown in a spiral until you find a piece of audio tape, and that piece becomes the subject of the work. And however long it is, that's the duration of the shot that's looped and repeated. I'm still a sucker for structuralist ideas!

People are asking us: Do you think you'll find any tape? And it'll be quite interesting if we don't, because we've got to perform the piece that night. So we're getting up early in the morning, and there's a writer who's going to document our travels. But I suspect we probably will find the tape, because if you look for things you find them, that's the kind of philosophy that runs through a lot of my work.

Nothing in any of my films is researched; I come across things. *Flag Mountain* is literally the view from an apartment that I accidentally ended up staying in in Nicosia in 1997. I went back last summer, booked the same apartment and shot the film. And similarly *Worst Case Scenario* – that's shot from a hotel room that they put me in for the Viennale. Two years later I phoned the hotel, said I really want to stay in the same grubby room – they thought I was a bit crazy – and barricaded myself in for a week with a camera pointing out the window.

**There's the wonderful quote in the catalogue that "a literal reading of all your films' narratives would lead one to presume that you're an alcoholic with mental health problems."**

Yeah, my wife laughed at that.

**But maybe it's the world that turns one into an alcoholic with mental health problems?**

Well, I did have a bottle of wine last night...

*'Flag Mountain' screens in competition at the Oberhausen Film Festival in May. John Smith Solo Show is documented on its dedicated **website**.*

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## On the Street where You Live: The Films of John Smith

by **Adrian Danks**

December 2003

Feature Articles, Issue 29

*... the films are based on the premise that pro-filmic events are secondary to filmic construction in the creation of meaning, that if you look hard enough all meanings can be found or produced close to home.*

– John Smith (1)

*John Smith is a master of withholding, his films are full implication rather than action.*

– Cornelia Parker (2)



The films of John Smith create a world from the “simple” experiences of living, breathing and being a filmmaker or artist in a particular place and time. Smith’s often humorous films produced over the last 30 years have inventively documented and probed his immediate surroundings, often not even moving much beyond the front door of his various abodes in a small area of East London (predominantly Leytonstone). Nevertheless, it would be wrong to describe Smith’s films as overly delicate, preciously insular or purely personal – assignations that the previous description might suggest – as his work sees within the minutiae of familiar surroundings a range of philosophical, aesthetic, technical and quotidian challenges and revelations that extend far beyond the realm of much other comparable cinema; bringing his work closest to such observational essay filmmakers as Patrick Keiller (with whom he shares a definitive, though in Smith’s case somewhat ramshackle, southern Englishness), Jerome Hill and Agnès Varda (in fact Varda’s 1975 film *Daguerréotypes*, a playful and personal documentary spun around the people who live in her street, is very reminiscent of Smith’s work). In film after film, Smith explores the cracks within and the tribulations of the world he confronts everyday, taking a closer look at and often transforming (verbally, associatively, just by observing from a different angle) things like a pane of glass, the discolorations of a mouldy ceiling, a hospital water-tower, the archaeology of an ancient toilet, an old shepherd’s proverb, or a work he was unhappy with some 20 odd years before. In the process, he makes us look more closely, not just at his films and the cinema generally, but our own surroundings, the everyday world that engulfs us but that we probably routinely dismiss as a suitable subject for contemplation, art and imagination (I would add revelation to this list, but such a term seems inappropriate to describe the gentle, temporal and unpretentious pleasures of Smith’s work).

Such a description might suggest that Smith’s cinema is closest to that of such personality-based documentarians as Ross McElwee (*Sherman’s March*), Andrew Köttling (*Gallivant*) and even Nick Broomfield, but his work routinely, matter-of-factly, asks and “stages” more probing questions about film form, and what can constitute the “subject” of cinema, than any of these other filmmakers. Although he sometimes appears on camera and is often heard on the soundtrack – as character or more often “himself” – Smith’s films lack the ego-driven intensity and staged self-indulgence of McElwee and Broomfield (even more self-effacing than such closely-aligned filmmakers as Varda). Smith’s often personal cinema is much closer in scope and sensibility to a Stan Brakhage film like *The Child’s Garden and the Serious Sea*, a work through which the filmmaker discovers a world at the bottom of his garden. But Smith’s cinema is less self-consciously visionary, abstract and preoccupied with finding new modes of vision than Brakhage’s. Brakhage probed his immediate environments for revelations of vision and event, Smith just wants to look a little closer, to stay and “brew” for a while, to see new combinations and cut-price visions in the built but organic worlds that surround him. As Cornelia Parker evocatively suggests:

*It’s as if by choosing as his subject the ordinary everyday things that surround us all and by scrutinising them closely, turning them over and inside out, he can find all the hidden complexity of the universe. The*

While Brakhage attempts to transform vision through his often deliberately unfocused, haphazardly composed images (to see outside of the constraints of practiced modes of vision), Smith mainly just wants to show, record and document his world through a sometimes mobile (more so when Smith moves to video in the mid-1990s) but more often than not closed-off camera (a conversational camera nevertheless that accompanies the words that fill many of his soundtracks). In the process, time and its critical impact on place becomes the key, gently moving leitmotif of his "economic" and prosaic cinema.

