



Pushed to the Limit

By Fred Camper

Films and videos by John Smith

The chaotic late 60s left a mixed legacy, but on the positive side is an artistic tradition that questions "the very roots of everything," in the words of John Smith, who's been making films and videos since 1972. He challenges authority with a lighthearted spirit; his intellectually subtle works can be whimsical, even fun. Smith, who's British, was last in Chicago showing his films in 1984--and his works have hardly been seen here since. Now he returns with a program of nine films and videos, ranging in length from one minute to 28 minutes, at the Film Center on September 13 as well as two videos at the Onion City Film Festival, *Regression* on September 14 and *The Kiss* on September 15.

At its best, Smith's work evokes doubt not only about cultural givens but about all givens. He dismantles songs, iconic forms of architecture, and the urban landscape, investigating two themes. Rejecting structures that suggest fixed power, he celebrates ordinary things: not a tower but the discolorations of its brick wall. At a deeper level, he constructs little narratives but undermines all human structures by breaking up the sequences of images and sounds.

Smith was born in London in 1952 and lives there today. His second year in art school was seminal: his professors then had been expelled from another school where they'd conducted a sit-in in 1968. They put together a multimedia curriculum informed by "anticapitalist impulses," Smith told me. He learned early on, he says, "to question...the fundamentals of meaning--don't trust representation, don't trust what you're told." Smith counts as key influences his teachers Guy Sherwin and Peter Gidal, and the films of Michael Snow, Hollis Frampton, and Jacques Tati (for "the playfulness of his use of sound and image, explor[ing] ambiguity and alternative meanings").

Smith deconstructs a universal symbol of beauty in the single-take video *The Kiss* (1999, made in collaboration with Ian Bourn). A particularly beautiful lily seems to grow before our eyes, gradually changing shape; what sounds like breathing on the sound track gives it an almost human presence. Suddenly the sound and movement stop as a glass plate, invisible until now, cracks--and it seems we've been watching, in Smith's words, "the forced development of a hothouse flower."

The effect is not only iconoclastic in the word's original sense--image breaking--but causes the viewer to question the degree of artifice in all "nature" today. The glass shattering converts what had appeared to be a transparent window into a barrier, reminding us of the camera lens, projection apparatus, and video screen. And because the flower and its transformation were so engaging, the shattering shatters our involvement and evokes the way in which every image we see is filtered through an individual's consciousness, a consciousness foregrounded by the video's end. Smith taped *The Kiss* in real time, placing a cut flower between two plates of glass that he moved slowly together with a clamp; the pressure eventually caused one plate to crack. It was originally shown looped as a gallery installation; as Smith says, there was "much more of a sense of a production line, with one flower after another being crushed."

Regression (1999) is a video version of the 1978 Smith film *7P* preceded by a sequence in which Smith talks about the film. Among the problems with the original, we learn, was the fact that a slight jump at each splice tended to distract from the "subtle changes" Smith intended between shots. When he shows the video version, at first one

is unsure whether it's the original--and Smith says that part of his intent was to "tease the audience as to whether the original film did exist." And the video remake turns out to be not much different from the preceding shot of Smith talking to the camera: we just see him singing "The Twelve Days of Christmas." But he shot it singing one verse per day starting on Christmas day, then spliced in each gift in the list from the day on which it was sung, so during each verse he's differently clothed and more or less shaven. Plus Smith doesn't seem to remember the gift for the sixth day, singing "da da da" instead, and the song has 17 verses instead of 12, with more "da da da"s instead of words.

Smith acknowledges the influence of Frampton's 1970 *Zorns Lemma*, with its street signs organized alphabetically, but *Regression* pokes fun at this encyclopedic project by picking apart a popular song. Taking the different days literally and creating disjunctive cuts within the verses, Smith reveals a bit of the child's desire to question cultural assumptions: if the singer sings on the different days of Christmas, shouldn't his appearance change?

