

Cornelia Parker
John Smith's Body

John Smith has a sister named Janet.

I first met him in the Northcote pub in Leytonstone in 1984.

Even before I moved to Leytonstone I had heard of the legendary John Smith, cult filmmaker, and was intrigued by the ordinariness of his name. I suspected it was a pseudonym, but if not, hadn't he been tempted to change it to something more exotic or strange? Later on, meeting him and seeing his films, with their ironic embracing of the ultra mundane, I realised that the name was a perfect fit, a ready made.

Leytonstone at that time was a great place to be. A thriving community of artists lived in dilapidated houses that were due to be demolished for the promised M11 Link Road. (Lutyens had designed the original plan for the road, so it had been on the cards for some time). Lured by short-life housing, we thought we would be there for a few months at most (why else move to suburbia), but the road plans kept getting shelved, and the months became years. Lulled into a false sense of security, everyone spread out, accumulated stuff, had kids, made art...

The cheap rents and abundance of space created a fertile breeding ground for ideas. Cross-pollinations and collaborations abounded, ground-breaking works were given birth to – creativity thrived under the threat of imminent eviction.

It was in this climate of instability that long-term friendships were forged in the Northcote pub, the beating heart of the neighbourhood – friendships that were to become woven into the fabric of John's films. After witnessing Owen Joseph's torso in **The Black Tower**, spotting Zoe Redman's legs and Alan Jennings's hands in **Slow Glass** and John Harding's head in **Om**, it seemed to me that by rewinding the films you could build up an exquisite corpse of the community, a found body.

As well as being used as props and body parts, friends became collaborators. Graeme Miller (**Lost Sound**), Jocelyn Pook (**Blight**) and Ian Bourn (**The Kiss**) were all fellow Northcotians. (It was the latrines

of the Northcote pub that John later captured in his video **The Waste Land**, based on his realisation that T.S.Eliot was an anagram of the word 'toilets').

When we all eventually got evicted in 1994, the community became scattered all over London. John was one of the only people to remain in Leytonstone, managing to buy a flat just around the corner from where his house once stood. The idea of having to leave E11 to move somewhere like South of The River or Nearer to The Centre, produced in him more than a slight tremor of fear.

But then he didn't have to travel far to find meaning.

For John, it was there confronting him every time he woke up. The view from his bedroom window had it all. Beyond his small garden was the Central Line, with its carriages packed full with tired commuters. Beyond the rail line there was an immense graveyard packed with ornate white headstones. Beyond the graveyard, on the horizon, was a hospital... Attached to the hospital was an inexplicable black tower. With its velvety blackness it was the perfect found object, the embodiment of fear.

In his film **The Black Tower** it becomes a state of mind, The Bogeyman. Half the time the screen appears as a monochrome, very often black, because the camera is in so close to its subject (I remember John telling me jokingly that he had overspent his budget and was wondering how he could make creative use of black leader). By the precise use of framing, the true identity of that being filmed is slowly revealed. There is a powerful sense of what might be going on outside the frame, of that which we don't see. The hypnotic voice of the narrator lures us into the twilight world of the agoraphobic and the blackness of the tower closes in...

John can build a tragi-comic narrative around anything – the hidden Mexican in the cornice on his bedroom ceiling, a Viennese sandwich shop, a man having a haircut¹ or an empty beer glass. **Slow Glass** appears to be about sitting around in pubs, drinking Guinness and

Cornelia Parker

having a mid-life crisis. But of course it is much more than that; it is John at his most philosophical, a beautifully crafted meditation on mutability, mortality, and suspicion of nostalgia.

The voice-over is that of a glazier, a pint pot philosopher, the proverbial pub bore you can't get away from. In a slow mesmeric monotone he meditates on his life, his craft and the history of his material. Made from soda, lime and silica, glass is a supercooled liquid. Like the narrator it never crystallises, never sets; its sharp edges get blunter with time.

A clock is seen reflected in a sheet of glass being cut, underscored by the resonant sound of the diamond tip making its incision. There is a slippage of time as the narrator splices memories of his childhood with the properties of glass. One has the claustrophobic sense of a vacuum being created between layers of double-glazing. There is a slow profound realisation that we spend our lives looking through glass, and it's in the mirror that we see age advancing.