Smith's cinema is difficult to encapsulate and describe, moving across the categories and boundaries of documentary, fictional narrative, conceptual art and the contemporary artists' film, as well as various other forms of avant-garde cinema. Smith himself is somewhat uncomfortable (though characteristically accepting) with any attempts to pigeon-hole his work – it is perhaps best to say that along with the often artisan work of filmmakers such as Varda, Chris Marker, Corinne and Arthur Cantrill (to take an Australian example), and (sometimes) Derek Jarman and Chantal Akerman, it documents the day-to-day process or act of filmmaking, and art as a quotidian, living and incorporative process rather than as a rarefied means of heightened expression. Like all such cinema it can therefore be fitted into no single category, open to the vagaries, digressions and often-extended time-frames of filming, gathering, contemplating. Such cinema is still determined by choices, selections and exclusions and combinations made by the filmmaker (there is little that is sordid, salacious or even traumatic about their films) but is more open to "new" possibilities of content, style and representation (including the impact of changing technology). These films are also much more likely to refer to their own conditions of production – a point of almost constant awareness for Smith – as well as the spectator's relationship to what is unfolding on the screen.

In so doing, Smith's films often explore several of the key parameters of cinematic form but in a fashion unlike the more strident works of conceptual and structuralist cinema (a context of largely Co-op-fuelled, London-based filmmaking from which Smith emerged in the early to mid-1970s). As A.L. Rees has suggested, two of his earliest films – *Associations* (1975) and *The Girl Chewing Gum* (1976), both made while Smith was still a Masters student at the Royal College of Art – establish the key formal questions and experiments that propel pretty much all his subsequent work (4). Though similar in many respects, these two films contrast, respectively, droll explorations of cinematic montage and the sequence shot. Nevertheless, I think it would be incorrect to suggest that there is anything particularly schematic about Smith's exploration of these two key parameters of avant-garde cinema – his films are too playful and idiosyncratic to allow this – but such forms do create a structure upon which he hangs multiple digressions, associations, observations and jokes (creating a potent contrast to the often painfully playful work of Peter Greenaway in this mode – Smith's films are often genuinely funny).

The principles of montage and the long take are also extended to the soundtrack of his films. Often filled with puns, associations, long digressions, personal testimonies, linguistic explorations and poetic reveries of thought and language (just listen to the enjoyment at the sound words and their combinations the glazier-narrator appears to experience at points in *Slow Glass* [1988-91]), Smith's soundtracks alternate between a variety of connections and disconnections between sound and image, long, extended stories (for example, the Poe-like narration of *The Black Tower* [1985-7]) and collections of alliterative and even "found" words (and music in *Lost Sound* [1998-2001]). Smith is also fascinated with the associative relationships thrown up by the dialectical contrast between sound and image (a semiotic obsession he shares with Godard), often running words and sounds over a collection of images in a manner that makes us question their connection and thus the "fidelity" of either component.



Such an approach produces its most hilarious and profound effects in *The Girl Chewing Gum*. The film consists of only two shots showing, in turn, a bustling streetscape in East London and a pylon-blighted country landscape that the narrator claims is "15-miles" away. These two shots are matched to a combination of ambient sound and matter-of-fact but somewhat urgent voiceover narration. On the soundtrack, the narrator appears to be directing all of the elements of the scene we are watching, moving even the fixed, concrete elements of the world – buildings, sky, etc. – to agree with his vision. The film does indeed look like a