Smith's 1987 film *The Black Tower* is perhaps his most entertaining work. In a voice-over he talks about how he was surprised one day by a mysterious black tower he hadn't noticed before. Then he sees it again someplace else. Soon the tower is everywhere--inside some prison grounds, next to a factory, as if pursuing him. He has a dream that he's imprisoned in it--and when one of the towers seems to have disappeared he begins to doubt his sanity until a newspaper vendor explains that it had recently been demolished. When he realizes later that the vendor had been talking about the demolition of an apartment tower, Smith is flummoxed, saying, "It seems as though I would have to stay at home from now on." Eating only ice cream, spending his time staring "downward" out of his windows so he won't see any towers, he eventually gets carted off to the nuthouse, where he's "not surprised by the architecture"--another tower. Months later he's come to understand that "the tower had existed only in my mind," but when he goes to the country to continue his recovery, he encounters another tower.

The tower's dark top, shaped like a small house but windowless, is a bit goofy looking but might also induce paranoia. Adding to its peculiar power is the fact that towers have long been symbols of authority, secular and religious, and that this tower is of unknown origin. But the tower is also a metaphor for human subjectivity. In a way Smith's madness is just an extreme version of what we all do, a way of exploring the borderline between personal vision and hallucination.

The Black Tower also seems concerned with urban change: the tower's appearances and disappearances recall the way that a much loved city can seem defaced by the demolition of familiar buildings and by the construction of new ones, a process over which the individual has little or no control. At one point when the protagonist is troubled by a tower's disappearance, the film cuts back and forth between two versions of the same nondescript landscape; in one version an apartment tower fills the sky and in the other it's missing. Then an image of the building being demolished by explosives makes it clear that Smith has been intercutting "before" and "after" views; later we learn that this is the tower the newspaper vendor was talking about. Here Smith draws a parallel between cinematic effects and changes to the urban landscape, reminding us that the images we see are always the result of human choices.

"Most of my works are made around places I've lived most of my life," Smith says, and in fact *The Black Tower* was inspired when he first saw the tower itself (yes, there's only one--he simply filmed it from different angles). Looking out the window of a new apartment he saw the top, painted in nonreflective paint, looking like "a hole cut out of the sky--and I thought, what the hell is that?" It turns out it was a water tower, disguised by a "house." Near the end of the film, when he finds the tower in the country, he approaches it and says he notices "signs of age and decay." We see a number of closer shots of the bricks, with areas of discoloration, and suddenly this forbidding icon takes its place in the physical world, where everything is impermanent.

The theme of fragmentation and decay is taken up by my favorite work here, the video *Lost Sound* (2001), made in collaboration with a friend, sound artist Graeme Miller, who suggested to Smith that someone should "make a film that's to do with the sound on audiocassette tape found in the street." Smith replied, "I wish I'd had that idea," so they collaborated on the videotaping and sound recording, though Smith did the editing.

Divided into short sections titled by location, *Lost Sound* shows discarded audiotapes around London--strands clinging to a fence, trapped in the crevices of a tree trunk, intertwined with weeds. The sound track combines the voices and songs on the found audiotapes with ambient sounds recorded on location. Visually the audiotapes tell us almost nothing; they must be "decoded" by the equipment that put them on the sound track. But we come to see that the signs, cars, and pedestrians in the videotape pose similar "decoding" problems: what do they mean, where do they come from, who are

they? A city that at first seems comprehensible is revealed as a layering of mysteries; we know no more about the passing humans from their images than we do about what's on the crumpled tapes, a point made through contrast when we see tape fluttering forlornly from barbed wire and hear a syrupy song ("Join in the music!").

Smith reinforces his ideas about the importance of context through simple but apt editing. The opening section of *Lost Sound* begins with the strands of tape in close-up, and only a few shots later do we see the urban setting. Another sequence begins with pedestrians seen from the waist down, then closer--only their legs and feet. Next is a shot of a tiny piece of tape with pedestrians' shadows passing over it; after that we get a view of the whole street. Each section charts a different relationship between tape and urban scene, taking the viewer on a little unpredictable journey. Finally, as happens so often in Smith's work, the representational structure itself seems to break down. Titles and images are flipped left to right, undermining the readability of words, and men loading boxes onto a truck are seen in a repeated loop, foregrounding the arbitrariness of cinematic time as well as commenting on the repetitiousness of manual labor. Lost in an indecipherable maze whose rules change constantly, we see the city as a network of unpredictably shifting relationships and come to doubt even the sounds encoded in the tape fragments.