Most of John's films have been shot within a few hundred yards of his front door, or inside his house. **Home Suite**, his first video piece, perversely ends up as an unedited, ninety minute monologue (a three piece suite of thirty minute shots). It takes the form of a shaggy dog story, a tragi-comic farewell to his home before it is demolished. Appropriate to the medium, it's a confessional home video charting the aesthetic pleasure of decay. (John sees it as a forerunner to the BBC television series **Changing Rooms**).

In deliberate contrast to his films (which are exquisitely composed and edited), the hand-held camera takes the viewer on a long, in and out of focus, journey. A calculated stream of consciousness exploits the threat of the extra long home movie. **Home Suite** plays with everyman's love of videoing everything that moves (as video is cheap and anyone can do it) and the captive audience's fear of tedium.

In many of his films John focuses on the objects that surround him, to such a degree that they surrender and become complicit with his fiction. Found action that he has captured on camera becomes the

basis of a beautiful inversion, real life directed in retrospect. In the first few minutes of his film **Blight**, derelict houses appear to be dismembering themselves. Bricks rattle, mortar falls, and wooden beams are dislodged, seemingly by poltergeist activity (a feeling reinforced by a poster for the film **The Exorcist**, on a bedroom wall that has become newly exposed to daylight). The claw of a bulldozer is filmed, ominously caressing a chimney stack it is about to tear down. But the shot stops short and the inevitable destruction happens in our heads, not on the screen. The restraint of John's editing beautifully undercuts the emotive quality of the music (composed by his collaborator Jocelyn Pook), and the music in turn replaces the drama that hits the cutting room floor.

John's tactile experience of the material stuff of film, gathered over many hundreds of hours spent in splicing and editing, bore fruit in another collaboration. Sharing an interest in synchronicity and the chance encounter, composer Graeme Miller and John worked together on **Lost Sound** (as they had on several other projects). Having noticed the huge amount of discarded audio cassette tape that seemed to wrap itself around every tree and traffic light, they could be seen, come rain or shine, on their knees in the streets of East London. John would have his camera trained on a lowly clump of abandoned tape; Graeme would be studiously recording the ambient sound from the location. The piece of tape would then be carefully collected and labelled. They were driven by curiosity – what was the identity of those lost bits of sound that had been denied their voice? Was it Bhangra up there, fluttering in that tree? Or was it Hip-Hop that lay abandoned in the gutter?

The resulting video is a pure process piece – whatever music is playing on the soundtrack is that found on the fragment of tape that appears on the screen. The formality of the idea is undercut by the emotive power of the found music (and John stretching his own rules in the editing). John, who had always been suspicious of lush soundtracks, had found an excuse to use passion, albeit in a rigorous way. It was as if any emotion he wanted to feel (but was too embarrassed to deliberately express) could be discovered abandoned out on the street, emotion as a found object.

Cornelia Parker

John Smith is a master of withholding, his films are full of implication rather than action. It is a deliberate decision to edit out the most dramatic moments. There is an economy of means, a love of limitations and restricted resources, that still persists from college days. His genius is in taking found material, the most banal situation, the slightest little cue, and imbuing it with a fiction that makes it potent. 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 whole world brewing in a 'Teasmade'.

Cornelia Parker is known for installations such as *Cold Dark Matter: An Exploded View* (1991) where she suspended the fragments of a garden shed, blown up for her by the British Army, and *The Maybe*, a collaboration with actress Tilda Swinton shown at The Serpentine Gallery in 1995. She was shortlisted for the Turner Prize, Tate Gallery, London in 1997. She has exhibited in group exhibitions including XXII Bienal de Sao Paulo and the 1st Melbourne Biennial and had solo exhibitions at Deitch Projects, New York and the ICA Philadelphia. She has works in numerous European and American collections.

1_ Since that first meeting in 1984 I have been the only person who has cut John's hair. Anyone who has met him knows his asymmetrical, pulled through a hedge backwards look, a ruffled style that has been honed over years. Aware that I am a very unpredictable hairdresser, John curiously feels more comfortable with the end result – a kind of intentional accident, a found haircut.



Om (1986)