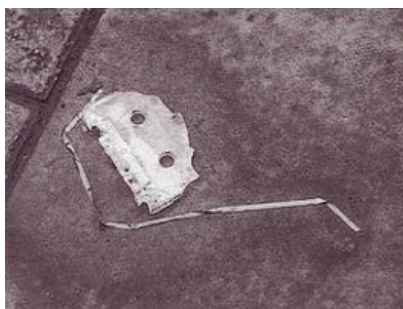
documentary – and, of course, in a Griersonian sense, in many ways it still is. At first, the spectator is carried along by the central conceit of the film's formal structure, taken in by the familiarity of its sound and image combinations. It soon becomes apparent – as the relation between image and sound starts to lag, flocks of birds are instructed to fly through the frame, an outdoor wall clock is instructed to move its hands – that the voiceover is actually recorded after the fact, and that the film is predominantly an examination of the interpretative pre-eminence of sound, and particularly word, over image (*Associations* explores similar territory by presenting a stream of variously associative images culled from Sunday supplement colour spreads that "respond" to the soundtrack). *The Girl Chewing Gum* could easily have become a throwaway parody of conventional documentary form – as is true of most contemporary mockumentaries which use the revelation of their fictionalised "reality" as both punch-line and central point – but instead it powerfully explores the links

between image and sound, constantly making us aware – through a variety of subtle methods – of the multiple ways in which such films tend to guide our reading of the image, while taking on, at times, an almost surreal dimension. A key to Smith's achievement in this film lies in extending this conceit to almost breaking point, reconfiguring the relationship we commonly allow to be created between sound and image. But, as Nicky Hamlyn suggests, this is fuelled by both a questioning and celebratory attitude towards such techniques: "He delights in the power of narration at the same time as he questions it" (5).

Throughout most of the first, extended shot of *The Girl Chewing Gum* an alarm is heard on the soundtrack. It is not until towards the end of this shot that the narrator draws attention to this element (in a way he hasn't addressed the soundtrack before) and relates it to an action unfolding on the screen – a young man in a coat walking into frame is said to have just robbed the local post-office, the narrator describing his sweaty hand on the gun in his pocket. Despite all that has come before, for a short time we wonder whether this is indeed true, if in fact it is a conceivable interpretation of the combination of the alarm on the soundtrack and the way the man walks through the frame. This quizzical moment pinpoints a key dimension of Smith's cinema. Unlike many of his counterparts in the British avant-garde, Smith is mostly interested in the juxtaposition of verbal, cinematic and gestural language with forms of narrative storytelling. In some ways he uses his immediate surroundings and day-to-day experiences to discover the raw materials and new possibilities for this storytelling. In the first long take of *Home Suite* ([1993-4] his first long-form video work) these stories and legends are wound around a soon to be replaced, ancient-looking toilet, spinning out in the third and final shot of the film (its three shots are 96-minutes long altogether) to incorporate the destruction of the whole neighbourhood around Smith's home to make way for the M11 Link Road, a project which completely ignores and obliterates anything of local topographical and cultural significance. Smith's most inventive use of the "bricolage" of reframed or "found" images and voiceover narration is found in *The Black Tower*. Smith utilises the variously reframed, "ominous" image of a hospital's water-tower – a built form that can actually be seen from the back of his house, across a graveyard – to weave a disturbing, symbolic tale of urban transformation and dread. Over the last 20 years, Smith's films have become understandably preoccupied and concerned with changes in the topography of East London. The title of one of Smith's most celebrated films, *Blight* (1994-6), indicating a shift of perspective, a somewhat bleaker and more direct vision of urban decay and supposed renewal. It is quite revealing that this film also includes Smith's most composed soundtrack, a combination of residents' testimonies and specially recorded, emotive music orchestrated by Jocelyn Pook.

As suggested earlier in this article, the key concerns of Smith's cinema are time and place. Two of the filmmaker's most profound examinations of these pockmarked terrains are *Slow Glass* and *Lost Sound*. *Slow Glass* is an extended work structured around the combination of a digressive, at times annoying but ultimately quite moving voiceover of an old-fashioned glazier (voiced by sometime collaborator Ian Bourn) and a series of images largely "containing" glass forms and objects. In many ways it is an emblematic Smith film. Shot and compiled over a period of three years, it is testament to the painstaking, temporally defined approach that the filmmaker often takes to his work, documenting small and more dramatic changes in architecture, light and topography (it often shows the "same" place with the same framing at two or more different points in time). The film takes glass as its central metaphor, highlighting its definition as a liquid rather than a solid form (and thus, in the process, questioning the solidity of things that are seen through it). It is a film that dwells on both drastic and gradual change, but that is ultimately about a more general impermanence of things (buildings, professions, objects and even modes of expression). In a manner typical of Smith's work, it makes us contemplate the apparatus of lenses, viewfinders, mirrors and screens through which we watch cinema, *Slow Glass* included.

One of Smith's most recent films, *Lost Sound* is equally responsive to the peculiarities and temporality of place. It is also a somewhat melancholy examination of both discarded sounds (shown in the "physical" form of strands of audio-tape) and a blighted urban landscape. It is in many ways a conceptual or process work – Smith and his collaborator Graeme Miller scouted a limited area of East London over an extended period of time to find strands of discarded audio-tape; these "discoveries" were then filmed *in situ*, ambient location sound recorded, the tape itself "recovered", digitised and then played over the recorded images and sounds.



Typically, the subsequent combination of image and sound registers as both documentation and as a controlling and manipulating aesthetic technique (for example, it is sometimes reversed or played backwards, matching similar visual experimentation). *Lost Sound* emerges as a strangely moving film that indirectly documents the changing topography and impermanent occupation of the East London landscape – surprisingly the majority of found music on this tape is of East Asian or African origin or derivation. Like *Slow Glass*, *Lost Sound* lets us hear, taste and see the impermanence of things, the ephemeral details of sound, image, light, macro and microscopic events that make up a community. Although Smith's films are wonderfully non-systematic in their portrait of a specific community structured upon its environment, they are also profound, humorous and small-scale manifestations of a much more universal human experience.

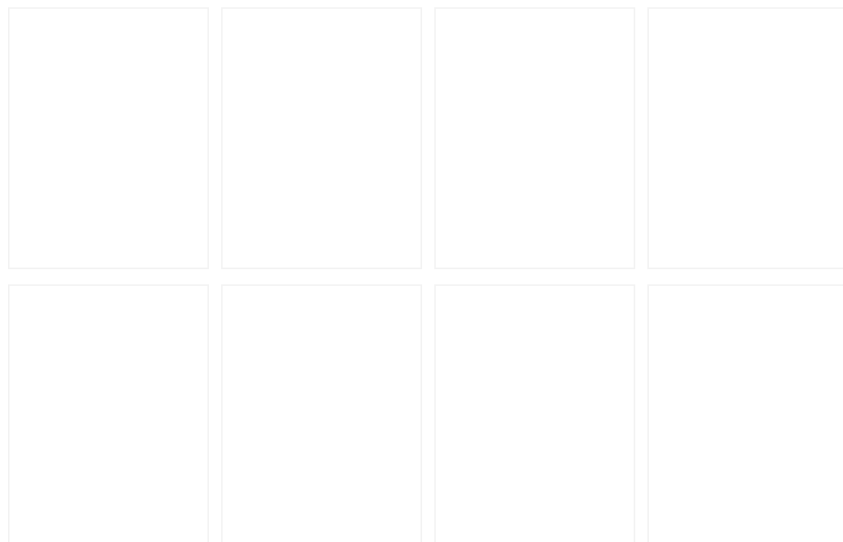
When watching much of Smith's work I am also reminded of an episode of the classic British comedy *Hancock's Half Hour*. In this particular instalment Hancock spends the entire duration of the show just wandering about his

home, spending time interacting with the small details of the bed-sit world that surrounds him. The *drama* of this episode is not conventionally dramatic, its solipsism not necessarily problematic, and its philosophical bent not particularly existential, and yet its insights into the way people relate to their environment are gently profound. It is from similar small moments and observations that John Smith creates such an equally captivating, garden-variety universe. He moves hesitantly from the micro to the macrocosmic, and from the world inside a bathroom, a toilet or bedroom to the street outside. As Smith himself self-deprecatingly states: "If I'm planning a film I'll start with one shot, and there won't be a second unless there's a reason for it. Basically, you're starting with your navel and then moving out from that" (6).

*A retrospective of John Smith's work is being shown at the Melbourne Cinémathèque on Wednesday November 26 at 6:30pm (screening at the Australian Centre for the Moving Image) and on Thursday November 27 at 7:00pm (screening at RMIT University's Radio Theatre). Installation and film works by Smith and Miranda Pennell are also being exhibited at Performance Space in Sydney from December 3-13, see [here](#).*

## Endnotes

1. Smith cited in "John Smith talking with Cate Elwes", *John Smith: Film and Video Works 1971-2002*, Picture This Moving Image and Watershed Media Centre, Bristol, 2002, p. 70 ↑
2. Cornelia Parker, "John Smith's Body", *John Smith: Film and Video Works 1971-2002*, p. 12 ↑
3. Parker, p. 12 ↑
4. A. L. Rees, "Associations", *John Smith: Film and Video Works 1971-2002*, pp. 16-7. ↑
5. Nicky Hamlyn, "John Smith's Local Locations", *John Smith: Film and Video Works 1971-2002*, p. 44 ↑
6. Hamlyn, p. 57 ↑



## About the Author

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# Personal space

For over 30 years John Smith has been wryly documenting the world by dissecting it on film and video. Nick Bradshaw welcomes a first DVD release

I'm looking at a handsomely produced triptych of digipak DVD cases – coloured in the red-green-blue scheme of the RGB video colour model – hosting what I believe to be the first digital collection of John Smith's unassumingly masterful, irresistibly experimental film and video eye-openers. The DVDs are making me feel old, and a bit sad: a few years ago I'd have been thrilled to have acquired a digest (and, I suppose, a trophy) of what I consider some of the most playfully revealing explorations in the film form. Just lately, though – faced with a cellar freighted with so many boxes of DVDs it could be mistaken for a priest hole – I've embarked on one of those personal pull-back shots that strip away the promise of use-value from a given medium and consign it to the coffee coasters of antiquity. What fate lies in store for the shiny optical disc? How will it compare to the discarded, billowing audio-cassette tapes seen in *Lost Sound*, Smith's 1998-2001 archaeological film dig around East London with the sound artist Graeme Miller?

Smith's films combine that sense of wistful, nigh-on maudlin nostalgia – for matters of far more human salience than the mere fate of physical media – with a dazzlingly nonchalant ability to transcend the prosaically personal. (As he's quoted as saying in the accompanying booklet, "Basically, you're starting with your navel and then moving out from that.") It's no coincidence that this strain has grown more pronounced in his work as he has aged: his early pun films – on this set, *Associations* (1975), *The Girl Chewing Gum* (1976) or *Om* (1986) – foreground the invention, irony and formalist derring-do that Smith has certainly never lost. (The film-school text movie *The Girl Chewing Gum*, with its comical, seductive over-narration of documentary street footage, makes you want to watch directed bombast like *Transformers* with a DVD-commentary overlay of the wild track of Michael Bay's on-set direction.) Yet you can read the recurrent melancholia in some of his other titles: *Blight* (1994-96), *Regression* (1998-99), *Lost Sound*, *The Waste Land* (1999), *Frozen War* (2001), *Worst Case Scenario* (2001-03), *Museum Piece* (2004)... Diverse though they are in



Artisan essayist: Smith in 'Regression'



'The Black Tower'

their content, the collected films conjure a tone somewhere between the convivial banter of the pub and the lonely walk home.

The collection's first disc closes tellingly with *Regression*, an attempt to improve an earlier distillation of time – Smith's sequential daily performances of 'The 12 Days of Christmas' in 7P (1978). The later work notably sees the filmmaker appear on camera to give a lengthy disquisition on his switch to video-making and his (unlikely) hopes of being mistaken for a Young British Artist. It follows *Shepherd's Delight* (1980-84) and *The Black Tower* (1985-87), which tease with putatively autobiographical hints of drink and breakdown. ("A literal reading of all of his films' narratives," Gemma Lloyd and Gareth Bell-Jones have noted, "would lead one to presume John Smith is an alcoholic with mental health problems.")

That sense of pulling back marks the second disc. The pithy *Gargantuan* (1992, one minute, one newt) and *The Kiss* (1999, five minutes, one hothouse lily) riff on shifts of scale, perspective and comprehension.

**The films have that enviable simplicity of a master and an exemplary economy of means**



'Lost Sound'



'Blight'

*Blight*, an exquisitely edited protest musical (in collaboration with composer Jocelyn Pook) shot during the demolition of Smith's Leytonstone neighbourhood to make way for the M11, turns the received meaning of 'urban blight' on its head. *Slow Glass* (1988-91) is a dense, contemplative masterwork that turns an erstwhile glazier's pub ruminations on the production and consumption of glass ("still a liquid... moving, trickling down, just too slow to see") into a fractured meditation on the sands of time, urban change and the act of seeing. Conversely, perhaps, *The Waste Land* pulls T.S. Eliot back to the bar for last orders and a glimpse of his anagrammed name as he exits the toilet.t.s. (*Shepherd's Delight* features similar word games with the Vacant/Engaged labels on sliding door locks, while *Home Suite* (1993-94) – absent from this set – reflects at length on the bowl of his old loo. Smith elevates the art of toilet humour.)

The third disc gathers Smith's 'Hotel Diaries' (2001-07), his major project from the Bush/Blair decade. Pushing (himself) into stark, unedited, single-shot performance terrain, these are eight intimate video diaries – or as Ian Christie calls them, nocturnes – taped in sundry hotel rooms around the world. Smith's handheld camera scans his confines in search of telling images, while his monologues make strange connections between his daily circumstances and news – initially mediated – from Afghanistan, Iraq

and occupied Palestine. (The penultimate piece, 2007's *Dirty Pictures*, features both Israel's West Bank wall and a hotel ceiling that's less steadfast than you'd guess.)

As ever, the films have that enviable simplicity of a master, not to mention an exemplary economy of means; they demonstrate how to surmount one's isolation, even if it leads you straight to larger geopolitical frustrations.

Last year the Royal College of Art, Smith's alma mater, mounted a rare solo retrospective of his work. Inevitably, that showcased some pieces not on these discs – those repurposed as installations, like *Blue Bathroom* (1978-79), but also early films such as *Leading Light* (1975) or *Hackney Marshes* (1977) that are involved, as Smith noted, with the materiality of film (you can read an interview I conducted with him then on the S&S website at [www.bfi.org.uk/sightandsound/exclusive/john\\_smith](http://www.bfi.org.uk/sightandsound/exclusive/john_smith)). His website lists 44 movie works up to last year's *Flag Mountain*. You can now take nearly half of them with you, but the rest will remain fleeting graces.

Reading about Smith for this piece, I've found Adrian Danks comparing him to the great playful/artisanal film essayists such as Agnès Varda, Chris Marker, Patrick Keiller and Corinne and Arthur Cantrill (not to mention his fellow dialectician Jean-Luc Godard). Michael O'Pray casts him with the cinema's "outstanding practitioners of humour" – Buster Keaton, Luis Buñuel, the Marx Brothers, Jacques Tati – "all of whom pushed or unpicked the logic of the medium itself through humour."

Thinking about Smith's attempts to address and bridge the gulf between illusionism and formalism, film's form and content, I'm reminded of the great avant-garde filmmaker Nathaniel Dorsky and the observations in his monograph *Devotional Cinema* on what he calls the age-old "instinct to express the union of material and subject". And film, he notes, can be a direct metaphor for our existence as temporal, perceiving beings.

"The more we are able to relax and accept the absolute presence of our situation and then begin to recognise its formal qualities," he writes, "the greater the chance we have to transmute it. With humility, we can perform an act of alchemy and transform what might feel like leaden claustrophobia into an expression of openness and clarity."

■ The three-DVD box-set 'John Smith' is available now from Lux

## Rooms with a View: Watching John Smith's *Hotel Dairies*

by **Adrian Danks**

March 2011

Cinémathèque Annotations on Film, Issue 58 | March 2011



Watching John Smith's playfully inquisitive, profoundly interiorised and often "hushed" *Hotel Dairies* is a curious and sometimes unsettling experience. Comprised of eight episodes (though the Rotterdam entries \* "Pyramids"/"Skunk" \* are always screened as a double episode) shot over a six-year period in a range of European and Middle-Eastern cities (Cork, Berlin, Winterthur, Bristol, Rotterdam, Bethlehem/Jerusalem) it provides an intimate, mischievous and sometimes angry response to the political events occurring outside – and often at some distance from – the various hotel rooms that Smith occupies and blithely

comments upon. Shot intermittently but pointedly in a range of cities Smith was visiting, often to introduce screenings of his films at various festivals, it is predominantly concerned with the dislocation or disconnection between the world inside the often-unitary hotel rooms and that found or seen outside. For example, Smith opens the final episode with a quick visual survey of his nondescript hotel room playfully situating each transferable object in a different city. Like many of Smith's films *Hotel Dairies* seems carefully structured and circumstantial, premeditated and improvised. Initially conceived in Cork in October 2001, its development as a longer-form project only took shape once the various episodes – screened individually at numerous locations across this period and also as an installation of side-by-side monitors – started to suggest a "complete" work. The final episode, "Six Years Later" (shot on the 20th of October 2007), is therefore an explicit attempt to unify and further structure the work, returning to a different, more modern hotel in Cork almost six years to the day after the first, slightly panicked episode. Characteristically, it provides both something of a conclusion and a more open-ended, circumspect, faltering coda.

As some other commentators have suggested, *Hotel Dairies* is something of a departure for Smith. Most of the films he has made over the last 40 years have concerned themselves with his immediate or local environment, sometimes not moving beyond the neighbourhood streets of his East London home. In its more extreme form, such as the three shot, 96-minute video work *Home Suite* (1994), Smith can find enough fascination and points of contemplation within the interior of his own domestic environment (the well-used toilet a particular source of inspiration for this film). In this regard, *Hotel Dairies* is a continuation of these earlier works, but it also moves Smith out from the familiar terrain of home to the anonymous spaces and experiences characteristic of international tourism (there are numerous plays in the film on the comforting *and* alienating uniformity of hotel interiors). Nevertheless, although Smith views the various hotel rooms he ventures into with a wary eye, he is often quite complimentary about a particular item of décor, a specific arrangement of objects, or the comforting lived-in wear-and-tear of some of the establishments he visits. *Hotel Dairies* is also the most explicitly or straightforwardly political of all the films Smith has made. Nevertheless, it would be incorrect to say that his earlier films are not also political in terms of their concern for local environments, cultures, languages and even temporalities, and the ways in which these are questioned and obliterated by modernisation and urban development. This engaged localism is a key element of such works as *Lost Sound* (2001), *Home Suite*, *Slow Glass* (1991) and *Blight* (1996). In this regard, *Hotel Dairies* continues a preoccupation with the relationship between the local and the global, the micro and the macroscopic, the world inside an anonymous hotel room and that teeming outside.

The first part of the "series" – "Frozen War" – is in many ways the most striking, immediate and questioning section of this intermittently created work. Filmed less than a month after the September 11 attacks on New York's World Trade Center, it finds a profound metaphor for the discomfort and dread provoked by those events

– and their aftermath – in the frozen image Smith finds on his television set when he returns to his room around 1:41 in the morning. It would be tempting to discuss Smith's response to this troublingly stilled image in terms that allude to Roland Barthes' key distinction between photography and cinema in *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*: the deathly frozen countenance of the snapshot against the continuum of the moving image. In this regard, part of what fascinates and worries Smith is the tearing out of an image from a continuum, an arresting of temporality that speaks to the seemingly overwhelming calamity of specific global events and their localised implications. But Smith's response to this image is more circumspect and situated than it might first appear. Although he wonders what has happened to the BBC transmitter and studio in London to affect this "failure" of continuity and information, he is more concerned about what this can also tell us about the multitude of civilian deaths meted out "simultaneously" by both Britain and the United States in the bombing of Afghanistan, then in its second night of execution. As in much of Smith's work, there is a profound sense of relativity and sympathy at play here. Although the film is restricted to the filmmaker's immediate surroundings and visual perspective – and none of the eight episodes moves beyond the corridor outside the room, only seeing the filmmaker when he is reflected in a mirror or shiny surface – it uses the immediate materials of this environment to suggest a series of pointed but strangely organic connections to the world outside.

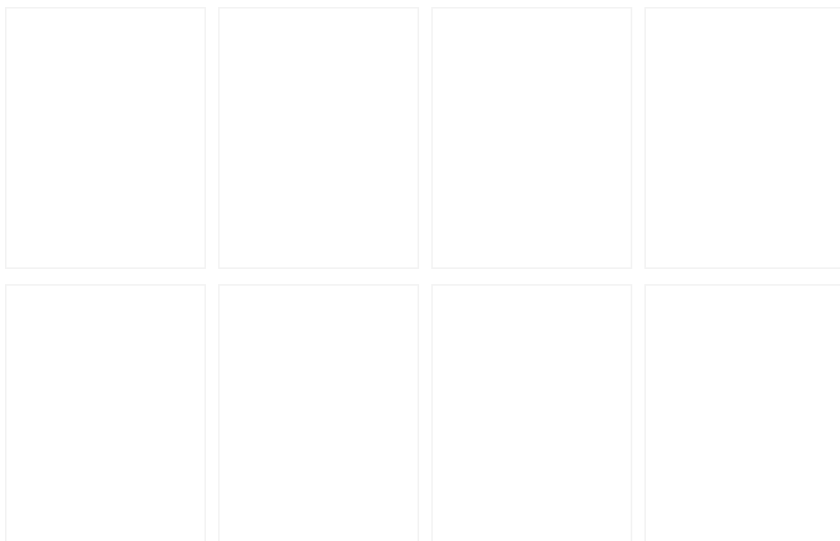
Of course, part of what worries and concerns Smith in this series of films is a sense of impotence, an anger at the mundane worlds we routinely occupy and think about while acts of aggression, prejudice and imperialism are carried out in our names. But Smith is also profoundly interested in the objects and signs he encounters, bringing an off-the-cuff inquisitiveness to his and our encounters with, for example, the lifting tiles of the roof of a hotel room in Bethlehem, a glass partition to the bathroom in Berlin, the ironically Orwellian nomenclature and implications of Room 101 in Winterthur, the snacks and mini-bars he finds in various locations. As in many of Smith's films, these encounters with the immediate physical environment are guided by the filmmaker's chatty and exploratory voiceover. (Actually, it isn't strictly a voiceover as it is seemingly produced – often in the hushed tones of early morning – at the same time as the images are captured.) It is this voiceover and Smith's palpably physical camerawork that acts to draw explicit, implicit and sometimes unexpected connections between the often-disparate elements that are drawn into the film's web or ambit. At times this approach can seem a little too calculated, such as when the second episode, "Museum Piece" – probably the most artfully constructed in the series – ends with a droll reference to *Schindler's List* (Steven Spielberg, 1993) in the context of a story about Smith's feeling of apprehensiveness at going inside Berlin's Jewish Museum due to contemporary Israeli military actions and government policy.

My description of *Hotel Diaries* may make it sound as if it is an overly sober and humourless work – but nothing could be further from the truth. Although "Frozen War" questions the import and meaning of an image severed from the continuous chatter of information and communication that characterises the BBC's 24-hour news service, it is also concerned with the world – both immediate and somewhat more distant – around this image. Many of the other episodes of this series are more playfully occupied with the quirky and idiosyncratic details of décor that mark each distinct hotel room, but "Frozen War" finds its key point of contrast or comic/cosmic comparison in "the stool thing for putting suitcases on" that stands next to the television set. As the shot unfolds in real time – all but one of the eight episodes is made up of a single take (the exception, "Dirty Pictures", has only two) – Smith becomes distracted from his off-the-cuff discussion of the image on screen by the ubiquity and ultimate pointlessness of this particular object: "That really is such a useless fucking bit of furniture". In many respects Smith's films are preoccupied by *mise en scène*, as well as with the ability to craft stories – or fragments of stories – from the bits of information that dot our immediate environments. It is a gently essayistic, conversational cinema of connections or connectivity that can effortlessly range across such subjects as the filmmaker's supposed lisp, Berlin's Jewish Museum, Israel's appalling activities in Palestine, the wall of a bathroom, the magic of an electric blind we can't see, a silent screening of Federico Fellini's *La Strada* (1954) in a bar downstairs, the Holocaust, the odd fruit patterns on the hallway carpet, and a characteristic pun on the title *Schindler's List*. The wonder of Smith's cinema is that he can make such surprising connections seem completely natural, almost inevitable, and combine this with a pointed critique of foreign policy and the outrageous activities of various nation-states. There is also a wonderful, characteristically open, improvised and self-deprecating moment when, as he reaches the end of the hall and his frame is filled with the nondescript image of a blank wall, Smith states: "I'll leave that bit of space for the imagination".

Although *Hotel Diaries* returns to Cork for its final episode, both neatly summarising the concerns and circularity of the previous sections and questioning the possibility of saying something complete or conclusive about anything ("Anyway, I don't really know where I'm going with this"), it is the penultimate episode – "Dirty Pictures" – that provides the series' logical conclusion or denouement. All of the previous episodes have incorporated discussion and condemnation of Israeli and Western actions in the Middle East, providing information (in voiceover, on television screens, across the text crawl added to Smith's images on one episode) about parallel events occurring in Palestine, Iraq, Afghanistan and the West (such as the re-election of Bush, British military atrocities, the initial bombings of Afghanistan, Blair's appointment as a Middle-Eastern envoy, etc). This incessant but subtly integrated material suggests that the key approach of *Hotel Diaries* will be to maintain a sense of explicit distance (or distanciation) between the European hotel rooms that the filmmaker is billeted in and the events occurring in far away Iraq, Afghanistan and Palestine. It is therefore something of a surprise when we realise that Smith is in a hotel room in Bethlehem, his camera showing the wall that separates Palestinian and Israeli territory. This is the only episode of the film that is shot during daytime and is divided into two parts, metaphorically recognising the key division between Palestine and Israel and the physical and

metaphorical spaces or places that each occupies. In the second half of this episode Smith returns to the footage he had previously shot in the Bethlehem Inn and expresses dissatisfaction with both the quality of the images and the lack of a contextualising voiceover for the material he shot through his hotel room window. This second section is dominated by his account of crossing the checkpoint between Bethlehem and East Jerusalem (occupied by Israel) and has little of the humour that structures other sections. But there is still a striking continuity between this episode and those that have preceded it. From the safety of his securely positioned hotel room Smith summons the world outside, providing a set of troubling connections and parallel stories that disable our ability to simply close the door and immerse ourselves in the bland comforts and décor of modern life.

*Hotel Diaries* (2001-2007 Britain 81 mins)



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